Research Article

Gender Stereotypes and The Dynamics of Women Evaluation: A Study of Igbo Anthroponymic Systems

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Abstract
The essentialist belief or perception that females are less valuable or are not worth as much as males and practices that mandate this behavior portray age-long and ideological underpinnings that drive gender discrimination. The aim of this article is to examine how unwritten rules of society and constrained expectations about women influence some derogatory names given to female children and their cultural reconstructions over time given a positive life outcome. The study adopts Ernestine Friedel's Social theory of gender and the Status Characteristic theory to challenge the perception that women are less valuable and explore ways in which normative expectations, male dominance and economic realities affect the values assigned to women in each culture. This is critical social research that investigated the semantic contents of some derogatory female Igbo names and their cultural reconstructions as changes in social context raised the cultural worth of those females in their life trajectories. It employed the ethnographic method of study with narratives, participant observation and informal interview methodology for collection of qualitative data. The paper analyses the gender-based values, ideologies and norms that mandate women devaluation and other relationships that have placed women in a subordinate status. It offers an emic understanding of a process of change that transforms negative attitudes toward women indicated by the new names given to them. The study recommends a cultural reorientation as a means to 'break the bias' and end all forms of discrimination against girls.

Keywords: Gender Stereotypes; Women Devaluation; Constrained Expectations; Anthroponymic system Derogatory Names.

Introduction

Studies in anthroponymy of different cultural settings have been addressed by scholars from multi-disciplinary fields of learning. Personal name giving is a social practice rooted in culture through which historical values are expressed. In Igbo culture and many other cultures in Nigeria, personal names have been highly influenced by European names. Virtually all human societies give names to their young ones before, at and after birth. Personal names are like markers of identity which in Africa are viewed as making the human personality [1]. Names in African cultures are symbolic, significant and interpretive. Personal names sometimes convey the giver's experience, story, feelings, emotions, philosophy and expectations for the newborn.

The experience of the giver may be represented by events in life, memory, story, season, thing, success or failure. Feelings or emotions are also expressible in terms of hurt, hate, beauty, love, joy, happiness, fear, mourning, objection, gratitude, thanks, excitement and others. Philosophical names portray ideas, ideologies, beliefs, values or proverbs. More so, names can be couched in terms that express the giver's expectations in life such as dreams, cause, prayer, wish, norms and ambitions. As markers of identity names stir up the sense of character, esteem, low esteem,

honor, dejection, excellence, prestige, shame, rejection, etc. First names are among the most important indicators of gender [2].

Pejorative or derogatory names are first names that have negative connotations as a result affect the bearer's self-esteem. These names could be given to a child at birth in order to drive away or repel evil spirits from possessing the child such as *Kgabo*; meaning chimpanzee [1,3]. In Southern part of Africa, particularly Swaziland, when a family expects a baby boy and a baby girl is birthed, she is named *Jabhisile*; meaning disappointment. A girl can also be named *Khombo*; meaning misfortune after successive infant deaths [4]. Investigation of the semantic and pragmatic meaning of some personal names in Igbo, mentioned some names given to girls as a backlash to the harassment received by agonizing mothers of only female children (Afuluenunanya; Does one see God, *Obumeke*; Am I the creator?). Other names easily observed among the Igbo cultural group are; *Nwanyiabunwa* meaning a female is not counted as a child; *Nwanyibuka* implying a female is the source of misunderstanding or conflict; *Amukahuru* meaning giving birth to the one seen and such like [5].

Derogatory female names make evident essentialist belief held

by many cultures that reflect the normative notions of men and women. Heteronormative expectations about sex roles develop as people grow older and vary between culture and generation. Men and women have different role expectations that define their status [6,7]. Research interest on gender stereotypes has spanned through decades. The Beijing Platform for Action sought to address such issues among others as 'stereotyping of women' [2]. Public discourse on gender stereotypes have centred around the sex roles and expectations of men and women that shape their life outcomes. More than two decades after the Beijing conference, gender stereotypes have persisted due to the ideology of differing genetic disposition that result in sex categorisation between men and women. Stereotypes relate to gender differences and explain how society expects men and women to behave, act, think or feel [6].

