

Christian Religion as Tool for Women Empowerment in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper looked at Christian religion as tool for women empowerment in Nigeria. The study found that Christian religion serves as a tool for empowering women in the society. Empowerment was seen as the process of enabling or authorizing the individual to think, take action and control work in an autonomous way. It was seen as the process by which one can gain control over one's destiny and the circumstances of ones lives. Empowerment includes control over resources (physical, human, intellectual and financial) and over ideology (beliefs, values and attitudes). The church was discovered to have helped in so many ways by giving money to women for businesses through micro credit scheme and others. It was recommended that the churches should strengthen their tie of relationship with the society especially in area of family upbringing and economic empowerment of women.

Keywords: Christian, Religion, Tool, Women Empowerment, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Christianity centers on the person and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew who lived in first century C.E. Palestine. Christians believe Jesus is the Christ, or the one promised by God in the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible. Through his life, death and resurrection, he is believed to have freed human beings from their sinful state and made them recipients of God's saving grace. During Jesus lifetime and in the generation after his death, Christianity was marked by egalitarianism in both its teachings and its institutional structures. Transcending the established norms of his own culture, Jesus openly and frequently affirmed women's worthiness and included them in his community of disciples. After his death women were prominent in leading the emerging church as apostles, deacons and prophets. Since baptism, rather than circumcision, became the primary rite of initiation, women became full members of the community and were given the same rights and duties as men (Gross, 1993).

Such egalitarianism, however, was gradually replaced with patriarchal institutional structures after Christianity spread through the Mediterranean world in the 2nd century C.E. and then, two centuries later; it became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Such changes in structure were accompanied by a theology which identified the patriarchal social order with the divinely created order and thus insisted that the proper relationship between men and women was one in which men ruled and women were obedient.

While such structures were to dominate most of Christianity for the rest of its history, egalitarian

structures and theologies would re-emerge time after time in minority renewal movements. Even in the patristic and medieval Church, proponents of the egalitarian core did not vanish. The egalitarian vision and institutional structures survived in modified forms in monastic movements, especially in women's monasticism. While the most powerful traditions in the Protestant Reformation continued the theology of subordination, sectors of the radical reformation sought to restore the New Testament church and its vision of equality between men and women.

Concept of Women Empowerment

Empowerment can be viewed as means of creating a social environment in which one can make decisions and make choices either individually or collectively for social transformation. It strengthens the innate ability by way of acquiring knowledge, power and experience (Hashemi Schuler & Riley, 1996).

Empowerment is the process of enabling or authorizing the individual to think, take action and control work in an autonomous way. It is the process by which one can gain control over one's destiny and the circumstances of ones lives. Empowerment includes control over resources (physical, human, intellectual and financial) and over ideology (beliefs, values and attitudes). (Kishore, 2008). It is not merely a feel of greater extrinsic control, but also grows intrinsic capacity, greater self-confidence and an internal transformation of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barriers to accessing resources or changing traditional ideology (Pinto, 2001).

A distinct vagueness and subjectivity is in-built into this concept as it goes beyond the material well being of women, the latter being only as one of the outcomes of the lengthy process of empowerment. To understand the doings and beings of women, researchers have resorted to various interrelated concepts like, autonomy, agency and well-being. Most of the works on women's empowerment start with: 'it is important to clarify what is implied by empowerment in this article', clearly reflecting the deferring views on empowerment (Kabeer, 2005). Different scholars hold different definition of empowerment according to the need of their work. In fact many of them value it because of its fuzziness, which gives them breathing space to work it out in action (Alkire, 2007).

Women's empowerment is very essential for the development of society. Empowerment means individuals acquiring the power to think and act freely, exercises choice and fulfill their potential as full and equal members of society. As per the United National Development Fund for women (UNIFEM), the term women's empowerment means:

- Acquiring knowledge and understanding of gender relations and the ways in which these relations may be changed.
- Developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life.
- Gaining the ability to generate choices exercise bargaining power.
- Developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change, to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

Thus, empowerment means a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power and legal rights. It is a multi level construct referring to individuals, organizations and community. It is an international, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to the control over these resources.

