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SOCIO-CULTURAL ASPECTS OF FEMINISM IN IKA NATION OF DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract
Ika communities are culturally patriarchal and so, have had traditional practices that are discriminatory against women. The research seeks to examine the socio-cultural aspects of feminism in Ika nation of Delta State, Nigeria. Women grew up to meet these entrenched cultural norms and beliefs and ignorantly accepted them as natural. With education and modernisation, however, it became clear that some traditional practices are burdensome to women in Ika nation. The persistent patriarchy and ingrained cultural practices continue to hinder progress in the nation. Through a combination of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, and using Cultural Relativism as the theoretical framework, the study finds out that only some of the unfavourable cultural norms against women have been abolished, while some others like female genital mutilation, right to inheritance and access to full political participation and to economic resources have to be completely addressed to better the lives of Ika women. The study concludes that through advocacy, improved girl child education, women access to land and property inheritance as well as access to financial resources, Ika women would be freer from masculine domination. The article recommends that Ika feminists should fight for equal opportunities for all irrespective of gender in order to ensure increased growth in the land.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, sociocultural norms, feminists, Ika nation.

Introduction

Ika land in Delta State of Nigeria is commonly considered as a nation, often termed 'Ika Nation.' While it is not a sovereign State nor an independent country, it is recognised as a distinct socio-cultural ethnic nationality, a unified ethnic group with a shared history, language and culture (Onu Ika, 2026). Ika nation is a collection of autonomous communities and eleven kingdoms, each of which is a sub-cultural unit (Onyekpeze, 2023). By 1945, the term 'Ika' was formally adopted to describe the people and the language with the creation of Ika District Council (Onyekpeze, 2020). The creation of Delta State from the old Bendel State and the subsequent division of Ika Local Government Area into Ika South and Ika North/East Local

Government Areas in 1991 further formalised this unity. Thus, the Ika people live primarily in Ika South and Ika North/East Local Government Areas as well as in some parts of Edo State. Nevertheless, the study is limited to the Ika people who live in the two Local Government Areas of Delta State.

Feminism is considered to be the belief that men and women deserve equality in all aspects, opportunities and social rights (Awotwi, 2018). Feminists generally acknowledge that social inequalities are based on gender discrimination and strive to eliminate these inequalities. As Raina (2020) puts it, the premise of feminism is to seek women's justice and equality in every sphere of life and to create opportunities for women to have access to the resources that are freely available to men. Simply put, feminism is fighting against the wilful oppression of women by men. Feminism in the African context is a complex, rich and dynamic area. In this context, feminism is a movement that is rooted in the specific socio-cultural, economic and historical realities of Africa as it is deeply shaped by the complex history of the continent, including the social structures of the pre-colonial, colonial, independence struggles and globalisation in the contemporary time. Thus, African feminism tries to address the particular experiences and unique challenges faced by African women (Onwuliri, 2024). According to Ikuenobe (2018), African feminism seeks to reclaim and celebrate indigenous practices that have historically empowered African women as leaders, healers/herbalists and custodians of cultural heritage. It is therefore a movement that strives to redefine gender roles while at the same time resist both colonial legacies and unfavourable patriarchal traditions. Ika nation is a patriarchal society where governance and culture are rooted in traditional and monarchical systems where men hold leadership roles. The kingdoms are ruled by kings ('obis') who hold supreme authority and are aided by the male-dominated councils of elders and chiefs (*Ndi ichen* and *Ndi orinzere*). The traditional ancestral structure is influenced by the Binis (Benin) in Edo State. Not many works have been written regarding feminism in Ika nation. The present study therefore seeks to bridge the gap by exposing the socio-cultural aspects of feminism in Ika patriarchal communities and analysing the journey so far, the successes and the way forward.

Methodology

The study is a qualitative one which focuses on the way Ika traditional patriarchy, norms and emerging gender perspective interact. It is based on a combination of focus group discussion (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDI). Through IDI, the study would be able to explore personal beliefs and experiences of some Ika women, having one-on-one conversations with them. The purpose is to get detailed information that sheds light on the individual's experiences, feelings and perspective on a particular issue (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). In FGDs, the researchers would have groups of young men, young women and the elderly to discuss specific sociocultural norms in Ika nation. These approaches will give an in-depth understanding of how Ika culture influences the development of feminist ideology in Ika nation.

