

Gender, Age and Context in the Use of Sex-Related Verbal Taboos in Traditional Igbo Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47175/rielsj.v5i2.953>

| Ihemamma Uwazuruonye Osonwa |

Humanities Department, School
of Social Sciences
Federal Polytechnic Nekede,
Imo State

ihemamma05@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

The study investigated how gender and age disparities, and situation/ context shape the use of sex-related verbal taboos. It adopted the qualitative orientation which involved semi-structured interviews with a total of 20 participants drawn from four purposively chosen communities or Igbo areas namely, Edda/Afikpo, Owerri, Uzuakoli and Awka. It was framed around the taboo theory of gender differences. The study identified some terms relating to sex and other parts of the body which constitute verbal taboo, and highlighted how gender and age disparities, as well as contexts shape the use of the verbal taboos. It also observed more female restrictive use of the taboo terms/expressions than male which speaks to the culture of patriarchy. Varied contexts or situations of use of the taboo terms were identified including 'closed' and 'open' contexts. It was concluded that gender and age disparities as a feature of verbal taboos depend on the culture and their underlying beliefs and values.

KEYWORDS

taboo; verbal taboo; gender; age; sex-related taboos; Igbo

INTRODUCTION

In many cultures, there are certain restrictions on what people are allowed to say or not to say in certain contexts and times. This restriction and constraint to verbal freedom is referred to as linguistic or verbal taboo. As in most other African societies, sex is a taboo subject among the Igbo. This paper focuses on sex-related verbal taboo in Igbo culture, and highlights the contexts or times of the use of sex-related verbal taboo.

The Igbo recognize sex difference in its thought, conviction and world see, and this shows totally different ways counting verbal expressions or imperatives. Wardhaugh (2000) clarifies that the suggestion of phonetic limitations or shirking is that certain words are not to be utilized and certain objects are not to be alluded to, but in certain circumstances and by certain or authorized people or through think circumlocutory setup of words. Wardhaugh (2000) certain situations and certain persons are utilized to state that the boycott forced on unthinkable words is both situational and individual. It is situational within the sense that such words are not anticipated to be utilized in open places or amid interaction including other individuals. In private, individuals are free to use unthinkable words and expressions; there's nothing prohibiting one or two from utilizing unthinkable words for sex organs within the throes of sexual intercut. It is additionally individual within the sense that certain people, by ideals of age or status may be permitted to utilize unthinkable words in open more than others. This consider inspected sexual orientation, age and setting within the utilize of sex-related verbal unthinkable in Igbo culture. Sex is regarded as the most profound aspect of Igbo verbal taboos. Previous studies on sex-related verbal taboo in the Igbo culture (Omego, 2013; Oyeka, 2015; Fakuade et al. 2018; Nwagbo, 2021) have not considered gender and age disparities associated with this type of verbal taboo. There is also the need to

explore and highlight perspectives from different communities or Igbo culture areas or communities not just to identify possible variations and for comparison but also to enrich and illuminate current discussions. In other words, while much has been seen in the direction of generic discussions on verbal taboos relating to female gender in the Igbo culture, it leaves to be seen what obtains with the male gender, and the different contexts of the taboo words across Igbo culture areas or communities. There is dearth of detailed work on both male and female restrictions on language use across different Igbo culture areas. This study is significant as it fills this gap, and contributes to discussion on taboo expressions in Igbo.

The paper hinges on the Taboo theory of gender differences in language use (Jespersen, O., 1992). which assumes that taboo can be a source of linguistic differences between male and females. It reports on data collected through qualitative research approach involving semi-structured interviews. The paper identified how gender differences, age and context/time shape the use of sex-related verbal taboos in the Igbo culture. The study observed that as in most other African societies, sex is a taboo subject among the Igbo. The conception of sex to the Igbo is influenced by social norms and patriarchal ideologies. The ideology reflects in some restrictions on the use of sex-related terms by female gender while male gender could be excused. Also, there is age restriction, as well as contextual restriction in the use of sex-related terms and expressions. The paper begins with a brief discussion of verbal taboos in Igbo culture, followed by the theory of gender differences in language use. Then, the study objectives and methodology are presented followed by analysis of how gender differences, age and context shape the use of sex-related verbal taboo.

