

MALE-CHILD SYNDROME AND THE AGONY OF MOTHERHOOD AMONG THE IGBO OF NIGERIA

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The persistence of high fertility among the Igbo of Nigeria is linked to the relative strength of the pronatalist tradition among them. Perceived relative benefits of male children as potential custodians of both identity and lineage have sustained this value over generations. A woman, who achieves recognition and status by the birth of at least one male child, is considered fulfilled and ultimately accorded greater respect relative to her counterparts who do not achieve the same feat. Studies have been focusing on the factors defining this gender preference at the expense of those that still sustain marriages that are "barren" and the tension and agony that characterize the psychological disposition of women in this dilemma. This paper examines the links between patriliney and patriarchy and male child preference, and also how inherent society-created effects of male-childlessness could be ameliorated at family and household levels.

Male-child preference has remained one of the most lasting cultural values among the Igbo of South eastern Nigeria. This phenomenon is evident in societies where male children are accorded special recognition and or higher status relative to their female counterparts (Akpan 1995; Nwokocho, 2005). In communities where such gender distinction is a norm, male children are perceived as sustainers of lineage, holders of central, and often, most important positions of authority and inheritors of immovable properties. According to Isiugo-Abanihe (1993), the Igbo with very few exceptions are patrilineal and attach strong significance to male-determined and dominated structure. He highlighted the situation more vividly:

A man who died without a son lived a worthless life; he is inherited by his brothers, and is soon forgotten since his branch of the family tree has ended... also, in traditional Igbo society, the status of a man is assessed in part by the number of his sons, a man with many sons is viewed as a wealthy or an

accomplished man; his neighbours cautiously avoid confrontation or litigation with him; he is assured of a befitting burial at death. For a woman, the birth of a male child is of paramount importance as well, because it establishes her firmly in the family. She is said to have 'taken root' or 'established a solid foundation' when the first son arrives. Since the birth of a son ensures marital security, given the prevailing high childhood mortality, just a son is not enough. The desire to ensure that at least one survives his father encourages prolific childbearing... (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1993: 6).

The above insight implies that the importance attached to male children in Igboland defies gender boundaries—both husbands and wives desire male children for their culturally perceived significance (see also Acsadi and Johnson-Acsadi 1991). Equally, Idimogu (2000) observed that male members of a family in patrilineal societies are the only ones customarily authorized to perform religious and political duties; females are expected to be married outside their homes and cannot be assigned roles that are life-long. According to Akpan (1995), the justification for the desirability of males among the Igbo derives from the tradition that allows only the first son (*Opara*) to inherit the *Ofor* title—the symbol of family authority. He is then automatically bestowed with the onus of both settling disputes and apportioning farmlands among family members each planting season.

Similarly, the *Opara* represents the family in religious matters. In some parts of Igboland—Mbaise, Obowo, Ngwa, Umuahia, and Owerri—for instance, the *Opara* performs some rituals tied to the second burial (*Okwukwu*) of his late father. He is expected to cut off completely, in one smart machete-strike, a goat's head in full view of the entire community in a ceremony marked with pomp and pageantry. Success of the event is synonymous with 'one successful cutting' and the actor remains the *Opara* forever. Failure (inability to cut completely at once) is interpreted symbolically to mean relinquishing his *opara* position to the next son. Given the traditional significance ascribed to *Okwukwu*, male children are conceived as invaluable blessings for families since females are never allowed to undertake the responsibility. A man that died not having a son is not given a second burial. Such a man is seen as unaccomplished and or a misfit.

