

Appraisal of Implementation of United Nations Declaration on Security of Women and Children in Ikwerre Society of Rivers State, Nigeria

BY

WOTOGBE, IGWECHI HOPE

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (I.A.U.E) Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt, Rivers State.



Article History

Received: 12/01/2023

Accepted: 16/02/2023

Published: 19/02/2023

Corresponding author:

WOTOGBE, IGWECHI
HOPE

Abstract

This study appraises the level of implementation of United Nations Declaration on security of women and children in Ikwerre society with a view to finding out how successful the implementation had been in contemporary Ikwerre society. The study employs feminist theory with emphasis on the womanist perspective as well as the qualitative and ethnographic methodology. The study have revealed various degrees of implementation of some level of the UN declaration in view, but there exist some areas where women and children still suffer insecurity because of imposed patriarchal culture in defiance of UN declarations. The study recommends therefore, notwithstanding the docility on the part of women in Ikwerre society, that practical steps must be taken to urgently implement as well as domesticate the UN declaration on security of women and children in Ikwerre society so that women and children can enjoy their right to live and dignity.

Keywords: Appraisal, Implementation, Declaration, Security

INTRODUCTION

Present-day Nigeria, Ikwerre society inclusive, is grappling with the growing level of violence as a result of the heightened insecurity in the nation, especially in the area of conflict, crises, and emergency situation. Unfortunately, women and children are usually the most affected as they are vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence including rape, sexual slavery, abduction, kidnap, malnourishment, forced impregnation, and other vices associated with conflicts times. This often leads to severe economic and health issues especially when the situation lingers. Although the United Nations have made declarations on the security of women and children during conflict times, the effect is yet to be felt in Ikwerre society.

Hence, we still see in Ikwerre society women and Children's rights being breached in the areas of security during conflict times and all manner of injustices meted out to them. It appears that the efforts the United Nations have made in terms of laws that focus on restoring the rights and dignity of women as well as protecting women and children in conflict times against insecurity in their Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in

Emergency and Armed Conflict is of little or no effect on Ikwerre society as the impact is yet to be felt on the women and children as a result of the non-implementation of UN declaration on the security of women and children in the society. And as such women and children in Ikwerre society still suffer gender-based violence such as kidnapping, trafficking, rape, sexual slavery, forced impregnation, or even miscarriages in conflict times.

The foregoing background is sequel to the review of women's situation in Ikwerre society in conflict times and justifies the call for urgent domestication and implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Protection of Women and children in Emergency and Armed Conflict in Ikwerre society for the benefits of the women and Children. It is based on these that this study embarked on an appraisal of the United Nations Declaration on the security of women and children and its implementation in the Ikwerre traditional society, with a view to emphasizing for the creation of a new society, where women and children are socially, culturally and legislatively empowered to enjoy full human rights

and further actions that will provide additional perspectives on the position of women and children in Ikwerre society.

WHO ARE THE IKWERRE?

The Ikwerre society with over 1,390, 895 persons from the 2006 census (NPC, 2008), is one of the major tribes in Rivers State who proudly address themselves with the coinage as *Iwhuruonha*, meaning proper native, to differentiate themselves from overwhelming strangers leaving in their society. The Ikwerre society spreads across four (4) Local Government Areas of Rivers State, namely the Port Harcourt, the Ikwerre, the Obio Akpor, and the Emouha Local Government Areas. It is quite unfortunate that the Ikwerre people are hardly known outside Rivers State as a result of lack of written literature about the people's way of life apart from a few excerpts here and there (Wotogbe-Weneka 2020, 3). The Ikwerre society is bounded in the north by Imo State, north-east by the Etche, Eleme, and Tai, in the north-west by the Ogba, Egbema, Ekpeye, and Abua and in the south by the Kalabari or Ijaw (Tasie 2008, 1). The Ikwerre society is made up of 29 clans.

Furthermore, the Ikwerre people are generally well-informed, good-looking, strong, intelligent, and clean (Tasie 2008, 4). They are religious people as there are practicing Christians, Muslims, and Traditionalist, all paying their allegiance to God Almighty, in the manner specified by the teachings and contents of their respective faiths. Deductively, the upland and urban nature of Ikwerre land accounts for the Ikwerre society area playing substantial role in contributing to the economic, educational, and social potentials and viability of Rivers State to justify Rivers' state acronym as "The Treasure Base of the Nation".

