

Youths 2gether Network

A Research Report and findings on Same Gender Marriage in Eastern Nigeria.

Authors:

Stephen Chukwumah, John Oziegbe, and Onyinye Nzekwesi

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youths2gethernetwork@gmail.com

+2348056038282

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INTRODUCTION:

For several years now there has been consistent argument over a particular culture/tradition that exists amongst the people of the Eastern region in Nigeria that embraces same sex marriage amongst women. Though most people have debunked the claim stating that the act is neither same sex loving nor in anyway embraces same sex relationship, as they claim that the act is just a practice of culture/tradition that exists in rare cases.

Though there has been no concrete research or findings that have been put in place to unravel the questions and truth behind this practice that is widespread amongst almost every tribe in the eastern region.

The Youths 2gether Network being the only LGBTQ organization located and working in this region decided to conduct a comprehensive/fact finding research that seeks to not only investigate the existence of this practice but to also ascertain if it is a same sex relationship practice or a mere option to seeking a solution to problems that plague the women in this region in terms of child bearing as this act is also speculated to solve.

A glimpse at the marriage in question as practiced in a particular state in Eastern Nigeria and as illustrated by Leo Igwe is below:

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In Mbaise in Imo state Nigeria, Traditionally, the community, marriage is taken to be a union between a man and a woman as the case may be. But there are circumstances where a marriage between a woman and a woman is permissible.

In a situation where a woman has no son or no child, if the husband dies, it is culturally allowed for her to marry a wife. And in this case, she becomes the husband. Like in every case of marriage, this woman goes out, inquires and gets a wife of her choice. She pays her dowry and fulfills other traditional rites as it is done when a man is marrying a woman. After that, the woman brings her wife home and they start living together as husband and wife. Nobody frowns at it. To have children -both the woman- husband and woman- wife- will agree to allow a man from the same village or neighboring town to sleep with the wife.

And the children born by the wife bears the family name of the woman- husband, not that of the man responsible for the pregnancy. It is important to add here that the man who sleeps with such wife in most cases are married men. And normally it is regarded as immoral, in fact it is a taboo for a married man to sleep with or father children from another woman. But in this case an act normally taken to be immoral is allowed.

This is a situation where people are permitted to break taboos and deviate from traditions. This marriage practice pre- dates Christianity and the so- called western culture which most people today blame for all the moral and cultural

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wrongs in Africa. The same gender marriage is still practiced till date. In other words, there are some families today in Igboland where women are husbands and wives, fathers and mothers.

Before proceeding we would love to categorize the existing or perceived same sex marriages as practiced currently in these regions and a short analysis by Prof.

Nkeonye Otakepor of the Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin city:

(a) A married woman with children providing dowry to her husband to marry another woman;

(b) A woman, married or unmarried, may provide the dowry for her son or other relative to marry because the man in question is unable to pay the dowry for his own marriage;

(c) A married childless woman purportedly marries another woman for her husband or on behalf of a male relation of hers.

(d) A married childless woman marries another woman on her own behalf while her marriage is still subsisting;

(e) A childless single woman marries another woman on her own behalf;

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(f) A childless widowed and/or divorced woman marries another woman on her own behalf.

Categories (a), (b) and (c) are not candidates for woman-to-woman marriage because the mere provision of dowry creates neither legal nor cultural bond between the woman who provides the dowry and the woman on whose behalf it is paid. No such bond is created on the offspring of the marriage.

Categories (d), (e) and (f) represent the true nature of this form of marriage. The basic element is present; such a marriage is not always contracted in the name of or on behalf of a man. It is basically an affair, a transaction and union between two or more women and their families. In some communities the name of a male is used as affront for the marriage, though everyone in such a community knows that a woman is marrying another woman. Nonetheless, the standard practice is; a woman marrying another woman on her own behalf.

Specific objectives of this research include:

- To create an understanding and background on this form and practice of marriage.
- Beaming light on this form of marriage and practice.
- Initiating a positive debate on the issue.
- Highlighting the realities and challenges lesbian women and women in general face.

