Women and Socio-Cultural Discrimination in Africa: A Focus on Some Ethnic Groups in Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Women and socio-cultural discrimination in Africa: A focus on some ethnic groups in Rivers State, Nigeria is the focus of this research. Women experience different forms of violence because of their gender, especially in the social sphere. Despite this alarming fact, for several decades, changes have taken place to overcome gender discrimination against women and girls in the public and private spheres, particularly with an increase in sexual violence within the home. Historically and even to contemporary times the issue cultural discrimination against women has raised a lot of concerns. The average African or Nigerian woman experiences cultural discrimination almost in all societies especially in Rivers State. Gender inequality is a socio-cultural phenomenon that divides various categories such as male and female with a very high bias on the female (women) less than the other. However, this research addresses cultural, discrimination in some ethnic groups (Ikwerri, Ogba, Ekpeye, Abua, Etche, Ogoni) in Rivers State how women in some ethnic groups are treated unjustly or discriminated against in areas of marriage, inheritance, burial rites, education and even economically. It further discussed the socio-religious remedies to women cultural discrimination in Rivers State. The analytical method with the utilization of books,

journals, internet sources, and personal interviews from different ethnic groups in Rivers State were carried-out. This research looked at recommendations that decision making process and community leadership (politics) roles should be accessible to women since development is not gender biased. There should be awareness campaign on women rights.

Keywords: Discrimination, Ethnic Group, Rivers State, Socio-Cultural, Women,

Introduction

Nigeria is blessed with rich cultural heritage as a country in Africa. Rivers State is situate in the South-South region of Nigeria in the continent of Africa. The African traditional society is a homogenous and close one with unique characteristic features that set it apart from other cultures of the world. The culture of Africa is varied and manifold; consisting of a mixture of countries with various tribes that each has their unique characteristic from the continent of Africa, (Sibani and Nyama, 2024).

Most cultures in Africa, do not value women as they are treated with disdain and levity. Women are made to be seen and not heard or matters of critical issues that demands their input and opinion. Gender inequality is apparently persuasive in myriads dimensions of social life. It is likely an orchestration of discrimination nation against women in diverse societal ways. Gender discrimination in Nigeria is very alarming in our contemporary time (Bassey and Ojua, 2001). Throughout the ages, there has always been bias and prejudice against women that are manifested in all spheres of human relations. It has always been exhibited in different ways such as social, cultural, economic, religious and most importantly, politically and socio-culturally (Adejuwon, 2011).

According to Haralambos and Holborn (2008), many women think they have been discriminated by men, and perceived they are relegated to specific roles. These roles include becoming mothers and wives, performing domestic works like cooking, cleaning, serving and taking care of the man, and being subordinate to make authority. According to Dogo (cited in Ahiauzu, Ngulube and Agborubere, 2023), stressed that women occupy a position of subordination to men and have

continually being discriminated on the basis of sex in their intention and attempt to partake in different spheres of social life.

Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979) states that "CEDAW" is often described as an international bill of rights for women. The convention defines discrimination as any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women of human rights and fundamental freedoms in a political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field. Rose (2023), states that despite the Constitutional provision for gender equality and nondiscrimination, women continue to suffer injustices and marginalization. This is often as a result of discriminatory laws, religious and cultural norms, gender stereotypes, low levels of education, and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women. Charity (2017) opines that women were restricted to home affairs only and misconception of them as imbecile place them heavily at various socio-economic disadvantages. Women were not only cut off from the world relationship and political participation but also made to become subordinate docile and suffer untold hardship

Definition of Culture

Every society is characterized by a unique culture which guide and order their lives and behavior. Culture is a complex system of shared beliefs, value, practices and material object that characterize a group of people. It is learned, dynamic, and symbolic system that shapes how individual understand the world and interact with others. Culture is that complex whole which involves knowledge belief, art morals, law, custom, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. The word culture originated from the Latin word "colere" meaning "to inhabit, care for or till," This Latin term evolved into "cultura," which initially referred to the tilling of the land or agriculture. Overtime the meaning broadened to encompass the cultivation of the mind, skill and intellectual aspects of human beings.