Appraisal of Implementation of UN Declaration on the Security of Women and Children in Ikwerre Society

The United Nations adopted resolution 3318 (xxix) on the Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict on 14th December 1974. The resolution reiterates the all-important role of women and children in the society. Resolutions 4, 5, and 6 states that: *All efforts shall be made by states involved in armed conflicts, military operations in foreign territories, or military operations in territories still under colonial domination to spare women and children from the ravage of war. All the necessary steps shall be taken to ensure the prohibition of measures such as persecution torture, punitive measures, degrading treatment, and violence, particularly against that part of the civilian population that consists of women and children.*

All forms of repression and cruel and inhuman treatment of women and children, including imprisonment torture shooting, mass arrest, collective-punishment, destruction of dwellings, and forcible eviction committee by the belligerents in the courses of military operations or in occupied territories shall be considered criminal.

Women and children belonging to the civilian population and finding themselves in circumstance of emergency and armed conflict in the struggle for peace self-determination national liberation and the independence, or who live in occupied

territories, shall not be deprived of shelter, food medical aid or other inalienable rights, in accordance with the provision of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Declarations of the Rights of the Child or other instruments of international law.

The proclamation of this declaration was apt and timely, in view of the deep concern and trauma expressed by women and children over their sufferings during emergency and conflict situations where women and children are victims of inhumane acts, are exposed to serious harm and sometimes elusive in the struggle for peace, self-determination, social and economic liberation, and independence of thought, action, judgment, and personal decisions as was witnessed during the Wilbros (an oil company situated in Choba community) and Choba (a community in Obio Akpor LGA) community crises of 1997. In this case, many women who suffered temporary displacement found themselves being raped and maltreated by the military men who they ran to for safety and protection (Interview with Nancy Wiche, September 16, 2021). Deploring the fact that grave attacks meted to women and children are defiant to their fundamental rights and freedom including their self-esteem as humans is definitely a way of violating humanitarian law. It has been observed that in most conflict situations that people face, women and children are the most sufferers and the most vulnerable to gender-based discrimination and gender-specific violence and exploitation. Conflict situations put them at risk in the crises communities, when they are fleeing, at risk during flight, and even in the refugee camps where they are seeking protection in case they find one. Sometimes they may even migrate to other places for safety. In situations such as this, the challenges women and children face are usually enormous, ranging from sexual assault, economy, health issues, ability to learn new languages and adapt to change (especially for the older women) in times of displacement, migration, or relocation as a result of insecurity. This is a worrisome trend as one is tempted to think that women suffer because most cultures all over the world the Ikwerre culture inclusive, subconsciously paints a picture that suggests that women are less than men. This gives rise to the view of (Esther Lasebikan 2001, 11) when she noted that "evidence of old tradition and myths of human existence have often given the place of eminence to men to the detriment of women". One may then ask, could it be the reason why women's quest for their rights are rarely adhered to? Also, for the women, it becomes most unfortunate for those who are kept in refugee camps as they fall easily susceptible to their male counterparts who take advantage of their vulnerability to mete out certain violent acts to them. Sometimes, the male perpetrators of violence against women are sometimes the military personnel who see these women as easy tools to satisfy their sexual urge during conflict times and communal crises, or other times use them as slaves to be at their beck and call meeting their daily needs. (Lasebikan 2001, 13) also noted as she asserts that "the need to talk of women's rights becomes stronger when we recognize that even to lay women in many places, particularly in war-torn areas are turned into mere prostitutes and sometimes forced into sexual exploitation and rape by soldiers" she further suggests that "the

assault on such defenseless women who are ravaged by unscrupulous men almost forces one to think of training women in martial arts". Others include immigration personnel, bandits or pirate groups, co-male refugees, and rival ethnic groups. Women and children's vulnerability in times of war becomes worsened when family structures which could have been a base for stability and protection are altered in refugee situations especially when there are cases of loss of family heads; it leads to women becoming heads of households with children to support and often no prior income generating experiences. This makes them dependent on external sources of income which increases their vulnerability and exploitative tendency. Even in cases where families remain intact after crises, certain family values, male and female relationships are often altered leading to mistrust between husband and wife resulting to frustration and increased incidence of domestic violence and depression. Sometimes, women who migrate as a result of communal wars and conflicts suffer discrimination, physical and even sexual abuse by their host, and in some cases, the women work in slavery-like condition with very meager or no pay at all. To this end, it would not be out of place to state that women and children in Ikwerre society should be given certain protection and security needs in conflict and crises times to forestall their increased vulnerability status and gender-based violence meted out to them during conflict, crises and emergency situations such as this.

Nevertheless, the international community has continued to make concerted efforts at protecting women and children from any action, programme, orientation, or situations like communal crises, conflicts, migration by enacting laws that seek to eliminate and checkmate the level of gender-based violence women and children face in conflict and post-conflict times.

