

# WHEN WOMEN REBEL: CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY IN THE GENDER RELATIONS OF OZUITEM, SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

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## Abstract

*Central to issues of male domination and female marginalization in Igboland are cultural attitudes associated with political authority. This study examines the unexamined intrinsic nexus between social and political authority within the arena of gender relations in Igboland, using Ozuitem-Bende women in Southeastern Nigeria as a case study. The study argues that, beyond the matrilineal powers wielded by women in some Igbo social formations, women's 'social authority' (evidenced in the activities of Umuada, which includes declaration of sex strike, etc.) in several Igbo communities has grown into 'political authority' that provides them the platform to participate in village democracy and governance. In this, women have extracted a variant of 'authority' from the men, for which no major decisions can be taken without their input. Using Ozuitem-Bende women as case study, this research affirms that the sheer number and unity of purpose of women including their ability and likelihood to impose sanctions on men especially in the area of detaching or distancing themselves from communal cultural feasts and festivals, refusal to take part in burials and above all, the declaration of sex strike remain instruments readily available to encourage men to 'let go' and involve them in decision making. Scholars of cultural and gender history seem reluctant or unable to investigate the curious link between men's 'natural' authority and women's 'earned' authority in the broader discussion of women's inclusion, marginalization, and authority in Igboland. The study concludes that women's accumulated social authority has made them co-travelers with men in village governance and in community organization/mobilization.*

*Keywords: Social authority, political authority, village democracy, rural governance, marginalization, sex strike*

## INTRODUCTION

The strongest weapon the Council had and used against the men was the right to order mass strikes and demonstrations by all women. When ordered to strike, women refused to perform their expected duties and roles, including all domestic, sexual, and maternal services. They would leave the town en masse, carrying only suckling babies.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ifi Amadiume (1987), *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, London and New Jersey: Zed Books, p. 67.

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We have chosen to preface our academic discussion in this paper with an excerpt from Ifi Amadiume because she showed by the submission above that withdrawal of 'sexual services' by wives from their husbands could bend the iron resolve of men and compel them to reverse policies considered obnoxious by the women. If this does not approximate to power, I doubt what is!! In like manner, the attitude of a husband that tilts towards oppressing the wife is good enough for women to institute a regime of punishment that could be widespread; a regime and sanction of sexual boycott that is emotionally and psychologically crippling. Thus:

In cases of extreme mistreatment of one of them by the husband, they may institute a Lysistrata regime, an economic and sexual boycott in which they may enlist their other sisters in the community.<sup>2</sup>

In its absurdity, sex strikes and boycotts are nothing short of a display of feminine power to compel obedience from the menfolk, even when men prefer to live in self-denial. Therefore, the nature of political power in Igboland and elsewhere must necessarily include this neglected area of the withdrawal of sexual services by women.

Scholarly debates continue over the nature of the political power women exercise in African communities, especially in Igboland. These debates follow a monorail line of thought, emphasizing that the possession and exercise of political power through village governance are the only true essence, manifestation, and reflection of political power. In this work, I argue to the contrary that, beyond gendered and visible duties that depict masculine presence and superiority, there are several feminine duties that project political power, even when such duties, roles, and functions are ignored by male-centered studies prevalent in centers of scholarship across Africa. Studies on political power in African rural communities glorify mainly the contributions of the men-folk while underestimating the role of women.<sup>3</sup> Here, we submit that there is a dearth of scholarly literature on the role of women in these communities, underscoring the need for information on women's involvement in village or rural governance. The cause of this knowledge gap is obvious, especially considering the prejudiced male-patronizing works produced using a "Eurocentric framework of history."<sup>4</sup> For instance, the role of spirituality and religion in Igbo societies

<sup>2</sup> Laurent Sharp (1933), *The Social Organization of the Yir-Yoront Tribe*, Cape York Peninsula, Part 1. Kinship and the family: *Oceania* 4: 404-31.

<sup>3</sup> Victor Ukaogo (2020), *Androcentrism and Misogyny: Debunking Myths Regarding the Role of Women in the Biafran War Economy, 1967-1970*, *Cogito Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, Vol. XII, no 4, December, 128-155.

