

Female Criminality in Nigeria: A Historic Review

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ABSTRACT

The paper looks at women in Igbo society and their involvement in crime and criminal activities over the years. It argues that more women are now getting involved in criminal activities than before. Poverty as well as change in the traditional roles of childbearing and rearing of women to economic occupations are identified as the main reasons for increase in female crimes.

The need to encourage women in the form of education and training programs, employment opportunities to reduce poverty and income disparities that exist in the society is advocated in order to ameliorate female criminality and save our society from moral decadence.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years Nigeria has been witnessing unprecedented rise as well as sophistication in criminal activities. The new wave cuts across all sections of the society, involving men, women and children. The society overtime, has devised means of controlling crime and dealing with those who deviate from its norms and values. In pre-colonial times women were more or less restricted to their traditional social roles. The communal system of living added to the internal and external mechanism for crime control (mainly of ridicule and public disgrace) kept the level of criminal activities by women low.

With the introduction of a money economy and emergence of private property during the colonial period, some women began to seek employment outside the home. With increased labour force participation for them, some had the opportunity of getting involved in criminal activities (Adler, 1975; Simon 1975).

The tilt in female crime became apparent after independence and particularly during and after the Nigerian civil war. It has since assumed different forms and styles. Women have been known to be accomplices to criminals. They no longer come as accomplices, but as active collaborators and sometimes leaders of the gang. They no longer contend themselves with hiding weapons for male counterparts but operate with the weapons as well (Sunday Champion, May 9, 1999). This shift may not be unconnected to the economic situation in the country where there is the quest for materialism and the get-rich-quick syndrome.

This paper focuses on the historical development of female criminality in Nigeria particularly in the Igbo society from pre-colonial time till date and what factors have influenced criminality among the women. It also systematically examines the factors and the problems they portend for the Nigerian nation and by extension to the nascent democracy.

PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

The mode of production in pre-colonial times was a subsistence one. People produced only the barest necessities of life. The economy was not based on money. Division of labour was by sex. Women were restricted to the traditional social roles of bearing and rearing of children and as such were required to lead exemplary lives. Particularly, women were associated with pacifist roles. They tried to restore social equilibrium when anti-social behaviour was on the increase (Green, 1964:91). Although offences such as stealing, infanticide and witchcraft were common crimes among women then, internal and external mechanisms for enforcing moral code were enough deterrent for those who had intent to deviate. Offenders were publicly ridiculed through being made butt of songs or being forced to parade through the whole village with

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instruments of their offence. So effective was this device as a deterrent for further offence that Uchendu (1965:17) wrote:

The concept of good life among the Igbo is so built on transparency theme that individuals dread any loss of face. The major deterrent to crime is not guilt-feeling but shame-feeling.

In fact, a prerequisite for joining women's meeting then was the promise that the woman should not steal. A man would ask his future mother-in-law whether the girl he has in view steals, and would explain to her that it is a law in his place that married women found stealing would be fined by other wives in the village (Green Ibid:90).

In pre-colonial Igboland urbanization was unknown. People lived in villages, village groups and clans with the result that respect for religion, law and custom was induced partly by the sanctions of reward and punishment and partly by the influence of the family, elders and near kinsmen (Afigbo 1981:342). This also made it possible for people's lives to be organized around such gods and institutions as were important to the community. There was hardly any thing like living in anonymity or living and individual existence to the extent that is possible today in the urban centres. If one were not known by name, his family and lineage were and so could be reached when the need arose through the head of the family or lineage.

The lower incidence of reported crime committed by women during the pre-colonial period according to some researchers is attributed to their restricted social roles, the mechanism for enforcing moral codes and the rural based pattern of living.

COLONIAL PERIOD

British Colonialism and imperialism in Africa introduced money economy and emergence of private property. This contributed to some changes in the economic and social lives of the people. Particularly the traditional social roles of women of child bearing and rearing were affected, as some women had to seek employment outside the home to cope with family responsibilities. As women go out to work there is tendency to get involved in some form of illegal activities or behaviour which may have influence on them. For instance both Alder (1975) and Simon (1975) agreed that there is a relationship between the changing roles of women and the increase in the number of crime they commit. Simon particularly examines the evidence regarding demographic trends and changes in labour force participation on the part of women in America. She argued quite plausibly that as labour force participation increases opportunities to engage in criminality should expand for them as well. In particular financial and white-collar offences ought to become more common on the part of women.