Culture is handed down from age to age, generation to generation and has its trait transmitted to newer generations. Culture identifies and makes for uniqueness of a people by indelible imprints it carries on the peoples' life. Culture though transmissible is also acquired by learning and sharing through education. It goes on to impact on their customary practices, dressing pattern and language or languages. Arinze (2006:116) posit:

> By implication, if a people's culture dies, it dies with the people's identity. Just like people live, culture also lives; it lives with the people. Since all living contingent entities are mortal. In other words, culture can die. The dying of culture is referred to as culture extinction.

Culture is generally seen as a people's way of life which in the Nigerian context reflects the African, Islamic and European influence. Culture as a concept is only meaningful in the context of human society. In other words, it presumes existence of human society and is imbedded with tools and skills with which the human society is enabled to work. As an entity that incorporates the totality of a people's way of life, culture is both incorporative of, and synonymous with a given society's ways of life.

Uwandu and Nwankwo (2006:63) opine that culture is:

> The complete way of life of a people: the shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterize a group; their customs, art, literature, religion, philosophy etc; the pattern of learned and shared behavior among the members of a group. It also includes their institutions and their organizations, their material goods– foods, clothing, building, tools, and machine.

Most cultural traits are inherited from the older and the usefulness and the reason of existence of some of them are hardly comprehended by later generations of the inheritors of such cultural practices. According to Sibani (2018) Culture distinguishes human being from other animals, in that human are able to construct patterns of behaviours for themselves, and are able to transmit this from person to person and through generations. African culture which Nigeria is included,

mismanagement, greed, embezzlement, bribery, tribalism has downplayed the influence of culture on the social system.

The Concept of Women

The concept of "women" encompasses the biological and cultural aspects of female specifically adult females, and the roles and experiences associated with being females. It goes beyond biological sex to include gender roles, societal expectations and the ongoing struggle for equality and empowerment. Women are mothers, sisters, daughters, wives, entrepreneurs, professionals and activists group of individuals who have wide experiences and backgrounds. UNESCO Report, (2017):

> Women are the driving force behind small changes of critical importance to their societies and communities: they are advancing the quality of education and access to health care; they are fighting for their rights and active participation (in political life); and they are promoting peace, reconciliation and development.

Sibani (2025) states that women are highly valued in the Western world. In Nigeria, women face great difficulty in the journey to achieve relevance in their political aspiration. Overtime, women in Rivers State have faced numerous challenges, including gender inequality, poverty, lack of access to education, etc. since women have become an indispensable entity, they should not be treated with reckless abandon and discriminatory cultural practices limiting their potentials, which include, seclusion from social life, ill treatments of widows from in-laws, sleeping on bare floors, wearing of black gown, denying them of inheritance from the wealth of their deceased husbands, female genital mutilation (FGM) and others. Sibani (2023) states that the Nigerian system of inheritance is not fair to women. Women are denied their rights as soon as they become widow. Most societies do not share property to daughters as parting gifts when she is married out of the family. In fact, due to lack of value for women, most men end up marrying many women and turning them into labourers and slaves.

UN Women (2010) stressed that women are conspicuously under-represented in peace committees. As such, women may not to contribute in decision making. The

concept of "women" is a complex and multifaceted one, encompassing biology, social role, cultural expectations and the ongoing struggle on equality and empowerment. It is a concept that is constantly evolving as society grapple with gender inequality and strive for a more just and inclusive world.

Louise (2021), holds that women are essential to a country's development and functioning, yet they still face a great deal of discrimination and violence because of their gender. What of the situation on the African continent? Women are those who suffer the most from gender inequality and marginalization on the continent. What are the solutions to gender inequality and discrimination against women and girls? What actions are possible? Africa has made significant progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment, yet inequalities reached a critical level in West Africa. It is, therefore, interesting to view the discriminations and then look at the different actions that can be taken to remedy gender inequalities.

