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**IKWERRE CULTURAL PRACTICES ON GENDER INEQUALITY: THEORICO-PRACTICAL  
IMPLICATIONS**

**OKAJI, SOLOMON CHIBUIKE**

**Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities  
University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria**

**And**

**I. U. GWUNIREAMA (Ph.D)**

**Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities  
University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria**

**ABSTRACT**

*This paper contains a study of Gender inequality in Ikwerre cultural practices. The essay became necessary due to the observation of two main problems, viz, dehumanization of women and lack of a theoretical and systematic approach to Ikwerre Anthropology. The aim of the thesis is to investigate Ikwerre cultural practices on gender inequality and on the strength of that draws theoretical and practical implications. The implications drawn from the analysis include: anthropological, ethical, social and political as well as existential. The study adopted textual-analysis and hermeneutics methods. Evaluating Ikwerre practices on gender inequality, it was concluded that the system negates the fact of the autonomy of human will made necessary by human rationality. The thesis recommends among others the setting of social institutions that would consciously promote a more inclusive society among the Ikwerre people of Rivers State, Nigeria.*

*Keywords: Gender Inequality, Ikwerre, Culture, and Practice.*

**Introduction**

The concept of gender inequality appears to be a global mind-boggling issue. Researchers have observed that socio-cultural practices of gender inequality have been in existence right from antiquity and through different epochs. This is why Ekanen observed that “the oppression of women, their exploitation and cultural subjugation have eaten deep into the fabric of our societies and have remained the integral part of the political, economic and cultural system of all parts of the world” (Ekanem, 2005, p.17).

In the ancient era, for instance, it became a socio-political problem, in which male and female were treated differently. In Athens, for instance, gender inequality was practiced in the educational system when the boys and girls were separated for different functions and responsibilities. The girls were trained to serve the leaders and help in reproduction in other to

**IKWERRE CULTURAL PRACTICES ON GENDER INEQUALITY: THEORICO-PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

multiply their military that will help in defending the city, whereas the boys were sent into the military for training at a tender age to assist and defend the city of Athens. In a similar way, the Sophists expanded the range of philosophy beyond the cosmological concerns by focusing on the questions about human knowledge, values and action. Gorgias (483-375 B.C), a well-known Sophist, argued that inequality exists where the weak make laws to protect their interest in the society. Thrasymachus (380 BCE) in the *Republic* is portrayed as the Sophist who asserted that Injustice and inequality is to be preferred to life of justice. He regarded justice as being the interest of the stronger and believed that the “might is right” (Stumpf, 1994, p. 33-34). Socrates (470 BCE) found that laws were made to favour the state men as against the life of women in the society. He rose against injustice which eventually led to his death (p.38). Plato, a disciple of Socrates took up the challenge from where Socrates left the problem unresolved to find a lasting solution. Plato (c. 427-347 B.C), in his “*Politics*” proposed a potential equality of men and women but stating that women are not equal to men in terms of strength and virtue but equal to men in terms of rational and occupational capacity. However, Plato (375 BCE), in the “*Ideal republic*” argued that women should be educated and allowed alongside men without discrimination. He believed that such organization will give a best possible state and each individual will be able to develop to the fullest (p.75).

Also, Aristotle (384 BC) was one of the first ancient Greek philosophers to make a distinction between male and female gender in his philosophy. From a philosophical perspective, Aristotle attempts to provide answers to the questions that originated from the four categories of the reality of life identified as opposition, generation, wisdom and virtues. Such questions are as follows: (i) Are men and women opposite or the same? (ii) What is the relationship between a father’s and mother’s contribution to generation and sex identity? (iii) Are women and men wise in the same way or different ways? (iv) Are men and women virtuous in the same way or different ways?

To answer these questions, Aristotle argues that “with respect to the opposite form, the male is active, superior and hot while the female is inferior, cold, passive and privation. In generation, the seed of the male is fertile and provides soul while in the female; there is no seed but only possession of the body. With regard to the possession of wisdom, the male has rational soul capable of ruling irrational soul while the female has rational soul without authority over irrational soul. With respect to virtue, the male is gifted to rule the public sphere of activity by nature while the female is to obey by nature, (private sphere, and public sphere of activities)” (Prudence, 1985.p.57-58). Therefore, Aristotle argued that men by nature are superior to women since women by their very nature possess deficient capacity for reason and should be suited to obey men. In that sense, whereas, men become rulers and women become subject or the ruled. Notwithstanding, the questions of inequality filtered from Greek philosophy into Jewish philosophy and to other philosophies of the world.

Today, the philosophical understanding of the concept of gender inequality has taken different dimensions. Gender inequality is conceived as an ethical and socio-political process in which men and women are not treated equally. Radical feminists, see women as oppressed group who had to struggle for their own liberation against their oppress (Valerie, 1999, p.225). Pamela (2005) notes that radical feminism tends to believe that they have always been exploited and that

only revolutionary change can offer the possibility of their liberation. In the same vein, liberal feminists advocate for a holistic change in the social, political and economic system of western society, creation of equal opportunities, particular in education and work (Sibani, 2017 p. 436). However, the understanding and practices of gender inequality varies in different cultures and traditions.

Ikwerre Cultural practices on gender appear to dehumanize women. Women play subservient roles in social, political, economic, cultural and religious life of the society. They are considered not only as second class citizens but also those who cannot take up leadership roles in the family or receive chieftaincy and traditional titles especially the “Ogbaknor nde Eze” (Council of Chief). Consequently, they cannot claim any right of inheriting land or property. Besides, the question of premium on the male child is a problem that has remained unresolved in Ikwerre land till date. Having female as an only child, becomes a serious issue that attracts the attention of family members to seek for solutions. This bias of placing a male child higher than the female child has become a source of anxiety, conflicts, disunity, and divorce, broken home among others vices in Ikwerre cultural milieu, Rivers State, Nigeria.

