

Gender and Occupation in Traditional African Setting: A Study of Ikot Effanga Mkpa Community Nigeria.

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Abstract

This study considers gender situation in Africa before the onset of contemporary occupational practices. It examines gender and occupation in African setting with particular reference to Ikot Effanga Mkpa Community in Nigeria. It was an ex-post factor review relying mainly on qualitative research method using Focus Group Discussion and Indepth Interview. The findings revealed predominant occupation in traditional Africa to include: farming, fishing, trading, hunting, brace work, etc. It shows that women participated in some of these occupations only under the guidance of men. The gains derived from women participation goes to the household head and women only benefited as members of household, and men were culturally accorded headship of household. Exception only occurred in religious vocation where women served as priest of goddesses in which they were not under men. Thus, the study reveals relative deprivation, male dominance, and subordination of female gender in African traditional occupational practices. The existence of cultural practices like “Iban Isong” help to prevent male verbal and other forms of violence against women. The study recommended among others public enlightenment and mass education on women right of access to occupation as a means of empowerment and emancipation in order to ensure development.

Keywords: Gender, Occupation, Female, Male.

Introduction

The gender of any individual is not determined by the person. It is rather an incident of birth. One is likely to born male or female. The gender category (male or female) plays very significant role in social interaction in the society, as many things, activities and roles are all influenced by individual gender group. One of such activities so influenced by gender is occupation. Occupation generally refers to a job or profession. It denotes what an individual engages in as a means, or source of livelihood. The occupation provides income or earnings with which a person uses in satisfying his or her basic needs. As noted by Rodney (1972) occupation in traditional African society include; farming (crop cultivation, animal rearing and fishing), cloth dying and weaving, blacksmith, hunting and trading. The aim of this study was to examine if gender issue affected choice of occupation or availability of occupation to African people before the advent of present day “White and Blue collar jobs” occasioned by linkage of Africa with the Western world through slave trade, merchantalist trade, Christian religion, colonialism and later neo-colonial imperialism.

This paper also aims at identifying occupational options that were available in traditional African setting with particular reference to Ikot Effanga Mkpa people of Nigeria.

Statement of Problem

The issue of gender discrimination in Nigeria and other African countries is so alarming in contemporary time. Governments in various countries are trying through social policy to eradicate gender barriers and discrimination. In Nigeria for example female are not admitted into the Defence Academy which is the only military institution that produces the officers corps in the Nigerian Armed Forces, comprising, Army, Navy and Air Force. This condition automatically hinders the female from achieving higher rank to attend command positions in the Armed forces. This kind of barriers permeate other areas of occupation in Nigeria including religious vocations in churches, as females are not accepted into priesthood in many Nigerian churches such as Catholic Church, Christ African Church, The Apostolic Church, Anglican Church, etc. In view of the above it is clear that female are discriminated against in terms of admission into some occupations in public sector as exemplified by the armed forces and private sector as exemplified by the churches.

What is the genesis of this occupational gender discrimination and segregation? Is it inherit in African tradition and culture or is it located in the incidence of African history and her linkage with the Western world? These are the cardinal issues which necessitated this paper and which the study intend to addressed. What is the impact of occupational gender discrimination on quality of life of those discriminated against, as well as the growth and development of occupations. These and other bugging issues are the cardinal concern of this study.

Conceptual Analysis

Gender as used in sociological analysis draws attention to the socially constructed aspects of differences between women and men, which in contemporary usage has been extended to include cultural ideas regarding masculinity and femininity, which include specialized roles assigned to gender groups as well as popular perception which varies among groups, institutions, organizations and cultures (Scott and Marshall, 2005).

Occupation on the other hand refers to a set of activities centered on an economic role and usually associated with earning a living, such as a trade and a profession (Hogan, 2006). In every society and culture, there are different categories of occupation. These categories involve specializations of socio-economic functions of individuals in a given society, requiring the classification of work type, professions and vocations.

Occupation and gender are there two main variables in this study. Gender is considered as independent variable while occupation is the dependent variable. This is so because gender is the variable that exert influence on occupation and it is likely to change, the structure, content and pattern of occupational practice.

Literature Review

Haralambos and Holborn (2004) study of gender in part-time and full-time employment concluded that women started taking full time paid employment during the twentieth century, maintaining that women concentrates in the lowest paid sector of non-manual work. This positions reveal that women were not in occupation requiring paid employment before the onset of twentieth century. This coincided with the prime of pre-colonial development of African states like Nigeria.