<sup>4</sup> Antwanisha V. Alameen (2013), *Women's Access to Political Power in Ancient Egypt and Igboland: A Critical Study*, Dissertation Submitted to the Temple University

cannot be overemphasized. The power and position of community rulers will be meaningless without the spiritual and religious dimensions. In most studies, this aspect has been conveniently ignored, probably because it will amplify and promote women's role in community administration. Official spiritual and religious positions in communities enabled women to lay claim to spiritual authority, which translated into political power and higher social status in their respective enclaves. This was what Watterson explains further to the effect that:

Women participated in a cult for both religious and social reasons: the holding of a priestly title carried a certain amount of prestige; it was taken as an indication that the holder was a woman of respectability and standing in society, and perhaps as an indication of her intellectual capabilities.<sup>5</sup>

Very importantly, the spiritual position of a priestess carries significant authority in both spiritual and political realms. Although attention drawn to women's role in communities would seem to be a 'romanticization'<sup>6</sup> of women's role, reality is that two opposing paradigms seek to interpret the role of women in the African political space, namely that which romanticizes women's contribution and the other that holds 'lingering inhibitive cultural and patriarchal forces' responsible for the diminished role of women across African communities.<sup>7</sup> Scholars such as Zulu Sofola<sup>8</sup> and Ifi Amadiaume<sup>9</sup> insist that foreign influence through colonialism diminished women role in African communities through the process of '*de-womanization*'.<sup>10</sup> *De-womanization* is the process by which African women were deliberately eliminated and removed from positions of authority and supplanted with 'less qualified men' in the interest of the colonizers. However, recent research initiatives encourage us to argue that the sexual and

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<sup>5</sup> Watterson, B. (1998). *Women in Ancient Egypt*. Phoenix Mill: Wrens Park Publishing, 39.

<sup>6</sup> V. Alameen (2013), *Women's Access to Political Power in Ancient Egypt and Igboland*...68

<sup>7</sup> Gloria Chuku (2009), *Igbo Women and Political Participation in Nigeria, 1800s-2005*, *International Journal of African Historical Studies* Vol. 42, No. 1 (2009) 81

<sup>8</sup> Sofola, Z. (1998), *Feminism and African Womanhood*, in O. Nnaemaka (Ed.), *Sisterhood: Feminisms & Power: From Africa to the Diaspora*, 1-64. Trenton: African World Press.

<sup>9</sup> Amadiaume, I. (1987). *Male daughters, Female husbands: Gender and Sex in an African society*. London: Zed Books. Also see Amadiaume, I. (1987). *African matriarchal foundations: The Case of Igbo Societies*. Lawrenceville: Karnak House

<sup>10</sup> Sofola, Z. (1998). *Feminism and African Womanhood*. 63.

spiritual perspectives of political authority in Africa must not be ignored in discussions of political authority in Igboland, with reference to the Ozuitem community in the Bende Local Government Area of Abia State, Southeast Nigeria. Women in pre-colonial Igboland held important spiritual roles, earning them society's respect and esteem. Accordingly, the civilizations that resulted from their efforts were societies in which women ruled both politically and spiritually. I therefore argue in this study that a discussion of political authority in Igboland that ignores references to men's sexual pleasures and events in the spiritual world denies the reality of power dynamics in Igboland. Achebe affirmed this and volunteered that in the:

Spiritual political constituency of government, the female principle held greater power than the male, as "goddesses were the primary figures of power and in reference to men who became "male priestesses," authority.<sup>11</sup>

In line with the above, it is safe to say that women have exercised some degree of independence in the past, even when males have reacted in a variety of ways, ranging from acceptance to accusing women of performing witchcraft.<sup>12</sup>

### OZUITEM COMMUNITY: AN EXPLORATORY SURVEY

The 2006 national census conservatively put the population of Ozuitem at about 20,000, even as the entire Bende Local Government area, into which Ozuitem is configured, boasts a population of about 192, 621 people within the same period. The community's location is highly strategic, at the center of the local government area and sharing common boundaries with most communities. This probably justifies the selection of the community as the headquarters of the defunct Elu-Elu County Council between 1960 and 1966. The County Council administered and supervised the day-to-day operations of the areas under its jurisdiction, particularly in education, justice administration, and social welfare. This same jurisdiction is today the Bende local government area, comprising the present 13 Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) electoral wards and 20 Abia State In-

<sup>11</sup> Nwando Achebe (2005), *Farmers, Traders, Warriors and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900-1960*, Social History of Africa Series, 37, (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann).