Verbal taboo

According to Nwaobodo, E. E. R (2021). in the traditional Igbo cultural context, taboos refer to those denials pointed at the advancement of ethical values, devout sacredness, social cohesion and infinite agreement. Encourage embracing the concept of unthinkable among the Igbo, watches that taboos are a set of disallowed activities, a set of ethics authoritative on a individual; the infringement of which draws in a serious discipline which may incorporate passing punishment (Nasution, J., Pujiono, M., & Iqbal, M., 2023). The institution and recognition of taboos in Igbo culture offer assistance within the quiet co-presence of individuals of the community. It makes a difference within the projection and advancement of social integration. Violators of taboos are seen as operators of socio-political deterioration and chaos. The institution of unthinkable targets the allen compassing efficiency of life and all human exercises and interaction in Igbo arrive.

Concurring to Nwagbo (2021) verbal taboos are based on verbal expressions, that's, words and expressions that people are obliged from utilizing at certain times and settings. The author encourage holds that not at all like the physical-based taboos that are not debatable, the verbal-based taboos are debatable. In other words, whereas ladies are entirely not permitted to climb trees at all, people are not totally banished from utilizing precluded words and expressions.

Verbal unthinkable may be a uncommon case of stylistics beneath which words are maintained a strategic distance from by speakers in particular circumstances like within the nearness of guests, inverse sex, children, grown-ups and open. Taboo is an expression that's disallowed whereas Ferb, N. (1994) notes that any word is blameless collection of sounds until a community encompasses it with intention and after that orders that it cannot be utilized in certain discourse circumstances. It could be a disallowance of evasion of words, explanations accepted to be grimy, destructive, sacrosanct, illegal, unsafe, sanctified to individuals of on the off chance that specified or alluded to maintain a strategic distance

from uneasiness, shame or disgrace.

One major highlight of verbal taboos is that the utilize of such words is or maybe confined to certain topics/subject, settings and time of the day or period, as the case may be, and more regularly than not include sex dissimilarity. A few subjects are considered consecrated so much so that certain words are loathed whereas locks in in dialog on such point. Too, in a few societies, a few myth and society convictions encompass certain times and setting that the utilize of a few words are prohibited. Here, setting is considered the important limitations of the communicative circumstance that impact dialect utilizes, dialect variety, and talk outline. For dialect to be important, person characters (both male and female) connected in settings with dialect being the mode of communication, making impressions within the minds of great speakers and conversationalists. As a concept, contextual can be seen broadly either in verbal or social terms. Verbal setting alludes to encompassing content or conversation of an expression (word, sentence, conversational turn, discourse act, et cetera). The thought is that verbal setting impacts the way one gets it an expression; hence, the standard not to quote individuals out of setting. Besides, most social orders attribute progressions to male and female sex that certain words/expressions are saved for one sex and denied from utilize by another sex. These talk of standards, values, convictions, contemplations and worldview of communities and societies. It assists talks of how words are relegated implications and parts by people who utilize them.

Taboo Theory of Gender Differences in Language Use

Taboo theory propounded by Jespersen, O. (1992) is another explanation to men and women's differences in language use. It is one of the theories of language-gender differences. Jespersen, O. (1992) has claimed that in some cases, taboo can be a source of linguistic differences between male and females. He has pointed out that on a war-path, the Carib men use certain words and expressions that can be uttered only by adult men. It is believed that 'bad luck' can result if such words were to be used by women or uninitiated boys. This can lead to significant differences on both the lexical and the phonological levels of language. Taboo can also have significant influences on vocabulary. Espousing the theory, Boudera, J. (2008) notes that Zulu is also an example where women were not allowed to use male's words or to mention the name of their father-in-law. Another example about male-female differences on the lexical level is found in the Chiquito, an American-Indian language of Bolivia. The female's word for 'my brother' is 'ičbausi', while the male's one is 'tsaruki.' Similar examples have also been found in other pronominal systems of some languages. In English, for instance, only the third person singular is differentiated (he/she). In the French system, the third person plural is differentiated (ils/elles). In this approach, the role of men in everyday interactions with women is seen as being 'operative'. In relation to this study, the theory offers basis to account for gender and age disparity in verbal taboos in Igbo.