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- Debunk the claim that homosexuality is un-African.
- Addressing the issues that women who practice this form of marriage face and supporting them if necessary.

INTERNAL TRAINING AND RESEARCH/EVALUATION

METHODOLOGY:

The Y2N organized training for researchers so as to train them on how to go about the research proper use the right language, develop together the questionnaire that was to be used for the research proper and then decide on the way forward.

Researchers due to funding constraint where undergraduate from Nigerian universities based in the east either studying psychology or other relevant studies in the field and is familiar with the culture/tradition of the eastern people, have lived or studied in the area for a minimum of 5 years and willing to work with the Y2N to ensure accuracy and anonymity for people willing to respond due to safety and trust (for complete profile of researchers, refer to the appendix below).

During the training organized for the researchers a questionnaire was developed for field testing and it was sent out amongst members and friends of the Y2N which they were requested to review the questionnaire, fill it out and inform us if it covered the necessary questions and response that is needed carry out the research.

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FINDINGS:

The findings in this section will be presented in thematic areas under which they will be discussed and elaborated:

- ✓ Capacity and ability of the Y2N to carry out the research

80% of the respondent noted that the Y2N as in the best position and had the capacity to carry out the research and achieve result. They also indicated that the research was timely and would help the Y2N in designing its work to better meet the needs of the women involved if they identified as same sex loving individuals and also debunk the claim that homosexuality is un-African.

The remaining 20% felt that the Y2N lacked enough funding in strengthening its capacity to be able to undertake the research and thus the research should be dropped and done some other time. Though they noted the importance but felt it needed enough funding and man power.

- ✓ Questionnaire (methodology for research)

90% of the respondents felt the idea of a questionnaire was great, but that researchers should aim to ask some questions orally and also take notes of the response in the case they are not captured anywhere in the questionnaire. It was noted as well that some respondents might be illiterates and so it was important for the researchers to use language that would be known to them and to fill the questionnaires themselves based on the response they get and ensure the respondent is aware and accurately captures his/her response.

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10% felt it was good to make it an oral research, as the questionnaire might not cover all the questions and space for response that might come up during the process of the research and it was important that all the issues are covered so as to ensure that the result is fact based.

✓ Researchers

55% of the respondents opined that it was necessary that the researchers be both boys and girls and university undergraduate or graduates with a degree in psychology or any other relevant course in the field, be from the eastern region, have knowledge of the culture and tradition of the people, have lived or studied for a minimum of 5 years or more in the region and willing to commit to follow up from the research in the case of any.

45% of the respondents felt it was necessary that the researchers be all female and be from the eastern region, have knowledge of the culture and tradition as it pertains to the eastern people, have lived or schooled there for a minimum of 5 years or more and are willing to commit to the follow up in the case of any.

✓ Result of Research

Some felt it would be difficult to get respondent to trust the researchers and so it was very important that confidentiality and anonymity is respected so as to enable a concrete and factual result to be developed, some also felt that it would be important that the result of the research be disseminated amongst

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partners, organizations, foundations and funders of the Y2N so that it can guide their work in working in the region or assisting future arguments and claims based on the issue.

Internal respondent recommendations:

- Carry out the research
- Use a questionnaire but create room for oral questioning and response, also create room for illiterates to also be able to participate in the research with help from the researchers
- Research should be done by both undergraduates and graduates that have been properly trained by the Y2N and have knowledge of the culture and tradition of the eastern people, live or have studied for at least a minimum of 5 years or more in the region and willing to participate in follow up.
- Result should be shared amongst partner organization, foundations, individuals and funders so as to be used for future work in the region with regards the issue and also for future arguments and claims on the issue in the region.
- Y2N should ensure to strategically create a plan that would incorporate the issues that would arise from the research into their working mandate and also strengthen its capacity as the only LGBTQ organization in the region.

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RESEARCH AND FINDINGS:

After taking into consideration all that had been specified and recommended from our internal research and questions/evaluations from members and friends of the Y2N, we were set to carry out the research and so the research proper was then fixed for the 13th to the 17th of December 2010.