Witz (1992) opined that men gain professional status and inclusion because of their economic, political and prestige resources which they utilized to limit women's entry into professions. Another strategy noted by Witz (1992) is the demarcating strategies by which women are restricted to a particular sphere of occupational practice subservient to men.

Scott and Marshall (2005) conceived occupation as economic role separated from household activity as a result of the growth of market for labour. Following this conception the market system was not developed in the traditional African setting, economic system in traditional Africa was based on trade by barter as noted by Rodney (1972). Medium of exchange was only evolving including such items like cowries, and beads which serves as money or medium of exchange in some traditional African societies like Old Calabar. Roles of male and female was cardinal in the classification of work in African society. Ekpo (2008) study of occupation in traditional African society maintained that the contemporary classification of occupation into "White and Blue Colar", as well as "artisans" and "professionals", classes were not tenable in African society, because of the absent of clear cut division of labour, structural specialization and differentiation of roles.

According to Ekpo (2008) Africans engaged in subsistence occupation in which their yield was mainly for their own consumption. A few others were engaged in peasantry where production was for consumption and income generation. In these occupational dimensions both male and female were involved. The findings of Ekpo (2008) supported Witz (1992) demarcation strategy as male dominated all occupational sphere controlling and directing the affairs of female. Female were working only for their husbands or other elderly male family members. Female were not independent in any occupational area, be it; hunting, crop cultivation, animal rearing or fishing. Merchant trading which was the highest level of occupational development in pre-colonial Efik city states of Old Calabar as noted by Ekpo (2008) was dominated by male members of the noble class. This condition reveals female subjection in traditional African society.

Domination as explained by Scott and Marshall (2005) refers to rule by coercion or non-coercive compliance. Male exercise power over female. The African culture prescribe a non-coercive compliance of female to the guidance of the male within the family circle. This guidance may be exercise by the husband or other elderly male member of the family. Female are expected to be submissive and humble to the male guide. This non-coercive control permeate all aspect of social life including work performance in various occupational area. The only exception as noted by Ekpo involved female priest of African gods who does not take guidance from any mortal male but only from the god or goddess. Ekpo (2008) noted that women were only out of male control in religious occupation.

African women submission to the men folk changes in pattern from time to time. Such changes varies from one cultural area to another. Reviewing the Efik culture in Calabar area, Ekpo (2008) opined that women must listen to the men and are not expected to act in any way against the decision of their husband or male family leaders. Ejpo (2008) noted that female can only head a household where there is no adult male and that such female leaders are represented by the most elderly male in the household in strategic community meetings where females are not admitted.

Theoretical Framework

Feminism is a post modern theory which is rooted in the belief that women should not be discriminated against, rather should be accorded equal rights, privileges and opportunities as men are given. The theory emerged and gained popularity from the writings of Chafe (1972), Gelles and Levine (1990). It is a gender sensitive theory and it is strongly opposed to all gender inequality. The law of this theory is the restoration of self-confidence and respect in women, as well as removing all cultural and historical barriers against female achieving self-actualization.

Feminism is chosen as appropriate theoretical framework to guide this study because it unearth cultural, socio-economic and political barriers against women capacity development, empowerment and involvement in different aspects of society's social life. One of such strategic aspect of social life is occupation, which is so considered because of its linkage with the means of livelihood, sustainability and satisfaction of basic human needs.

Consequent upon these theoretical background women in Africa should have equal access to occupational activities like the men folk. Women are not to be restricted to certain occupational areas or their occupational and career progression subordinated to that of men folk. Any form of subjection is contrary to the theoretical position of feminism, which requires equal opportunities and chances for women in society. The theory of feminism also maintains that no society can be developed if all segment of the society are not carried alone. There are two main segments recognized by feminists theorists, namely are; male and female segments. Thus, both should be integrated equally in order to achieve overall wholistic progress, advancement and development in the society.

Profile of the Study Area

Ikot Effanga Mkpa is a village in Calabar. It is an Efik settlement founded by Obong Effanga Mkpa of Effanga Offiong Royal House, one of the houses entitled to the prestigious royal throne of Efik kingdom. The Efik society is rich in culture in terms of dances, traditional music and display, norms, values and art works like brass work.

The population of Calabar is 375,196 persons, out of which male are 187,676 and female 187,520. Population of Ikot Effanga Mkpa which is only one out of over 32 villages and settlements in Calabar is 3746 (male 1892 and female 1854), showing that male are more than female in both Calabar as a whole and Ikot Effanga Mkpa Community in particular (National Population Commission, 2009).

