

Women Contributions to Item Amagu Development: A Case Study of Oginyi Echara, 1987-2022

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Abstract

The quest for women's participation in politics did not just start today in Nigeria. It has been a long protest from the female gender. In Item Amagu of Ikwo Local Government Area, in Ebonyi State, a case in point emerged in 1987 when Oginyi Echara emerged as the president of the Item Amagu Development Union, women's wing. She made a lot of innovations in an effort to uplift the status of the area. Oginyi's first project was the construction of Item Amagu Tower, used as centre for *Ajereke* festival. She also stopped women's maltreatment by their husbands where she enacted a law that approved the bundling of such men by a group of women. She was however ousted by a group of men who felt threatened by her reign and that brought about the end of women reign in Item, till 2022 when the same woman was appointed the leader of Item Amagu women group by Chinedu Ogah. This paper therefore argues that women should be given a position to occupy as most of them have genuine innovative minds that can transform the society. The study adopts liberal feminist theory in its analysis. Both primary and secondary sources are used, while qualitative historical method is adopted.

Keywords: *Women, Oginyi, Echara, Item, Development*

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Background to the Study

In Igbo traditional politics, women were not allowed to participate in political activities; this has been the fate of Item Amagu women group since time in memorial. The trend was however truncated in 1987 when Oginyi Echara, a woman of forty-two years in 1987 was elected as president of Item Amagu Development Union (Women wing). She started initiating some policies she believed could help the people to advance in development (Anyigor, 2023)

Firstly, she started the construction of Item Amagu tower, which was the first tower in Amagu Ikwo community, in January 1987 and completed in April 1987 (Echara, 2023). Oginyi also fought against the maltreatment of women by their husbands and enacted a law that prohibited such act against women. She however, faced a lot of challenges like lack of finance to execute more projects, verbal attacks by the male folks, and finally ousted by Item Amagu men. Item Amagu has never had it well than the regime of Oginyi Echara. It is against this backdrop that this paper argues that leadership should not be restricted to a particular gender (male gender) for among the female gender are ladies with exceptional ingenuity.

Methodology

The study adopts qualitative historical method. Also, analytic and descriptive techniques were used to beautify this study. Both primary and secondary sources were used in this study. The primary sources featured oral interviews, while secondary sources include journal articles, books chapters and books.

Theoretical Framework

Liberal Feminist Theory

The gender inequality witnessed in human race pushed the feminists and gender scholars to propound theories that could help to solve the problems. One of such theories is Liberal Feminist Theory. This theory according to Orizu and Ezechinachi, (2019), argues that the natural differences witnessed among the people should be discarded in order to achieve gender equality. It supports the importance of equality and seeks individualists' equality of men and women through political and legal reform without altering the structure of the society. It is in recognition of the above fact the women of Item Amagu started developing some political skills to enable them to attend some political functions like their male counterparts (Atuonwu, 2015). This recent view gave rise to the emergence of Oginyi Echara as the president of Item Amagu Development Union, women's wing.

The world view underscores the idea that both genders (male and female) have divine source even though each has a definite role to play in the development of a community. In this regard, one cannot do without the other and any form of inequality is unacceptable. Women have been invaluable in playing the role of a counterpart of man at all levels of the societal and economic order, institutionalization of the institution of daughters (*Umuada*), and stabilization of life within the family in participation in the business of making a home, community, and so on. In the light of the above, why then are women treated as second class citizens, an aberration and a necessary evil? (Orizu and Ezechinachi, 2019).

While some societies today in Igboland allow such equal rights of both genders to exist, others abhor it. In *Uju Ede* cult as written by (Atuonwu, 2015, 482) members were exclusively women, and they enjoyed the same rights and privileges like their male counterparts in *Ekpe* and *Okonko* cults respectively. Enwo-Irem, (2015) in her paper titled, *Afikpo Women in Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam*, argues that women play larger role more than men in agricultural production, which is the mainstay of the people's economy, and they work harder more than the men. They did virtually all the processing of food for home consumption and for sale, as well as making large numbers of pots. The increase role of women in the development of the community, morally, is an initiative to intervene in a war. Emezue, (2015) noted that women usually guarded the battlefield, usually the neutral zone between two armies waving tender palm fronds (*Omu*). They usually sang songs extolling the virtues of peace and condemning needless violence. Their presence in battlefields normally forced a ceasefire which the situation was exploited by other interested parties usually of men to bring the parties to peace talk. Their sole aim was to create an enabling environment for men to sort out the issues leading to a war. Unfortunately, in Item Amagu, women were not much regarded. Oginyi Echara was denied a plot of communal land generally agreed to be given to her for her impact on the community development. Some people who considered themselves the pillars of the area denied her the gift. (Ngwuta, 2023).