Study Objectives and Methodology

The broad purpose or objective of this study is to examine sex-related verbal taboos among the Igbo with a focus on gender and age disparities, and situation/ context. The specific aims include:

- (a) To examine gender disparity (male or female) associated with sex-related verbal taboos among the Igbo.
- (b) To analyze age differences associated with sex-related verbal taboo among the Igbo
- (c) To identify different situations or contexts associated with the sex-related verbal

taboos in Igbo

To achieve these objectives, the study adopted the qualitative research approach involving semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted with purposively chosen 5 participants drawn from randomly selected four areas namely: Uzuakoli (5), Owerri (5), Afikpo/Ehugbo/Edda (5), Awka (5) and Owerri (5) making a total of 20 participants involving male and female from ages 45-above. The choice of the age bracket was informed by the fact that the researcher did not want to mix data from young people who often use slang expressions in the place of some words not in recognition of such words as tabooed expressions but for stylistic purposes.

So also, the choice of the zones or communities was impacted by the want to assemble a agent test from the five South-eastern states where Igbo is overwhelmingly talked specifically Abia (Uzuakoli), Imo (Owerri), Anambra and Enugu (Awka) and Ebonyi (Afikpo/Edda). The analyst built up contacts with two members (drawn from her earlier contacts and organize over family and work ties) within the regions who made a difference through snowball procedure to enroll extra 3 investigate members for each of the regions understudy. Meet questions centered on verbal taboos in their ranges, sex dissimilarity, points or subjects, and setting or circumstances. The ponder embraced the topical and interpretative approach for information examination. The topical approach involved that the recorded interviews were tuned in to a few times by the analyst in arrange to recognize striking focuses or topics that develop from them.

Gender, Age and Context in The Use of Sex-Related Verbal Taboos in Traditional Igbo Society

Sex-related or body-based verbal taboos are the most profound verbal taboos in the Igbo culture. They include terms, words or expressions related to sex as well as human body. The Igbo observe some restrictions in the use of these terms or expressions, and the restrictions relate to gender; male and female, age and in certain contexts or situations. In this section, we present some sex-related or body-based verbal taboos, and analyze restrictions in terms of gender, age and contexts relating to the words or expressions.

Table 1. Taboo terms associated with parts and activities of human body

Sex terms/activities and genitals	Igbo term (s)
Penis	<i>Utu, amụ</i>
Vagina	<i>ọtụ or ịkpu</i>
Breast	<i>ara</i>
Sexual intercourse	<i>ịra ọtụ/mmekọ</i>
Buttocks/hip	<i>ike/ukwu</i>
Pubic hair	<i>Aji ịkpu/amụ</i>
Anus	<i>ọnu ike, ọny nsi</i>
Mensuration	<i>nsọ nwanyi</i>
Scrotum	<i>akpa amụ</i>
To excrete	<i>inyụ nshi</i>
Woman experiencing menopause	<i>Nwanyi anaghi ahụ nsọ</i>
Pregnant /pregnancy	<i>Ime /afọ ime</i>

Above are some words or expressions that are considered taboo among the Igbo. They are seen as words or expressions that people find embarrassing or offensive, excessively repulsive, sacred, or allowed only for certain people. Sex to the Igbo, is conceived as an activity that thrives on mutual consent, and exclusively a private activity carried out within the socially approved institutions of marriage and concubinage. Sex is not considered a

public affair. Also, certain parts of the human body are considered private and as such, their mention or use is socially restricted.