LOCATION:

The area where the research was carried out was in Anambra state Nigeria and this was due to the reason that the Y2N has more knowledge about general situation of things in the state and Y2N has more strength and a large community in the state that was selected. Researchers were expected to cover major villages in the communities in the state and they were selected and broken down according to Local government areas. Facilitators were expected to monitor the progress of the researchers and how they were effectively doing their job. Researchers also started their jobs in the morning and ensured to cover the right places and at least get the right information from the people they were interviewing before they left the area to move to another, they were given per-diems and so this was to cover for their transportation, feeding and other incidentals they might incur due to the process of ensuring the research goes on very well.

Facilitators were also mandated to cover and monitor the areas in which the researchers ought to be covering and then submit reports based on the work the

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researchers were doing and how well they carried out the work they were given to do, also re-imburements and per-diems were only given when the research for the day had been completed.

RESEARCH FINDINGS:

The findings would be presented in thematic areas:

- ❖ **Culture/Tradition:** All the respondents that participated in this research indicated that they hold in high esteem their cultures, beliefs and traditions as they indicated it is normal for an Igbo man/woman to strongly believe in culture and tradition as they are what make them up. They also indicated that if anyone didn't believe or practiced culture and tradition as an Igbo person he/she would be perceived to be an outcast or one who has been corrupted by western influence. They also insisted that westerners are beginning to spoil their culture and tradition and so it was important they started fighting to protect it.
- ❖ **Location:** 80% of the respondents are originally and biologically from the eastern region, while 20% are people who have lived and studied in the east for more than a period of 20 years and so were familiar with the culture and tradition of the people and so could speak about it.
- ❖ **Gender:** 70% of respondents were women while the remaining 30% were men – This was so, because we wanted to ensure that we get enough information from women who the culture/tradition is actually practiced by

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and to also get information from the men to ensure they are familiar with this and what do they regard it as.

- ❖ **Marriage:** All the respondents indicated their understanding about marriage and expressed it thus: it is a union between a man and a woman and it is either blessed in the church or traditionally. They also indicated that while some people may not have money to go to the church and do big ceremonies and also being that the traditional one is their culture before foreigners came, that the tradition marriage is more recognized. Some indicated that you can have the traditional marriage and forget the church marriage but cannot have a church marriage and forget the traditional marriage.
- ❖ **Tradition of Same Sex Marriage:** Respondents first indicated that there was no such thing existent in their culture but after a brief introduction to the referred culture by the researchers 80% agreed that it existed while the rest debunked the claim. The 80% though indicated that the practice was a rare one and hardly happens this days and also that it only happened in the past on rare occasions where a woman for certain reasons couldn't bear children or had some marital problems and that it was in no way a sexual relationship between the 2 women but between one woman and a man that would be selected by the woman who takes the husband role. They said the marriage between the 2 women had no recognition as there would be no form of going to the family and paying bride price and so it is more like a solution to a problem and not a marriage as speculated. Respondents

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also indicated that there was no other form of marriage recognized asides from that between a man and a woman and blessed traditionally or in church.

- ❖ **Sexual Orientation:** 95% of the respondents indicated that they didn't believe in sexual orientation and doubted if it existed amongst them, some even joked that there were a lot of women enough for each man and so there was no need for people to engage in sexual act amongst themselves while the remaining 5% indicated that they were aware about sexual orientation but perceive it to be evil and some form of stupidity amongst male youths who are effeminate and female youths who are butch. They attributed it to improper up bringing from parents, wrong friends and evil spirits but felt that with the right training and teaching that such people would change from it.
- ❖ **Human Rights:** Respondents indicated that they all believed in human rights but felt it was to an extent and that there were some things that human rights couldn't apply to. They indicated that when people do evil things they had no right to exercise their human rights as evil affects everyone and so should be fought against.

ANALYSIS:

Following the outcome of this research, a lot has been uncovered about the same gender marriage that exists in Igbo land. A lot has been said and speculated about this form of marriage that promotes same sex loving relationship but this research

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has been put in place to uncover the truth and real act behind this practice and also people's perception about same sex issues in the region.