However, due to the problem of subjectivism associated with cultural relativism, it is increasingly difficult to identify a rational foundation to fault the logic of such cultural malpractices. Besides, there is underlying problem of dearth of literature to establish the origin of such cultural practices so as to ascertain whether the ground of circumstantial changes could also warrant changes in cultural practices. The problem is further compounded by the inconsistencies and gaps in oral tradition concerning the origin of the practices.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate Ikwerre cultural practices on gender inequality and on the strength of that draws theoretical and practical implications. The arguments for the implications will be drawn from the anthropological, ethical, social and political as well as existential perspectives. Since it has been observed that the very concept of gender inequality entertains a faulty ontological essence of humanity, the thesis argues that women are rational and have the capability of autonomous moral judgements as well as the potential to be at liberty to choose and define their lives without being constrained by culture or traditions. This means that before traditional and cultural practices can be conceived as a justification for gender inequality, one must first be able to appropriately situate what it means to be “a human”. This by implication would mean that women by their existence are inherently rational and truly human with equal rights, dignity and responsibility. Meanwhile, defining the terms “gender inequality” and “culture” would be useful for our discussions.

### **Gender Inequality**

Clifford (2017) noted, that “gender inequality” refers to “discrepancy between men and women and differences in access to resources in health, education, political and economic empowerment and situations in which women are treated unequally with men” (Doi.10.4314/Ujah.V1812.25). Researchers have offered some other explanations of gender inequality. It is believed that most discussions on gender inequality centre on the degree of importance attributed to the male child over the female counterpart. In his own view, Edmond (2006) defines gender inequality as “the belief that one gender is superior to the other; specifically, that men are superior to women” (p.17). Similarly, it refers to “unequal treatment or perception

**IKWERRE CULTURAL PRACTICES ON GENDER INEQUALITY: THEORICO-PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

of individuals wholly or partly due to their gender” (Lippert, 2013. p.15). Gender inequality can also be described as discrimination on the bases of sex or gender causing one sex or gender to be routinely privileged or prioritized over another. In other words, it is the social process by which men and women are not treated equally. The treatment may arise from distinction regarding biology, psychology or cultural norms prevailing in the society. Some of these distinctions are empirically grounded while others appear to be socially constructed. Gender inequality is experienced differently across different cultures and it also affects non-binary people.

**Culture**

The concept “culture” originally seem unclear to researchers who compared organizations in different countries. To cultural anthropologists’ culture is neither obscure nor a residual. It is a social phenomenon that manifests itself quite clearly, even if the manifestations are not always easy to explain. Culture is not a specific material object that has its own objective existence. It is underpinned by real phenomena that; however, we perceive and analyze subjectively. Therefore, the best we can do to the concept is to look at the meaning and explore the subjective conceptualizations of various scholars.

The term “culture” “has its origin from the Latin word “*cultura*” derivative of the verb “*colo*” (infinitive “*colere*), meaning “to tend”, “to cultivate” and “to till” among other things” (Tucker, 1931, p.2). The etymological analysis of “culture” is quite uncontroversial. Definitions of culture abound and range from very complex to very simple approach. For instance, a complex definition was proposed by Kroeber and Parsons (1958), as “transmitted and created contend and patterns of values, ideas, and other symbolic meaningful system as factors in the shaping of human behaviours” (p.588). A less easily comprehensible definition was provided by White (1959/2007) when he holds that “by culture we mean an extra somatic, temporal continuum of things and events dependent upon symbols” (p. 3). According to Klukhohn (1955):

Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional, (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values (p. 86).

However, Jahoda’s (1984), understanding of culture appears significantly different from Klukhohn. Considering “culture” from its complex nature, Jahoda opines that “culture is the most elusive term in the vocabulary of the social sciences and the number of books devoted to the topic would fill many library shelves” (p.23). Segal (1984), noted that a practical solution should be given to the concept of culture. For him, it is not worth the effort to enhance the concept’s clarity or articulate a universally acceptable definition. In his view, “cultural analysts should abandon the struggle to conceptualize culture; instead, they should “turn to real business at hand”, which is to intensify the search for whatever ecological, sociological and cultural variables might link with established variations in human behaviour” (p. 154). Conceiving culture as a system of behaviour, Brown asserts that “culture consists of the conventional patterns of thought, activity and artefact

that are passed on from generation to generations” (p.40). This means that if a society demonstrates a recognizable pattern of activity such as cultivation of yam and accompanied by celebrations as well as its festivity, that is part of culture. Murdock (1940) dissociated behaviour from the scope of culture, stating that the former does not automatically follow the later, “which is only one of its determinants” (p.366). Haviland (1990), in his own investigation summed up the views of many anthropologists when he said that:

Recent definitions (of culture) tend to distinguish more clearly between actual behaviour on the one hand, and the abstract values, beliefs, and perceptions of the world that lie behind that behaviour or the other. To put in another way, culture is not observable behaviour, but rather the values and beliefs that people use to interpret experience and generate behaviour, and that is reflected in their behaviour” (p. 30). Whether behaviours should or should not be considered part of culture is a matter of abstract conceptualization.