Gender Disparity (Male or Female) Associated with Sex-Related Verbal Taboos Among The Igbo.

The Igbo recognize gender disparity in the use of some terms or expressions. This is related to the notion of higher social recognition given to the male gender than the female in the Igbo culture. The conception of sex to the Igbo is influenced by patriarchal ideologies which seem to favour male against female gender with regard to the personal and situational restrictions on the use of sex terms. In addition, gender disparity with regard to sex as a taboo subject can be related to the culturally-interpreted roles assigned to male and female in sex or sex activity. The male is considered to play an active role while women is perceived to play a passive role; male is considered an initiator. This culturally- assigned role which is a fall-out of the culture of patriarchy reflects in some restrictions on women with regard to the use of sex terms and expressions.

Generally, verbal taboos in Igbo have alternative means of codifying them such as the use of euphemisms, proverbs and idioms. The Igbo society expect the observance of the use of alternatives to verbal taboos more from the female gender than the male. This is explicit in the statement of a participant thus;

Males are seen as superior. When we talk about sex-based taboos, females are the worst hit. In my community, males use some of these terms exactly the way they are such as utu (penis), ọtụ (vagina), amụ (penis), etc. but females are abhorred from using them except for older women.

In many communities, male gender may be allowed to use the terms mentioned in the table 1 above but this is not the case with women. The Igbo society view the use of terms by female as absolutely offensive. Another participant expressed this in a statement below:

As a woman, you dare not use such terms like penis, vagina, sexual intercourse, etc in public. When it comes from a woman, it is considered offensive and jeering. Though their use by males may be seen as such but the case of female is taken more seriously.

Participants reported an exception to the restriction on the female use of sex terms occurs in some Igbo communities. This is more in communities where women are assigned certain statuses such as traditional titled position and gendered roles. For instance, women in some areas such as *Edda* and *Afikpo/Ehugbo* as well as *Awka* are allowed to use sex terms during cultural festivals like the *Mbe* festival of *Afikpo* in Ebonyi state. In some Igbo communities such as *Awka* and *Ngwa*, where gendered roles exist such as “male daughters” and “female husbands”, these lines of restrictions in the use of sex terms are blurred. This is explicit in the statement below:

The only women allowed to use these terms or expressions are titled and older women. However, this is not obtainable in all Igbo communities. Like in my community, and our neighboring communities like Edda, Ngwa and others, ‘female fathers’.

The observation above corroborates the submission of Emeka-Nwobia (2021) that in some Igbo communities, some female assumes higher social statuses such as “male daughters” and “female husbands.” The practice of making “male daughters” is resorted to when a man does not have a male child after marrying other women; one of his daughters

may decide to “stay back” without being married out to produce male children that would bear and retain her father’s name. In most cases, her parents arrange for a lover who would impregnate her or allow her to choose one. A woman can also take up the role of “female husband” if she is childless or widowed and/or wants to produce male children who will bear her husband’s name for the continuity of his lineage by marrying wives to bear children in his name. The “female husband” status can also be acquired through amassing as much wealth as possible and taking up formal political power and authority like their male counterparts. In a society that expects adult women to be married, these “female husbands” are free to marry their own wives and “father” their children. Such women are seen as ‘men’ by their communities. This is, however, different from same-sex marriage in the western sense. The relationship between the ‘female husband’ and her bride is not amorous or based on same-sex relationships.

A participant reported that another manifestation of the restriction on the use of sex-related terms by females is in the use of proverbs, particularly those that make reference to women. It is reported that in Igbo culture, women do not make use of proverbs. This is explicit in the statement below;

In my community and indeed many Igbo climes, women do not use proverbs in exchanges and communication no matter the context or situation. It is considered an exclusive reserve of males in Igbo culture. Someone told me that this may be the genesis of the derogatory reference to women in some Igbo proverbs, particularly those that mention sex-related terms.