The birth of a male-child thus establishes a man's worth-ness on one hand and legitimacy of marriage on the other. It is apparent that the quest for such legitimacy motivates women to continue bearing children in anticipation of the 'desired child' even in conditions that threaten their lives (Arkutu, 1995) a situation which not only explains high fertility but also high maternal mortality and morbidity. Moreover, as Ottong (1991) and Ekong (1988) observed, preference for the male-child has been implicated in polygyny and large family size in parts of Nigeria. The implication according to Nwokocha (2003) is that family planning programmes and the need for adequate birth

spacing are undermined. Werner *et al.*, (1995) extending the above view noted that there is great danger for women who carry many pregnancies to die in childbirth leaving many motherless children. The situation is worsened in communities that lack adequate maternal health facilities to cater for complications and emergencies.

Studies indicate that 99 percent of the 600,000 women aged between 15 and 49 that die globally each year of pregnancy related causes come from the developing world, especially sub-Saharan Africa (Population Reference Bureau, 2000; Addai, 1998) with Nigeria accounting for 10 percent of this total (Okolocha *et al.*, 1998). It has been found that 1 out of 13 women in Nigeria dies due to causes related to childbirth (UNICEF 2000, federal office of statistics Nigeria and IRD/Macro international 1999). Despite the foregoing data, studies still reveal that the inability of women to have male-children has largely been responsible for breakdown of marriages in Africa (Blitsten, 1963; Chinweuba, 1994; Olunloyo, 1993). Although some men are ready to grapple with their wives' infecundity on one hand or the inability to give birth to the 'preferred child' and/ or the expected number of children on the other, family and peer pressure contributes significantly to making marriages 'empty-shell'.

SON PREFERENCE AND AFRICAN FERTILITY: A FRAMEWORK

Studies indicate that fertility is higher in Africa than in any other part of the world, (Population Reference Bureau 1997; Okolocha *et al.*, 1998; UNICEF 2001) notwithstanding that access to adequate maternal health facilities is lowest in the region (UNICEF, 1995; Hulton *et al.*, 2000). This contradiction can only be adequately understood within the African sociocultural context. High fertility among Africans results from the interplay of social, cultural, religious, familial, economic and political factors (Yount *et al.*, 2000). In patrilineal societies for instance, the desire for sons is related to high fertility especially when male children are not 'born early'.

The relationship between preference for male children and high fertility among Africans underscores the pronatalist ethos of peoples of the continent. Consequently, men in most parts of Africa have power over women in virtually all spheres of life, including income, legal rights over children (Nwokocha, 2006; Nwosu, 2006). Male children, who would grow to be men, thus symbolize strength and longevity among Africans. Symbols are created and given meanings by individuals and it is within these meanings that individuals interact. As Haralambos with Heald (1995) noted:

Symbols provide the means whereby man can interact meaningfully with his natural and social environment. They are man-made and refer not to the intrinsic nature of objects and events but to the ways in which men perceive them (Haralambos and Heald, 1995:544).

Human social environment and activities are created by man himself and, the later on the other hand, being shaped by these. For instance, the patriarchal structure and its concomitant definitions including son preference among Africans were designed by individuals in society to direct human interactions in relevant environments. Such designs, however, derive from their perceived roles in human relationship. In the long run, individuals' attitudes and behaviours (like high fertility) are shaped by these prescriptions and, at times, enslaved by it.

While men who design these symbols do not directly experience the impact of high fertility, women in their reproductive activities are particularly vulnerable to maternal morbidity and mortality. The implication of the foregoing is that African societies are embedded in wholesome gender inequality; a situation which Sen *et al.* (1994) have argued has been carefully sustained by men through ages. This means that women are not only disadvantaged but also emotionally restrained in a special way (Lerner 1986). It has been pointed out that women's subordinate status underlies high fertility (Isiugo-Abanihe 1994; Kritz *et al.*, 2000).

Feminists are vigorously challenging a system that ascribed negligible power to women. Positive results have been recorded in western societies at least to the extent that women's affairs are made public issues (Oyewumi, 2002). A large majority of women in African countries still do not conceive of feminism as sublime. As Effa-chukwuma and Osarenre (2001) observed, for example, discriminatory laws against women in Nigeria are most visible in customary law, which hardly emphasize social equity. Oyewumi (2004) had regrettably noted that western feminism, by blaming "African culture" for misdeeds among men in Africa, is one of the main sources of misrepresentation of African women. As such, feminist consciousness and agenda have been characterized by internal contradictions that question the inviolability of the feminist ideology at spatially holistic level.

TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL SYNTHESIS

The study integrates the influence of patriarchy perspective and symbolic interactionism in explaining the sociocultural context of son preference in an African society. The framework in Figure 1 indicates that patriarchy encompasses every aspect of the social system. It therefore means that values, beliefs and practices in most societies are designed and directed by it (Nwokocha, 2003; 2004). For instance, in societies where men determine and dominate the direction of social relationships, economic and religious roles are demarcated along sex lines. Equally, political functions within the community and the level of education perceived as necessary for both sexes for the proper functioning of the social system are located within patriarchal

definitions. In addition, both the concept and content of lineage continuity and social security for the aged derive from patriarchal prescriptions. All these 'elements', it has been argued, are designed to favour men as well as sustain gender inequity (Sen *et al.*, 1994).

The dignity and values ascribed to the above roles justify the quest for male children whose right it is to exclusively perform these functions. Women who are blessed with the 'desired children' have the benefit of legitimate marital union—both in principle and content. Moreover, they are accorded high status and recognition among family members and kins. Women who could neither give birth at all nor to the 'preferred child' continuously strive for at least one. Her agony has begun. This pronatalist-propelled tradition has been implicated in the relegation of family planning practices, short-interval pregnancies, abortions and adverse pregnancy outcomes in general. A woman's agony is heightened when after several efforts the 'desired child' is not born. Evidence shows that there is disparity in the treatment of women and daughters, relative to men and sons, even in matrilineal settings. Ottong had pointed out that:

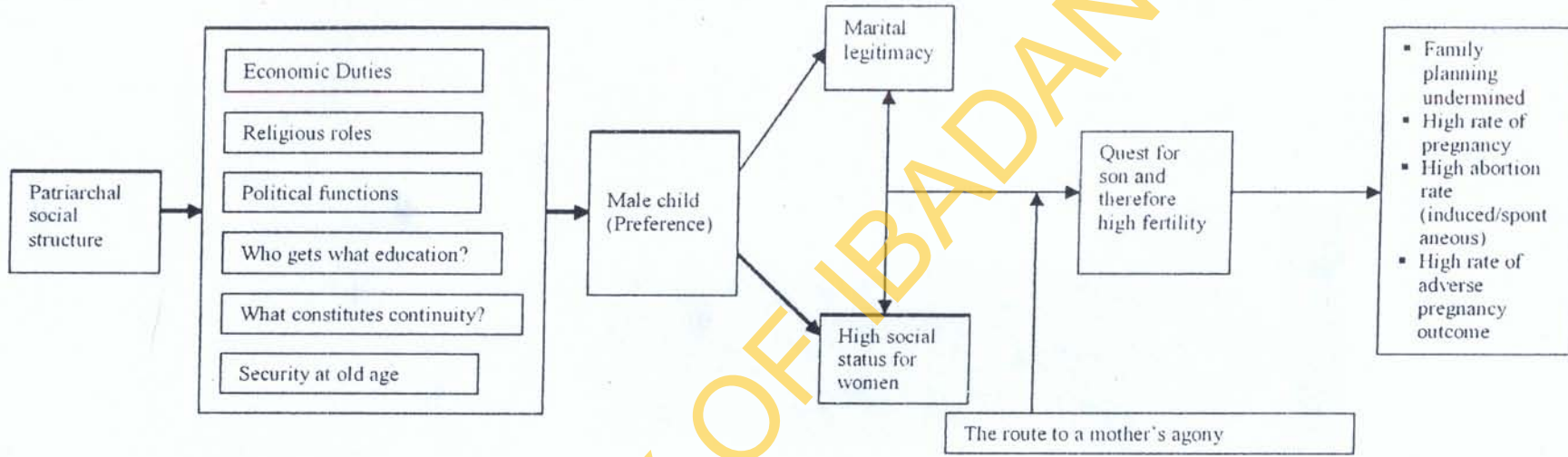
The male plays a very dominant role in the social structure; he is, as of right, the head of the family, and is seen and regarded in certain circumstances by the wife (or wives) as the lord and master whose decision is always final. Even in the exceptionally few matrilineal societies, authority relations are still patriarchal, although patterns of descendency and inheritance might be governed by the principles of matriliney (Ottong, 1993: 1).