Boys and men are expected to behave in certain ways that portray them as aggressive, powerful, superior, wise etc. These behavioural traits are reinforced by social norms of informal rules and expectations that are based on gender differences. Girls and women are largely undermined and undervalued due to shared ideology of male superiority [8]. From infancy, girls grow up to internalise the perception of gender differences, between boys and girls, men and women arising from biological characteristics [9]. This is made possible through the process of gender socialization. The aim of this article is to examine how unwritten rules and shared expectations that people hold about women and girls in Igbo culture change over time given a positive life outcome.

This study explicitly rejects the view of Social role theory and other approaches which hold that men and women have different roles because of their different physical and anatomical characteristics. Similarly, it is also critical of the male strength and women's childbearing hypotheses among other evolutionary approaches in gender study that explain inherent biological differences in men and women as accountable for the behavioral differences. In addition, the view of Structural Functionalist Talcott Parsons on sex roles, notes that men play the 'instrumental' role as breadwinners. On the other hand, women's biological characteristics predispose them to nurturance ('expressive') role. Parsons have been criticized by feminists as limiting the woman's role in the family mostly for the man's comfort thereby, promoting women's oppression [10].

The study's approach to understanding women evaluation draws insight from the Social theory of gender and the Status Characteristic theory. Gender roles are said to be culturally set and not biological. More so, the rules and shared expectations that society holds about the sexes are culture relative. Different societies assign different roles to men and women. In the traditional Botswana society, the responsibility of house building which is designated a man's task in many other societies is the prerogative of the woman. Hair making or styling in Nigerian cultures had been a woman's task, but in the contemporary society, male hair stylists are highly sought after. Friedl argued that women are devalued because the culture does not attach premium to the roles they play. Evaluation of roles is based on the gender (masculine and feminine) of the individual rather than the role [11]. Magnusson's view that the prestige assigned to an occupation, job or task portrays its worth in the society further buttress the cultured devaluation of women in traditional settings [12]. Tasks culturally designated for the males are given higher value than the ones assigned to females. Gender shapes the meaning, value and by implication prestige assigned to tasks or work activities [2]. Yam in Igbo culture for instance, is defined as a male crop, hence the prestige that society confers on male yam farmers. Higher valuation of men's work or roles is a 'reflection of male dominance'. Male dominance is strategically aimed at granting men preferential access to opportunities and placing greater value on them as a means of exerting authority or control over others [11].

Female subjugation is an issue easily taken for granted without possibilities for change. On its part, status characteristic theory or theory of expectation is an interactionist approach that lends credence to the organisation of interaction based on sex category. Gender expectations and stereotypes result because interactions are based on sex category. Status characteristic becomes a quality of individuals linked to a society with widely held beliefs placing higher worth or esteem on the maleness than femaleness [13]. This theory provides explanation of the influence of the connection among expectations, value and stereotypes. A lower status characteristic is therefore attributed to females. Gender in Nigeria is a status characteristic that shapes expectations and forms the basis for stereotypes.

Studies in stereotype have seen the evaluation of men and women [14]. Oha analysed the content of some Igbo proverbs about women and observed that representations of females in social discourse portrayed stereotypes, negativity and prejudice. Broverman; Vogel; Broverman; Clarkson and Rosenkrantz 1972; investigated the 'traits that people typically ascribe to women and men'[15,16]. Women are reported to have been less favourably evaluated than men as a result of 'biological determinism' [8,17]. Women devaluation has been variously defined. Gendered devaluation is a differential cultural treatment or relation that views male as more important than whatever is associated with female. In this study, we conceptualise women devaluation as the act of placing higher value on things considered masculine, while tagging things considered feminine as valueless or worthless. Anele demonstrated the many ways in which women are devalued in many social relationships in Nigeria [18]. Prominent among these ways is the institution of marriage which involves such kinds of marriage arrangement like Polygamy, *Sadaka*, 'Pawn', forced or early marriage, widow inheritance and levirate. Many countries in Africa support polygamous marriage particularly Kenya, Guinea and Swaziland with existing legislations that enforce the practice.