On a more practical note, culture means the ideas, customs and social behaviour of a people handed down from one generation to the next. It is a way of life of a group of people; the behaviours, beliefs, values and symbols that they accept generally. According to Edward Taylor (1974), it encompasses the social behaviour and norms found in human societies, as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities and habits of the individuals in the group (p.10). In a broad sense, culture means cultivated behaviour, that is, the totality of a person’s learned accumulated experience which is socially transmitted, or more precisely, behaviour through social learning. It is the sum total of the learned behaviour of a group of people which is generally regarded to be the tradition of that people and are transmitted from one generation to the next. The Merriam Webster’s Universal Dictionary and Thesaurus renders it as “the appreciation and understanding of the arts; skills, etc.; of a given people in a given period; the entire range of customs, beliefs, social forms and material traits of a racial, religious or social group” (Geddes and Grosset, 2003. p.134). It is the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization. It is also used to denote the complex networks of practices and accumulated knowledge and ideas that are transmitted through social interaction that exist in specific human groups or traditions. Culture as used in this study is learned behaviour of a group of people handed down from generation to the next.

### **History and People of Ikwerre Ethnic Group**

The Ikwerres, like any other nations are known by a common descent, language, culture, leadership and historical traditions. They have ever since regarded themselves as a distinct group and have happily come a long way in their struggle for self- identity as evident in their origin, geographical and socio-political setting, and there is a well recognition of their language (Ikwerre) as one of the Nigerian languages.

Some scholars noted that Ikwerre nation is one of the largest ethnic groups in the present day Rivers State, in Nigeria. Amadi Nna (1993) holds that: “the Ikwerres are a small but distinct tribe that has specific linguistic, social and cultural traits formation that distinguish them from other close neighbouring tribes like the Ijaws and Ibos” (para.1). History has it that majority of the Ikwerre settlements have their roots traceable from the old Benin Empire. In the words of K.O. Amadi (1993), “Traditions suggest that Ikwerre is a nickname given to Iwhnuruoḡna people.....who have ever distinguished themselves in their own language and with unique culture and traditions”.

**IKWERRE CULTURAL PRACTICES ON GENDER INEQUALITY: THEORICO-PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Eric Amadi (2018), acclaimed that “Iwhnurɔhna people descended from the ancient Benin Kingdom. The name of the grand ancestor is Akalaka. Their relations in Rivers State are Ekpeye and Ogba people. The reigning Oba of Benin when Akalaka, the ancestor of Ithru ɔ ha (later called Iwhnurɔ hna) fled was “Oba Ewuare” (Ogwaro). Akalaka, a member of the Benin royal family, sneaked away from the palace in the 13th century on allegation of plotting assassination of the Oba. He died in 1462. “Iwhnurɔ hna” his third son settled east of the Sombrero River by 1538 AD.

N.M.T. Solomon (2004), a native of Ikodu Ubie in Ekpeye land, in his narrative draws heavily from the now authenticated written historical records delivered by various informed sources including “Eketu (Weber) of Ubeta, assumed to have lived for over two hundred (200) years as the oldest man in all Ekpeye, Ogba and Iwhnurɔ hna (or Ikwerre), at that time was asked to narrate the history and customs of Ekpeye people” as unfolded in his lifetime. Here is what he said, which has been validated by the accounts of the current generation through questions and direct interviews thereby increasing our level of confidence on the history: Ekpeye, born in Benin, was the first of the three sons of Akalaka. While in Ndoni, he married a second wife to gain the love and favour of the people. The new wife gave birth to a son, which he named Ogba. Akalaka was still in Ndoni when his first wife, the mother of Ekpeye, gave birth to his third son called Ithruoha (Ikwerre). Similar historical fact by J.N. Olise (1971) averred that: “Akalaka, a member of the Benin royal family, fled with his wife from Benin to Ndoni, a community located close to the River Niger, to save the life of his new born baby (Ekpeye) ... While at Ndoni, Akalaka took a second wife. ... Akalaka had two sons, Ekpeye – born to him by his Benin wife, and Ogba – born to him by his Ndoni wife. According to F.E. Otuwarikpo (1994): "After the death of Akalaka in 1462 AD, his two sons, Ekpeye and Ogba had conflict, which compelled Ogba, the younger son, to move northwards where he founded Ohiakwo (Obigwe) and settled with his family.

Ekpeye who remained at Ula-Ubie had seven sons – Ubie, Akoh, Upata, Igbuduya, Ekpe, Awala and Asa. The last three sons – Ekpe, Awala and Asa – crossed to the other side of Sombreiro River (present day Ikwerre land and settled there since 1538 AD.” He added that: “Ekpe migrated to present day Rumuekpe and spread through Elele (Alimini), Ndele, Rumuji and part of Ibaa. Awala migrated to present day Isiokpo ...” Amadi-Nna (1993) also said that “Akalaka migrated with his half brother called Ochichi from the area of Benin Empire”. Ochichi sons were Ele (Omerere, now Elele), Elu (Elumuoha, now Omerelu), Egbe (Egbeda) and Mini (Alimini, Isiokpo). The crucial point here, which is of great importance in tracing the joint origin of the ancestors of the Old Ahoda Division (in the governor Diете-Spiff administration), is the mention of the number of children that Akalaka had, namely: Ekpeye, Ogba and “Ithruɔ ha” (Ikwerre). It is noteworthy that the pedigree and name of Ikwerre people, Iwhnurɔ hna, obviously took its root from this original name – Ithru ɔ ha. Chief Solomon therefore establishes a very vital historical link, which has been missing in literature on Ikwerre origin that would assume more significance in the discourses of Ikwerre genealogy in the future – the fact that “Akalaka” was the direct father of “Ithruɔ ha” (Ikwerre).