<sup>12</sup> Onaiwu Ogbomo (2005), *Women, Power and Society in Pre-colonial Africa*, Lagos Historical Review 5(1), DOI: 10.4314/lhr.v5i1.32524, August

dependent Electoral Commission (ABSIEC) electoral wards. Ozuitem is bounded to the North and Northwest by Igbere and Alayi respectively; to the South and Southeast by Bende and Amaeke Abam respectively; to the East by Umuhu; and to the West by Uzuakoli. A road of six kilometers from Ozuitem joins the Umuahia–Arochukwu Road at Uzuakoli.

The origin of the people comes in folklore, 'romanticized by exotic legends' and 'chronicled in European travel diaries'.<sup>13</sup> And as Uchendu<sup>14</sup> affirmed on the Igbo origin, it remains a subject of much speculation and has become very worrisome to scholars. It is possible to insist that there are many variants of Ozuitem's origin, but similarities abound across all the narratives. One such narrative by Abraham Idika,<sup>15</sup> and put out in the public domain with further corroborated by some other elderly individuals, states that Ozuitem is culturally divided into three broad sub-groups; the first of which is Isiegbu, comprising Obuofia, Ofiavu, Amaeke, and Amakwu. The second is Agbua, comprising Amankwu, Ndiagbo, Ebem, Amagbo, Umuokorieukwu, Ogboko, and Ndiambe. The third is Mbalaka, made up of Mba, Elugwumba, Mgbele, and Ndiobu. Ozuitem took its name from the individual who founded the town, and according to oral traditions, its origin is traceable to Ntu, a verifiable place near Ugwueke in Bende Local Government Area. An earlier movement had taken the migrants from Okpanku in Afikpo to the new place of Ntu. A brotherly migration took two brothers, namely Omaka and Item Okpi, from Ntu to Item, where Omaka's wife delivered twin babies, which were regarded as taboo and a desecration of the land. As a result, Omaka was banished with his wife. He proceeded on exile to Agbugbo near Amiyi in Igbere and later moved to Avu (Ofiavu). Omaka decided to rest in Avu in present-day Ozuitem and, over time, took his new abode as his home, without wishing to return to his original home. Avu thus became the '*OZUZU IKE ITEM*' (the place where Item rested), which was thereafter shortened to Ozuitem. Many independent scholars seem bold to affirm the authenticity of this account, for which the unity and cultural ties between Item and Ozuitem remain a bold confirmation of consanguine ties. In very specific terms, with undulating topography and a multitude of streams and brooks, the soil in Ozuitem is a mixture of clay, silt, sandstone, and shale, all condu-

<sup>13</sup> Harris, J. "Paper on the Economic Aspects of the Ozuitem Ibo." *Africa* 14 (1943): 12–23. See also Susan Martins (1988). *Palm Oil and Protest: An Economic History of the Ngwa Region, Southeastern Nigeria, 1800–1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.82.

<sup>14</sup> Victor Uchendu (1965). "The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria: Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology", New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Toronto, London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965., .111

<sup>15</sup> Abraham Idika (1984). "The History of Ozuitem," unpublished B.A dissertation submitted to the Department of History, University of Calabar, Nigeria, p. 23

cive to agriculture. The community presents conducive vegetation for habitation, such as great shrubbery, tall trees, and the gift of regular heavy rainfall between April and October. The population is around 30,000, with a vast majority living outside the community's confines. Due to population growth, terrain, and topography, there has been pressure on land, leading the community to be encumbered by land hunger. The community is 48km away from the nearest. The present study was conducted in this community, which has a rich history of tradition and culture. It is, therefore, not without reason that this study derives much of its conclusion from the bowels of its rich tradition.