According to Obermeyer and Cardenas (1997), where women's status is low, parents tend to invest less in their daughters, which discriminatory attitude accounts for higher mortality and morbidity among female children. The above views are however inconsistent with contemporaneous reality in most parts of Igboland. Although the value for males is still strong among the Igbo, the premium placed on children generally is high. In fact, the reverse seems to be the situation, in some cases, as females are provided for more than males although not to the extent that the latter are disadvantaged. But Bélanger (2002) had noted that any situation that still emphasizes gender disparity of any kind calls for more attention by scholars and policy makers considering its implications for human development.

METHODS

The study was conducted among the Igbo who inhabit the Southeastern part of Nigeria. Igbo society is one of the three major ethnic groups—the others being Yoruba and Hausa—in a country of 389 cultural groupings (Otite, 2000). The Igbos are found in seven of the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory, as their homeland. The states include: Abia, Anambra, Delta,

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Source: Nwokocho, 2006

Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo and Rivers. The Igbos are a highly migratory people, found in all parts of the world.

Among the people, both Patriliney and Patriarchy are valued and conceived as inviolable ways of life. With very few exceptions, inheritance, succession and exercise of power within families and communities are exclusively reserved for males. Consequently, male children are desired relative to females; high fertility among the people is largely explained by this discriminatory attitude. Extended family system is strong, in Igbo society, to the extent that major decisions affecting individuals are taken in kin-groups. Until recently, a family could impose on its member the responsibility of taking a new wife in the quest for a male child without any form of objection from the latter. Abia and Imo states were purposively chosen for the study due to their central position and given that they possess some sociocultural attributes that are common among the seven Igbo speaking states of Nigeria. The specific areas in the selected states, where fieldwork was conducted, were chosen on the basis of strong attachment to cultural norms and values in a rapidly changing society such as Nigeria. These areas include: Ngwa, Umuahia, Igbere, Arochuku and Ukwu, all in Abia State, and Mbaise, Okigwe, Nkwerre, Owerri and Ideato in Imo State.

Fieldwork was conducted over a six-month period between October 2002 and March 2003 by employing intra-method triangulation of data gathering. The method of data collection was basically qualitative which included: focus Group Discussions (FGDs), In-depth Interviews (IDIs) and Unobtrusive Observation. The above complementarity ensured that the weaknesses of each of these methods were covered by the other techniques and in this way, different insights were elicited for analysis.

A total of 26 FGDs were conducted to elicit data on cultural perception and construction of male children among the Igbo relative to their female counterparts, the factors that have sustained the phenomenon and its implications for the Igbo society. Individuals in various homogeneous groups with identifiable characteristics constituted participants for each discussion session. Their views on inheritance and succession, sex roles, family size and composition, ideal family size and value of children were generated. These groups were constituted by parents who have both male and female children; those who have only one sex of children and participants who do not have children at all. Another category of participants comprised the never-married-youth who constituted two discussion groups according to their sexes. The essence of engaging the latter category in FGDs was to compare and contrast their views with those of the adults on the thematic issue.

