

The role of Christianity in gender issues and development in Nigeria



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Gender issues permeate all socio-cultural institutions. They condition how people of different genders see themselves, act and relate with each other in any given situation and time. In Nigeria, the issue of gender is one that affects all facets of human life. It affects personality traits, gender role behaviour, social status, acquisition of property, inheritance, occupation and responsibility in the family, and society. Since most traditional African societies are patriarchal, of which Nigeria is one, it is assumed that the women are subjugated and relegated to the background. This situation has created tension and unhealthy relationship between males and females in Nigerian societies because of the seeming undue advantage the men have over the women. It has also hampered harnessing of women potentials in Nigeria's developmental process and progress. Christianity as a religion in Nigeria is a dominant force in the lives of men and women. Since its emergence in Nigeria, many people have embraced the religion and its teaching thus changing most of the cultural values of the people. Against this backdrop, this work explored conflicts and challenges associated with gender issues and how Christianity has used some faith-based organisations to address the issue, so as to promote holistic development policy and practices in Nigeria. The methodology used in this article is the phenomenological method of research. It was used so as to provide an objective report on the findings of this research.

Contribution: This article advocates for a committed contemporary approach, especially from the Church towards ameliorating the gender disparity in Nigeria and within the Church. Although the context is Nigeria, Christian belief of Jesus Christ as the liberator of humanity emphasised could be applied to other contexts too.

Keywords: Christianity; Gender; Gender relations; Socio-cultural institutions; Development.

Introduction

The human society is afflicted with gender issues wherever men and women interact. This relationship between males and females in socio-cultural institutions such as family, economy, politics, religion and education is most often marred with inter alia domination, marginalisation, discrimination and victimisation. The worst is gender domination, a phenomenon that tilts to patriarchy in Nigeria. Etymologically, patriarchy literally means a structure of rulership in which power is distributed unequally in favour of fathers (Waters 1989:193). Men are valued and respected more than women in the society, independent of the achievements of the latter. This discrimination is often characterised by psychological, physical and spiritual victimisation of women that leads sometimes to their feelings of misery and shame, and even death (Ali 2011). To worsen this ugly state of women, this practice is also prevalent in the church, taking into consideration that the Church is acclaimed as the arbiter of justice and fairness, the refuge for oppressed people and victims of injustice. Yet, it accommodates gender domination and discrimination.

Gender-related issues have affected the activities of and the relationship between males and females since biblical times. For a very long time, it has been seen as an acceptable way of life in the Church and in the society at large with biblical backing, even though it seems to be inimical to the teaching of Christ, his person, mission and the Church that evolved after his death and resurrection. It goes against human rights of equal rights and opportunities for all. Unfortunately, those that suffer gender domination are women. Women, for instance, constitute the highest number of churchgoers, but in most cases they are not allowed to ascend to the highest level of Church authority, or partake in most higher decision-making boards. Instead, they are relegated to the background. Apart from religious sphere, Bako and Syed (2018:425) observe that 'marginalization of women in economic development, and social and political spaces is a

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worldwide phenomenon'. This is especially the case in a developing country like Nigeria, that (Bako & Syed 2018):

'[D]espite the adoption of the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in 1985, and similar local policies such as the *National gender policy* of 2006, inequality still exists due to a myriad of cultural and structural challenges.' (p. 425)

This has hindered women's participation in almost all areas of life with serious implications for the economic and human resource development of Nigeria.

This clearly shows how gender domination has become a weapon of intimidation, oppression and suppression of the womenfolk. But times have changed and the Church, which is the bedrock of Christianity, must change with it. In the gospels, for example, it is clear that Jesus and Paul (see, e.g., 1 Cor 7:1-6), related with both, women and men without discrimination. Males and females were responsive to his teaching and showed devotion by ministering to and serving the master (see also Rm 16). Ayuba (1998) has noted that:

Jesus restored the original relationship between humanity as established by God at creation. In the gospels, He erased all lines of male superiority and female inferiority and placed all on the same level. In His teaching and ministering, He recognized everybody and disapproved of anything that discriminated against any group, especially women. He rejected the law of adultery which penalized women and not men (Jn 8:1-12). (p. 102)