### WOMEN AND THE HISTORICIZATION OF AUTHORITY AND POWER IN IGBOLAND

Immense scholarly attention has been accorded to women's involvement in local governance in several African societies, including Igboland. The involved scholars emphasize women's roles in political organizations to gauge their level of engagement in governance. Truth is that both men and women demonstrate and wield different levels of power in Igboland, and there was a certain, measured, and seeming equality in power in the era gone by. African and Africanist scholars are united in holding a consensus that an understanding of women's involvement in political governance can be examined from only two perspectives.<sup>16</sup> The first eulogizes and fantasizes on what could be likened to the glorious past of full and adequate women's involvement in power and authority before colonialism, while the second laments the subordination and alienation of women in the era of colonial rule.<sup>17</sup> In understanding this, we must refer to the pioneering works of Afigbo, Nzemiro, and Ohadike in identifying two variants of political structure and organization in Igboland, notably the constitutional monarchy in Oguta, Onitsha, and parts of western Igboland, as well as direct democracy practiced in about 80% of the entire Igboland.<sup>18</sup> In the former with 'constitutional village monarchies', Uchendu<sup>19</sup> and Orji<sup>20</sup> in-

<sup>16</sup> Michael Muonwe (2019), *Women in Igbo Traditional Religion and Politics: Prospects for Women's Political Leadership Role in Nigeria*, UJAH, Vol. 20, No. 3, 4

<sup>17</sup> Gloria Chuku (2009), *Igbo Women and Political Participation...*p5. Also see Nwando Achebe (2005), *Farmers, Traders, Warriors and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900-1960*, Social History of Africa Series, 37, (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann).

<sup>18</sup> Michael Muonwe (2019), *Women in Igbo Traditional Religion and Politics...*6

<sup>19</sup> Uchendu, V. (1965), *The Igbo of southeast Nigeria*. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston.

<sup>20</sup> Orji, J. (2007). *The End of Sacred Authority and the Genesis of Amoral and Disorder in Igbo mini states*. *Dialectical Anthropology* 31, 263-288.

sist that such a political arrangement was alien to Igboland but merely diffused via intrusions from neighbors. This alien political arrangement, where it held sway, had kings who dominated governance and were assisted by elders. At some point in their political trajectory, Chuku affirmed that they were ruled by queens.<sup>21</sup> In this instance, there is a possible temptation to validly assert that women had a pride of place in village democracy and governance. As a result, the pre-colonial era is considered a glorious era that heralded and witnessed inclusivity and equality with men. However, being of foreign origin, this practice was not acceptable in other parts of Igboland. Conversely, direct democracy was not just 'participatory' and 'intensely decentralized' but was widely accepted and practiced in the majority of Igboland.<sup>22</sup> Politically more diffuse with elders occupying a place of relevance and pride, village democracy abhors the dictatorship and dominance of a supposed sovereign who singly makes and executes law all by himself. Good governance is dependent and thus evaluated by the level of inclusivity; how everybody is carried along' by the leader. In Ozuitem, for instance, the elders led the oldest gathering in the 'Olobo', otherwise referred to as the village square, to enact laws and deliberate on issues of importance. The *Olobo* is usually dotted with very old trees that provide shade, with the unearthed roots used as seats. This village assembly was dominated by men, and women may have been in attendance<sup>23</sup> only by invitation.<sup>24</sup> This was indeed a system of patriarchy at this period. In the era of the slave trade, it was at the *Olobo* that the British slavers negotiated and dialogued with slave catchers and elders who were, in turn, given gins in lieu of money; at the end of the mutual consumption of the gin, the bottles were broken, the relics of which are still visible to this day in Ozuitem. The broken gin bottles unearthed by the vagaries of the environment command a measure of spectacle for visitors who gladly elect and plead to be allowed to have a deeper look at the relics of a best-forgotten past characterized by village greed and wickedness.

A deeper examination of power and authority arrangement in Igboland in the era before colonialism has been aptly referred to as 'dual-sex political structure by Chuku.<sup>25</sup> Clearly characterized by assigned roles to each gender, women took charge of affairs that concern them, while men

<sup>21</sup> Chuku, G. (2009). Igbo Women and Political Participation in Nigeria, 1880s-2005. *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 42(1), 81-103.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Muonwe (2019), *Women in Igbo Traditional Religion and Politics...* 4-5

<sup>23</sup> Uchendu, V. (1965), *The Igbo of southeast Nigeria*. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Muonwe (2019), *Women in Igbo Traditional Religion and Politics...* 7