Theoretical framework

Given the cultural focus, Cultural Relativism will be appropriate as the theoretical framework. It is the principle of regarding values, beliefs and practices of a culture from the point of view of that culture itself (Nickerson, 2023). It is a view that social and ethical standards reflect the cultural context from which they are derived. By this principle, what is considered right in one culture may be considered wrong in another culture. This framework will enable the researchers to analyse Ika practices, not just from a Western viewpoint, but within Ika people's cultural context.

Concepts of African feminism

Motherism, womanism, nego-feminism and stiwanism are foundational concepts of African feminism and aspects of cultural relativism theory which define the African feminist discourse.

Motherism

This is a concept proposed by the Nigerian scholar Cathrine Obianuju Acholonu in 1995 which, according to Achaolu (2021), presents women as advocates of symbiotic relationships between humans and ecosystems and as preservers of the environment. Motherism emphasises the social and spiritual power of motherhood and its role in nurturing and sustaining life.

Womanism

According to Younger (2020), the term womanism was coined by the activist Alice Walker in 1983 in her book of essays *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*. The term was also made popular in Nigeria by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi in her book *The Nigerian Novel by Women* (1996) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her essay *We Should All be Feminists* (2012). Womanism focuses on the struggles, concerns and conditions of Black women and women of colour. The concept emphasises the historical and cultural experiences of African and African-descended women, their strength and their connection to family and community.

Nego-feminism

The term, meaning 'negotiation' feminism or 'no ego' feminism, was developed by the Nigerian Obioma Nnaemeka who argues that the lived experiences of other people should not be applied in Africa (Onabolu, 2019). It is a non-confrontational approach to achieve change within specific cultural contexts, emphasising dialogue, compromise and negotiation as a cultural strategy rather than outright confrontation. This is in contrast with a more confrontational approach in Western feminism.

Stiwanism

Stiwanism stands for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa (STIWA). Stiwanism is an African feminist concept coined by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie emphasising the need to actively include women in all spheres (Masha & Mogoboya, 2024). The concept analyses barriers like traditional practices, colonialism, race, capitalism and economic exploitation. It contrasts with Western feminism which is racist and colonialist because it does not include in its fight racism, Zionism and colonialism that affect non-Western women (AbiRafeh, 2025).

Core socio-cultural characteristics of African feminism

African feminism is localised in Africa and fights gender inequality alongside traditional patriarchal norms, colonial legacies and economic underdevelopment. The characteristics include:

Complementarity, not conflict

Many African feminist theories argue that the goal of feminism is not to create a society where women dominate men, but to restore a balance of power. The theories agree that the pre-colonial societies were not based on principles of opposition or absolute hierarchy, but on principles of gender complementarity, not just equality. Traditionally, Ika women have never striven to be equal with men nor to dominate them, but rather to complement them. Many African feminists include progressive men who advocate for gender justice. Ika feminists see men as necessary partners in the struggle, considering the enemy as the system of patriarchy, not men themselves.

Rejection of victimhood

African feminism counters the narrative of passive victimhood and works to reclaim pre-colonial authority positions held by women and the resilience of African women as powerful traders, farmers and spiritual leaders throughout history. Market women collectives and the *omu* (a female spiritual leader) are good examples among the Ika people. These roles were disrupted by colonialism which marginalised women's political and economic participation and imposed Western patriarchal structures.

Practical and holistic

Indigenous feminist theories highlight a holistic understanding of gender that encompasses social, spiritual and economic dimensions. African feminism is mostly practical, connected to everyday struggles. It focuses on tangible improvements in women's lives such as access to healthcare (especially maternal health) education for girls, access to land and political representation. Ikuenobe (2018) attests that this perspective recognises the interconnectedness of gender and other aspects of life and strives to address inequalities through a comprehensive approach that considers the wider socio-cultural context. In addition, African feminism acknowledges that patriarchy is not the only system of oppression. Thus, it intersects with culture, economic exploitation, urban/rural divide, gender and ethnicity which form part of the challenges.