Against this backdrop, this study draws on certain practices or gender-based values, ideologies and norms that mandate women devaluation to show how radically some derogatory female first names have undergone cultural reconstruction given an improved life outcome. Gender norms are informal and unwritten rules and shared expectations that distinguish expected behavior on the basis of gender and portray disparities in the value placed on boys over girls which in turn affects the self-esteem of girls or others, who choose to identify with the feminine gender [19,20]. The following research questions guided the study:

1.	What is the role of stereotypes in women devaluation?
2.	What are the practices that stoke women devaluation?
3.	What are the semantic contents of some female Igbo derogatory names and their cultural reconstructions?

Method
The study is critical social research that examined the changes in social context that raised the cultural worth of females in their life trajectories. It adopted the ethnographic method of study with the participant observation, narratives and informal (conversational) interview methodology for qualitative data collection. It investigated the semantic contents of some female Igbo derogatory first names and their cultural reconstructions. This approach was adopted for a more insightful analysis of the ideological underpinnings and practices that support women devaluation through derogatory first names. As a method that seeks to study ways of life of a cultural group, ethnography brings to limelight rules and stereotypes that reinforce women oppression. Field notes were taken from interactions with people.

Results and Discussion
Ending all forms of discrimination and harmful cultural practices are crucial to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 5. Gender stereotypes produce uncritical judgement about females and reinforce the power differentials between males and females which in turn give value or devalue. Gender stereotypes are an underlying factor in women devaluation [21]. Gender stereotypes are harmful social and cultural biases about qualities or roles that should be taken up by men and women which restrict their ability to make life choices [22]. They are injurious to women's dignity and diminish the capacity of women and girls. The perception that females are not of much worth as the males, are mainly essentialist and undermine the place of females in Igbo culture. Anecdotal evidence on baby factories in Nigeria reveals that the cost of a male baby is far more expensive than a female baby. The normative notion holds that males are biologically and anatomically different from the females, therefore naturally dominant. Beliefs and expectations about the different sex roles trigger the resultant behavioral pattern of female insubordination. Most known human cultures view females as subordinate to males and portray this perception through diverse ways. Proofs of negative cultural evaluation of women include; cultural ideology and sexism, symbolic devices that assign inferior valuation and unequal power relations that discriminate against women Ortner [8].

The Igbo culture subtly ascribes defilement to women as evidenced by some of the notions held about them. A woman's urine is believed to be an antidote to any form of poison or evil power in charms and unorthodox medicine. Men who seek supernatural powers are warned to keep away from women in order not to weaken the potency of their charms and attract defilement. Again, menstruation is culturally symbolized as defilement, hence women are prohibited from entering sacred places and touching sacred things particularly during their menstrual periods. It is an abomination for a woman to break *kolanut* except for personal consumption neither can they make libations to the ancestors. In a gathering of women, it is expected that a boy or man be invited to break the *kolanut* (In Igbo culture women are regarded derogatorily as urinating with two hands. Women do not break *kolanut*, they are regarded as impure during menstruation discriminated against in inheritance and places absolute power on the right of males to decision making).

Stereotyping is a mental coloration which attenuates women and girls and portrays prejudiced attitude and sexism. Some of the commonly held notions about women generally include the following: a woman without a male child is childless, the woman's place is in the kitchen, women are irrational, are meant for sex roles, etc. Modo highlighted that they are held down in a low or merely no esteem and their fundamental human rights violated [21,23]. Stereotypes impact negatively on the exercise of women's fundamental human rights, 'assigning women to subservient roles in society' and relating with them according to "restrictive generalizations" ([21]. Women in African culture are socially and institutionally conditioned to a subordinate status. Stereotypes obscure women's career progression in management and suit dominant narratives that have been internalized in everyday interaction among people [24,25]. Women and girls are socially vulnerable, stigmatized and their self-worth and image reduced. Gender norms foreground stereotypes which are reinforced by the status quo.