Participants also reported that the restrictions on the use of proverbs associated or related to sex or genitals may be related to the culture of patriarchy, and the Igbo’s perception of female gender as subversive. Some sex-related proverbs which have restrictive use include.

- *Ọtụ ma ụma egbu amụma, ọ gaghị ezo mmiri* (the vagina is feigning in vain as lightning, it will not cause rain to fall)
- *Ajị bụ ebube ọtu, nke na-enweghị ya bụ ejula* (the pubic hair is the aura of the vagina, any one that does not have it is a mere snail).
- *Nwanyị tūsa ụkwụ ya, ọtụ ya agbaa n’ibe n’ibe* (when a woman throws her leg wide apart, her vulva splits into two parts).

Age in The Use of Sex-Related Verbal Taboos among The Igbo

The Igbo conceive sex as strictly for adults. It is against Igbo norms and values for certain people, particularly young people to use sex terms, as well as certain body-based terms or expressions. It is a way of keeping sacred the intimacy of sex. Young people are culturally abhorred from having sex or sexual relations, and that sexual education is not taught among the Igbo but acquired in the course of family and community socialization, which allows such education to be reserved till one gets to adult age, culturally assigned as 18 years and above.

Also, marriage signals adulthood in Igbo clime. So, in this sense, unmarried young people are forbidden from using some words or expressions relating to the human body or sex. These are words or expressions captured in the table 1 above. A participant expressed that in Igbo culture, sex is a not a topic to be discussed by unmarried young people, and that the only time this could be allowed is in preparation for marriage such as ‘fattening room’- a process whereby women or adolescent girls are kept away from their companions, societal interactions and also from performing their customary duties, and are taught and prepared for marriage. So, the use of alternatives of verbal taboos or expressions is not for young

unmarried people. Sex is considered a subject reserved for the adult married people. This is explicit in the statement below:

Adulthood in Igbo is closely tied to marriage. One of the signs of adulthood is marriage. Others in some communities include initiation into age groups, and other sociocultural institutions. Sex terms are not to be used by unmarried young people. They have no business with their use except during special ceremonies to initiate them into adulthood, and marriage for example fattening room.

Another participant reported the influence of age in the use of sex-related terms or expressions in relation to marriage and concubinage. It is reported that sex as well as its discussion including the use of terms associated with it, is reserved for people engaged in two socially-approved institutions for sharing of sexual relations which are marriage and concubinage. Thus.

People who are not in marriage and concubinage relation are not meant to discuss sex, and as such not allowed to use sex-related terms or expressions. It is considered a sign of poor upbringing for a young unmarried person to talk about sex, or use sex-related words or expressions particularly in public. The Igbo society shuns at it.

The observation above lends credence to the submission of Onwukwe (2020) who alludes that “In traditional Igbo society, a woman’s sexual services are rendered within the socially approved institutions of marriage and concubinage”. To the Igbo, sex or sexual relations within these socially approved institutions form part of the social fabric of the society which should be preserved, and are reserved for people in such institutions. Serious reprimand awaits a child that breaches this prohibition in many Igbo communities. A participant reported a case in *Isuikwuato* Igbo community where a child was reprimanded for uttering what was considered taboo; he gave a proverb thus, “*aji bu ugwu ikpu*” meaning “pubic hair is the aura of the vagina or confers dignity to the vagina”. Children irrespective of their gender are prohibited from mentioning some parts of the human body including male or female genitals, sex activity or even make reference to these in any expression or utterance.

Different Situations or Contexts Associated with The Sex-Related Verbal Taboos in Igbo

As observed earlier, verbal taboo among the Igbo is context-based. This means that there are certain contexts or situations wherein people are not allowed to say or use certain words or expressions. The context or situation of the restrictions on the use of sex terms and expressions is layered across Igbo communities. I have categorized them into “open” and “closed” contexts. By “closed” contexts, I refer to small and confined closets involving family setting such as spouse/intimate space (husband and wife, concubinage), nuclear family (husband, wife and children), extended family (husband, wife, children and relations), and sometimes among only group of men or female like in men/female’s meeting or male drinking joint. By “open” contexts, I refer to other spaces involving a group of people like kindred/village/community meetings/spaces and cultural events/activities.

