

**SIMILARITIES IN THE PLATONIAN AND IGBO CONCEPTIONS OF WOMEN: ANY RELEVANCE FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT?**

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**Abstract**

*While Plato acknowledged the fact of role playing vividly bestowed on the different sexes of the human kind by nature, he did not in any way place any gender (male or female) above other. Igbo culture seems to also place definite roles for male and woman without a priori making the human a slave of sort. History has shown the woman as actively involved in political, social and juridical activities in Igboland. The famous Aba women riot is one of the numerous lucid examples. This paper takes an in-depth look into Plato's and Igbo concepts of the women, with specific emphasis on the possibility of using their similarities as a recipe for the solution of national development and problems playing Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Igbo women, Plato, feminism, national development

**Introduction**

Every human society, however primitive has a societal organization, hierarchy and social structure, that is, a system by which the task necessary for its continuing existence are distributed among its members. These members, who are male and female are assigned roles, responsibilities, obligations and rights according to their ages, strength, abilities, etc. Biologically, women are different from men and feminine roles are mostly based on local customs, traditions, gender, rather than mental capacities. This is because, women are regarded as the weaker sex.

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica (1768:909), In the ancient period, the status of women degenerated to that of child bearing slaves. they were secluded in their homes, they had no education, they had few rights and were regarded or considered by their husbands “no better than chattels”. In other words, female companionship existed only in extramarital relations.

In the Igbo society, although women are cherished and esteemed high, yet patriarchy rules, that is, male chauvinism has been the order of the day. Women are regarded as “birds of passage” who will leave her home for another home. Recently, the former President of Nigeria; Mohammed Buhari maintains that his wife belongs to the kitchen and the other room.

Based on that, the questions become; are women not persons? Do women have any role to play in the society? What are the roles of women in societal development. These questions and many of its kind are the major concern of this paper.

**The Evolution of the Personality of Women:**

Women in the ancient period lived a life of seclusion. Their lives were centred around their households. In the Greek city state of Athens (from about 500 to 300Bc), women raised children, cooked, weaved as well as managed the spinning, only men could engage in

trading as well as in soldiering.

Women enjoyed considerable independence and high status in Egypt. Marriage was monogamous and women could divorce their husbands on the grounds of cruelty or adultery, they could trade on their own account independent of their husbands, owned properties, worked in many sectors of the economy, took part in public life as well as mixed freely with men.

During the Middle Ages, which began in the A.D 400's and lasted about a thousand years women's lives continued much as before. Although women were credited with a soul equal to men in the eyes of God, yet they were regarded as temptresses responsible for the fall of Adam and as second-class citizens. This could be exemplified with the Pauline conception of women, thus "a man ought not to cover his head since he is the image and glory of God but woman is the glory of man" (1 Cor 11: 7). He went further to say that "the women should keep silence in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak" (1 Cor 14:34) However, the status of women suffered a relapse under the Greek and Roman families, but during the Renaissance and enlightenment periods, there were fundamental changes in religious and political outlook which took root as thinkers began to emphasize on the rights of the individuals. It was a period of a great cultural and intellectual activity that centred on humanism.

There were irreversible changes in the status of women in the age of reason which was a period of great intellectual activity. There were educated women, who participated in intellectual and political debates.

### **Platonic Conception of Women**

Plato (428 – 347 BC) an Ancient Greek Philosopher wrote on women in his dialogues; *Republic* and *Law*. He maintains that women should be regulated by law for they are part of the human race. The negligence of the female folks by the legislature was a mistake and it has made the women to grow lax thus, he states (1953:144);

That which has law and order in a state is the cause of every good but that which is distorted or ill-ordered is often the ruin of that which is well ordered.

It stresses therefore that the careful considering and arranging as well as ordering of a common principle of all institutions relating to men and women greatly contributed to the happiness of the state. Buttressing this point, the United Nations Secretary General Boutrous Boutrous Ghali adds:

Without progress in the situation of women there can be no true social development. Human Rights are not worthy of the name if they exclude the female half of the humanity. The struggle for women's equality is part of the struggle for a better world for all human beings and all societies.

Regarding the leadership of the philosopher-king, Plato maintains that the common good and common life involves men and women as such. They are meant to receive the same education as well as share equality in all public duties. Women according to him should not be excluded from the men (Macdonald, 1953):

Women with the right natural gifts Are not to be debarred by difference of sex

from fulfilling the highest function. So, when the best guardians are selected for training as rules the choices may fall upon a woman.