“Iwhnurɔ hna”, in Ikwerre parlance, means the face of the community (town, city or village). Nigerian colonial history records that the name "Ikwerre" was given by the colonial administration when they wanted to acquire the Rebis waterfront to build the wharf. Using an Ibo interpreter to talk to the illiterate Rebis (Port Harcourt) chiefs, they asked them: Would you permit us to use the

waterfront to build the wharf for ships to berth? And they answered: "A *KWERULEM*", meaning - "We have agreed." What the white-man was hearing was "Ikwerre," so he recorded it in the official gazette that the "*IKWERRE PEOPLE*" have agreed for the colonial administration to build the wharf. And since it was the official record of government, the name Ikwerre became the name of the "*Iwhnurohna*" people in all official documentations till date. Geographically, Ikwerre people inhabit the upland part of Rivers State and are located within the geo-morphology of the area found in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria which was created in the Holocene by the process of sedimentation. It has a population of about 2.6 million people. The Ikwerres are made up of four major clans namely: "*Ishimbam*", "*Ishiali*", "*Risimini*", and "*Opa*" (Obio/Akpor/Port Harcourt). These clans are further classified into four Local Government Areas, namely: Emuoha, Ikwerre, Obio/Akpo and Port Harcourt.

### **Socio-Political Organization of Ikwerre Ethnic Group**

Socio-politically, the Ikwerres live a well delineated clan with each having its own paramount ruler known as "Nyeweli". Traditionally, Ikwerre people have well respected traditional administrative institutions to ease the challenges of social, political and administrative activities at all units. Goddy Wilson (2018) holds that such institutions are families, village and clan youth forum, men and women associations, age grade, general assembly, council of chief and council of village heads (p. 52). Since they have no overall paramount ruler but designated rulers that occupy legislative seats that are vested with the power of leadership to oversee the affairs of the people in their communities, settle dispute where necessary and carry out development projects (p. 2). It is pertinent to note that these leaders are mostly approved by their constituents. However, all paramount rulers in Ikwerre are united in what is known as "*Ogbaknor Ikwerre*", which was formed in 1963 as an umbrella of socio-cultural organization of Ikwerre people.

There are also family groups which make up the clan. These families own lands where they cultivate and move for settlements. The lands are shared to individuals by family heads. The settlement is a form of communal life where family groups that are related by bloodline live together that makes up kindred of a small community. Leadership among the people is by the head which is controlled by the male folks (i.e., the eldest among the men line). These men likewise become the titled men known as "Owhor holders". Administration of this sub-group in reference to the village is usually in the hands of the elders who are heads of various families. The belief is that these elders are very close to their ancestors who take precedence in the scheme of their families. The hierarchical order on which the families are governed is based mainly on seniority. The head of the council is the eldest male member of the patrilineage. In other small families living in homesteads, the hierarchy revolves around the first male child.

There are other institutions in Ikwerre culture and traditions that promote socio-political activities. These include market places and Ogbaknor. The market places form the foundation of various communities. It constitutes a vital and colourful component of socio-cultural life. According to Imaah (2004), the market place affords the agrarian people a place for commercial exchange of goods and services. The very concept of market in Ikwerre culture is extended beyond the normal practice of buying and selling of goods and services. Imaah (2004) also noted that "the market is seen as the socio-cultural space that serves as the arena for the dissemination and assimilation of vital information on various aspects of life in the society" (p. 69). Significantly, the market days give

**IKWERRE CULTURAL PRACTICES ON GENDER INEQUALITY: THEORICO-PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

rooms for political and administrative purposes in various communities of the land. It provides an opportunity for the veneration of the ancestors and paying homage to deities.

The socio-political term use to express the gathering of Elder's Council is "Ogbaknor Nde Eze". It serves as a democratic institution where deliberations and decisions are made, justice upheld, and sanctions given. In support of this view, Okajile observes that, "the chiefs, elders and *Owhor holders* (title holders) are predominantly men; they have prerogative to make local laws because the Ikwerre ethnic group is a patriarchal society where men decide what happens" (Okajile, 2009. p. 63).

The same direction of thought is captured in the statement of Ahonsi when he notes that:

The differentiation between men's and women's role is one of complimentary and superior relationship in favour of the men. It involves a hierarchy in which men are given greater leverage over decision making and resources than women; the result is a cultural setting that invariably promotes male domination and female subordination" (Ahonsi, 1997, p. 8).

This means that, in Ikwerre socio- political organization, there is an existence of patriarchal system whereby women are tactically excluded from full participation in social, cultural, and political activities.

**Religious Organization of Ikwerre Ethnic Group**

Ikwerre people are deeply religious and they belief strongly in one Supreme Being (Chiokike). Their religiosity according to Wotogbe, Weneka (1996) possesses a pantheistic view of life and the universe in which divinity is recognized in every aspect of life either spiritual or material with "Eli" (the earth goddess) as the paramount deity in their pantheon. In his words:

The divinities are believed to be instrumental in directing people on the part to moral rectitude. Certain days of the week, certain seasons of the year, and certain period of the day are regarded as sacred in connection with the worship of various deities and in obedience to the behest of Eli and violation is met with serious sanctions (Wotogbe, 1996. p.137).