The church as an institution has been very instrumental in the empowerment of women financially, economically, psychologically and morally. Many churches today render loan scheme to women even without interest. Many widows have been empowered through this medium. Most times, they are given money ranging from ₦50, 000, ₦100, 000 or ₦200, 000 and are made to pay back the capital after twelve calendar months without any interest. Some Roman Catholic, Anglican and new generation priests and pastors buy sewing machines,

grinding machines among others and give to some of their dedicated church members as a way of empowering them economically.

Women's empowerment is a flow rather than a stock variable manifesting into various outcomes and well being is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the former, i.e. well-being going through various pathways like gaining resources, autonomy and agency. These pathways denote expansion in capabilities in a way which brings changes in the lives of individuals; people who are previously denied power are now being empowered. Kabeer (2005) defines it as a process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability. The elements required in enabling one to gain power, authority and influence over others, institutions or society may be listed as follows:

- decision-making power of one's own;
- access to information and resources for taking proper decision;
- availability of a range of options from which choices can be made (not just yes/no, either/or);
- ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision making;
- positive thinking on the ability to make change;
- ability to learn skills for improving one's personal or group power;
- ability to change others' perceptions by democratic means;
- involvement in the growth process and changes that is never ending and self-initiated;
- increasing one's positive self-image and overcoming stigma; and
- increasing ones' ability in discreet thinking to sort out right and wrong.

Women as Fully and Equally Human

Those Christians who contend that Christianity has an egalitarian core insist that their position is most authoritative because it represents the earliest tradition within Christianity. Thus while the theology of subordination remained dominant throughout most of history, those pointing to Christianity's egalitarian core insist that such a theology is in direct contradiction to Jesus own proclamation and the writings which can be authentically traced to the apostle Paul. The understanding of women's subordination to men, they claim emerged only in texts which, while attributed to Paul, were actually written after his death.

Three main texts form the core of the egalitarian tradition within Christianity: Galatians 3:28; Genesis 1:1-2:4, and Acts 2:1-18. Galatians 3:28 is actually an early baptismal formula quoted by Paul in his letter to the churches of Galatia. Often called the Magna Carta

of Christian liberty, Galatians deals primarily with the question of whether Gentiles must become Jews (through circumcision and obedience to the Law) before they can become Christians.

In answering no, Paul provides insight into early Christian views of women's status in Christianity. By using the baptismal formula, there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female. Paul affirms that not only Gentiles, but also slaves and women become full and equal members of the community through baptism, the primary rite of initiation.

Genesis 1:1-2:4, the first of two accounts of human creation found in the Bible, demonstrates that women and men were originally created equal. In this creation story, since men and women are made in the image of God and share the same human nature, they are equal. Some opponents of egalitarianism appeal to the doctrine of the fall to insist that while Adam and Eve may have been created equal, they became unequal after their fall from God's grace. Proponents of the egalitarian core, respond in two ways to such objections. Some concede that after the fall, women did indeed become subject to men. Nevertheless, because in Christ's resurrection, the vision of the original creation is restored, men and women are once again equal partners in the world.

Others, however, insist that the announcement of Eve's subjugation to Adam after their departure from the garden was not a punishment for their sin, but God's prediction of what life outside of God's order would be like. Put another way, women's subordination to men is the inevitable consequence, not God's punishment, of human sinfulness and rebellion against God's original plan for humanity. Thus the emergence of male domination is not a prescription by which humanity is to live, but rather a description of the inevitable consequences of a life lived in disharmony with God's will.

The story of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-21), in which Jesus' followers received the Holy Spirit, demonstrates that both men and women received the gift of prophecy in the early church. Prophecy was possible only when a believer was filled by God's Holy Spirit, and became the primary means by which the risen Christ communicated with the early Christians. At Pentecost, God pours the Holy Spirit on all of humankind, the young and the old, the sons and the daughters, and both male and female slaves. Later in Acts, Luke also specifically mentions the four daughters of Philip as renowned Christian prophets (Acts 21:9). While Paul does admonish women to exercise their gifts of prophecy and their liturgical gifts properly, he nevertheless assumes that women engage in such activities. The inclusion of women in prophecy is no small matter since Paul himself lists

prophets after apostles in the hierarchy of spiritual gifts.