<sup>25</sup> Gloria Chuku (2005), *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria, 1900-1960*. (African Studies.) *New York: Routledge*, 32

had a more general function. While this created a measure of balance of power on the surface, it did not foreclose the reality that rules made by men would still invalidate those creatively fashioned by women. The argument has therefore raised to the effect of pouring cold water on claims of equality in the power relations of this era. How real, how sustainable was this seeming equality that has been so romanticized? The truth is that the monarchical duties assigned to women in this period may be a sign of female participation in governance in Igboland, but they could be more rewarding if they are not taken out of context to approximate equality in political influence with men. Too many scholars have dwelt on and used the pre-colonial political arrangement in western Igbo territories as justification of the claim of 'dual-sex' or power-parity political arrangement, but this seems to have blinded some of them from engaging in research that focuses more on issues that depict real power for women, which the musings of men cannot reduce but accept. Accordingly, Muonwe had it all wrapped up when he summarily volunteered that:

In all, it suffices to surmise that, even though women of Onitsha did enjoy some level of political participation in pre-colonial times, which could be considered better than that enjoyed by women in most parts of Igbo society, their involvement was nothing near being symmetrical to that of men, as some have claimed.<sup>26</sup>

I therefore argue that a sustainable and more enduring power ticket, deeply rooted in the inner recesses and confines of women, should be regarded as political power, not a shared responsibility with a group eager to ensure a wholesale usurpation of such thinly granted powers, which is so very easy to retrieve.

#### Sexual and spiritual Power: Insight from Ozuitem Women

Furthermore, I argue that two areas of academic interest should be interrogated to clearly dissect and understand the true and authentic nature of political power in Igboland. This should indeed determine the reality or otherwise of claims and counterclaims regarding power and authority. It is true that research efforts on female participation in political power in Igboland have stalled on the western flank, where the intrusion of alien cultures seemed to ensure gender parity in political authority. My submission here is a charge for change and a focus on neglected themes of sexual and spiritual power in relation to men, and on the political equation of social formations in Igboland.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Muonwe (2019), *Women in Igbo Traditional Religion and Politics*, 7.

FROM THE SPIRITUAL TO THE SEXUAL:  
A CONTESTED TERRAIN?

The Igbo belief system is deep, and along with other ethnic nationalities in Africa, they are very spiritual.<sup>27</sup> This spirituality is all too evident in all that they do, but there is every evidence that the coming of colonialism with Christianity influenced the Igbo traditional worldview negatively.<sup>28</sup> The Igbo deeply believe in one creator called Chineke, whom they ascribe everything to<sup>29</sup> and in the view of Kalu,<sup>30</sup> 'Africans operate with a three-dimensional perception of space: the sky, the earth (land and water), and the ancestral or spirit world, which is located under the earth, but each dimension is interconnected and interdependent.<sup>31</sup> God (Chukwu), in the view of the Igbo, is supreme and 'is the highest of all and resides in the sky.' This explains the view of Ubah thus:

Chukwu is responsible for all creation. He knows everything, can do everything, but hardly concerns himself with anything. Quite unlike other spirits, Chukwu does not require people to expend their resources in the effort to worship him, unlike God in Christian theology he is not jealous of peoples association with other spirits.<sup>32</sup>

From the foregoing, it is evident how deep the Igbo worldview is and its belief system. Central to this understanding is the reality that whoever understands what spirits and havens need can command the obedience of the humans who take their instructions from the source of life. As a result, Chukwu is all-knowing; he uses other spirits to handle issues that are of

<sup>27</sup> Antwanisha V. Alameen, (2013), *Women's Access to Political Power in Ancient Egypt and Igboland: A Critical Study*, Dissertation Submitted to the Temple University Graduate Board in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy, 147

<sup>28</sup> Chukwuezi, B. (2008). *The Relationship between Human Destiny and the Cosmic Forces-A study of the Igbo Worldview*, in Holbrook et al (eds) *African Cultural Astronomy- Current Archaeoastronomy and Ethnoastronomy Research in Africa*. Springer Science Business Media. Also see Ubah, C.N. (1982). *The Supreme Being, Divinities and ancestors in Igbo traditional religion: Evidence from Otanchara and Otanzu*. Africa: Journal of the International African Institute. 52: 90-105.