Ikot Effanga Mkpa is currently a sub-urban community, predominantly agrarian society. Historically, the people were mainly farmers (cultivating crops and rearing domestic animal), as well as hunters. The community was established primarily as a farm settlement of Effanga Offiong royal house of Old Calabar, where in the peak of Efik feudalism, settlers dwell in the community to cultivate and pay tribute to the land owner, most people occupation was at the subsistence level while others that were related to the land owners operated at the level of peasantry. The settlement was established in 16th century.

Industrial development capturing Calabar is yet to fully spread and cover the sub-urban areas. In-view of this modern occupational careers and professions are yet to be fully followed by the nature of this community. But many other residence in the community that are not indigenous to the area like Ejaghams, Ibibios, Bekwara, Igbos, Yorubas, Hausas, Ijaws, etc. are engaged in wide variety of occupational areas. Ikot Effanga Mkpa Community was considered as appropriate unit of analysis as a remnant of traditional African setting for the study of gender and occupation in Africa.

Methodology

This study relied extensively on qualitative research method. The qualitative methods so utilized were Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Indepth Interview (IDI). In order to substantiate the empirical claim of this investigation two FGD were conducted and two IDI.

Each FGD consisted of eight participants (8) excluding the researchers who moderated the discussion, two research assistants, one being as time keeper, while one acted as recorded. One FGD was for female while one was for male. Participants in the FGD were provided by the village chief based on criteria purposively determined by the researcher. Such conditions include the fact that participants must not be less than sixty (60) years, which implies that the person must have observed the community before the emergence of current economic system and occupational trend.

In the indepth interview, only two key persons were interviewed namely; the village chief representing male and the village women leader representing female. The division of IDI and FGD to male and female was in conformity with the two gender groups. It was also aimed at ensuring balance opinion and comparative analysis of responses.

The Focus Group Discussion guide was also utilize for the indepth interview. The village chief is the custodian of culture of the community and information provided by him is considered to be dependable and reliable in social investigation. Occupation is part of the people culture, it is very important component of culture. The village head serves also as the repository of history of the village. The FGD guide was divided into three sections, section 1 deals with Gender issues, section 2 deals with occupational issues, while section 3 brings together gender differentiation and occupation in an attempt to determine the relationship between Gender and occupation.

Data Analysis, Interpretation and Discussion

Data analysed in this section were primarily sourced from the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Indepth Interview (IDI). The analysis followed responses to various questions in the Focus Group Discussion and Indepth Interview Guide. The eight participants FGD were represented with the alphabet A – H that is 1 – 8. While the two participants in IDI were represented with A, B, that is 1 and 2. Names though collected in the Discussion are excluded to ensure anonymity of participants.

Demographic Analysis

Demographic Data for FGD Male

Participants	Age	Level of Education completed	Occupation	Religion	Denomination	Place of Birth	Ethnic Group
A	68	Primary	Farming	Christian	The Apostolic	Ikot Effanga	Efik
B	63	Secondary	Retired Gender	Christian	Catholic	Ikot Effanga	Efik
C	77	Secondary	Farming	ATR	Nil	Ikot Effanga	Efik
D	81	Secondary	Trading in market	Christian	Assembly of God	Ikot Effanga	Ibibio
E	66	University	Retired Public Servant	Christian	The Apostolic	Ikot Effanga	Efik
F	73	Primary	Trading/Farming	ATR	Nil	Ikot Effanga	Efik
G	79	Secondary	Trading in market	Christian	Catholic	Ikot Effanga	Efik
H	62	College of Technology	Builder	Christian	Catholic	Ikot Effanga	Anang

Demographic Data for FGD Female

Participants	Age	Level of Education completed	Occupation	Religion	Denomination	Place of Birth	Ethnic Group
A	76	Primary	Farming	Christian	Catholic	Ikot Effanga	Efik
B	71	Primary	Trading in market	Christian	The Apostolic	Ikot Omin	Qua
C	60	Primary	Civil Servant (Rtd)	Christian	Deeper Life	Ikot Effanga	Efik
D	75	Secondary	Civil Servant (Rtd)	Christian	The Apostolic	Ikot Ansa	Qua
E	83	Primary	Farming	ATR	Nil	Ikot Effanga	Efik
F	67	College	Teaching	Christian	The Apostolic	Ibiono	Ibibio
G	64	College	Teaching	Christian	Good Cheers	Ikot Effanga	Efik
H	62	Secondary	Business owners	Christian	Presbyterian	Ikot Effanga	Efik

Demographic Data for Indepth Interview

Respondents	Sex	Age	Level of Education	Occup	Religion	Denomi	Place of Birth	Ethnic Group	Position in Community
A	M	80	College	Retired Teacher	Christian	Presbyterian	Ikot Effanga	Efik	Village Chief
B	F	61	Secondary	Trading /Farming	Christian	Catholic	Ikot Omin	Efik	Women Leader

The demographic data above shows that participants in FGD and respondents for the indepth interview were all above the age of 60 years. Male and female were given equal chances of participation. Participants were all literate and exposed enough to provide reliable information as the standard of education at their time was very high. The participants engages in various forms of occupation, varying from farming, teaching, trading, general business, public and civil services, and building construction. It shows that they are knowledgeable in various occupational areas and were competent to discuss on the issue “Gender and Occupation”.