Lastly, proponents of the egalitarian core look to Jesus own actions and words to bolster their claim that the egalitarian tradition is the earliest and most authoritative. The lack of any Gospel texts which justify women's subordination to men indicates that Jesus did not endorse women's subordination. Indeed, in contrast to cultural expectations, Jesus' actions appear to affirm that he saw women as his equals. In addition to affirming women's right to study alongside his male disciples (Luke 10:38-42), in the Gospel of John, Jesus reveals his identity as the Messiah to both women and men alike.

Religion and Rights of Women

Historically, much of the oppression women have faced came as a result of policies within churches and organized religion. Forced marriage, oppressive ideas about sexuality, quashing of rights to speak, and lack of stake in family and church leadership are all issues women have faced through the centuries. On the other hand, research in recent decades has shown that women who are involved in religion report higher levels of happiness. Researchers could examine this dichotomy to discover core values held by women who choose to affiliate with a religion and those who do not. Researches could look at what specifically and indirectly makes women happier when their lives are tied to religious beliefs and settings (Sharma, 1987). They could also look at how much religious oppression colours women's views about religion in the present day and whether it affects their choice to be or not to be religious.

While religion can be oppressive to individual and gender rights, religions have also helped to pave the way for social changes and civil rights. The Christian Apostle Paul wrote that "... women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says" (1 Corinthians 14:34), but also made the point that there is no "male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28) and instructed husbands and wives to have mutual care for each other. The Christian church's prohibition against divorce, which may have bound women into marriages against their will, was also designed to protect women from finding themselves cast out of a home. The Protestant Reformation helped change paradigms about views of women by first emphasizing the value of the individual, and his or her own value in the eyes of God, a key underlying idea to the exploration of human rights. Hence, the church is a means not only to building peaceful homes but, empowering the home especially women economically and educationally.

Religion and Societal Development

If they are to play a genuine role in the building up of society, creative and original ways must be found in order to achieve a healthy and humane balance between professional life and family life for women. In most cases nowadays women and men have to combine family life and work. I think it is important here to overcome the contradictions found in societies that are organized on the basis of criteria of practicality and efficiency and therefore have family policies that do not support and protect working mothers (Siena, 2006). In this sense, the Social Doctrine of the Church can offer principles to help the laity support actions and initiatives that advance women and men in the field of work in respect for personal dignity and mission within the family.

Specifically in Nigeria, the commitment of the Church to the dignity and vocation of women in the sphere of the evangelization of culture is particularly appreciated. Nigeria is a multi-cultural society made up of many tribes and languages. In our globalized world, Nigeria has become in a special way an arena of agreements and clashes between traditional African cultures and Western postmodern culture where basic values like family and marriage are questioned.

Despite the misunderstanding between traditional African cultures and the Christian mission, the dignity and importance of the Nigerian woman cannot be overemphasized. Today, a common slogan in our communities, particularly among women circles which I consider relevant to this discourse is:

woman talks to woman, woman understands!
educate a woman, you educate a nation!
empower a woman, you empower a nation!

It therefore follows, in my opinion, that for any meaningful development to take place in any nation, an all round development of women is not negotiable. The above slogan vividly captures the role of the Christian religion in giving back to the society via women's empowerment.

CONCLUSION

The Christian religion is an important institution of social development not only in the empowerment of women but in the overall growth and development of the Nigerian economy. Churches today create job opportunities and also empower their members especially women economically. The church teaches morality and prudence in management of finance both at private level and government circle. It also serves as source of encouragement to women in society. It is expedient therefore that the church be given special recognition by the Federal Government

of Nigeria and other well meaning individuals for its contributions to the development of the nation.

RECOMMENDATION

While commending the church in Nigeria for the giant strides in enhancing the dignity of womanhood, it is recommended in this paper that:

1. Each religious organization in the country should endeavour to strengthen its ties of relationship in the building and cementing of good family upbringing especially in preaching peace and togetherness as it relates to women empowerment.
2. The churches should be encouraged to increase their corporate responsibility of developing the society through empowerment especially of women for rapid economic advancement.
3. All restrictions hindering the full humanization of the Nigerian woman should be eradicated.
4. Government should create the enabling environment for women to actively participate in politics. The 35% affirmation in favour of women in the Goodluck Jonathan led Federal Government though commendable, should be reviewed upwards to reflect parity.

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