Early Life History of Oginyi Echara

Oginyi Echara of Item Amagu Ikwo was born into the royal family of Igboji Obushi, in Ndiagu Amagu Ikwo on 10th October, 1945. She lived with the biological parents for only two years and was taken to a family friend of the parent for further upbringing (Echara, 2023). And this came to be because it was traditionally believed that her personal god [*Chi*] did not approve her upbringing by her biological parents. To solve this problem, their family friend [Imor Nwafor] was invited to take her and raise her up in Item Amagu. Imor Nwafor brought her up and gave her the necessary training except education (Echara, 2023). Education at that time was meant for the stubborn people or people of questionable characters. It was traditionally believed that school was a place where people's excesses were limited. Obedient ones and ladies were denied the opportunity of being educated. Unfortunately, Oginyi Echara being an obedient child was shortchanged by this philosophy. Kalu (2015), observed that as late as 1980, the true purpose of colonial education was still suspect among many native communities in Nigeria especially those of them in the hinterland that lacked access to the coastal areas where the whiteman made his initial contact with some communities of the native population...when they were made to see the new reality and to receive it, they not only rejected the offer but also ran away from it.

Kalu, (2015), further noted that parents only released the urchins and some never-do-well in the communities to school as a way of punishing them. This parental attitude may have been why inept leadership is witnessed in Nigerian society today, because the early educated elites who are the current political leaders of Nigeria were people of questionable characters who never had human sympathy. People who would have transformed the society because of their loyalty were kept at home and wrongly assumed that they were to be exempted from school punishments.

Oginyi Echara married to the first son of Imor Nwafor, Thomas Imor, at the age of 12 years. She gave birth to ten children but lost five children to cold hand of death and was left with five children (Echara, 2023). She had served in different positions of authority. Oginyi Echara was the Chairperson of Okoroko Women Organization from 1991-1998. This was a socio-cultural organization that houses the whole of Okoroko clan in Amagu Ikwo. She also served as the Chairperson Unwuanyi Ndube Amiara Okum Association from 2000-2008, Chairperson Unwuanyi Ndube Imor Cultural Organization, 2006-2009, Treasurer Unwuanyi Ndube Ekoyo Imor Association 1990-1993, Treasurer Unwuanyi Nduoduma Association, 2018-present. Treasure Unwuanyi Amagu Association, 2021-present. Chinedu Ogah, a member representing Ikwo/Ezza South Federal Constituency appointed her as the Treasurer Amagu Ikwo Ajiereke Cultural Carnival, 2023. Oginyi Echara is a traditionalist (Echara, 2023). Oginyi also won several awards among which are Odozi Obodo 1 of Item Amagu, 2021. Ochiora 1 of Okoroko clan, 2006. Ezinne 1 of Unwuanyi Ndube Ekoyo Imor, 2022 (Ogah, 2023).

Achievements of Oginyi Echara

On assumption of duty, Oginyi Echara realized the importance of trade and Ajiereke festival, as veritable tools for sustainable development of a particular society, quickly embarked on the construction of a tower, later named Item Amagu Tower. It was first of its kind in Amagu Community of Ikwo local Government Area of Ebonyi State. The quest for people to exchange what they have with what they did not have according to Ajaegbo, (2005) led to the construction of the tower used for evening trading and the hosting of the Ajiereke festival. Oginyi, being aware of the financial involvement, levied the women of the village. They agreed upon paying the sum of #20 but after set and done, the money realized could not complete the project. She then consulted the village central government under the chairmanship of Bertrand Nwuruku for assistance. This was done and by April, 1987, the tower was ready for use and the people of Item Amagu started trading around the tower. It was constructed at Item Amagu village square. The people trade there in every evening and it later turned to be relaxation and craft production centre, (Ajaegbo, 2005).

One finds different goods in every evening especially locally produced goods like rice, cassava, pepper, yam, potatoes, water yam, fish, groundnut, and so on, Nwefia, (2023). On the aspect of *Ajiereke* festival, the tower was also used during the festival. Oko, Unya, and Igariwey, (2022) noted that festivals are institutionalized as aspect of the people's culture usually once in a year and they have been present in people's life for ages. They are celebrated to commemorate one important event or another.

Eze (2011), affirmed that *ajiereke* is one of the major festivals in Ikwo Clan especially in Amagu, Igbudu, Inyimegu, Ekpaomaka, Ameka, Ekpeli, Umota, Echaraukfu, Amangvuru, and Ezeke. It is celebrated in Amagu, Item inclusive when the moon of April of every year is sighted. Men usually clear grasses in a playground called *Edukwuaji* playground in preparation for the *Ajiereke* festival. It is the quest to have a clean and presentable ground that Oginyi Echara built the tower to beautify the environment while dancing a special *Ajiereke* dance called "*Egwu Ereke*" (Echara, 2023).