There is the cult of "Eli" (earth goddess) among the Ikwerre people which in itself is a complex phenomenon. *Eli* is often associated with the feminine gender as she is believed to have conceived the world in her womb and responsible for the procreation (mother earth) while watching over the activities of humans and their interactions with others in society. *Eli* among Ikwerre people because of its potency is held in high regard and reverence. There are obvious serious implications for profamatory actions against the *Eli* at all levels. This may vary according to the offence and the family or clan involved. The implications for defiling the *Eli* are usually grave and so not contemplated. The importance of the *Eli* as the arch deity is best seen in the myth, ritual, taboo, belief, sanctions and emotional commitment that this worship engenders on the people. *Eli* is therefore seen as the instruments of social, political and economic control.



Another important area of religious organization for the Ikwerre people is the cult of the ancestors. Ancestral veneration is the basis for solidarity and of submission to authority. The ancestors are the departed members of the family or clan. They are the living dead and serve as mediators between the living and the death. They are conceived as those who have lived good life and died good death and have all rites associated with them through some rituals and ceremonies. Because of these pedigrees, ancestors constitute veritable source of norms, values and customs. That is why they are consulted, why prayers and offerings are made to them. They are believed to provide personal order and stability to the members of their families, communities, clans and ethnic group since they commune more intimately with the divinities.

### Gender in Ikwerre Culture

Gender in Ikwerre culture is conceived and interpreted according to the biological and physiological aspect of human nature. Etymologically the term “man” in Ikwerre is derived from the word “Yeruka” which is a combination of two words “ye” meaning one that “possessed” and “ruka” means strength, power or gifts. “Yeruka” then means one who has possessed power and strength. Socio-culturally, it could be interpreted as someone who is physically and mentally strong as well as one who has a reputation for firmness. It is believed that the power of the man resides in his innate values, his sense of balance, intellect and his ability to stand by his words.

In a similar way, the woman is described as “Yerinya” which is also a combination of two words “ye” meaning one that has or possesses and “rinya” meaning “little or “weak”. Put together as one who has or possesses little power and strength. Gender is simply understood either as strong or weak gender. Ikwerre people believe in the metaphysical explanation of gender inequality; whereby men are considered as strong gender and the women as weak gender. Furthermore, it is believed that the strength of a woman is a participation in that which nature has given to man. This idea is proven in the physical masculine nature of man and it is a criterion that gives men the power of leadership over the women. Imaa (2004) notes that: “in Ikwerre cultural practices on gender, men and women are not seen as equals. This why Ikwerre people will always insist that women must be controlled by men and succumb to the authority of men especially those of their husbands and senior family members” (p.41).

There again, Language is a strong tool that differentiates gender in Ikwerre culture. Communication among the people is made possible through the use of languages that affect the social construct and entire life of the people. The emphasis on spoken words and art of conversation is made manifest in adages and proverbs. As regards gender language in Ikwerre culture, is in form proverbs and names are used as tool to inject and encode negative appellations and stereotypes on gender to the disadvantages of women. This is highly impressionable as it forms into the minds of people a particular way of behaviour and social construct, either positive or negative. For instance, in the household circle, the “head-shoulder” metaphor is expressed with the proverb, *Yeruka bvu yesi ezi no oro* (man is the head of the family). This proverb clearly suggests that man is the head of the family, the provider, the breadwinner and the financier. The name “*oriakwu*” (the consumer, enjoyer of man’s wealth) is given to women which is a gender stereotype that sees the men as provider, while the women are consumers. The name above expresses vividly the consumer and enjoyer personality of women. Such name like “*dike*” (a man with exceptional strength), “*Yeogu*” (a warrior) are used to buttress men’s superiority over women in terms of power and strength.

**IKWERRE CULTURAL PRACTICES ON GENDER INEQUALITY: THEORICO-PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

In the marriage circle, some proverbs are also used to show women as commodities to be bought by men. Proverbs like “Yeriya bvu aku” (a girl child is a wealth kept in reserve). The use of these idioms, proverbs, names and literary expressions have formed an unbalanced gender categorization and stereotyped connotations that show the tyranny of patriarchal worldviews of Ikwerre people and have limited the potentials of freedom and achievements of women. These ideologies give the man a sense of ownership of the woman who becomes his property.

**Family and Gender:** In the family structure, there is a high value for a male child over the female child. Many a time, no matter the number of female children in the family, without the male child, the couple is almost regarded as not having one. For instance, “the desire to continue the family name”; which is believed that the lineage of the family lies in the hand of the male child. The male child grows up, stays in the family, marries a wife and starts reproducing to continue the lineage of the family. But the female child grows up and is married to a man, leaves the family, deletes the family name and bears the surname of the husband. This factor rest on some anthropological interpretations that tend to defend the position of the society that is fundamentally patriarchal in nature. Patriarchy in Ikwerre culture can simply be described as a structure in which men have power over women. It is rooted both in the biological nature of human and social structure of the community. Biologically, it is believed that the reproductive faculty of the female sex dwelt more in producing offspring, having the wombs that carries pregnancy and subsequently caring for children. This is what Williams (2003) called “biology is destiny” (p. 77). Biology is destiny ideology gave credence and birth to assigning roles and functions where men in the society have more advantageous and higher positions. Socially, it is believed that the women have their unique way of doing things, such as eating habits and manner of cooking and providing cooked food for men, washing of dirty cloths, patience, hospitable and more. These reasons provide evidence why women should be depended on men and therefore, play subordinate roles.

Another major reason while the male child is preferred to the female child in Ikwerre culture is the practice of patrilinealism. This mechanism entails that succession and inheritance of titles and property occur in the male lineage. Men have the traditional rights to inherit property whereby the right of women to inherit land and property cannot even be contested or discussed in the Council of elders. This is because, under native law and custom, women are understood as those whose stay in their fathers’ family is temporary. Hence, they are not given equal allocation with their male counterparts and at the same time not given comfort and confidence that the men are given in the family. Take for instance, the female child is seen as a prospective wife to another man who will come and marry her out of the house. On this ground women are tagged as those who can never inherit their fathers’ property.