Practices that stoke women devaluation have their roots in gender norms that perpetuate female subjugation. Women are devalued through certain practices that assign greater worth (economic, cultural and biological) on boys and men over women and girls. A survey carried out by the United Nations Population Fund (2020) shows that 90 percent of men and women have some form of bias or prejudice against women. More so, these obnoxious practices stem from essentialist beliefs that place more worth on men and boys and perpetuate male dominance. Some of these harmful cultural practices include; female genital mutilation or cutting, early/forced/child or any other form of marriage arrangement that violates the human rights of women and girls and trade their well-being. Other factors that drive negative evaluation of women and girls include gender-based roles, values and norms (breadwinner/housewife, inheritance, son preference/daughter devaluation) and the institution of patriarchy. These are plausible drivers towards the perpetuation of negative attitudes about the value of women and girls especially in Africa.

Female Genital Mutilation also known as female circumcision or cutting is a normative expectation built on misperceptions that it is a means of controlling sexuality and deterring promiscuity among women, enhancing sexual pleasure of men, initiation into womanhood and others. This form of gender-based violence mostly perpetrated by women who have been cut (UNFPA 2020) against women is waning in Nigeria, but not yet eradicated [26]. It is a harmful traditional practice more prevalent in the southern part of Nigeria with South East at 32.5% among women of child bearing age and 12.7% for girls aged 0-14 years. FGM has been criminalized in Nigeria under the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act 2015 which seeks to eliminate it and other forms of gender-based violence [27].

Early or child marriage reflects other gender and social norms and are no longer commonplace in the southern part of Nigeria particularly Igbo societies. The internalization and adoption of

western education have led to a reorientation on the importance of female education. There is a higher incidence of female educational enrolment and attainment in schools at the basic, secondary and tertiary levels in addition to delayed marriages. It had been noted that the literacy rate of females within the reproductive age bracket in Nigeria was only '52.65%' (UNESCO 2018) which indicates a narrowing gender gap in education [28].

Forced marriage on the other hand persists. A girl's family imposes a suitor on their adult daughter mostly for economic or any conjectured reason regardless of her consent. Poor families with young and beautiful daughters are the most vulnerable to forced marriage. Marriage offer from a rich suitor is viewed as a lifetime opportunity that would change the fortunes of the family, hence the irresistibility of such an offer. Consequently, the girl is coerced into marriage at the expense of her physical, emotional and psychological well-being. The same social norms that negatively evaluate women and girls as providers to societies and economies reinforce both marriage and educational chances [29]. The *Sira* culture of the *Ogonis* (non Igbo speaking ethnic group in Rivers state, south-south of Nigeria) mandates the Sira (a daughter) to remain unmarried in her father's house and reproduce children, especially in situations where there is no male child. The Igbo culture adopts queer types of marriage arrangements in order to raise an heir. Ghost marriage is an arrangement whereby a girl is married on behalf of a deceased male member of the family. By virtue of this marriage the deceased's family expects the woman to raise children in the name of the deceased. Woman to woman marriage is also practiced if the widow of the deceased man was unable to produce a male child. The widow is culturally authorized to marry another woman preferably young in her late husband's name in order to raise a male child through a chosen kindred or family member.

In the normative expectations of a husband-and-wife, roles are distinctively assigned to men and women based on their sex. Like many other societies, there is division of labour along sex lines. Differential gender role remains the foundation of heterosexual marriage. These are socially defined differences between men and women that place greater worth and institutionalize male hegemony over socially valued resources. Culturally, society apportions women tasks with no identifiable or tangible income as wife and mothers. Men exercise marital power as breadwinners and occupy or own the public sphere where as women belong to the private domain. This dichotomy of the sexes entrenches systemic power, domination and female subordination. Traditional social norms are more resistant to social change in rural than urban areas. However, intergenerational shifts have launched women into the public space with increased positive outcomes in education, work, business and even marriage. Harsh economic realities and responses to technology and communication facilitated social change is gradually engendering egalitarian family roles.