Ekpo (2008) noted that occupation that required hard labour like building is exclusive for males.

Participants were mostly Christians, as 15 out of 18 participants were Christians (83%). This follows the fact that Southern Nigeria which Ikot Effanga is located is predominantly a Christian society. Only 3 belongs to African Traditional Religion – ATR (16.7%). Five were members of The Apostolic Church (27.8%), five were Catholics (27.8%), one belongs to Assembly of God Church (5.6%), 1 Deeper Life Bible Church (5.6%), 1 Good Cheer Partners Church (5.6%) and 2 Presbyterian Church (11.11%). Three belongs to no church as their religion remains African Traditional Religion (16.7%)

The participants all resided at Ikot Effanga Mkpa village, as it was a specific requirement for their selection and they must have commonly resided in the village for not less than 40 years. This was to ensure that they understand the culture and the historic past of the community through long interaction and socialization. Only one participant was born in Ibiono, Akwa Ibom State far away from the community understudy. All others were born in Ikot Effanga except one born at Ikot Omin, the neighbouring village. 13 participants were of Efik extraction, 2 from Ibibio, 1 Annang and 2 Qua.

Interpretation and Discussion

The first question in the FGD Guide was to identify the roles of men and women in order to determine male, female identity in terms of role performance in this Ancient Efik settlement. The question was “what were the roles of male and female in this community before the present time?” The male participants in Focus Group Discussion explain that there was a great deal of differences between the male and female. They noted that

“Male were the leaders in the community while females were to assist in various activities at home. Females were not recognize to speak for themselves at community circle, but only to speak through their household head or his authorized representative” (Focus Group Discussion: male).

This shows that the roles of women were subservient to that of men. The community like other African communities was a male dominated community.

In order to further analyse the issue of role the women were asked if “women were accepted everywhere and in all institutions in the community?” All the women answered in the “negative”. In their contributions the female in the Focus Group Discussion stated that:

Female were not accepted in all social gathering and institutions in the society. For instance most community decisions were initiated and decided upon at the Ekpe Lodge, in which women were not admitted, neither were women allowed to initiate in cultural organizations that regulate the society like “Akata” Mboko and “Obon”. Women were forbidden from all these (Focus Group Discussion Female).

On the contrary, females were asked “if there was any institution that was exclusive for women?” the answer was 100% “Yes” and “Iban Ison” was the only socio-cultural organization exclusively reserved for female. In the same Focus Group Discussion, it was said that:

“Ikot Effanga Mkpa is known in all Efik land for the operation of ‘Iban Isong’ in Efik Kingdom. It is an organization which places oath against people that uses language on others. If you called a woman prostitute “Iban Isong” will place an oath for you if you had ever slept with the woman on commercial basis”. The women used Iban Isong to regulate social interaction and it is still in existences, membership is restricted to women above menopausal age (Focus Group Discussion: Female).

This group called “Iban Isong” was the only institution used by women in Efik land to regulate the exercise of men. It was gathered that a wife could call Iban Isong for the husband, not to talk of the members of the community. It helps in ensuring social control as well as preserving female dignity and honour.

It was also discovered that female could not be considered as the Head of the Village, but may be seen as the mother of the village and honoured as such. The Headship was reserved exclusively for the most senior male member of the lineage whose turn it is to chose the Head. In this regard women were automatically excluded from overall leadership. As indicated in an interview with the village head, he maintained that “no woman can sit on this stool”.

The second group of questions in the FGD guide was to discover the traditional occupation of people in the community before the advent of ‘Blue Collar’ and ‘White Collar’ jobs in which they engage now. In response to the question, “what occupation were your people engaged in before now? Both Focus Group Discussions and Indepth Interviews with both male and female revealed; farming, trading, fishing, hunting and religious vocation. In Focus Group Discussion, it was stated that:

“The farms were owned by the male and their female only assisted them. Few women may accompany their husbands and other men folk to fishing. But it was customary for women to take the proceed of the farm or fish to the market. Selling in market was not the duty of a man, male were only merchant who travel long distance in their canoe to ‘Koanya’ (Equatorial Guinea) to buy items in large quantities for female to display in the market” (Focus Group Discussion: male).