In-depth interviews for the study involved 58 respondents who were identified, through key informants, as having specific knowledge relevant

to the issue being examined. A total of 40 families were involved in the interviews with each of the chosen states represented by 20 families that were randomly selected through multi-stage technique. In each of the chosen families, a parent was randomly selected. In single parent families, the choice of interviewee for the study was automatic. The remaining 18 respondents included community elders and chiefs, religious priests and women leaders.

The use of observation as a 'passive ingredient' of the qualitative research technique is a consistent prerequisite for a proper undertaking of culture-related studies. This justifies its adoption in the present study. The influence of beliefs, values, customs, arts (all subsumed in culture as a complex whole) and resulting attitudes and behaviours need not be underestimated in inferring the behaviour of individuals in a given context and can only be deeply appreciated by observing them uninhibited. Unobtrusive observation for the study led to exploration of family relations, religious roles, political functions, economic activities and other observable sociocultural features that are associated with male preference among the study population.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis began with the translation and transcription of tapes and notes of FGDs and IDIs. In this way, eclecticism was adopted in data analysis for the study considering the complexity of the thematic phenomenon. Qualitative data are far-reaching but given their unstructured textual character are not straightforward to analyze (Bryman, 2001). This difficulty presented the challenge of browsing through a conger of analytical methods. In so doing, Miles' (1979) assertion that though qualitative data are attractive, finding analytical course is difficulty is affirmed. Interestingly, Sarantakos (1998) highlights a catalogue of analytical methods each germane in its own context but also at times contradictory to the methodological design of others. This seeming antithesis supposes that peculiarity of approach in analysis of qualitative data should be adopted as a necessary contrivance. In essence, standardization of analytical technique for qualitative data is not feasible in the social sciences. Hence, the researcher is allowed the freedom to choose the most appropriate analytical method for a particular study.

In the end, qualitative data for the present study were analyzed using manual content analysis. By adopting this method, aspects of discussions and responses from focus groups and in-depth interviews respectively, were imported into analysis on the merit of their, individual and collective, relevance in explaining the phenomenon under examination.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The major findings of the study were on the following: factors that have sustained high value of male children relative to females among the Igbo; women's agony for not giving birth to the "desired child"; and coping mechanisms among these women and their families. The factors sustaining male child preference among the Igbo include: identity and recognition, continuity and security at old age.

On Identity and Recognition

Given that Igbo society is patriarchal, a man strives to retain his social recognition among kinsmen by the birth of at least one male child who will retain his father's identity/position after the latter's death. Men who are privileged to have at least a son are identified as 'achievers' whose names will not be forgotten soon after they are dead. They are naturally fulfilled. This perception, partly, explains why all male respondents for the study emphasized the significant position of male children in family and community life. One of the interviewees noted:

I would rather have as many as ten wives instead of living and dying without at least one male child. My people, living and dead will never support a man who was unable to raise a male child that will replace him. What can a daughter offer in terms of tradition and what custom will she practice? She is only a "marketable commodity" and cannot be said to belong to a culture until she is married. If you go round this community, what I have told you, other reasonable men also will. It is an attitude that has transcended generations and I would not be a party to any change in that direction, I thank God I have five sons (Mr. Ikenna, 16/11/02. Pers. Comm.).

These views were unanimously confirmed by the category of male FGD participants that have at least one son. The implication of the above position is that the value of males far more than females has continued to be resilient to changing times. That stems from the design of Igbo orientation with strong emphasis on gender disparity and bias against women in virtually all spheres of life.

Exacerbating the situation is the fact that women in some communities achieve recognition not only by high fertility but also, and particularly, the birth of at least one son. Virtually every female respondent agreed that the quest for sons is a constant concern especially among those that are fecund. Beyond the fact there is inherent pressure from peers, in-laws and even the woman's family, sons confirm the status of a couple's union. A female in-depth interviewee who incidentally does not have a son explains:

When a marriage ends up abruptly, it is usually the woman that suffers more. For one, it is not easy for her to establish another relationship that will culminate into

marriage. In our society, once a woman is divorced, the notion is that she must be responsible for the situation, because it is the 'man world' and even when it is glaring that her husband is responsible for the problem, she is surprisingly blamed. Moreover, women expire early (referring to menopause) at which time men can decide to marry girls of 16 years. Women who more frequently experience dissolution of marriage are those who do not have sons; that is why most of us struggle to have them at all cost. We want to be counted among women achievers (Mrs. Eunice, 13/12/02. Pers. Comm).