Patriarchy as a practice is nested in the minds of people and ensures the maintenance of unequal power relations between the male and female. Gender systems in Igbo societies are deeply hierarchical according more rights and privileges to the male [30,31]. Decision making at the family, kin group, lineage, clan and community levels is the prerogative of men. The *Umuada* only decide matters that affect their perception of members' behavior and attitudes as daughters or wives in the community. Patriarchy advocates male supremacy and reinforces female subordination. Economic decisions take place at the public sphere giving males added advantage to seize and control the highly valued goods and services in the society. Patriarchy accentuates male dominance in Igbo culture through the exclusion of women from inheritance.

Generally, inheritance among the Igbos is patrilineal as women are excluded from inheriting their fathers' properties or land. A variation exists in some Igbo societies like Ohafia and Bende local government areas of Abia state where inheritance is mostly matrilineal. In most Igbo societies, women only inherit their late mothers' dresses and kitchen utensils. This discrimination had always been supported by the customary courts in Igbo land. Women's exclusion from inheritance, especially landed property undermines their empowerment. Women are expected to be financially dependent on their husbands, fathers, sons and brothers as evidenced by the title given to married women *Oriaku* (which literally means one who enjoys wealth). Disinheritance of girls conflicts with Section 42(1) (a) and (2) of the 1999 constitution.

In the same vein, sons are preferred over daughters, because of their assumed gender roles as protectors of the bloodline which are more valued in society than females [32]. Culturally, men perform ancestral rites and maintain the name of the family. Sons are invaluable in Igbo culture that a family with daughters and no son is perceived as childless. If a man dies without a son, his properties including land inherited and acquired are given to his brothers or male relations and his name dies equally. The society expects such a family to do anything possible in order to raise an heir. Women who could not give birth to sons are also prone to discrimination and violence [33]. Son preference was identified as the main driver of daughter devaluation through derogatory first names in traditional Igbo societies. Another example of a derogatory female first name among the Igbos is *Amuchieovu* meaning literally, giving birth to close the compound.

First names given to boys portray the high cultural worth that society places on them. Male children are assigned names that relate to deities or qualities and ideals that are highly revered. Examples of some of these names and their literal meanings include *Nkume* – rock, *Ohia* – bush, *Njoku* – the god of yam, *Orji* – iroko, *Agu* – tiger, *Nwaji* – child of yam, *Igwe* – king or cloud, Okeamadi – the great one; Iheanacho – what is desired; *Ikenna* – the father's strength and others. In contrast to this, names given to girls reveal societies or families' expectations of little or no worth. Girls are usually named after common things in relation to the boys. For example, *Nwangaji* – child of spoon, *Nwaefere* – child of plate, *Nwaololo* – child of bottle, *Eresi* – rice, *Nwasini* – child of shilling, *Nwaokuko* – child of fowl, *Mmaji* – wife of Njoku, *Nwainyamkpe* – child of cocoyam, *Nwamba* – child of cat, and so on.

Unequal power relations in patriarchal societies produce meanings that vituperate women. Derogatory first names were given to girls in objection to the birth of only girls. Every Igbo family expects to have both male and female children. The unmet expectation for a girl child portends no danger or threat, while that

of a boy has serious consequences for the family. The search for a male child can also lead to polygyny. The anger or disappointment for this unfulfilled expectation sometimes crystallizes into such pejorative first names to the bearer as *Ejiemeke* – Of what use, *Achifuoaku* – waste of wealth, *Emejiaka* – literally meaning nothing or wasted. Others are *Avuta aghiawa-aghaleagboto* – pick with excitement, glance and drop out of disappointment, *Nwanyiabughinwa* – a girl or woman is not a child and *Nwanyiabughife* – a girl is nothing. These are real life situations discovered in the course of field research.

Ejiemeke (which literally means of what use?) was born after two boys and three girls. At birth, she was reportedly ugly and very tiny unlike her siblings. Out of disappointment her father's inquiry of her essence was eventually given to her as a first name. Her father gave her out to a distant trader at infancy for keeps and at no cost and she was later abandoned. Many years later a respectable man and her father's business partner sought to marry her after he found her. It was at this point in her life that the father changed her name to *Ejiemeihie* meaning she is useful (Personal communication).