Furthermore, there is an aspect of primogeniture whereby men are vested with the right to control and manage all the property flowing from the eldest son at the death of their father or if there is none to the brother next in hierarchy. This implies that women are human beings with lesser right. Hence, they have no right of property inheritance whether leased or acquired. A Widow cannot inherit her late husband’s property because such property at the death of her husband is recognized as family property. Also, daughters do not have any right to inherit the properties of their fathers; women have no access to ancestral land or house. There is also a

mindset that even a woman is thought to be a property of the man. However, in the present days, extra legal factors are required for any widow to enforce a right to own a property from her husband.

**Metaphysical Dimension of Gender in Ikwerre Society:** Metaphysical dimension of gender in Ikwerre society is easily understood from the basic concept of metaphysics which means “beyond the physical” or “beyond visibility”. There is a compelling believe that sex or gender determination is the responsibility of beings, especially the earth deity called “*Chi*”. The “*Chi*” deity is the spiritual parent of both male and female gender that manifests realities in human affairs. The metaphysical realities are often associated with concepts through which gender is perceived in Ikwerre culture as a gift from the “*Chi*” deity”. As the principal deity of human creation, “*Chi*” deity has various influences to one’s moral character and general behaviour. However, there is a strong believe that this mystical being has power to decide the sex of gender of a child (male or female). Sometimes, human problems such as bareness and procreation of same sex are discerned as the will and the intention of the “*Chi*” deity. No wonder, at the birth of a new baby, the familiar and common question being asked is “Is it a boy or a girl? This means that concern for the differentiation of sex and gender issue starts right from birth in Ikwerre cultural society. Moreover, it cannot be ascertained whether the “*Chi*” deity should be addressed in a masculine phrase or feminine terms but what seems more convincing is that the “*Chi*” deity is beyond categories.

Since, gender has a kind relationship with the transcendent (on different levels, and varied capacities), there are some behaviours that are rendered as taboo and abominable. This classification corresponds to what is known in Ikwerre moral setting as ‘custom/tradition’- (Omeni obodo) as opposed to ‘abomination’ — (Omeni elu). The custom concerns what ought-to-be-done in the land, while abomination - (‘omeni elu) refers to what-is-abominable, and reprehensible in the land. For instance, a woman is forbidden to claim tree or shelve her hairs while the husband is still alive. On this, Nwala (1985) notes, morality in this sense refers to this ethical dialectics of positive and negative dimensions whereby the positive enjoins actions to-be-done and the negative prohibits those to-be-avoided” (p. 138).

### **Status of Men and Women in Ikwerre Culture**

The status of women in Ikwerre culture has been a subordinate position. Men are the custodians of authority not only in the family but in the community. According to Chidi (2021), there is the belief that women should always succumb to the authority of men (p. 64). Women for instance, do not have the right to greet the Council of Elders. If a woman has opinion to express, a man among her folk stands in for her to greet the Council and after which she can be allowed to speak. Furthermore, men have the exclusive role of performing kola-nut rituals. Women do not perform the kola- nut ritual by themselves either in public or in private. If the need for it arises, a man would be invited to preside over the ritual. They are only to partake of it when it is shared and that is, after every male present (regardless of age) has taken his share.

More so, men play the role of ensuring security of the society in times of family conflicts and tribal wars. They occupy the status of providing economic support for the women. Secondly, there is a domestic regulation of service exchange between men and women. Those attributes seen as feminine or as pertaining to women are exclusive for women. For example, Chitu.W. P (2017)

**IKWERRE CULTURAL PRACTICES ON GENDER INEQUALITY: THEORICO-PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

observed that in some cultures (Ikwerre), nursing of children and cooking are seen as feminine roles and should not be exhibited by men (p. 18). A man who does this for his wife can easily be referred to as a woman or one who is not man enough. In spite this cultural understanding, Ikwerre philosophy of life embraces what we call hierarchical structure of differentiation between men and women.

**Ikwerre Cultural Practices on Gender Inequality: theorico-practical Implications**

The implications of Ikwerre Cultural Practices on Gender Inequality could be viewed from the anthropological, ethical, socio-political and existential perspectives.

**Anthropological Implications:** Ikwerre people belief that women are biologically inferior to men. This means that they are not fully develop with the capacity to articulate the affairs of life. But from the anthropological point of view, a human being is human and different from other beings because of the possession of rationality. What makes one human is not the biology but the rationality that gives him/her the ability of self-consciousness. The implication of this is that the female gender according to Ikwerre cultural practices is not completely human but needs to depend on male to be completely human.

However, the finding of this study from the anthropological perspective is that women, who by virtue of their uniqueness possess a dignity that is inextinguishable. This dignity is rooted in the sacredness of the human person that cannot be destroyed even in the face of inequality, culture or traditions. To disregard this inherent dignity in women is to multiply the problem of violence and social inequality. Hence, we summit that women’s brains are complete, therefore, they are fully human and rational as well as their male counterpart.