However, most women from Mbaise and Obowo in Imo state where *ewu ukwu* –which literally means goat for the waist that achieved a feat; symbolically translated as ceremony for blessed women—custom is celebrated stated in the course of interviews that women in addition to having sons are accorded higher social recognition and respect by the birth of the number of children that qualifies them for the *ewu-ukwu* ceremony not withstanding their sexes. The *ewu ukwu* is celebrated for women that had experienced at least ten pregnancies notwithstanding the number that is living at the time of the ceremony. It is a kind of induction into a group referred by Isiugo-Abanihe (1993) as parity-ten class, which members are conceived as the privileged. This group is also referred to as *Eze chinyere*, meaning "Kings crowned by God". In communities where the custom operates, women achieve recognition and status either through male children or attempting ten pregnancies notwithstanding their sexes. Thus, the agony undergone by women for "failure" in one aspect is appreciably reduced by the achievement of the other. In the instant example, the birth of at least ten children, even if they are all females, qualifies a woman for recognition through *Ewu-ukwu* ceremony. Women who achieve both are said to have their joy to the fullest. The implication of the duality of recognition-route is that women who are not able to achieve these two feats also experience double agony.

The above scenario indicates that the patriarchal structure is designed in a manner that women can only achieve recognition through very risky activities related to pregnancy and child bearing, which in Africa given some obvious inadequacies, life ~~are~~ threatening. While most male but few female respondents for the study did not subscribe to the submission that women can be recognized in the society without giving birth to sons, the position of very few men especially those that are very educated is that members of those societies should begin to encourage women in all aspects of human endeavor and recognize those that excel in different activities.

On Family and Lineage Continuity

The perception among respondents is that lineage is maintained by men. This is explained by the fact that social relations within the Igbo society are patriarchally defined. For instance, descent is traced through the father's line

(patrilineal) and the pattern of residence is male-centered (patrilocal). Moreover, according to respondents, members of this society cherish the system and are always ready to abide by its demands and defend its sustenance.

Both FGD participants and IDI respondents agreed that religious roles are necessary for the proper functioning of the society. Although the Igbo acknowledge that God is the Supreme Being, they equally believe that men have some role to play in effectively relating with God transcendently. For most IDI respondents, women cannot and are not permitted in any circumstance to undertake certain religious rituals—activities perceived as consistent with the life of the community.

Respondents also noted that no matter the position of the first male child in terms of birth hierarchy, he remains the head of the family notwithstanding his age. In addition, it was stated that the quest for continuity is the reason why first sons in Igboland are under pressure to marry early. This is given that the mortality ratio in Nigeria is high and life expectancy for both sexes is 52 years (Population Reference Bureau, 2002).

On Security at Old Age

One factor that was acknowledged by most interview respondents is social security for the elderly by their sons. In addition, the responsibility of burying dead parents is solely that of sons, while daughters and their husbands can support in some prescribed way but without definite sanctions on failure to contribute exactly as requested. This perceived intergenerational wealth flow partly is responsible for high fertility among the Igbo. In parts of Igboland, the *onyima* ceremony involves great-grand parents who have had at least 20 grand and great-grand children to take care of them (invitation is extended to friends and relatives to celebrate with them). Furthermore, one IDI respondent indicated that men more than women engage in more meaningful economic activities and therefore are better placed to take care of aged parents.