Key socio-cultural challenges

African feminists tackle a wide range of challenges that are unique to their contexts. Among Ika people of Delta State, the challenges include:

Culture and tradition

African feminism generally navigates oppressive traditions while reclaiming positive cultural identities. For example, a tradition where a woman is disliked by the husband and the family in Ika land for having all-female children is highly discouraged. On the other hand, the traditional practice where a man is expected to share yearly portions of his farmland to his wife

and daughters (not inheritance) to plant their own crops for the year is highly commendable. Again, in t he past, Ika men would conclude the marriage arrangements of the daughter and only inform the girl and the mother later. Today, it is the girl, especially the educated one, who permits the suitor to see her parents to ask for her hand in marriage. Nevertheless, it is still the men in the family whose prerogative it is to formally give out a girl in marriage, decide on the bride price and the items to be written on the traditional list of requirements to be provided by the groom's family. In some Ika communities, it is the men who decide on a general list to be used by all families in the community. It is also the sole responsibility of the men to verify and receive the bride price and the items presented.

In addition, the oppressive Ika custom where a man would use the daughter to settle a debt by giving her out in marriage to a creditor (who may be old and already married) without the girl's consent (*Ikwa nwunye*/ *Ikwa di*) is seen as unwholesome and is already eroding because modern and educated girls do not consent to such arrangements any more. The practice where two fathers arrange the marriage of their children (without the children's consent) just to strengthen parental relationships has been criticised by feminists in Ika land. Again, in Ika tradition (like in most African traditions), a man is believed to be polygamous in nature and so, can marry more than one wife without inhibitions. He also cannot be guilty of infidelity in marriage whereas a woman's infidelity is a taboo due to the traditional belief that a woman's infidelity kills the husband and or the male children in the family. Thus, when a man dies, the wife is usually suspected or accused of killing him by spiritual means or by adultery. In contrast, when a woman dies, no one accuses the man of the death. Even when he is suspected, no one dares say it out.

In modern times, Ika feminists have opposed practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), early marriage, forced marriage and other forms of medical neglect. In Ika nation, it was usual for women to have many children as a way of competing with co-wives in polygamous settings and in order to have enough hands in the farm. Today, advocacy by women elites and health workers as well as women's access to contraceptives and family planning awareness have helped reduce the number of births which in turn reduced maternal deaths (Orolua & Obiazikwo, 2026). Although the practice is gradually dying down, FMG which was very prevalent in Ika nation is still being practised today, especially in rural communities. Some rural dwellers have vehemently refused to stop the tradition because it is believed that any girl who is not circumcised grows up to be very promiscuous (Eku, 2023; Onyela, 2025).

Again, Ika feminists are against women's denial of access to inheritance of family land and property. Ika culture sees it as the sole prerogative of male children to inherit the father's properties. In a situation where a man dies without a male child, the brothers of the deceased or the extended family members, not the daughters, inherit the property. At present, families who are considerate do give some properties to female children, while conservative families do not still consider the females at all.

Furthermore, the discriminatory tradition of the past where a menstruating Ika woman was made to sleep in an isolated hut (*olo oban*) has stopped. During the menstrual flow, women

were not allowed to sleep in their homes, cook family meals nor even enter the house based on the superstitious belief that the flow was harmful to men. With education, negotiation and modernisation, such a practice has been abolished. In addition, feminist advocacy in Nigeria has led to the adoption of laws such as Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (2015) aimed at protecting women from abuse and violence (Nwankwo. 2020).

Another traditional practice that is demeaning to women is the unfavourable traditional widowhood rite imposed on widows in Ika land. When a man dies, the widow is compelled to sit and sleep on an old mat spread on the floor, wear a unique dress, not eat the food cooked in the man's (her own) house for five days. Thereafter, both her dress and the mat are burnt to chase away the dead man's spirit and prevent him from taking her. As soon as the man is laid to rest, the widow's hair is shaved completely and she makes a mourning dress (usually plain black or a floral fabric of very dull colours) which she wears with black earrings for three months. The aim is to make her look unattractive to other men while mourning her late husband. With Christianity, the practice has been slightly modified for Christian women by using white as the mourning colour for the same number of months. The traditional old mat for the first mourning period of five days is replaced by a mattress which must also be placed on the floor and may not be burnt thereafter. While only a few religious groups do not insist on these rites, other religious groups and traditionalists (including the widows themselves) hold tenaciously to the rites, believing that neglecting to do them would make the widow die while mourning. If this happens, it becomes a clear indication that she killed the husband and that is why he had to take her during the mourning period. On the other hand, when a woman dies, the widower is not under any traditional obligation. It is remarkable to mention, however, that these oppressive widowhood practices against women are being perpetuated and strongly monitored by women (mothers, mothers-in-law, grandmothers, sisters-in-law) on fellow women to ensure strict compliance, thereby aiding patriarchy.