**Ethical Implications:** from the ethical point of view, it must also be clarified that the possession of rationality is consistent with the possession of an autonomous will. Kant (1948), notes that “the autonomy of the will is the seat of morality” (p.95). But the trust of Ikwerre cultural practices on gender inequality implies that women do not have autonomy of the will. This means that they lack the power to make choices and decide what they want. On the other hand, this study affirms that any argument that attributes inferior rationality to any human person by implication is an argument that erodes the person’s capability for autonomous moral judgement. The consequence of this is the trauma of low self-esteem. For instance, women will have the impression that they cannot positively engage in things that will make them resilient in their approach to men. When women feel inferior, there is a feeling of unhappiness and dissatisfaction with their status in life and they find it difficult to recognize positive qualities thereby holding onto negative views of their abilities, character and appearances.

**Socio-political Implications:** given the fact that Ikwerre cultural practices on gender inequality refuse to recognise the intellectual ability of women, their creativity and higher participation in the society, it therefore follows that in social stratifications, there will be three classes of people in the society, namely: the class of elderly men, class of male youths, the other class to which all female and children belong. According to this stratification, therefore, Ikwerre men by cultural practices will be willing to place the male youth above their mothers. For instance, kola-nut ritual in Ikwerre

is only performed by men. Women can only take part in consuming the kola-nut when every male child must have had their share irrespective of their age. Politically, the study of Ikwerre cultural practices on gender inequality expressively states that women have no say in the society and cannot have any office in government. Nonetheless, the findings of this study is that women have the ability and capacity to participate in public governance, leadership and perform inclusive roles even in the "Elder's Council".

**Existentialist Implications:** the basic element of women's subjugation and discrimination in Ikwerre cultural practices is the argument that rest on the metaphysical understanding of gender in which the "*Chi deity*" is responsible for determining the male or female gender. This argument suggests that, the "*Chi deity*" have prepared a fixed essence and gave women existence within the framework of that essence. It then means that they would not be free to make decisions for themselves.

However, existentialists have argued that existence precedes essence. This means that human person has no fixed essence but have the autonomy to act and make free decision/choices and that nothing has meaning "apriori"; life has no meaning "apriori" and it is human beings by their freedom that give meaning to life and the world around them. The implication of this argument is that, it is the responsibility of every individual to forge his existence by developing himself/herself into those potentials that are humanly possible within the world or environment into which one is thrown. The main idea is that the human being is a dignified free being, who shapes his or her own life rather than being shaped or pushed around by the world, culture or tradition in the manner of a flock or herd animals. It follows that women should be at liberty to choose and define their lives since there is no existential barrier such as culture, tradition, social, economic or political condition that can serve as an excuse for one not to exercise his or her freedom and advance in his or her potentialities. But by Ikwerre cultural practices, it no longer matters whether a person of female gender advances herself into higher heights than persons of male gender, because, irrespective of such advancement, such a female will be seen or counted as inferior to the male gender. For example, the premium on a male child leads naturally to an understanding that a particular gender must necessarily be superior to the other which places a surpassing challenge in the dynamics of the family ideals.

The practical effect is that there are some cases where women are neglected or thrown out of their matrimonial homes for failure to give birth to male children. In other words, a woman will not establish her marital ground on the husband's house until she has given birth to a male child. A husband who has no male child is perceived as not being man enough. This will result to weighty pressures on the man to seek for solutions. One of the possible solutions is for the man to marry a second wife. The woman may also stand the risk of marital infidelity or being divorced by her husband for not being able to give birth to a male child. What is funny about this is that the whole blame goes to the woman alone without considering the role of the man in the fertilization process of sex selection. Chief B. W Dike (2021), in one of the oral interviews during "*Ogbaknor Ubima*" (Council of Chief), remarked that "the fact of a woman not being able to give birth to a male child is always perceived as the fault of the woman and not the man. Thus, everything that goes in the wrong direction in the family is attributed to the mistake of a woman". Elder Samuel Amadi (2020), in another scene of oral interview, noted that "the subordination of women in Ikwerre ethnic group

**IKWERRE CULTURAL PRACTICES ON GENDER INEQUALITY: THEORICO-PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

is a cultural heritage. It is a value that Ikwerre people have that guides the activities of men and women, each knowing their boundaries and limit. Through these practices, we come to understand each other more and this understanding would lead to peace and harmony. But the effect of the cultural practices as regards gender inequality on women is the understanding that a woman is not truly on ground in her family without a male child. However, the origin and foundation of this belief remain unclear.

Furthermore, using the phrase of the idea expressed in Ikwerre communal society that it is the community that defines the person as person, not some isolated quality of rationality. It implies that women can only exercise their freedom within the framework of the community. Hence, it is to be argued that this understanding is highly deceptive and at best an incomplete truth since it reduces women to mere set of extrinsic relationship with others; whereas a woman ought to be seen as self and no other determined.

Another social implication to this unfair treatment of women is the practice of giving birth of many children in search of male offspring which will result to social insecurity. This will also cause massive strain on the women's health as well as increase in population that affects the national resources and the state's ability to provide for all her citizens.

From the economic perspectives, it has been observed that where economic inequality is practiced, the important role and contribution of women in the process of development is minimized and given the fact that any economy that is dominated by a stereotype culture cannot be diversified. The implication of this is food insufficiencies which result to poverty and underdevelopment. Considering the fact that some of these women cannot provide the needed food for their family, it will eventually result to over dependence on their husbands for economic welfare. This means that a society in which women are given opportunities to exhibit their potential will emerge as a society with a growing economy.