According to the findings and result from this research, it has been uncovered that the practice of a woman marrying her fellow woman does truly exist in the IGBO culture but due to the homophobia and hypocrisy that exists especially as it relates to sexual orientation and gender identity issues, people in the region as we can notice from this research have decided to tell a lie about it and claim it is only an avenue to seek for solution to a problem a woman might be facing in the home or in the family. Some claimed it is an avenue to have children that's if the woman is barren and then she gets another woman to help her bear children for her husband, in some cases it is also an avenue for the woman not to lose her position in the family, especially as it is believed in this region that men often marry another or extra wives as soon as they find out that their wife is not able to bear children for him.

There is also the claim that this kind of marriage between the women is not recognized but in several cases, the marriage takes the shape and turn of a normal marriage between a man and a woman with regards tradition in the region. The woman who wants to marry another woman sends out message for people to help her look for a wife to marry and then when the wife is found, she follows all the procedure of marrying her wife, including paying her bride price and authority is given unto her by the wife's family to be her husband. That being said, it is utmost hypocrisy to claim that the marriage is not recognized or should

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not be called a marriage. It takes the full traditional procedure of a marriage between a man and a woman and so it is called marriage but then between people of same gender.

It is also very important to note that the people in this region and those that participated as respondents in this research are ignorant of sexuality and the diversity that exists and so their judgment and classification of the marriage and the act is based on assumptions or what they have been told to believe. From the research and findings, the people also don't have any evidence that the women don't have sexual relationship. It is claimed that homosexuality is a western import but in the course of the research, it was uncovered that this practice dates back to years before the westerners arrived the African soil, it has been an age long practice which promotes the peace and beauty of same sex marriage and so it is another form of hypocrisy to claim that homosexuality is a western import.

Some of the women who practice this kind of marriage and participated in this research had indicated that they have a strong connection with their wives or husband (woman) and that they always feel responsible for each other, some of the women also claimed that they feel so much like in a normal marriage just that the gender is different and they didn't see that as much of an issue.

“What a man can do, a woman can do it better” these were part of the proverbs used by the women, indicating that when women are properly empowered, they

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can do very well better than their male counterparts. On the question of if they identify or feel they are lesbians, the women claim they are not but this response can be attributed to the fact that they lack proper knowledge about sexuality and also based on the homophobic environment they find themselves in and how women are treated in the region.

Findings in this research also reveals that the men who are called upon to impregnate the wife of the woman has no claim on the child or ever has the responsibility to declare in public that he is the father of the child or children as the case may imply and do it is important to note that the man only serves as sperm donor. Findings also revealed that this marriage is still so much in practice but are in the minority, evidence also shows that these women are still in existence as today.

It should also be noted that children who are born from this form of marriage, grow up in an environment where both parents are women and they grow up to be normal children.

Part of the recommendation from this research includes that there is a great need for these women in the region and those practicing this form of marriage to be empowered with proper knowledge on sexuality and gender. It is also very important to note that the region in general lacks that knowledge as well and so it as much as needed for everyone in the region to understand and be informed

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about sexual diversity and gender issues. It is also highly recommended that people stop claiming that homosexuality is a western import, because findings have shown that homosexuality existed long ago before the western people came into Africa and current laws that criminalize homosexuality these days are laws that exist as a result of colonialism and they should be done away with, so that people can be free from oppression and discrimination of any sort and embrace diversity ensuring a free and loving society.

CHALLENGES:

Some of the challenges faced in this research is that some of the respondent refused to speak to researchers and so researchers always had to look for some people who were willing to speak and participate, it was also very difficult to take pictures of respondents as they all refused and due to security reasons and the fact that we wanted respondents to be open, this decision by respondents were respected.

It was also difficult to get professionals to work on this project, as they all had one demand or the other and also they all wanted their privacy to be respected, as all their interest was in working on the project as researchers and working with the Y2N in evaluating and compiling the research findings and follow up to the research as well.

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Youths 2gether Network is the only LGBTQ organization in Eastern Nigeria and serves a large community of LGBTQ people, by providing sexual health and rights services to them. For more info on the Y2N, please visit:

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