Some Rivers State Ethnic Groups and Women Cultural Discrimination

Women Cultural Discrimination in Ikwerre Ethnic Group:

The Ikwerre ethnic nationality is one of the major tribes in Rivers State. The Ikwerre people are the majority in terms of population and they control four out of the twenty three local governments in Rivers State. Women cultural discrimination which can be linked to violence in Ikwerre ethnic group or nationality is embedded in other parts of the world (Bergman & Brismar, 1991). Cultural practices alongside traditional attitudes of Ikwerre men has laid the foundation of cultural discrimination of women in Ikwerre ethnic group, where the men are allowed to express dominance over the women in all spheres of socio-cultural life. For instance, when there is childlessness in marriages, some men will not be at peace with their wives seeing them as the cause of this misfortune. Women in this situation are faced with a lot of humiliations from their husbands, in-laws or community at large and women who have children are being recognized and honored. Women suffer cultural discrimination in areas like attending gatherings or even partaking in rites due to motherhood. Hence, the challenge may not even come from them as most husbands may not go for medical examinations since it is believed that any woman should be fertile enough to bear children after marriage.

Moreover, women in Ikwerre ethnic group suffer discrimination when it comes to land and property inheritance. Women do not inherit lands because it is believed that they will be married off. Again, after marriage no matter the freedom they get from their in-laws, they are not permitted to come back home (N. Queen, Oral Source 2025). Culturally, women go through a lot of discrimination during burial rites. Widows are made to sit beside their late husband's corpse until he is buried whereas the men are exempted. The widow is subjected to tying one wrapper throughout the period of mourning, wearing bushy and unkempt hair for about a year. Sometimes, they are culturally bound and forbidden from taking their bathe. This is the height of the ruthlessness and discrimination (B. Amaechi, Oral Source 2025). Another area of cultural discrimination is in the education of the girl child (woman). It is believed before now that a woman's education ends in her husband's kitchen hence, they are deprived from been educated. This has left a lot of women who would have been educated to experience under-development, leaving the woman stereotyped mentality of male dominance and subjection to rules created by the male folks. However, there are exceptions today, as modern day parents are beginning to come out of such cultural discriminations lending their support to women in a male discriminated family who are interested in pursuing their educational course. (B. Amaechi, Oral Source 2025).

Cultural Discrimination in Ogba Ethnic Group/Nationality

Ogba ethnic group or nationality constitutes of the minority ethnic group in Rivers State and share a common ancestry, social institution and heritage. Its neighbors are the Ekpeye, Egbema and Ndoni. Women in Ogba land are indispensable entity, however, there are a lot of cultural discriminations faced by women as they are seen as been subjugated and controlled with all male related dominance. Women in Ogba are suffering from socio-cultural discriminations through traditional practices that have affected their lives as stated by (G. Ogbukwu, Oral Source 2025) in the following areas:

1. **Property Confiscation:** A widow is denied inheritance rights, with their properties being taking away after their partner's death.

2. **Harmful Rituals:** Widows are forced to participate in degrading and life threatening rituals during burial and mourning periods

3. **Education:** Women in Ogba tribe had a limited access from formal education with priority given to male children. According to (R. Lucy, Oral Source 2025):

   > My female children were not given proper education because my husband felt disappointed due to the fact that I was bearing only female children. This has really affected them so much that they had to struggle with the present trend of living since education of females are now prioritized.

4. **Female Genital Mutilation (FGM):** This practice has affected women's health and wellbeing, and some women died in the process through bleeding. The issue of forced or early marriage was not left out as it limits women's economic and educational opportunity

5. **Economic Empowerment:** Women were not given access to economic opportunities, such as employment or entrepreneurship. Women were financially dependent on their husbands or male relatives, limiting their autonomy and independence. Over time, women in Ogba tribe faced cultural discrimination which has posed a lot of personality challenge to them. The need to recognize and address this cultural discrimination has become essential.

Cultural Discrimination in Ekpeye Ethnic Group

The Ekpeye people are one of the largest ethnic groups in the Niger Delta region and are known for their Igboid language and cultural similarities to other Igboid groups. They are primarily located in Ahoada West Local Government Area of Rivers State of Nigeria.