<sup>29</sup> Afigbo, A. (2006), *Ancstral Igbo Religion and Cosmos and the Idea of World Religion. Myth, History & Society: The Collected Works of Adiele Afigbo*. Trenton: African World Press.

<sup>30</sup> Kalu, O. (2000). *Ancestral Spirituality and Society in Africa*. In *African Spirituality: Forms*.

<sup>31</sup> Oriji, J.N. (2011). *Political organization in Nigeria since the late Stone Age: A history of the Igbo people*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>32</sup> Ubah, C.N. (1982). *The Supreme Being*. . .91

lesser importance to him. Chukwu uses spiritual mediums to handle human issues. In handling human matters, Chukwu or Chineke uses several channels, chief among them the deities such as the Earth goddess (Ala), the water goddess, the protective goddess, Priestesses, and other ritual positions. All these deities and goddesses are considered feminine and thus accorded with womanly attributes. They are closely associated with obvious female characteristics, such as mothering, protection, and fertility. In a sense, female deities are the spiritual form of the Igbo woman, being regularly ascribed with Igbo womanhood.<sup>33</sup> The deliberate deification of Igbo women, in turn, makes them 'powerful and revered' and a deep sense of 'identity within the metaphysical framework'.

The masculinization of all sacred authorities in Igboland is a falsification of Igbo reality. It is a false representation that attempts to give a few religious roles to women. It is true that in patrilineal societies, men occupied most priesthood positions, but women played significant roles in religious activities, and many were indeed priestesses. This much was amply displayed by Achebe's narrative of priestess Mgbofor of the Nwachukwa oracle.<sup>34</sup> She had everything a man does not have and galvanized obedience and authority in her domain, especially by frontally criticizing and challenging European colonial overkill. Having inspired a rebellion against colonialism, she affirmed her power and authority, demonstrating authority where men merely floundered, stammering into silence. Here, it is discernible that Mgbofor's gender was no deterrent or limitation to speak and act for the people, especially given that her spirituality and 'supernatural powers' worked in tandem with 'her spiritual authoritative position' to enable her, through the strength of purpose and character, to solve her community's problems.

### SEX, SEXUALITY, AND POLITICAL POWER IN IGBOLAND

The power of sex should not be underestimated and must count as a weapon of power available to the womenfolk in their torturous relations with men. Most people have come to think of sex as something women give, and men feel entitled to take. This giving, taking, and the associated entitlement mentality is the heart of contestations around sex. Men's entitlement mentality over sex explains why it has become a weapon of sorts

<sup>33</sup> Antwanisha V. Alameen, (2013), *Women's Access to Political Power in Ancient Egypt and Igboland: A Critical Study*, Dissertation Submitted to the Temple University Graduate Board in Partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy, 164.

<sup>34</sup> Nwando Achebe (2005), *Farmers, Traders, Warriors and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900-1960*, Social History of Africa Series, 37, (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann).

used to extract obedience and compliance in all disputes and misunderstandings. The women have accordingly used sex to 'bring about political change for centuries.' The first of these women's resistance to extract men's compliance and obedience was chronicled by the ancient Greek playwright Aristophanes in his play *Lysistrata*. In the play, women were mobilized by the heroine and asked them to abstain from sex as a means of bringing the war between Sparta and Athens to an end.<sup>35</sup> And in the 1600s, the Native American Iroquois tribe in North America let go of sex as well as childbearing. Their men were regularly at war, especially an unregulated war, to the disapproval of their women. This led to a sex strike and, with it, a request of a political nature to allow them more political power. The men agreed and granted women veto power over all wars. The success of the sex strike is considered the first feminist rebellion in the United States.<sup>36</sup>