The practice of *kịrị di*

Kịrị di? is a term /question in Ika language meaning 'What is in a husband?' or 'What is in marriage?' The term was initially coined in the early 1980s by women, mostly urban dwellers, who were fighting for freedom from marital restrictions and control (Eku, 2024). Part of the *kiri di* ideology was ''A wife should not help a man execute projects.'' ''A man should not control a woman.'' *Kiri di* women formed female associations with all sorts of names like *Seven Sisters*, *Kiri di Women*, *The Happening Babes*, *Unique Women*, *Special Ladies,* and so on. Most members were unmarried mature women, divorcees, separated wives, husband beaters, and the like. Some of the married members ended up separating from or divorcing the husbands. However, such associations never existed in Ika rural communities.

Due to the fact that Ika culture generally has high regards for morality and values the marriage institution, *kiri di* soon became a derogatory term for women of loose morals, home breakers, adulterous women, women who have children for different fathers, and married women who oppress husbands. Today, such associations are no longer popular.

In contemporary times, Ika young women practice *kiri di* in a new dimension. Some of them marry internet fraudsters or rich men who live in diaspora and can afford to spend heavily on them. T he young women prefer to maintain an ostentatious lifestyle to living together in marriage. (Obed-Ohen & Omembu, 2026). Staying alone in the town, they enjoy the freedom of clubbing and partying and can be rightly designated as married but single women.

Economic exploitation and poverty

Since feminism is also about fighting global economic policies that affect women disproportionately, African feminists fight for economic justice. Policies like gender wage gap and women's concentration in informal jobs are termed retrogressive. Poverty, inadequate social services, lack of access to financial services, underemployment, and so on, are some of the economic struggles faced by Nigerian women (Agboje, 2025). Service providers like hairdressers, point of sale (POS) operators and tailors are not in jobs where the proprietor expects gratuity or pension on retirement. For women in this sector, there is little or no opportunity to break away from the poverty cycle, and this makes women depend economically on men and limits their decision-making powers. Afolabi & Ojo (2019) emphasise that economic disparity influences gender expectations and roles as lower-class women are more vulnerable to marginalisation and exploitation than those from affluent backgrounds.

Access to education

In general, rural women have limited access to education. Apart from Boji, Boji urban dwellers, most Ika women in Ika land reside in the surrounding rural communities. Despite the provision of schools, the number of Ika girls in school is not encouraging (Aselue, 2025). Before the 1950s, girl child education was uncommon in Ika rural areas. In an oral interview with an old retired headmistress, Eku (2023), it was revealed that she was able to go to school in 1940s because the father defied societal norms against girl child education. She became the first educated woman in Ekwuoma village and among the first in Abavo Kingdom. She later pushed for the establishment of an all-girls secondary school in Ekwuoma, Abavo in 1980, which boosted the education of women in the kingdom, raising the standard of living (Etumudon, 2026). Ndisika & Gordon (2022) agree that education generally contributes in raising the political and socioeconomic status of women in Africa.

Gender roles

There are distinct gender roles and cultural practices in Africa which both reinforce and challenge gender norms in ethnic groups. Ika people make up one ethnic group, yet there are different traditional roles which give women influence and power in some communities more than in others. For instance, women in some communities are greater farmers than others, while some are greater traders than others. It is noteworthy to mention that Ika nation is regarded as the agricultural heartland of Delta State, growing crops that sustain the food needs of Ika communities as well as the entire Delta State (Okonta, 2024). Crops like yam and palm were specifically for men, while women specialised in farming cassava, cocoyam, okra, melon, tomatoes and pepper on farm portions (*mmkpa*) assigned to them by the men. However, it is not

unusual today to find women who own personal palm plantations and produce palm oil monthly and women who purchase farm lands to cultivate yam and tie up personal barns at harvest time like the men. Some of these women form cooperative societies that empower them financially, making them less dependent on the men and less vulnerable to masculine oppression. The idea is supported by Kenyan activists who attest that women's cooperatives in Kenya give economic empowerment to women and should be institutionally supported (Karanja, 2019).

