International Journal of Business and Quality Research
https://e-journal.citakonsultindo.or.id/index.php/IJBQR

E-ISSN: 2985-9468

Language and Gender Inequality: Proverbs that Debase Women in Igbo Land and their Interpretations

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Abstract

Gender inequality its attendant problems have plagued the world for a long time and the end of this social malaise seems not to be in sight. The female folk are usually commodified by society in varying degrees. Africa, being largely patriarchal in nature is worse off for this. The culture in most African societies have perpetrated and perpetuated this thorny issue. Language, which is an aspect of culture is often used to commodify, stereotype and disdain women. Frankly, language has not been fair enough to our women. An aspect of language used to innocuously spite or reduce the worth of women is proverbs. This study examined how some proverbs are used in Igbo ethnic in Nigeria to debase women. The paper revealed that Igbo people place high premium on proverbs, although there are many proverbs and sayings used in this part of the world to reduce women. The paper concluded that all proverbs that debase women should be discouraged and stopped.

Keyword: Language and Gender, women

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world fraught with sickening and noisome inequalities; a world where egalitarianism continues to be elusive every passing day. Ours is a world where disdain, subjugation, discrimination, deliberate subordination and disrespect for the women folk continue to assume staggering dimensions. This is due to myriads of factors which include culture, religion and socialization.

Miruka (1994) cited in Karakacha (2021) says that a proverb is a brief statement full of hidden meaning, accepted and used by a community as an expression of truth and wisdom. Chinua Achebe posits that proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten (Achebe, 2006). Achebe here is reechoing a popular saying in Igboland of Nigeria. Igbo

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people are domiciled in the South Eastern part of Nigeria. In Iboland, proverbs are widely used so much that there is any social, religious or political gathering that series of proverbs will not be used. As a matter of fact, it is believed in this part of the world the use and interpretation of proverbs is a proof of intelligence or wisdom and anyone who cannot use proverbs proficiently is dim witted or unwise.

Proverbs are often explained in terms of structure, form and function. And they are significant indicators attitudes and beliefs of a people. Thus, proverbs depicts a community's attitudes, belief and reactions to people, objects, issues and concepts. The functional dimensions of explaining a proverb are in some sense open-ended and would seem to include the fact that virtually every society deploys them in subtle ways to promise not just images and meaning but alos underpin commentary on the images presented, including images of women, men, children, communities, animals, etc (Karakacha,2021).

Paramiology, the study of proverbs, is a multidimensional epistemological approach that interrogates proverbs from diverse points of view and draws from such fields as cultures, folklore, history, literature, sociology, anthropology psychology, arts, communication, religion, etc. (Mieder, 2004). Proverbs are part of our everyday life and are used to pass across divers messages to divers audiences. Unlike plain language, proverbs are short pithy sayings, ingenuously embodying an admitted truth or common belief (Schipper, 1991 in Karakacha, 2021). One of the problems with problems with proverbs is that they are sometimes not easily grasped by some people, especially people belonging to different linguistic frames of reference or cultural backgrounds.

Negative and erroneous stereotypes of women is a commonplace in virtually all cultures, especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America Omonubi- McDonnell (2003:xi) notes that the rights of the Nigerian women have been subsumed and suppressed by gender arrogance couched in garb of tradition and culture.

The influence of culture and its elements, especially language on gendering cannot be over emphasized. The language of a particular culture does not serve all its speakers equally. This implies that language is a man-made construction that reinforces or strengthens the prejudices against the female folk. One very glaring aspect of language that mostly debases women in various cultures is the proverb. Many proverbs in Igbo language are hostile to women thereby upholding the unfair stereotypes of the female gender.

In this work, we shall be doing an overview of proverbs in Igbo language that debase women. We shall also suggest ways in which this unwholesome phenomenon can be nipped in the bud.

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CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Proverbs in Igbo Land

A proverb, according to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary is a short, well-known, pithy saying, stating a general truth or piece of advice. Its synonyms include adage, maxim, axiom, aphorism, gnome, dictum, precept, saying, words of wisdom, saw etc. Anyone who is not conversant with proverbs in Igboland of Nigeria is often seen as unwise, and unintelligent. Opinion leaders, elites and aged peoples, especially men are known to be more proficient, and fluent in the use of proverbs in this part of the world. Any social gathering where proverbs, adages and maxims are not used is seen as incomplete. Young people often times go close to elderly men and women to learn wisdom embedded in Igbo proverbs and this interpretations.

In Igboland, proverbs and adages are employed to electrify and enliven formal or public speeches in such a way that the listeners smile, nod or even laugh to show compression and appreciation. These proverb also mistake the audience thinks or reflect. Proverbs are not usually explained in Igbo land as every a adult Igbo person is expected to figure the meanings and interpretations by themselves. It is only children that proverbs could be explained to.