This idea Plato exemplifies by the way Athenian women were treated. They lived in seclusion and their statuses degenerated to household affairs of childbearing, slaves, etc.

As regards occupation, Plato argues that there is no occupation that belongs to either man or women as such. He maintains that although they have different nature in which women are weaker, but they have the nature, if they have same occupation, for “many women are better and competent at many things than many men” (Macdonald, 1953). Natural gifts to him are found here and there, in both creatures and as such should be given equal opportunities at all level. For instance, during acting, women should have their turn on stage when the men have quite finished their performances. Plato, therefore, did not see sex as a barrier for women and women development.

### **The Igbo Conception of Women**

The Igbo constitutes one of the ethnic groups in Nigeria. It is bounded to the East by the lands of Ibibio and Cross-river, to the South by the Ijaw people to the West by the Edo and to the North by Ijala and Idoma people. The Igbo extend over eight of thirty six states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, such inhabit the entire Imo, Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi as well as some parts of Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers states.

The Igbo people have a rich cultural heritage with distinct beliefs, customs, and social structures. The Igbo conception of women is shaped by their traditional values, which can vary across different communities. In the pre-colonial era, the Igbo women are considered to be weaker sex, yet they play a major role in agriculture cum agricultural activities, in order to meet the basic needs of the family. They planted cocoyam, vegetables amongst others. Women in Igbo were never idle, for a woman without a craft or trade or who was totally dependent on her husband was not only rare, but was regarded with contempt.

Politically, women were an integral part of the political set up of the communities. For instance, women as *umuada* (married daughters of the community) are known for their power drunkenness's, settlement of dispute, punishment of culprits (inclining men) which men in the community cannot do.

However, the political pre-occupation of women among the South Eastern Nigeria varies from one community to the other. Harry Gailey (1970:35) accounts that:

Igbo women traditionally exercise more influence than was typical in an African society. In addition to their influential role as wives and mothers. They were accustomed to being consulted on issues affecting the village.

Even in the political society, women are accustomed to being consulted on issues affecting the village. Buttressing this point, U.D. Anyanwu (2000:56) asserts:

Men generally was the leaders/heads at the Igbo political structure. Women did not have equal access to power and authority with men. Yet women were not second-class citizen in Igbo political terms, the Igbo world view was neither the man's world nor woman's. This the relevance of gender in Igbo political life was in the contemporary roles which both men and women played for the political and overall health of the communities.

Although the women are married, they still impose sanctions on culprits in the communities.

Earth goddess (*ala*) is worshipped as *Ala*. *Ala* is the ruler of (all) men, and also the source of morality and protection of the harvest. She is the goddess of fertility and guardian of justice both for the human world and for the ancestral or spirit.

### **Powers and Roles of Women**

Women are cherished and esteemed high as mothers. Motherhood is highly valued in Igbo culture. Women are often regarded as the primary caregivers and nurturers within the family. The role of a mother is considered crucial in the upbringing and socialization of children. "All women are carriers and givers of life in one way or another", says Bernaditte Nbuy-beye (1998:27). Catherine Acholonu (1995:35) maintains that "women fertility is power, wild power". Motherhood is therefore the anchor, matrix and foundation on which all else rest in the society; as such, Chinweizu (1990: 15) outlines the three powers of women as follows: Power of cradle, Power of the kitchen and Power of the womb.

The power of the womb, according to him, is the greatest and priceless power of women; that is the biological foundation, anchor, strength as well as the tap-root of female power. Although the placenta and umbilical cord separates the mother from the child at birth, but this separation is not a permanent but a temporary one.

Women are loved and cherished as sisters and daughter and as a result are protected from hard ventures such as climbing trees, hunting, going for wars etc. Women in Igbo society play some roles such as: complementary role. In Igbo society, there is a recognition of complementary roles between men and women. Both genders are considered essential for the overall well-being of the community. Women traditionally play key roles in family life, nurturing, and maintaining the household, while men may be involved in activities such as farming, hunting, and community leadership.

**Economic Contribution.** Igbo women have historically been involved in economic activities. They participate in trade, agriculture, and various entrepreneurial ventures.

In some Igbo communities, women are known for their business acumen and may also engage in market activities, contributing significantly to the local economy.