Achifuoaku (waste of wealth) as her name implies was also a victim of daughter devaluation due to the consequences of her birth. She was the fifth daughter of a wealthy farmer whose expectation of a son remained a shadow till her birth. Since inheritance is mostly patrilineal it was believed that the birth of only girls symbolized a waste of socially valued resources, hence the name. In the course of her marriage she was successful in business as she traded on palm produce and became a pillar in her family. Afterwards, her name was reconstructed to mean bring in wealth (*Achibataku*).

Emejiaka was an only child of her mother born after a long period of waiting. The frustration brought about by the delayed conception and the eventual arrival of a baby girl resulted in despair. Her parents expressed their state of hopelessness in the name Emejiaka (nothing or wasted). Young *Emejiaka* married and gave birth to eight sons. *Kaka* as she was fondly called traded on stockfish and was wealthy. In appreciation her husband's family renamed her *Iheaka* which means 'our own'. There is a similar narrative but her name was changed to Ihuaku meaning the one that is lucky in making wealth.

The circumstances of *Emejiaka*'s birth were not too different from *Avutaghiawa-aghaleagboto*. She was an only child of her mother. Her mother was married as a second wife after the first wife could not bear a child. Her birth brought much joy and relief to the family, but was short-lived because she was not a boy. *Avutaghiawa; aghaleagboto* denotes the excitement of the birth of a baby and the disappointment felt because she is a girl. She remained unmarried in her father's house and she bore two daughters and three sons. Her kinsmen changed her name to *Ejimaku*; which literally means 'holding well on to wealth'.

Nwanyiabughinwa was the second daughter and last child of her parents. Her father was an only son and desperately wanted a son. The twin sons of her parents died shortly before her birth. The grief of their sons' death culminated in the name *Nwanyiabughinwa*. She was elegant, beautiful and educated at a time when girls enrolment in school was at its lowest ebb in Nigeria. Nwanyiabughinwa was employed in Nigerian customs service and later got married to her husband. She was a philanthropist and catered for her mother as she built a bungalow for her. Her name was eventually changed to *Nwanyibunwa* (a girl is a child).

Nwanyiabughife was the last child out of eight children only girls. She was married at an early age to a middle-aged man. *Nwanyiabughife* acquired some skills as a traditional birth attendant later, enrolled in school and obtained a certificate in Nursing and Midwifery. She rose through the ranks while upgrading her knowledge and reached the peak of her career. Her husband's family renamed her Nwanyibuife while the community rewarded her with a chieftaincy award. Data showed that all these women would have lived more than eighty years. The implication is that it is an indicator of the time space in which this practice of devaluation through names was evident.

Conclusion
This study investigated how unwritten rules and shared biased expectations about women and girls in Igbo culture influence the type of names assigned to them. It analysed certain obnoxious cultural practices, gender-based ideologies and norms that mandate women devaluation to show how radically some derogatory female first names undergo cultural reconstruction given an improved life outcome. Previous studies have shown that women are negatively evaluated in the workplace, in the family, language (sexist proverbs), but none highlighted this devaluation in Igbo naming system. The study drew attention to the interplay of gender-based values, ideologies and norms in perpetuating discrimination against women and girls. We identified the overarching influence of christianity in Igbo anthroponymy. The contributions of the study indicated the role of stereotypes in women devaluation; and the semantic contents of some female pejorative Igbo names and their reconstructions. The paper argued that although negative evaluation through the anthroponymic system has waned out in Igbo culture, some of the gender-based ideologies, values and norms that underpin this practice persist. The study noted that not only do stereotypes, gender-based ideologies, values and norms devalue women, but that positive evaluation could be constructed through names that celebrate womanhood. We recommend a cultural reorientation as a means to 'break the bias' and end all forms of discrimination against women. This will no doubt enhance their self esteem and place them on a better pedestal to make more contributions to the improvement of their households, communities and national development.

For further research, there is need to investigate other Nigerian anthroponymic systems in relation to the worth and image of girls and women in the society. Examining how other societies share 'socially valued resources' could also yield rich cases for comparison [34-37].

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