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DIVORCE AND FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY IN ABAKILIKI URBAN, SOUTH-EAST OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Industrial urbanism has brought about changing roles of women in modern family. Strains occasioned by the emerging roles have led to increasing family instability and divorce. Divorce has many consequences but the economic consequences have not received the attention it deserves in scholarly and public circles. Hence, the thrust of this study which is an investigation of the link divorce has with increasing poverty of women. A number of divorced men and women were selected from Abakiliki urban and interviewed to obtain their pre and post-divorce standard of living. Data obtained from the field were compared with heuristic standard of living designed purposively for this study. The results show that divorce has made poverty a woman. Divorced wives fared far less in their standard of living of pre-divorced husbands. The discrepancy in the standard of living of pre-divorced and post divorced women compared with that of their divorced husbands is attributed to socio-structural inequalities that inhibit the realization of the female potentials in the event of divorce. Female education campaign should be intensified to erase the social inequalities between the genders. Specific welfare scheme should be introduced to assist women stand their feet in the face of challenges of divorce.

Keywords: *family, female education, divorce, gender studies*

INTRODUCTION

Marriage as a union is entered into by conscious agreement. Strains in the union may lead to divorce. Nigerian laws (the Marriage Act and matrimonial Causes Act) and traditional culture discourage divorce but never foreclose it. Industrial urbanism carries life-styles and activities that attenuate spousal intimacy and create strains that breed divorce.

Divorce statistics in Nigeria is poor and incomplete. The 2008 and 2013 NDHS reported 2% of divorced women and 1% of divorced men in Nigeria. This figure ought not to be a cause for worry if it were a complete representation of the divorce fact, but it is not. The median age at first marriage among women in Nigeria is 18.1 years; for men, it is 27.2 years (NDHS 2013). For Nigeria's social, cultural and economic circumstance, the age at first marriage is very low and may be devoid of the requisite economic and emotional maturity to maintain a stable marriage. Again, it is dishonourable culturally for any Nigerian to be divorced. So, many are likely to hide the status making the fact under reported. Polygyny still obtains in Nigeria. Thirty-three percent of married women reported being in polygynous marriages during the 2013 NDHS. There was no question on 'ever divorced'. So many remarried women may not report their former divorced status. Polygyny itself is a source of spousal strain that may predispose spouses to divorce. Therefore divorce statistics in Nigeria is under reported.

Whatever is the divorce prevalence, the problem is the economic consequences of divorce. This paper seeks to find the economic effects divorce has on women divorcees. It is hoped that the result shall provide data for stable family advocacy. It shall speak also for gender justice and equity. Divorce has radically different economic consequences for men and women. For most women, divorce means precipitous downward mobility both economically and socially. The reduction in income brings residential moves and inferior housing, drastically diminished or non-existent fund for recreation and leisure, and intense pressures due to inadequate time and money. Financial hardships in turn cause social dislocation and a loss of families' network for emotional support and social services, and intensify the psychological stress for women. Divorce stigma bites deeper on women than men. On a societal level, divorce increases female

poverty and creates an ever-widening gap between the economic well-being of divorced men on the one hand and former never remarried wives on the other. Thus divorce feminizes poverty.

SETTING, DATA AND METHOD

Forty-three divorced women resident in Abakaliki urban were searched out purposively for the study. Their former husbands were also traced. However, seven of those men had died leaving only thirty-six (36) men for the study. Five out of the 43 divorced women had remarried at the time of this study and were excluded. Only 38 divorced women formed the respondents. For the men, 28 of them had remarried, while 7 lived in polygamous marriages and only 1 man who was divorced 4 months before the study had not remarried. The study need must use the entire 36 ever divorced men for analysis or there would be virtually no male respondent at all.

Abakaliki is the capital city of Ebonyi State with heterogeneous inhabitants. The people still battle with the dearth of social amenities like power, water, transportation, security, housing and even feeding. Life in the city therefore is tortuous. The people are barely literate and populated dominantly with rural migrants from indigenous cultural province of Izzi and Ezza stocks. So urbanism is not well entrenched leaving many not truly urbane or truly traditional. Divorce was defined to include any 4 years and a longer time separation between spouses and not necessarily legal divorce.