Proverbs are so treasured in Igbo land that anyone who is not conversant or versed at using and interpreting them is seen as unintelligent or unwise. This explains why people value proverbs and strive to be good at interpreting or explaining proverbs. A popular Igbo proverbs says that **nwata aturu ilu kowari ya, ego eji lua nne ya lara n'thi** (anyone given a proverb but cannot interpret it, the bride price paid for his/her mother was a mere waste). Even this particular proverb, (though not among the three the author has chosen to explore, is one of those proverbs that debases women as it treats women as a mere commodity that can be bought or sold at a price. This commodification of the women folk is apparently one of the negative stereotypes of the women folk today.

Proverbs that Debase Women in Igbo Language

In Igbo, people say Ajonwanaaza aha nneya (a bad child answers his/her mother's name). That is if a child is good, he/she belongs to the father, if bad, he/she belongs to the mother. This proverb apparently debases women as it portrays them as bad while it portrays men as good. Although taken as a joke sometimes, this proverb ridicules women and confers a negative tag on them. This tag could be what makes most men to nag at their wives and call them to question whenever any of their children misbehaves. This could be why Nwodu (2006b) opined that Nigeria is a male chauvinist society.

Another proverb in Igbo language that debases the women folk is **nwanyi kaba nka, odika efighi aku luo ya** (as a women gets old, it seems as if she was not married

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with wealth). This proverb undermines women especially as she ages. This explains why women in most part of Igbo land begin to loose their dignity, respect, pride etc as they age. Agbanu (nd) captured this vividly:

> A female in her prime is the envy of all, especially her male counterparts... But, like the flower, once she starts to wither away or lose her beauty, her pride, she is abandoned by society or the institution that once held her in high esteem. Unlike her male counterparts, she is no longer appreciated, respected or accorded her pride in society.

The aforestated proverb also commodifies women as it treats women as commodities that can be bought or sold based on the forces of demand and supply. It is rather too unfortunate. Women as frequently presented as a product for male pleasure, and satisfaction. Treating women as a pleasure object is cardinal sin society perpetrates and perpetuates using language and other tools.

Another unfortunate Igbo proverb that debases the female folk is: **ji gwu n'oba, nwayi azaba oku ike** (when there are no yams in the barn, the woman becomes hostile). This proverb portrays women as being materialistic. It negates the very nature of women which entails care, love, tenderness, understanding, industry and productivity. These proverbs and more perpetuate the negative stereotypes and prejudices against women and must be discouraged if the campaign for gender equality must be won.

Language, Culture and Women

Language is an old as man and it has evolved and will continue to evolve. Language studies have also evolved spamming decades and centuries (Alhumaid, 2017). Studies have shown that speakers of different languages perceives the world distinctively (Alhumaid, 2017). The implication of this that the way people view concepts, issues (Like gender) has a lot to do with the language of the people. In other words, language can affect the way we view or perceive women. Language does affect people's world view.

Language forms the thoughts of a speaker. And one of the ways of extending one's thought limits is learning different language(s). scores of sociologists are of the opinion that language inherent to every country not only represents, but also influences its social order. The sociology of language tries to discover how social structure can be better understood through the study of language (Wardhaugh, 2016).

Culture is the way of life of a people and language is a prominent aspect of it. Culture shapes the life of people, their perspective, attitudes, motivations and perceptions. Gender inequality problems facing the world today can be traced or linked to culture. The

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culture of gender-based violence, male jingoism and patriarchy is deep seated in African and in several other parts of the third world.

Language is most times seen as unfriendly to the women folk and so often depict the women as weak, inefficient, incompetent, dependent, etc.

Sexist language can trigger feelings of ostracism and negatively influence womens motivation and industrification (de Lemus & Estevan – Reina, 2021.) Sexist language, according to Fajardo, Ligaya & Ham, 2020) is a form of discriminatory language, a gender linked language that carelessly excludes females gender and presumes that male gender is the standard or the norm. society is repute with sexist language: from the workplace to the home, schools, marlats, religious centers, etc. you see terms such as "newspersons", "chairpersons", "Camerapersons" etc. again such words as 'Engineer', 'doctor', 'pilot', etc. are mostly used to apply to men, while words like :Secretary", Office assistance", etc apply to women.

DISCUSSION

God created us equal, culture made us unequal. It is time to interrogate language and its ramifications. The gender inequality issue and its attendant problems arose because of culture and language. Language has contributed immensely to the commodification of the female folk and this has to be discouraged by all. There are a lot of women-unfriendly proverbs and adages used in Igbo ethic nationality in South eastern Nigeria that have contributed to the commercialization of women in this part of the world. We see this unfortunate debase in our religious centres, films, news media, etc. this, may have also contributed to the violence most women are exposed to.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Society has not been fair to women. Women are treated as second class human beings in many regions of the world and this is condemnable. Language is a man-made construction which has been used in many societies to portray or showcase women n bad light. Many Igbo proverbs debase women and these gender unfriendly proverbs must be condemned by all stakeholders.

Recommendations

1. Gender unfriendly proverbs, not only in Igbo language, but in all languages should be identified and discouraged using indigenous media, interpersonal media as well as the mass media.
2. The traditional institutions should educate their subjects on gender-friendly practices, including shunning proverbs that debase women.

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3. The National Orientation Agency in conjunction with gender based organizations should sponsor reorientation campaigns that will help people shun and discourage gender unfriendly practices.

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