No gender is superior to the other. All human beings, men and women alike, are blessed with gifts and talents that can be used to better the world, hence they must be given the opportunity to express and excel themselves. In view of this, this study considers that for any meaningful development to take place in Nigeria, the female gender has to be giving her rightful position devoid of discrimination and marginalisation. In achieving this, Christianity as a force to be reckoned with, must be found to be serious in championing human rights, justice, fairness and peace in Nigeria, and in the world at large. Christianity must be in the forefront of fighting gender domination and promoting gender equality.¹

Gender difference, gender relations and gender roles in Nigeria

Gender differences could be well understood by examining sex and gender together. Sex could be referred to as the 'anatomy of an individual's reproductive system', while gender could be seen as secondary sex characteristics from which social roles are 'based on the sex of the person (gender role) or personal identification of one's own'(Virginia 2005:1). In other words, while gender is a socially constructed definition of men and women, sex is the biological characteristics of men and women (Virginia 2005).

1. For what follows, the phenomenological descriptive method was used. Sources of data collection include library and internet materials.

Gender relation dates back, in biblical narratives, from the creation stories and the fall of man. From the first creation story, males and females were created at the same time and given dominion over every other thing (Gn 1:27), thus making them equal. In the second creation story, the woman was created from man (Gn 2:22). In other words, there was this air of hollowness and incompleteness present with the man prior to the creation of woman. Thus, woman's creation was to complement man. But despite this imagery on egalitarian relationship of male and female, Thomas Aquinas, as recorded by Uchem (2001:145), observed that the image of God is found in the man and not in the woman, for man is the beginning and end of woman. These early notions about the supremacy of the male over the female influenced and formed most traditions that subjugated and relegated women to the background, thus affecting the relationship between male and female. Amongst many Nigerian families the social system on which the people operate is patriarchy. This patriarchal structure showcases men as heads of families (*pater familias*) with women and children under their status and discipline. Here roles and responsibilities are assigned to members of different families according to their biological make-up, position, abilities and capabilities. With this type of structure, there is the assumption that males are empowered more than females.

Regarding this patriarchal structure, Chinweizu (1990:69) observes that 'in the face of patriarchy is matriarchy (rule of mothers)'. He further observes that 'patriarchy may be socially and publicly accepted, but matriarchy is the law of life'. The following statements from Chinweizu throw more insight into this observation: 'my husband may be the head of the house; I am the neck that turns the head – an American housewife'. The deduction here is that life will be incomplete without the complementary role of women.

Reading the gospels, one sees that Jesus related with both women and men. Both were responsive to his teaching and showed devotion by ministering to and serving the master. Gasque (1988) equally opines that in the Bible the 'traditional view' stresses submission and dependence. This could be seen in Ephesians 5:23, 1 Corinthians 11:3, and 1 Timothy 5:8, etcetera (Gasque 1988):

A woman's role in relation to home, church and society is to be in submission to her husband (or to male leadership) and to be dependent upon him/them. She has her own sphere and freedom to exercise her spiritual gifts, but it is ultimately under the leadership of the male who takes the lead in the home and in the church, that her gifts are expressed. This view is based on hierarchical understanding of the relationship of God to Christ to man to woman, stemming from Paul's argument in Corinthians 11:1-16, where he presents what we might call a chain of hierarchy: Christ is subject to the Father, man to Christ, and woman to man. (p. 1)

This, according to Gasque (1988), is the accent of the traditional view. He further submits that (Gasque 1988):

The egalitarian view argues that there is no scriptural reason for women not to share in leadership in the Church, or to

participate in a marriage relationship that is based on a principle of mutual submission and interdependent love. The accent in the egalitarian view is on mutual submission, not on the submission of one party to the other, but each party to one another – both in the church and in the home. (p. 1)

Unfortunately, a look at the Bible clearly shows that Bible was written by men, for men and about men. According to Jacqueline Dorr (1991), women only appear in the Bible in rather subordinate roles that mainly serve to develop and support the men's story. For instance, men wrote about women as they actually experience them in the society. However, their experience of women was coloured by masculine prejudice and ignorance which is highly patriarchal and could not be said to be 'God-inspired'. Patriarchal systems most of the time reinforce and interpret that which is beneficial for its survival. Carbajal (2018:2), for example, quoted a Bible passage which indicates that the 'wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does' (1 Cor 7:4). The problem, as noted by him, 'is that most individuals forget the second part of this verse, which is likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does' (Carbajal 2018:2). But often, the latter is neglected. The 'complete verse indicates that both are responsible for each other', it also (Carbajal 2018):