The economic consequences of current system of divorce emerge from two different types of analysis. In the first analysis, focus is on income. Here men's and women's incomes before and after divorce are compared. The second analysis focuses on standard of living. Here the question is on how the husbands' post-divorce standard of living compare with that of their former wives. Since it is reasonable to expect post-divorce incomes and standards of living to vary with the length of marriage and the family income level before divorce, these two factors are controlled in the analyses.

Standard of living is measured by an index of economic well-being developed specifically for this study. It is a heuristic instrument. Amenities required for minimum comfort are itemized with their current naira worth in Abakaliki urban:

1.	A flat N1,000,000 per annum	-	83,333 monthly
2.	Power 120 000 per annum	-	10,000 monthly
3.	Sanitation 12,000 per annum	-	1 000 monthly
4.	Transportation		15 000 per month
5.	Medicine		5 000 per month
6.	Feeding		60,000 per month
7.	Water		30,000 per month
8.	Laundrying		5, 000 per month
9.	Clothing		5,000 per month
10.	Schooling		6,000 per month

Total = 220,333 per month for one man household; 440,666 for two - person household, and N660,999 for three- person household

The first three items are fixed for the household, while items, 4 -10 are multiplied by the size of the household. A three person household should have a minimum budget of N440,999 at April 2025. Questions on the wife's and husband's pre divorce and post divorce incomes were raised. The values are compared to obtain income disparities between the former husbands and wives. The deviations of the income from the heuristic index measures the standard of living which may be plus or minus - for the wife and husband respectively. Membership in post divorce

families of husbands includes any new spouse or co-habitant and any children whose custody were assigned to that spouse.

LITERATURE

The concept of "feminization of poverty" was introduced to sociological literature by Diana Pearce. She pointed out the critical link between poverty and divorce stressing that the mother burden for the economic and emotional responsibility for child-rearing often impoverish her family (Pearce 1978). This may be truer in Nigeria where woman's status is traditionally poorer.

Poverty is correlated with employment, occupation, level of educational attainment and ownership of assets. By the 2013 National Health and Demographic Survey (NHDS), 45% women and 62% men have a secondary or higher level of education. Those with no education were 38% women and 21% men. Regarding wealth, the tendency for men to be in the fourth and highest wealth quintiles is higher, while women tend to be more in the lowest two quintiles. Occupationally, only 7% women engaged in professional, technical or managerial positions; 61% are in sales and services, 16% in agriculture; 14% in skilled manual jobs, and in unskilled manual jobs, 1%. Seventy- nine percent of women are self-employed. In general, 82% of women own no house, and no land (85%) in Nigeria.

These statistics are suggestive: women in Nigeria are to live, appended to men. If a woman lives unattached to any man, she is expressly deprived. Her burden increases if she has dependent children/wards. Divorce creates such burdensome deprivations. When a couple with children divorces, it is probable that the man will become single but the woman will become a single parent; and poverty for many women begins with single parenthood.

Data on the number of single-mother households in Nigeria are not available. But observations disclose increasing cases of single mother headed families and that implies increasing pauperization of such families. The declaration of the American national advisory council on economic opportunity as at 1980 has become applicable to Nigeria in 2025. The council had feared that the "feminization of poverty has become one of the most compelling social facts of the decade" (National Advisory Council 1980).

In America, the scourge of female poverty has attracted suggestions on combating it focusing on labour market strategies and expansion of social welfare programmed to favour women. But in Nigeria, the direct link between divorce, the economic consequences of divorce and the rise in female poverty is unknown let alone being acknowledged in literature or public sphere. Hence, the need for this study.

RESULTS

The data reviewed in this article indict:

1. the current traditional customary system of divorce: it provides neither economic justice nor economic equality.
2. the culture that denies female paternal inheritance.
3. social structural deprivations of the girl-child that breed adult female dependency which worsen on divorce.