There is restriction in the use of sex terms on the male gender particularly in more of ‘closed’ than in ‘open’ contexts/spaces. For instance, even though males are allowed to use sex terms in ‘open’ contexts, they are not allowed to use sex terms in any setting/context involving children and women such as in nuclear and extended family settings. This relates

to the belief or norm among the Igbo that sex is a topic reserved for adults so it will be against cultural norms and values to mention sex terms when with children or more broadly people who are not party to the activity. However, both male and female are allowed to use sex terms when in intimate/spouse space such as husband and wife, which is designated as ‘closed space’.

The restriction on the use sex-related terms by the female gender occurs in virtually all ‘closed’ (except for intimate/spousal space and among solely women or group of women like women meetings) and indeed all ‘open’ contexts. A participant reported an exception below:

Females may use sex-related terms or expressions in some contexts like among themselves such as female community meeting, female group associations and other gatherings exclusively for females. In such gathering, them sometimes makes reference to genitals and other body-parts in comic songs and expressions.

Female gender is not allowed to use sex terms in all ‘open contexts or situations, for example kindred/village/community meetings or spaces. This is explicit in the statement below:

Any gathering outside those that are female exclusive or intimate space such as husband and wife, females are not allowed to use sex-related terms. Coming from a female is considered offensive. I cannot imagine a woman attending a village meeting and she uses sex term or even makes direct or indirect reference to sex-related terms.

This relates to the delineation of female gender among the Igbo to certain statuses (weak, subservient), and the culture of patriarchy. There are varied portrayals of Igbo women by some scholars as being subservient, inferior, voiceless, and mere appendages to men. According to Basden (1921), Igbo “women have but few rights in any circumstances and can only hold such property as their lord’s permit. There is no grumbling against their lot; they accept the situation as their grandmother did before them taking affairs philosophically, they managed to live fairly contentedly.” Although his opinion about Igbo women has been critiqued by scholars such as Ezeigbo (1990) as misleading and based on a lack of knowledge of the sociopolitical system and power relations between Igbo men and women, the Igbo women have continued to be represented as subservient even in most contemporary Igbo communities as evidenced in the restrictions on the use of sex terms.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine sex-related verbal taboos among the Igbo. It identified gender and age disparities, as well as different contexts of use of the verbal taboos. The study identified verbal taboos on parts of human body, and particularly sex/sex activity, and further observed that the conception of sex to the Igbo is influenced by social norms and patriarchal ideologies. The social norms relate to the persons involved, the context of sex, and the manner as well as nature of the activity. In terms of persons involved, the Igbo conceive sex as strictly for adults. These contribute to some restrictions on the use of sex terms among the Igbo.

The study highlighted some gender and age disparities with regard to the verbal prohibitions relating to sex and other parts of the body among the Igbo. Context of restriction is another theme which featured in our analysis of sex-related verbal taboos among the Igbo.

Varied contexts or situations were identified ranging from ‘closed’ involving intimate/spousal, and nuclear family, as well as ‘open’ context involving extended family space, village/kindred/community as well other groups such as male and female groups. These contexts relate to different perspectives of verbal taboo.

The study concludes that gender disparity as a feature of verbal taboos depend on the culture and their underlying philosophy and values. Some cultures indeed do not have some cultural segregation based on gender and some on age, for example in most western societies, lines of gender and age divides have been blurred, and these are societies and cultures that are championing social and human equality. An appreciation of the interesting dimensions of gender and age disparities in the use of verbal taboo entails an understanding of the culture’s stance on gender and age divides and roles each gender and age group is culturally assigned.

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