Under colonial rule some towns grew either as commercial or political centres or both. Each of these towns became important as soon as they were made administrative capital, division or province. They acquired the status of an urban area and thereby attracted migrants from the rural areas. In urban conditions of existence one is released from all the intricate and intimate links which tend to hinder the development of rugged individualism. Also one comes across people who have ideas, styles of life and behaviour, techniques etc., which are quite different from those obtaining in one's village. One therefore stands a chance of learning things new – good or bad.

There is also the tendency for some women who migrated from villages to town to learn bad habits and commit crimes.

POST-COLONIAL OR INDEPENDENCE PERIOD (1960-1966)

The emergence of private property as a result of the capitalist mode of production encouraged corrupt practices during the First Republic in Nigeria. So long as private property exists, so will the urge to illegally appropriate resources also persist. Turner (1978:167) observed that Nigeria's economy then was dominated by import-export business largely of cash crop and mineral products. The economy was presided over by the representatives of foreign firms or Multinational Co-operations (MNCs). They made their wealth through bribery and other corrupt means, to exercise control over state officials and this made them have a lot of influence over the economy. Nigerian politics was thus transformed into a form of business through which actors sought to have very strong influence over the state. Nearly all business was involved in politics because the state had become the main source of finance and contracts, and nearly all politicians were in business (Rimmer, 1978:148-149). Bribe taking soon graduated into outright graft, while plunder of government coffers became a prominent feature of the system. It was difficult to identify where affairs of the state ended and where activities of the individual, especially business deals started. Those who were marginalized in the struggle for 'social surplus' of which women were in majority, had to look for other ways to survive. Some were used as decoys and lures for crimes. Others took to prostitution and other social vices to survive.

The civil war in Nigeria (1967-1970) compelled women in Owerri to double their roles as mothers and breadwinners of their families. Women suffered untold hardship as they toiled to feed the family. Some ended up stealing and committing all sorts of crime as a result of hardship. The war gave way to the oil boom. The money from the oil boom facilitated corruption on a larger scale, as there was increased desire for material possession by the people. Those who could not cope with the struggle hence lived in poverty in the midst of plenty.

THE SECOND REPUBLIC (1979 – TILL DATE)

The growth in women's poverty is also a consequence of the economic crises of the 1980's, which were particularly harmful to the poorest socioeconomic groups. The curtailment of social services, such as healthcare, childcare and family planning brought about by the multilateral bank stabilization and structural adjustment policies – macroeconomic reforms designed to alleviate developing country debt and economic stagnation created more burden for women.

Official corruption has become the order of the day since the military rule after the second republic. The culture of extortion by all forms of security agencies, most pronounced being the police, has become so wide spread that most Nigerians now see it as a way of life. Bribery or what is commonly called 'settlement' is now a necessary condition for one to be attended to in most of the nation's public offices. A retired Supreme Court judge, Honourable Justice Chukwudifu Oputa in an interview with *African Concord* in 1994 took the issue further as he explains that:

Corruption is a virus, which has affected not only the judiciary in Nigeria but every facet of Nigerian society from head to toe. Nigeria is corrupt. Why single out judges? Is there any office you go to and get things done without paying a tip? The answer is no.

Buffeted by economic hardships and with a growing loss of confidence in government, the few Nigerians still with noble virtues are themselves fast developing itchy fingers; all in a bid to survive the hard times. For now the dominant philosophy is the brutish feeling of every man for himself - survival first and moral later.

SOCIAL CONTROL MEASURES

Control mechanisms for crime and delinquency exist at two levels – the internal and external social control.

Internal Social Control

This is based on the process of socialization which one undergoes provided it had been successful. Success is measured in the individual's ability to identify, internalize and comply with the social norms and standards of the groups or community. The process of identification requires that the values of a particular group become crucial to the extent that he identifies with the group and uses its standards as a model for actions and personality development. There exists the reference group, which may be positive or negative. Where positive, conformity to standards of society is enhanced, but where negative, deviation from the norms of wider society may result. The process of non-compliance or norm-complaints depends on whether the weight of the definitions favourable to violation of law and vice-versa. Conformity is rewarded while deviance is punished.