Economic pressure, weak, extended family ties and incompatibility of spouses are responsible for rise in divorce leading to the increase in female headed families and that increase has been the major cause of the feminization of poverty. Thirty out of the 38 (79%) of the women studied got divorced in the first seven years of their marriage with children ranging between 1-4 numbers with ages 0-6 years. Out of the 30 divorced women 27 (90%) of them had their

children to cater for while only 3 (10%) has their children living with their fathers. All the 30 women are in their mid twenties and early thirties. Customary mode of divorce was used by 36 out of the 38 (95%) female divorcees; while only (5%) had legal divorce.

The situation of these young women divorcees is drastic if not tragic. The discrepancy between men's and women's standard of living after divorce is much greater than for older couple, and few of these younger women can ever hope to recapture their economic and psychological stability. The younger women divorcees may have potential for some level of self-sufficiency because of their age. They may enter or re-enter into the labour force, they may acquire new training, they have greater attraction but they are burdened with the stigma of divorce, lack of employment, lack of education and need to care for their children without legal or traditional alimony from their former husbands. The older women are dud cheques which no one accepts but they may have grown up children to support them. So they have brighter chances to enjoy better post divorce life.

The divorced husband begins with no one to cater for. So all his incomes are his alone. He is without a family to care for which allows him time to think of his self-improvement and attend to his career. With more income and more savings, improved career and self-worth, a divorced husband becomes more attractive and easily gets a new wife. A new wife comes in with new dowry, new energy and new opportunities to further improve the husband's life. Where there is a child/children from the former marriage, the person(s) must have grown to do certain basic self cares. So children in the husband's custody are not burdensome but those in the custody of the divorced wife are usually kids to care for and therefore hinder the freedom of the women to engage in full-time money making ventures. Two women who had legal divorce and awarded child support cash complained that their respective husbands never paid it for once. Customary divorce has no enforceable child support award. The custodial mother bears the whole burden of caring for the children of the divorced marriage.

Almost in all cases of divorce the wife leaves the family home either to her parents' house or she rents a new apartment. The disruptive costs of moving and establishing a new household further strain her limited income to the breaking point.

The final explanation for the large income discrepancy between former husbands and wives lies on the different earning capacities and starting points of the two adults at the time of the divorce. Not only do men in our society command higher status to begin with, they also benefit from the common marital pattern that gives priority to their careers. Marriage gives men the opportunity, support and time to invest in their own careers. Thus marriage itself builds and enhances the husband's earning capacity. For women in contrast, marriage is more likely to act as a career liability. Even though family roles are changing and even though married women are increasingly working for pay during marriage, most of them nevertheless subordinate to their family responsibilities. This is especially true if they have children. Thus women are often doubly disadvantaged at the point of divorce due mainly to the toll the marital years have taken on their earning capacity.

Thus marriage - and then divorce-imposes a differential disadvantage on women's employment prospects, and this is especially severe for women who have custody of minor children. The responsibility for children inevitably restricts the mother's job opportunities by limiting her work schedule and location, her availability for overtime, and her freedom to take advantages of special training, travel assignments and other opportunities for career advancement.

Even though women who have not been employed during marriage seek jobs after divorce, and part-time workers take full-time jobs, neither of these factors accounts for as much as the rise in male wages in the first year after divorce. The study reveals that 80% of the men as against

10% of the women receive higher income immediately after divorce due to more intense efforts. In all, divorced men have more surplus income for themselves.

Figure 1, below reveals the radical change in the standards of living to which was alluded earlier. Just one year after divorce, men experienced a 42 percent improvement in their post divorce standard of living while women experienced a 73 percent decline.