Clearly, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, article 3 states that: everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person. UN interventions on the security of women are evident world over, but the problem is with their implementation in societies less developed like the Ikwerre society of our discourse. Here we see the real suffering of women and children in many in Ikwerre society in communities like Emohua, Ogbakiri, Ibaa, Ndele, Omademe (communities in Emohua LGA), and the likes, experiencing communal crisis, conflicts, cult activities is grave and vital. Deeply concerned by the fact that despite general and unequivocal widespread condemnation by individuals, groups, or government, these acts continue to suffice without any concrete or lasting solution put in place to forestall this uprising which continue to subject many people especially women and children under their yoke of cruel suppression, oppression, bondage, and other heavy emotional and often incalculable suffering inflicted on this vulnerable population in Ikwerre society.

Furthermore, it is found out that sometimes, the quest for the pursuant of rights and freedom has degenerated to more conflicts than peace in itself. As (Oluremi 2021, 47) puts it, while rights have been traditionally understood in its negative sense as the security of the citizens from state action, it is progressively being developed as a positive right to state action in pursuit of security of its citizen. In other words, when it comes to the issue of security of

persons, the gender divide of equality and inequality should not be considered, rather an impartial approach should be adopted in order to harness all the human resources there are in the pursuant of the security of not only women and children but for all. Recalling the relevant provision contained instruments of international humanitarian law the protection of women and children in time of crises and on basic principles for the protection of civilian population in armed conflicts, as well as economics and social council resolution 1515 (xviii) of 28 May 1970 in which the council requested the General Assembly to consider the possibility of drafting a declaration on the protection of women and children in emergency or wartime. Having considered the recommendation of the economic and social council contained in its resolution, the question to ask is "What provision has the Nigerian government put in place to ameliorate the suffering of women and children as victims of violence, conflict, crises, and emergency situations in Ikwerre society? Absolutely nothing much has been seen on ground despite signing treaties consenting to such laws. Obviously, the negative effects of insecurity during conflict, crises, and emergency situations on women and children magnify the discrimination women go through in "normal conditions" in times when there are no negative situations. In normal situation, the security of women, girls, and children should not be debated owing to the fact that their place in the society as bearers, nurtures, caregivers, and the future of tomorrow cannot be overemphasized. The implementation of UN laws and policies regarding women, girls, and children in crises, conflicts, and emergency situation in Ikwerre society should be top priority since most communities in Ikwerre society have become highly volatile as cult crises have been evicting people from their home.

Most times, during these scenarios in Ikwerre society, violence against women takes several forms which hinder Ikwerre women from enjoying their human rights economically, politically, and socially. Although studies have shown that men and boys sometimes are victims of gender-based violence, but women and children are mostly the majority of sufferers of negative acts and are often more affected. In 1992 the CEDAW in its general recommendations recognized that "wars armed conflicts and the occupation of territories often lead to increased prostitution, trafficking in women and sexual assault of women, which require specific protection and punitive measures." Unfortunately, this violence is committed both by non-State and State actors as there are no corrective measures put in place to checkmate the excesses of these violence. Rather it has been observed that rape and violence are employed as intimidating tools to humiliate the adversary during crises, conflicts, and emergency situations even in Ikwerre society.

From observation in Ikwerre society, conflicts heighten the discrimination women experience. It brings to bare pre-existing patterns of discrimination that are gender-based and puts women and girls at the risk of sexual, physical, and psychological violence whose underlying factors are not different from those in normal peacetime circumstances such as: patriarchal value system, inequality, and gender-based discriminations between men and women. Furthermore, conflict no doubt causes an acceptable

higher level of violence which gets aggravated even in post-conflict times. Meaning that after conflict situations have died down, violence against women caused during conflict situations just do not go away but continues to haunt them. In Emohua, (an LGA/ community in Ikwerre society) there were numerous cases of abduction and gang violence such that a local monarch was reportedly kidnapped for ransom in April 2013 which resulted in the deaths of at least two bystanders who were shot by the kidnapers (Conflict Bulletin 2015). According to (Interview with Isabella Wonte, September 5, 2021) in describing post-conflict situations women face in Emohua explains that “women continue to suffer from the medical, physical, psychological and socio-economic consequences of the violence suffered during conflict long after it has ended. This is because the stigma associated with acts such as rape that happened during conflict just does not go away, but is ever-present in the minds of those affected both in conflicts times and in their aftermath”. In Ikwerre society, owing to the fact that even in post-conflict times, violence against women and girls are spiked because conflict brings about break-down of the rule of law as well as social and family structures which stands to checkmate the excesses of some of these negative social vices bringing about peace and order in the society.