Another successful sex rebellion came in recent times in Liberia when, in 2003, the 'instigator' Leymah Gbowee incited women against men with mass sexual abstinence in the greater task of ending the war in the country. Sex strike became a tool in the hands of the peace movement to end the Liberian civil war. She was later rewarded with the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011. Sex strike is effective in all climes, as also evidenced in two Colombian cities; first in Pereira, where the wives of gangs and mobsters took a stand and staged a sex strike, asking their male lovers to end violence and gangsterism. The result was a deep decline of 26.5% in the murder rate recorded in the city.<sup>37</sup> In the second city, a three and half months of 'crossed legs sex strike elicited government attention to have a road repaired and paved.<sup>38</sup> In 2009, women went on a seven-day sex strike 'to make the opposing leaders of the Kenyan government stop squabbling with each other, and even tried to mobilize the politicians' wives and sex workers to join — to get all the bases covered'.<sup>39</sup> In reporting this celebrated event, the BBC teased that 'Great decisions are made during pillow talk, so we are asking the two ladies at that intimate moment to ask their husbands: 'Darling, can you do something for Kenya?''<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Rajvi Desai (2019), *No Sex for You: The History of the Sex Strike as a Form of Resistance*, *The Swaddle*, May 15

<sup>36</sup> Rajvi Desai (2019), *No Sex for You: The History of the Sex Strike as a Form of Resistance*, *The Swaddle*, May 15

<sup>37</sup> Rajvi Desai (2019), *No Sex for You: The History of the Sex Strike as a Form of Resistance*, *The Swaddle*, May 15

<sup>38</sup> Rajvi Desai (2019), *No Sex for You: The History of the Sex Strike as a Form of Resistance*, *The Swaddle*, May 15

<sup>39</sup> Rajvi Desai (2019), *No Sex for You: The History of the Sex Strike as a Form of Resistance*, *The Swaddle*, May 15.

<sup>40</sup>BBC Report cited in Rajvi Desai (2019), *No Sex for You: The History of the Sex Strike as a Form of Resistance*, *The Swaddle*, May 15

I have taken the pain to historicize the sex strike as a background to what Ozuitem women have had to resort to compel the men to accede to inclusivity in local governance. Madam Oti, who led the last sex strike in Umuobasiukwu Ozuitem in 2015, informed with a bemusing smile on her lips that she discovered early in her marriage that her husband was a fierce man in tender matters of the heart and would stop at nothing to please the wife, provided the disagreement did not involve sex. On the processes and procedures leading to the strike, Oti teased:

I mobilized other women, especially the younger ones, on the need to compel our husbands to agree with us on several issues related to marriage, notably dowry and sundry purchases. We also agreed to sensitize the old and very elderly women to do their best in this regard. In less than one week of sensitization and mobilization, we struck, and for 9 days, our husbands were at a loss as to what had happened. They reported to the *Umuada*, but it was too late, as we had already convinced the *Umuada* that dowry matters must be revisited if our daughters are not to be stuck at home without suitors.<sup>41</sup>

Speaking to one of the participants of the sex strike, Mrs. Roseline Ndubuaku, she volunteered that

My husband initially thought it was one of my usual jokes and pranks, but on the second day after a night of alcohol consumption, he sauntered home late and jumped into bed after a shower, and began his preliminary signs of sexual engagement, but I calmly reiterated my sermon of the last night on the imperative of discussing with other men and elders on the issue at hand. When pleas fell on deaf ears, I observed that in the morning he bone-facedly entered the communal compound, where I believed initial discussions on the women's request began.<sup>42</sup>

A preponderant number of male respondents in the community confirmed the ordeal the women put them through and glibly muttered that it appears 'these women would stop at nothing to get what they want,' but he sounded more worried when he wondered whether the women would not make the ancestors come against them.<sup>43</sup> The success of the

<sup>41</sup> Personal Communication with Mrs. Abigail Oti (45 years), Ndiuguru-Umuobasiukwu Ozuitem, 21 January 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Personal Communication with Roseline Madubuaku, Ndiokala-Umuobasiukwu, Ozuitem, 21 January 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Personal Communication, Mr. Emelike Mbonu, Oti (60 years), Ndiuche-Umuobasiukwu Ozuitem, 21 January 2022.

Ozuiem sex strike is a signal that the womenfolk can use all manner of their largely unrecognized power to compel obedience at home.

### CONCLUSION

This paper explores gender dynamics in Igboland, using a comparative lens to argue that despite the outward appearance of male-dominated politics, women exert significant influence over local governance. Specifically, it highlights how women—often through the strategic use of "the sex weapon"—successfully navigate and direct political outcomes. Using the rural community of Ozubulu as a case study, the research reveals a frequently overlooked dimension of how political power is actually negotiated and held.