**Evaluation**

As a people, the Ikwerres believe in the inequality of male and female gender, a concept which has continued to generate contemporary ethical, political and socio-cultural debate. This concept remains something unique and interesting. Further justification was made to give male and female their place in the society. To show the premium on a male child, a distinction between "yeruka" and Yeriya was drawn in which it has become a practice that the male child is superior while the female child is inferior. Therefore, superiority entails that men should rule over women both in the household and state. This is because the household obligations of men and women are distinct in such a way that the business of the man is "to acquire" while that of the woman is to keep. This as a practice has become the reason women should be excluded from politics and public realms since they exist for the services of men like slaves for their masters. The claim that the *Chi deity* have prepared a fixed essence and gave women existence within the framework of that essence by making them emotional, irrational and inferior to men is a strong motion that disqualifies women from participating in elders' council as well as the right to inherit land and property.

However, one of the problems associated with this assumption is that it reduces women as second class citizens. Again, the physiological understanding of the human person makes us to know that a person is always either a male or female. Thus, no definition of the human person will afford to ignore the relevance of gender issues to creating and understanding of human nature. In the society we find human persons of disparate gender and identity the male have similar features that make them males as well as females. This forms a basis for arguing that their natures are unique but uniqueness is never reducible to inequality. Hence, where gender disparities are used to form a basis for superiority and inferiority it becomes questionable whether the affinities for asserting uniqueness are mistaken for unequalness. Since culture posits uniqueness as a factor for women subordination to men, it is to be taken that the culture is guilty of mistaking uniqueness for unequalness.

Similarly, the theory of distributive justice faults Ikwerre cultural practices on women as regards equal opportunities to socio-political functions. This means that any philosophy in which the socio-political and economic welfare of the society are entrusted into the hands of men and a culture where women do not have equal opportunities to social welfare as well as property inheritance with men contradicts the law of distributive justice which justifies equal rights and opportunities to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties for all (Rawl,1999.p.3) This is where John Rawl's concept of distributive justice helps us in condemning the gender problem that is associated with the right of inheritance in Ikwerre culture.

More so, adopting Kant's deontology (categorical imperative) which prescribes that a class of rational agent should not be treated as having higher intrinsic value than others (Kant,1996. p.433). Ikwerre cultural practices on gender inequality can be denounced for promoting a culture in which a class of rational moral agents is treated as having higher intrinsic value than the other. Therefore, every form of human discrimination equally implies a disregard for human dignity and fundamental human rights and freedom. Dignity and worth of woman suggest that the political, economic, scientific and cultural agenda of the society must be inspired by the awareness of the primacy of each human being irrespective of gender. It is on this ground that we note that women should not be treated in the society as a means to achieve, political or cultural end for men because to affirm their dignity is to ascertain their intrinsic worth. This implies that any society that recognizes and upholds class distinctions especially in terms of gender, experience, endowment, achievements, opportunities and benefits contradicts the dignity of women.

Giving a nod to the existentialist notion of freedom which negates the imposition of limits on the individual (Sartre 1996, p. 541), it can be deduced that Ikwerre cultural practices on gender impose limit on the freedom of women while ignoring the fact that all human beings are born free and equal. Limitation can be faulted on the platform of equality conferred by nature on all persons. This also implies that freedom is identical with human existence and there cannot be any justifiable human discrimination based on individual or personal gender clause. This point buttresses the fact that society cannot strive with imposition of limit on certain gender; for social responsibility are saddled on all genders equally. Therefore, a society cannot be well ordered if it places limit on individual freedom and discriminate persons on the basis of gender uniqueness.

Besides, Ikwerre cultural practices on gender inequality is guilty of dividing humanity because he failed to realize that human nature is one and recognition of inequality in human can

**IKWERRE CULTURAL PRACTICES ON GENDER INEQUALITY: THEORICO-PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

only fault pertains and not to human nature. While arguing on the nature of human person, Stella (2013) notes that “there is neither inequality in human nature nor are there unequal human persons” (p.72). It is pertinent to know that human nature is fundamentally equal since there is only one human nature in all men. This logically implies that a thing cannot be greater than or superior to itself.  $1=1$ . A thing is always equal to itself. One is not less or greater than one. That is, one is always equal to one, where one is human nature. Therefore, applying this model of formal mathematics to human nature, it becomes intuitive knowledge that human nature, which is always one and the same, is always equal to it. There is nothing like one human nature less or greater than another human nature, since there is only one human nature in every member of the human family. Such a simplistic approach adopted by men in defining humanity is not logically tenable. It is the equality of human nature that is the basis of equal right, dignity and freedom of all human persons. So, there is nothing like a justifiable gender inequality that should be based on biology or social status.

**Conclusion**

From the above mentioned, it is obvious that Women by virtue of their uniqueness and existence possess a dignity that cannot be relinquished either by culture or traditions because it is difficult to establish any argument that attributes inferior rationality to any human person. The reasons for Ikwerre cultural practices on gender inequality are geared into believing that women possess no intellectual ability and therefore women should be deprived of higher participation in governance and remain subservient to men. The argument of this study is that women have the ability and capacity to participate in public governance and leadership and should be given a place in “Elder’s Council” (*Ogbaknor Nde Eze*). Women should be at liberty to forge their existence by developing those potentials that are humanly possible within the world they find themselves. No society can strive to high level of development if a particular gender is being discriminated against because no gender is a monopoly of knowledge, intelligence and skills. The paper recommends that since constitutional laws are essential but are not sufficient to curtail the spate of gender inequality in Ikwerre cultural practices, it seems indispensable to set up a social institution (committee) that will report to the state all forms of violence and discrimination against women. This commission will be charged with the responsibility of looking into the affairs and the status of women in Ikwerre society. Those who hold the socio-cultural idea of denigrating women as inferior sex, based as it were, on sheer patriarchy or at times chauvinism should consider a change of tune in order to align Ikwerre culture with global best practices where women are agents of positive change.

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