Surprisingly, until the 1990s, sexual violence during wartime was not seen as an international crime which was to be prosecuted, despite its prohibition under international humanitarian law. Instead, sexual violence was viewed as a mere attack against the honour of women and morality but not as a crime with serious offence that is to be punishable under the law; no wonder the perpetrators of the wicked act continued in their evil. Thankfully the fourth Geneva Convention in 1990 expresses the need for special protection of women “against attack on their honour, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution or any form of indecent assault” (UDHR 2014). This convention gave a clear specification to clarifying the legal norms applicable to gender-based crimes during conflict. From the foregoing, it will not be out of place to categorically state that sexual violence such as rape and all forms of discriminations against women during crises, conflict, and emergency situation can be considered as crimes against humanity and women in particular. One begins to wonder why UN policies that are centered on prosecuting crimes which appear gender-based are yet to be implemented in Ikwerre society. Some reasons adduced from the interviews carried out is that firstly, most people in Ikwerre society, men, women, and even traditional lawmakers are ignorant of the existence of such UN laws that stresses on the security/protection of women in crises, conflict, and emergency situation. But this is a shocking finding considering the fact that Nigeria is a member State of the UN body and all arms of government are binding under all forms of UN policies. Could it be that the fault can be attributed to the federal government who has failed to trickle down these laws in a more understandable manner to the state and local government levels? Secondly, most girls and women who been have sexually abused both in crises, conflict, and emergency situation and in peacetime in Ikwerre society often find it difficult to report the evil act meted against them to the appropriate authorities and law enforcement agencies because of the fear of being stigmatized or tagged “loosed women”. Based on

this reason, wickedness continues to thrive against womanhood. The government of Nigeria and all law enforcement agencies in Ikwerre society should take decisive measures to curtail the violence women face in crises, conflict, and emergency situations in Ikwerre society by ensuring that women and children’s human rights in are not infringed upon.

Conclusion

Issues on national security have always been on the fore of global and national discourse because of its importance to the progress and development of a nation. It is unfortunate that women and children in all of these discourses have rarely been given their right of place in security and protection. After all article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates that “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”. I am of the opinion as a feminist scholar that most of these vices inflicted on women and children can be curtailed if criminal charges are attached to them and if women are courageous enough to speak up whenever they are mistreated by the opposite gender no matter who is involved whether the military or civilians. There is the urgent need to address the security situation of women and children as a nation beginning from the federal government down to the grassroots by implementing the UN declaration on the security of women and children. Only when this is done that Nigeria as a nation can achieve greater development strides than it has done thus far.

Recommendations

- i) The Nigerian Government should note that it is not enough being a member state of the United Nations, but more important is to ensure that conscious efforts are made to implement UN laws/declarations that are beneficial to its citizens, especially women and children alike.
- ii) Women, men, and traditional rulers who make laws in Ikwerre society should acquaint themselves with global/universal laws that concerns women and inculcate them into traditional laws as long as they do not totally negate Ikwerre core values and traditions.
- iii) The UN should review their laws/declarations to include cultural considerations of less developed cultures in the enactment of international laws and policies and to device measures to check their level of implementation the world over for effective administration.
- iv) Education is a veritable tool for the rapid development of a nation. The instrumentality of education should be implored to inculcate in women especially the rural ones what their rights are and device means on how best to agitate for their implementation.
- v) The educated women in Ikwerre society should champion programmes like seminars, summits, workshops, and symposium and activities like meeting, sharing ideas, and skill development to sensitize and re-orientate their fellow women to know their rights and pursue them for most efficient form of agitation towards the ending of all forms of violence in crises, conflicts and emergency situations in Ikwerre society. Ikwerre society

should endeavour to form Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the society to go from community to community, Local Government Area to Local Government Area to sensitize women on the need to know their rights.

References

1. Dorcas Olu O, ed. 2001 *African Culture and the Quest for Women's Rights*. Ibadan Oluseyi Press Ltd.
2. Lasebikan, Esther. 2001. African culture and the quest for women's rights. A General Overview In *African culture and the quest for women's rights*, ed. D.O Akintunde, 11,13 Ibadan: Oluseyi Press Ltd., 11.
3. Oluremi Savage. 2021 Women Peace and Security in Nigeria: Examining the Domestic and International Legal Framework. *Nnamdi Azikiwe University Journal of International Law and Jurisprudence* Vol.12N0.1:47 <http://www.ajol.info/index.php/naujilj/article/view/206732>
4. Tasié, Chijioko. 2008. *Ikwerre land History, Culture, and People*. Port Harcourt: Purify Press Publishers.
5. Wotogbe-Weneka W. 2020 *Owumini: Beliefs and Practices of AQUATIC SPIRIT among the Ikwerre People of Niger Delta*. University of Port Harcourt Press Ltd.: 3
6. Conflict Bulletin. 2015 https://scholar.google.com/scholar?9conflictbulletin2015&hlen&assdtoas_visi&oiScholart
7. United Nations. 2010. *Committee on the elimination of discrimination against women: General recommendation No. 28 on the core obligations of States parties under article 2 of the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women* <http://undocs.org/CEDAW/C/GC/28>