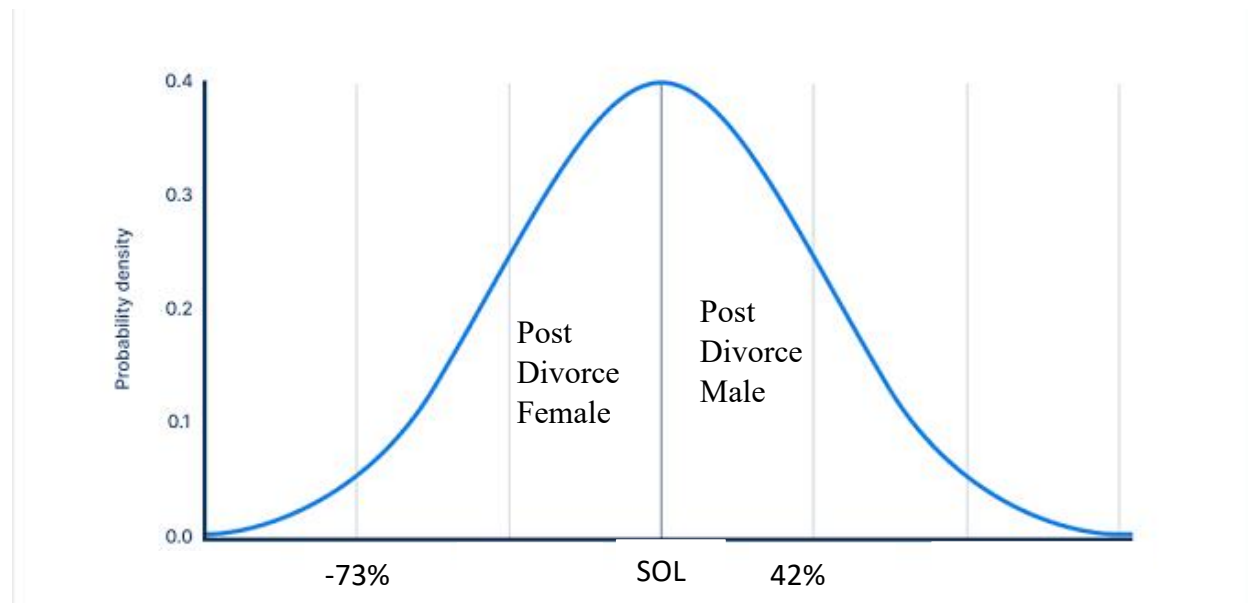


Figure 1: change in standards of living of divorced men and women (approximately one year after divorce)

Post Divorce standard of living (SOL) experiences of male and female expressed in normal curve

Income in relation to needs with need based on heuristic computation as shown above,

The discrepancy between divorced men and women has been corroborated by other research. Some ten years ago, Weiss and Espenshade (2015) documented the disparities in both income and standards of living of men and women after divorce among Americans. Divorced women who had not remarried earned 53% of the income of divorced men who had not remarried. The situation of divorced women with young children was ever grimmer. The median income in families headed by women with children under six years of age was only 30% of the median income for all families whose children were under six (Weiss 2016). Thus, for the United States as a whole, the income of families headed by women is at best half that of other families, the income of families headed by women with young children is even less, one-third of that of other families" (National center on women and family law 2016:132).

Conclusion

The economic consequences of the present system of divorce reverberate throughout our society. Divorce is mostly by customary means rather than by court system and therefore no benefits of alimony or child support awards. To women this leads to impoverishment after divorce and downwards mobility of most women divorcees who shoulder alone the burden of providing for both themselves and the children of the "divorced couple" restricting her opportunities for economic betterment.

Meanwhile, divorced men increasingly are freed of the major financial responsibility for supporting their children and former wives. Moreover, these men retain more than higher incomes. They experience less day to day stress than their ex-wives, they enjoy relatively greater mental, physical and emotional well-being and have greater freedom to build new lives and new families after divorce.

The economic disparities between men and women after divorce illuminate the long-standing economic disparities between the incomes of men and women during marriage. In marriage the disparities do not matter as the couple's resources are pooled and used together. Divorce shuts the woman off the man's resources and she and the little children begin to suffer. The result is a likely creation of underclass of women and children who would be a societal burden in the future.

Recommendations

Divorce is a product of stale marriage. Efforts should be made to build stable marriage in our society in spite of the myriads of challenges in modern families. But where divorce occurs, it should be processed through the courts so that alimony, child support awards may be granted the women who often are granted the custody of the minor kids. Legal divorce allows also for equitable distribution of the couple's property and not merely asking the women to leave the husband's home as it is traditionally done.

Education and training should be pursued by women before and during marriage so that they have what to fall back on in case of divorce. Furthermore, a woman should be allowed inheritance right in her father's house to give her strong asset base for survival in the face of any challenge including divorce situation.

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