In Owerri, a social stigma is usually attached to women who were found to be criminals or those who were not properly socialized to conform to the accepted ways of the society. Usually men avoid marrying from such families.

External Social Control

The pressure to conform in this case is exerted to the situation on which the person acts on the actor himself. External social control has to do with the role of the state. There are laws and modalities for checking crimes and criminals in Nigeria. There are also punishments for different offences. However with the phenomenon transformation and the level of sophistication of crime in the country, people have devised ways and means of circumventing some laws and getting away with some criminal offences. For instance some writers explain that some crimes by women do not get to their appropriate quarters as Pollak (1950:58) noted:

The types of crimes they commit are less likely to be detected, when these crimes are detected, they are less likely to be reported to the authorities. Moreover when crimes of women are reported, the offenders have a better chance than men of avoiding arrest or conviction because of lenient double standards that is applied to them

In Nigeria most of these crimes by women are under-reported or not reported at all. Some times they are closed before they get to prosecution stage by relations or friends who feel that women should not be disgraced publicly. Law enforcement agencies themselves appear to be ineffective sometimes in dealing with crime situations. Most of these crimes, particularly white-collar crimes are under-reported, under-recorded and suffer a lot of attrition in the hands of the police.

Crime Prevention

The crime policy of the Federal Military Government was draconian especially with regards to armed robbery and other capital offences (Orakwe, 1987:7). Since the promulgation of the decree number 47 of 1970, mandatory death sentences have been pronounced on anyone found guilty of armed robbery. Armed robbery and firearms tribunals were set up in every State to try armed robbery cases by decree and pass death sentences on those found guilty. There is no right of appeal to superior courts. However the State Governors have power to annul, commute or uphold such sentences. By imposing the ultimate penalty the idea was to scare fledging armed robbers and nip new initiates in the bud. But more than thirty years after the imposition of the death penalty the malaise has increased significantly. Robbers have become more vicious in response to death penalty, believing that it is either their victims' lives or theirs. As a result they do not hesitate to kill their victims. This has made them even more successful in their operations.

Apart from the death penalty decree, Nigeria as a nation is now more determined than ever before to fight heinous crimes. Policies have been formulated to demonstrate their unalloyed

commitment to the cause. The Guardian of 29/7/96 shows some of the elements of the policies. The legal framework for the crusade include:

- Stiff penalty for Dangerous Drugs Act which covers usages and illicit drug trafficking.
- The 1995 Comprehensive Drug and Financial control policy, covering anti-money laundering laws in all ramifications of control, including bilateral and multilateral agreements, the Vienna Convention 1998 and the European initiative.
- The Promulgation of a decree known as Advanced Fee Fraud and other related offences – decree number 13 of 1995; under which even an attempt of a scam letter is a punishable offence – promulgation of ‘failed banks and financial malpractice’s decree number 8 of 1995’; for prosecution of all those responsible for failed banks.
- Further in 2002 Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), was established by the Federal Government to check and punish those that misappropriate public funds.

These decrees notwithstanding, those with less human resilience and with propensity to negative tendencies could no longer cope with the harsh economic conditions in the country, turn to crime as a way of life; since the welfare system to ameliorate some of these problems is non-existent.

However, government provided such programs as the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) and the Better life Program for Rural Women (BLP) in 1986 and 1988 respectively to alleviate and improve on the living standards of the people. SAP which was meant to stabilize the economy and make it self-reliant increased the hard economic conditions in the country. Prices of basic necessities on the national scene rose with adverse impact on the poor and female sectors of the population.

The Better Life Program which was initiated to assist rural women to be self-reliant and better aware of their potentialities was not properly actualized to the level where it could positively and in a sustainable way change the conditions of women.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria in fact has a complex political history; frequent abrupt changes in government have led to sharp changes in economic and social policies. These have for most part impacted adversely on the population and have worsened income distribution. The exploitation of the nation’s oil resources and management of the great oil windfall have significantly influenced the evolution and perception of poverty. The provision of job opportunities for Nigerians may be one way of stemming crime rate.

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