Women in Ekpeye ethnic nationality has faced a lot of cultural discrimination such as female disinheritance, whereby women and widows are prevented from partaking in the sharing of fathers' and husbands' properties or estates. Female inheritance is one of the ploy used by the males to dominate societies in Ekpeye for impoverishment of women. Women are faced with discrimination on family matters in that during decision making, they are not allowed to make any input.

Women can only give suggestions but on a surface level (M. O. Okai, Oral Source 2025).

Whenever there is a disagreement or quarrel between a man and the wife, and the matter is brought before the kinsmen for settling, justice for the woman becomes like a taboo. In fact, the woman is subjected to appease the husband before the elders with a drink. This is done in a bid not to disgrace or humiliate the man or husband before the elders (M. O. Okai, Oral Source 2025).

If a woman is married and have no child or children, she is treated like an outcast. Again, in a situation of the death of her spouse, the widow is given to a male in the family to fill the vacuum else she will not be recognized in the family (L. Azubuike Oral Source, 2025). More still, she will have to buy a goat and gift it to the kinsmen before she will be given a land for cultivation.

A Look at Women Cultural Discrimination in Abua Ethnic Group

In Abua ethnic group of Rives State, women have been marginalized or discriminated through traditional cultural practices, as they are left without a voice. This is because of the patriarchal nature of the Abua descent. In areas of marriage, education and even the economy women has suffered discrimination. During masquerade festivals which is a socio-cultural activity that should involve all, the women (wives) are not allowed to be part of the event. Consequently, the men became promiscuous and would not be questioned. (O. Akari, Oral Source 2025).

Educationally, the girls (women) were not sent to school because they would be married out. Culturally, women are not given any inheritance till date. If a woman gives birth to only female children, she does not have a place of relevance in her husband house until she gives birth to a male child (O. Akari, Oral Source, 2025).

Women Cultural Discrimination in Etche (Ozuzu Clan)

Etche is made up of six clans namely: Ozuzu, Okehi, Mba, Igboh, Ulakwo Umuselem and Omuma. Each of these clans has not less than five communities. Ozuzu clan is made up of Ozuzu, Isu, Ogida, Orwu, Egbu, Ihie and Elele

communities. In this clan, there is an initiation ceremony called *'Itu anya'* which is exclusively for boys growing into manhood. Women are strictly barred from participation in this rites. They are called *'ngbokoro'* in this context which is another way of referring to women as second class citizens. Women in this context are girls and young ladies (C. Amaechi, Oral Source 2025)

In Etche, fathers whose children have grown to adulthood especially the age of marriage usually share portions of land to their male children for farming purposes. The female children are usually left out. It is believed that the stay of the female child in her father's house is temporal hence she is expected to get married and consequently leaves her father's house to stay permanently with her husband (C. Amaechi, Oral Source 2025).

Women Cultural Discrimination in Ogoni Land

The Ogoni people are one of the majority groups in Rivers State. They have a makeup of the Khana, Gokana, Tai and Eleme, sharing a common ancestry. Women cultural discrimination as experienced by women in other ethnic groups is not strange in Ogoni land. Generally, women in Ogoni are not entitled to any inheritance rights in their fathers' house. In fact, in a situation where a woman has only female as children, one of them is not expected to get married. She will be subjected to stay back to retain her father's name in the family. In this regard promiscuity becomes normal for her as she is not questioned since the purpose is to bear children in the family (A. Njigwum, Oral Source 2025). In the view of Sibani (2014:128),

> The sira tradition found among some communities in Ogoni land…where their first daughters are forbidden to marry but stay at home, inherit property alongside with their brothers and as well bear children from any man or men of their choice and the children will bear their father's name….it exposes them to risk of veneral diseases.

On widowhood practices in some areas in Gokana, if a woman's husband dies, the widow is not allowed to be remarried to any other. Even if she has no offspring in that family, she is subjected to remain unmarried. This practices is on till date. (J.