**Ceremonial and ritual roles.** Women in Igbo society often play important roles in ceremonies and rituals. They are involved in traditional dances, rites of passage, and religious ceremonies. Some of these ceremonies are exclusive to women and emphasize their spiritual and communal significance.

While traditional Igbo society has been patriarchal, women have had influence in decision-making within their communities. In some instances, women serve as priestesses, participating in religious and political matters. Modern Igbo society has seen increased advocacy for women's rights and political representation.

Although there are some obnoxious practices that oppress the women in the society, (such as obnoxious widowhood practices, female genital mutilation and so on), yet they were not totally deified.

### **Relevance for National Development**

The African cultural world (particularly the Igbo) view of women-hood is defective in the sense that it takes account mostly of the accidental attributes of women, disregarding the essential nature of humanity (men and women) and humans are endowed with reason and passion. According to G.E Ogbenike (2020: I28):

It is glaring that in Nigeria today, women are treated as second class citizens, they do not equal their male counterparts in the area of social and economic activities and most of all in politics. These various areas of women under-representation are detrimental to the growth of the nation.

When the essential nature of womanhood is taken cognizance of, then, there would be rapid development. Sex is not and should not be a barrier to women development, as it brings about retarded growth in the society.

When a woman is trained, the entire nation is trained. The inhuman treatments and obnoxious practices against women bring about underdevelopment in the society. Olu Awofeso (2014:105) notes that many have unveiled the travail of the female gender humiliation, manipulation, and marginalization through a number of culturally biased norms and gender practices which have culminated into systematic institutionalization of male superiority over the female. Amina Ghorfati (2014:53) explains further:

... Woman was not considered as equal citizens, they suffered from bad treatments, discrimination and racism under man domination and rules. In spite these problems, they could challenge them and prove themselves over the society. Woman in the past was living unequal and unfair life. She was prevented from doing any political, social and economic activities and her only job is being a housewife who takes care of home and children. At that time, woman was under the control of man who dominates all the fields in which he represents the symbol of power.

Going by the dictum, which says time changes everything and Telhard de Chardin says “to live is to change and to have change often is to be perfect”. This demand for change of world view on women; by not only to uplift the status of women in all spheres of life but for the development and better life of the whole human society. Amina Ghorfati (2014:53) explains more:

By the coming of feminism, woman was able take back her rights in addition to changing her negative image. Feminism proves that woman is capable to play important roles the same as man. Moreover, the most important goals of feminism were giving woman her total freedom in addition to equal opportunities in the representation of the political and social events.

Both men and women are all humans persons with rights, *voluntas* and *ratio* (willing and rational) who deserve to be respected. The only difference between men and women is that, all men beget and all women give birth. Complementarity in this context recognizes the unique contributions each sex can make to the family structure and societal development. The concept of complementarity among the sexes centres on the idea that men and women have different strengths, attributes, and roles that complement each other in various aspects of life. Also the idea of complementarity is a way to promote social stability by

establishing clear roles and expectations for each gender. This division of labour can contribute to a sense of order and predictability in societies. Hence, by recognizing and valuing the diverse strengths and perspectives of both sexes, societies seek to foster cooperation and collaboration. This can lead to more comprehensive problem-solving, creativity and productivity.

However, the Plato's concern, together with that of Igbo people is centred on the well-being of the society. In other words, the needs and capacities of the individuals that will lead to a better life is the vision of any progressive society. This however points at the common good. The common good serves as a guiding principle for creating a just, equitable and harmonious society. It encourages the members of any given society and institutions to consider the broader impact of their actions and decisions, ultimately contributing to the well-being and flourishing of the entire community.

The Igbo society cannot dream or talk meaningfully of civilization in isolation of human capital development of women, that is, when their women still remain in cultural bondage. Women as such, are entitled to all their human rights as persons, so as to facilitate sustainable development.

### **Conclusion**

From the above analysis, it is evident that in both the platonic and Igbo conceptions of women, women have a place in the society. Women are humans (persons) and are part and parcel of humanity and as such should be recognized as well as given opportunities in all spheres of life. There should be the equality of opportunities for men and women as Plato advocates for women occupy a greater percentage. The segregation against women will lead to retarded growth and development, since gender imbalance did not originate in the Igbo traditional society but was as a result of the advent of Christianity and colonialism.

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