However, contrary to the views of few respondents that daughters do not support their aged parents beyond the emotional, the majority position is that daughters more than sons in most cases provide social security to parents. One respondent stated:

I thank God for my daughters. If I had depended on my sons, I would have died a long time ago. It is as if they want me dead; they don't even care to know how I am coping here at the village. Hardly do they come home and my daughters have been doing even what men should do. I do not believe people should pray to have sons like them no matter how people look at it.

The implication of the statement is that some sons are irresponsible to the extent that the cultural significance ascribed to their prescribed roles is

undermined. In sum, the realization of intergenerational wealth flow, which essence is synonymous with old-age security can derive from either of the sexes or both.

The Agony of Motherhood

Agony in the context of this paper is related to psychological stress undergone by women who for various reasons were not able to give birth to the "preferred child". Various reasons why women experience such emotional trauma have been adduced. First, it was pointed out by some FGD participants that some women are subjected to repeated child bearing notwithstanding the inherent dangers especially in societies with grossly inadequate maternal health facilities.

Equally, some interview respondents highlighted that men quickly remarry when their wives die trying to give birth to sons. In addition, it was pointed out that a women's stress is heightened when the husband resorts to polygyny as though the women single-handedly determined the sex of her children. However there are instances where the desire for sons are not met by the new wife specifically married for that purpose leading to the reverse of the stress situation to the direction of the man instead.

Respondents also cited instances of situations where men abandoned their wives by not taking care and responsibility for their welfare. Such insensitivity has led to breakdown in spousal communication, and in certain cases abuse and divorce of partners. As was further noted, women have been ridiculed by husbands and kinsmen and or beaten up at the slightest misunderstanding—a situation that can be explained in terms of the latent reason ascribed to *sonlessness*. These treatments in some instances are carried out with such impunity that a woman regrets her involvement in the union.

It is necessary to note that any of these factors or a combination of some of them and depending on the psychological disposition of individuals can propel emotional stress among women in the category discussed. This scenario evokes tension and skepticism between spouses and ultimately leads to breakdown of order in households.

On Coping Strategy

Most women respondents agreed that divorce is avoided as much as possible given its inherent consequences. Therefore, most women affirmed their willingness to encourage men to bring in another woman (polygyny) in their quest for at least a son. Others suggested total submissiveness to the man's wishes on all issues even when they impinge negatively on their well-being, so as to make him happy as a strategy for preserving peace at homes.

Some of the respondents argued that such a situation calls for the engagement of women in meaningful economic activities. This according to them will not only ensure that the woman can take care of herself but also reduce the time she could spend together with the man. One of the respondents noted that most men maltreat their wives due to frustrations arising from poverty and that women who are economically independent experience less of those treatments. Respondents were aware of the fact that couples could adopt a son but noted that such practice is rare among Igbo people.

CONCLUSION

The present paper has explored the content and context of male-child preference among the Igbo of Nigeria to establish its inseparability with the patriarchal structure, which defines and determines the direction of social relationships. The significance attached to male roles and responsibility transcends social, economic and educational status. For the most part, sustenance of pronatalism among the people is situated within the perceived inevitability of having at least one male child by a couple. Rather than bolstering stronger marital bonds, such preference has accounted for wife-battering and abuse and breakdown in marriages in Igbo society.

Ordinarily, in cultures where polygyny is dwindling, such preferences would have been conceived as unnecessary and divisive. The transition to monogamy is a feature of contemporary Igbo society, yet there are few signs that the quest for male children would be abating in the near future. There seems to be a contradiction in the above scenario considering that polygyny explains competition among wives for inheritance of property and succession to the status of their husband which in Igbo society, except in few cases, were strictly among sons. However, beyond competition at nuclear family level, competition for resources is reinforced at the extended family level, again among male members. It is therefore suggested that, since male-child preference has been upheld over generations and given that changing times have not distorted its relative strength, more vigorous reorientation towards value, attitudinal and behavioural change should be emphasized in Igbo society.

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