Tombari, Oral Source 2025). Before globalization, females where not sent to school because it is believed that their qualifications will end in their husbands' house. This has affected women in the areas of self-actualization and defense. But with the process of socialization and migration to cities, women are now encouraged to be educated as development is not gender specific. (A. Njigwum, Oral Source 2025).

Socio-Religious Remedies to Women Cultural Discrimination in Rivers State

Looking at the prevalent cultural discriminatory practices against women in some ethnic groups in Rivers State, it becomes essential to deal with some of these practices against women in the society. Sociologically, women are very essential in every given society and no society or family can exist in a vacuum without a woman or women. Life in general cannot be complete without the presence and effect of women. Women produce life in offspring through family and relationship in marriage. Hence, it is of utmost relevance that women should be treated without discrimination or marginalization. They are part of humankind and should be given their due respect in traditions and cultures where they find themselves or represent. More so, on a religious note, women were part of creation in that man would not be completely complete without the woman, hence, the need of creating her to compliment the men, Genesis 2:22-23. Women should be treated as part and parcel of the society. The resurrection account featured women's relevance even within a culture where men had dominance, hence, they made significant impact (Mark 16:1; Luke 23:26).

1. Women should be treated with respect and love because no society can exist in isolation.
2. The application of the golden rule should be paramount.
3. Development is not gender specific. Women development is important.
4. Socio-religious principles should be applied, if society must maintain a high standard of morality.
5. The principle of love for one another should be embraced. Some cultural practices against women are borne out of hatred for female gender.
6. Education of male and female should be encouraged and practiced without preference to a particular gender.
7. Creation was all inclusive; hence roles should not be created to subject women.

8. Economic empowerment schemes should be introduced and applied.
9. Women should be allowed to express their fundamental human rights.
10. Widowhood practices that are dehumanizing should be abolished.
11. There should be punitive measures given to some cultural practices that are seen as not acceptable.

Recommendations

1. Government should look into these challenges faced by women, ensure that they get justice and be allowed to express their rights in following ways:
1. Women should be empowered through skills acquisition for economic viability. They should be given access to employment opportunities. Women should not be dependent financially on their male relatives, hence, they should be allowed to express autonomy of their civil and economic rights.
2. Education which is the bedrock of socialization and civilization in any society, so the girl child should be compulsorily educated to avoid low esteem.
3. Women should be given equal opportunity in the religious circle and should be ordained to become priests and operate in the episcopal position.

Conclusion

Women are more inclined to participate in religious life. The role of God, or a creator of a religion, is always taken by a male and the woman is primarily valued as a mother, especially as a mother to a son. Her place is in the household, less so at religious ceremonies or in public positions. The real status of women in Rivers State culture is more complicated as it dehumanizes them and hinders their self-awareness and discoveries. In the history of religion and culture, the voice of women is rarely heard, due to the patriarchal disposition of the societies in which these emerged, eventually stifled some of the changes in the status of women. The world religions all agreed on the respect for women and their crucial role in family life, especially with emphasis on women as mothers and wives. They do not, however, advocate emancipation in the sense of total equality with men. According to Holm (1994):

> The most severe restriction apply to women during their menstruation and pregnancy, when, for example, they cannot enter the temple or touch the Quran. Male and female roles are therefore much differentiated and also unbalanced in Nigerian religions. The influence of women on the formation of religious norms and traditions is small, even though in certain doctrines, it is clear that women who succeeded in having their normative views accepted, or, men who advocated equal integration of women into religious ceremonies (p. 34).

Africa is a continent still strongly marked by gender inequalities in all areas, which has a strong impact on women, whether from a social, economic, or political point of view. However, the economic, social and political rights as contained in chapter II of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria are not justiciable, they are unenforceable. According to Urther (2025), African customary law uses aspects of African traditional culture to undermine the capacity of women to own children and property, and that this has a negative impact on the development of a woman who needs to take custody of children and property if her husband dies. In most cases, a woman is stripped of all the properties that she worked for together with her husband, and this leads to her impoverishment together with the children. For Africa to develop fully, Africans should begin to value the contribution of women in society and culture without looking down upon them as "soft targets" or weaker sexes.

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