Another achievement of Oginyi Echara was the ban on the maltreatment of women by their husbands. Before her leadership, women have been suffering from several humiliations from many Item Amagu men, both their rightful husbands and other men. On assumption in office, she swung into action by seeking prohibition of the act. The first person who fell into the trap was Amiara Imor, when he beat his wife for trivial issues of presenting egg sauce with yam to him. He was bundled by group of women in September 1989 (Nwanchor, 2023).

Furthermore, she introduced cleanup activities in Item Amagu which took place twice in a month. Ajaegbo, (1981) said that as migrants, women like men; gain an interest in the material and non-material elements of culture, behaviour patterns and ideas that originate on or are more distinctive in the city. Oginyi was able to learn the culture of cleanliness, due to her frequent contact with Enugu state people as a trader. She was greatly influenced by the life in the city, and this made her to introduce the clean-up exercise to the remote village of Item Amagu. It is note worthy that other neighbouring villages like Obegu, Enyigbichiri, Orona, Ochienyum were influenced by the leadership style of Oginyi Echara.

Another striking achievement of Oginyi was the formation of cooperative society. This was locally done since most of them were not educated. She was aware that people would make remarkable progress when they came together and helped themselves. Ottenberg (2005) asserted that they gave loans to members for business, trade and other purposes, where other wealthy people were not willing to help out. They supported members in disputes with outsiders. They also preferred to settle disputes through their unions rather than going to police or native court. Cases like adultery women disobeying their husbands were handled by the cooperative society in addition to money related issues.

The above contributions and more earned Oginyi Echara a special place in Item Amagu and beyond. All the titles she earned were all merited because of her dedication to the service of humanity. However, it is not as if all the above achievements were gotten from a platter of gold; she experienced some hitches in the course of her leadership.

Challenges of Oginyi Echara

The African culture being patriarchal and hostile to the female gender actually played a heartbreaking role in the life of Oginyi Echara. This traditional culture of not sending female children to school limited most of her views. According to her, when she was ousted from his post, she would have gone to court to seek interpretation, but lack of education humbled her to accept the humiliation from the male counterparts. Echara, (2023) on this note, maintained that lack of Western education was the first challenge she encountered during her regime. Another challenge witnessed by Oginyi was natural hatred by the male counterparts. Anyanwu and Ugbudian (2015) noted that there are still deeply ingrained cultural and structural barriers against the mainstreaming of gender on all spheres of human activity. It is pertinent to state that available indicators reveal that girls are discriminated against from the earliest stages of life. The status of girls is still significantly less than that of boys in some countries and this makes girls more vulnerable to discrimination and neglect. This led to her expulsion from the post. Igwe (2023) affirmed that her crime was her women gender who

introduced several policies more than men. Another form of hatred shown to her was the type of kindred she came from. In Item Amagu, three kindreds exist. These include: Okoroko, Amaogu and Unwuomara. Other kindreds believed that Okoroko people were slaves and as a result deserve no position of authority. This scenario dealt with Oginyi as she came from Okoroko. Her gender vis-a-viz her mighty policies and the hatred they had on her kindred led to her expulsion.

Furthermore, there was lack of finance to execute more projects. During her regime, she levied the women to be able to execute and complete the projects she started. The money she realized was not enough to execute the project and she sought the help of the Item Amagu ruling council, (the male counterparts). Isichei (1977) noted that having considered the fact that self-financed development strategy was impossible for the women; the then general chairman of Item Amagu Development Union, Bertrand Nwuruku approved financial assistance which saw the completion of the Item tower. Another striking challenge of Oginyi Echara was disunity among the women. The quest to get favoured in the central government of Item made some women to set Oginyi Echara up. They fabricated stories against her personality and were later championed by the men, (Echara, 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, the women in Item played enormous role in the contribution of the development of Item Amagu. They served as an eye opener to their male counterparts. Under the leadership of Oginyi Echara, she constructed a tower used for both trading and Ajiereke festival. Other villages learnt the tradition of building a tower in their respective village square from Item Amagu. It is in the light of the above that this paper argues and concludes that the discrimination meted against women both in Item Amagu Ikwo and elsewhere in the world should stop. This is because; they are fellow human beings and also have ingenuity in them which can contribute immensely to the development of the society. Realizing this fact, an Igbo adage comes to play, "*Nwanyi bu Ife*" taken to mean that women also have worth.

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