This shows a division of labour in terms of occupational role as indicated above. Women work in farm owned by men and collect items to sell on behalf of male. In traditional Africa, the means of production were owned and controlled by men and women were only utilized by men in disposing their commodities. This shows that women were not really in control of their affairs and destiny in terms of occupation.

Central to this position was vocation in the African Traditional Religion where female deities were worshipped by male and female also served as priest to these deities, raising female to a position in which they can collect tribute and sacrificial items from men. This automatically placed men in subordinate condition to female. In Female Focus Group Discussion which was supported by the Indepth Interview with the women leader, it was gathered that:

“Though woman work under man in farms and sell farm products from their husbands and family farms for collective good, women were heads and priest of various gods. All water spirits (Ndem Efik) were mediated by female priests. Men must past through these female priest to appease the gods. The Ndem were considered superior to all other gods attended to by male priests (Focus Group Discussion: Female).

It was only in religious vocation as indicated above that females were considered traditionally superior to male in occupational matters.

This was widely accepted and acknowledged in the entire Efik Kingdom and City states in which popular female priests were sought after and heavily paid, giving them great affluence to compete with male.

Many occupations were restricted to household for example brace work which were owned by certain families. Though women were mostly engaged in brace work, ownership remains with the household head which was traditionally a man. The women leader confirmed in an interview saying that:

Designing brace was a perfect work of a woman, though it was done by female, payment was made to the male family or household head. It was later in the 1960's that female actually began to work for themselves (In-depth Interview: Women leader).

In contemporary time, things have changed greatly, people are working for themselves, earning salary and profit. This is a modern time change sweeping through the entire African continent, except few rural settlements in which modern socio-economic patterns of production are yet to be introduced.

The findings of this study that females were working under men and for economic benefit and directives of men in Ikot Effanga Mkpa Community is in line with the idea of Witz (1992) that men gain professional status and inclusion because of their economic, political prestige resources which they utilized to limit women's entry into profession. In Africa, it was not entry per se, but ownership and control of occupational area. The resources at the disposal of male represent cultural practices which placed male at leadership level at the expense of female. This automatically resulted in segregation and subordination of female. This also follows Ekpo (2008) observation in which the Efik culture restricts female household heads from strategic meetings in the community, which also affects female occupational practice.

In view of Scott and Marshall (2005) conception of occupation as the separation of household activity from economic role, this was not tenable in traditional Africa due to the absence of role differentiation. In this regard, it is difficult to qualify any work in traditional Africa as an occupation, but since it provides means of livelihood the concept of occupation as rightly applied by Rodney (1972) provides a conceptual foundation for this study.

The findings of this study follow Ekpo (2008) conclusion that occupation in traditional African setting was dominated by male at the expense of female. Though female were dominated in most work areas, it was not so in religious vocation. Males were subjected to revelations as received from gods by female priests whom they paid to sacrifice to the gods on their behalf.

Conclusion

Gender discrimination existed in every society in one form or another. African societies like Ikot Effanga Mkpa, Nigeria are not left out in terms of the experience of gender discrimination in occupational practices over the years. This study revealed prevailing traditional occupations in traditional Africa to include; farming, hunting, fishing, trading, brace work, etc.

The occupations were practiced by male and female, but the females were practicing under the guidance and leadership of male kins. Females were hardly alone except in religious practices as priests of gods and goddesses. This situation shows relative subordination of female to the male gender in areas of occupational practices. The African culture placed leadership under men and subsequently female must operate under men in work and occupation.

In order to evade the excessive of men in these practices certain cultural practices like the existence of "Iban Isong" help to control male verbal and other forms of violence against women. A practice which had been weakened in contemporary time. The wave of violence against women, discrimination in workplace and restrictive barriers against women entry and advancement in various professional areas remain alarming in Nigeria and other African countries.

Non-governmental organizations, media and the state should rise up to carry out enlightenment programmes and educate people about the rights of women. Male and female should be given equal opportunity in employment and advancement including the Armed forces. If we must achieve the level of development required by the Millennium Development Goals, both male and female should be empowered in diversities of occupations to contribute their quota in moving the continent forward. Development must start with mental and attitudinal change incorporating women as agents and partners in developmental process. It is through occupational practice that all could contribute effectively, efficiently and equally to development.

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