Political participation

Women involvement in decision-making and political processes is important for addressing women's issues. Nevertheless, due to socio-cultural norms and stereotypes, women in some African societies face barriers in political participation and representation (Sadiq & Kazibwe, 2020). From ancient times, an Ika woman can neither be crowned a Queen to rule an Ika kingdom nor be made an *Olotu* (a village or community head) nor be a member of the Council of Elders (*Ndi ichen*) except such a council is solely for women (*Olotu ikpoho*). A woman cannot also be a member of the Council of Native doctors (*Ogwa idibiẹ*), even if she is a spiritual leader like an *omu,* an *ohenren*; a priestess or a sorcerer. Ika women simply participated in politics in the past by being market union leaders, religious or spiritual leaders. Many of them were often limited by inadequate education.

Today, many Ika women are educated and occupy leadership positions. The women hold top positions in Civil Service and government establishments. Some play partisan politics, but they are not yet well-represented in elected positions. Apart from Doris Uboh-Ogunkoya who represented Ika Federal Constituency from 2007-2011, Marilyn Okowa-Daramola who is a member of the House of Assembly representing Ika North/East Local Government of Delta State from 2023-date, no Ika woman has been governor, deputy governor or even the Speaker of the House of Assembly, Delta State (Ikwu, 2025). Surprisingly, it is observed that Ika women, whether educated or not, are now accepted as palace chiefs in some Ika kingdoms.

Reflections of feminism on the language

Ika language is the language generally spoken in Ika nation with some dialectical variations in different kingdoms. While the language has some similarities with Igbo and Bini languages, Ika is not a dialect of any of these two languages. Some aspects of Ika language heighten feminism and gender inequality, whereas some others challenge patriarchy.

Firstly, onomastics in Ika language reveal male dominance. Names like Okenyehike (A male child is of great value), Okenyewuishie (Man is supreme) and Okenyewuolo (A man is synonymous with the home/the head of the home) explain this socio-cultural entitlement of patriarchy. The feminine name like Okpohoma could have dual implications: It could be given if several girls came earlier and the father resigns to fate, meaning: "I don't care anymore. Female children can keep coming, I will patiently wait for a male child." It could also be that all previous female children died and the surviving one is so named to mean: "Female children can keep dying for all I care," Again, the feminine name like Okpohowuku (A girl is an asset) implies that the father only sees a girl child as a source of wealth. That is to say that once a female child is

born, the father quickly thinks of what he stands to gain from the girl's marriage. This idea is however countered by some fathers who give female names like Nneka (Mother is supreme) and Nwaeyeogho (A child brings honour) to their daughters. The names are a reflection of men who have high regards for mothers and women in general.

Secondly, Ika expressions like *'Onyẹn mụ ikpoho a muni nwa'* (One who has all-female children is childless) and *'U w' aghọsị okpoho ọtọ owẹhịle'* (A man does not show a woman his nakedness every day) debase the woman. When a man uses this last expression, it means that the man is not expected to have intimacy with the wife every day, otherwise, that man will lose respect.

Conversely, some aspects of Ika language subtly challenge patriarchy, showing regard for the woman. This is quite glaring in enumerations. For instance, to talk about fraternal twins, Ika language lists the girl before the boy: *okpoho lẹ okenye* (A girl and a boy) and not 'A boy and a girl' as in English language. To refer to parents, it is *Nnẹ lẹ nẹdi* (A mother and a father). Furthermore, while English language would say: Men and women; Boys and girls, Ika language would say: *Ikpoho lẹ ikenye* meaning (Women and men/ Girls and boys).

Conclusion

The present paper discussed the socio-cultural aspects of feminism in Ika nation of Delta State. Feminism has been shown to reflect in the social, traditional, political, economic, educational as well as the linguistic dimensions of the people's lives. Feminism in Ika nation has been instrumental in raising awareness for the girl child education, better healthcare for women, more political participation for women and fostering an ecosystem of support for women. Through awareness, advocacy, negotiation and modernity, many unwholesome cultural practices against women are gradually being abolished in the land. It is, however, an ongoing struggle that still faces resistance. It is hoped that in no distant time, FGM will be completely eradicated and all Ika women will as well be entitled to land and property inheritance. It is clear from the foregoing, that feminism in Ika nation does not just strive to challenge patriarchy, but it also seeks the betterment of all Ika women.

Recommendations

It is hereby recommended that:

1. Ika feminists should fight for equal opportunities for both men and women;
2. The Government should make policies that prioritise economic empowerment for women;
3. More women from Ika nation should be elected into political positions.

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