[T]reats the couple as equal partners, not as a hierarchy. Thus, the Bible is used to interpret women's role in society. This women's societal role has been institutionalized, resulting in biased treatment in the workplace. (p. 2)

A look at the model of leadership has also been consistent with masculine characteristics. Whatever contributions women make in the developmental process are most of the time dismissed because they are perceived as weak. In Nigeria, for instance, women provide the backbone of the rural economy. 'About 80 per cent of the economically active female labour force is employed in agriculture and women comprise about 47 per cent of the total agricultural labour force' (Fapohunda 2012:19). To 'develop a more productive, sustainable and equitable agricultural sector, Nigerian women cannot be neglected' (Fapohunda 2012:19).

Causes and effects of gender domination in Nigeria's development

One of the causes of gender domination is patriarchal organisational structures, as pointed out earlier. This is visible in most organisations in Nigeria; even where majority of members are women, majority of the leaders are men. Unfortunately, this arrangement is easily rationalised as God's will and law, and several verses from the Bible would be quoted to prove the point (Hadebe 2018). For instance, in the Bible, God is recognised as the God of 'Abraham, Isaac and Jacob', with no mention of their wives, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. On the other hand, in the negative sense, Delilah (Jdg 16), Jezebel (1 Ki 21), Bathsheba (2 Sm 11) and

Eve (Gn 3) are consistently blamed for the 'fall' of the great men of God and humanity. Though this situation is considered as unfair to women, even the Church finds it difficult to go against these verses believing that they were recorded as historical facts. 'Male and female roles are therefore much differentiated and also unbalanced' in our everyday lives (Ram, Strohschein & Gaur 2014:1).

According to Klingorová and Havlíček (2015:3), it is also important to note that 'there exists a certain discrepancy between normative conditionality, which refers to what the given religion proclaims (equality of men and women before God) and practical conditionality', which involves the actual role of women vis-a-vis men in our everyday life. When this unbalanced gender concerns comes up, it militates against the extension of equal opportunities to women which will lead to irritation, frustration, indifference, disappointment, apathy, violence and lopsided sustainable development, and underdevelopment. Okeke (2011) posits that sustainable development requires the fulfilment participation of women at all levels. Any attempt to identify a people's problem and appropriate strategies for implementing solutions with half of the people concerned will be inappropriate. Gender equity becomes imperative.

Gender discrimination also impedes development and leads to women's oppression. This is evidenced in many Nigerian cultures and it has health implications on females; in spite of countries' joint signatories to all the charters on girl-child's rights. A wide range of harmful practices are still prevalent. This practice has far-reaching effect on the health of the female gender, and at times problems like infertility and childlessness may result from the damage caused because of this exercise. There are also cases of diseases contracted. Eneh and Nkamnebe (2011) noted that, from the age of seven:

[O]ther discriminatory social practices, which place the girl-child at a greater disadvantage over the boy-child, begin to manifest. These practices include unequal gender division of work and access to leisure, early marriage and female disinheritance. (p. 41)

On unequal gender division of work, Tijani (1998) rightly observes that the woman is a child producer, child caretaker, food producer and sole bread winner and also takes care of schooling of the children despite her limited resources and educational status. These practices no doubt affect the health of women and also impinge on the females' fundamental human rights as well as her contribution to the development of Nigerian nation.

The place of Christian Church in gender dominance²

Christianity is the most widely practiced religion in the world with more than two billion followers. The Christian faith

2. For the purpose of clarity, the concepts of Church, Christian Church and Christianity will be used interchangeably in the discourse. The place of Christianity could be examined on what Christian Church has been able to do to improve the lots of women, thereby empowering them to contribute their quota in the developmental process, and progress of Nigerian society.

centres on beliefs regarding the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Slick (2008:1) observes that 'it is a relationship with the true and living God through the person of Jesus Christ by whom we are forgiven of our sins and escape the righteous judgment of God'. Jesus' teaching centred so much on love and peaceful co-existence with one another. According to Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, he noted that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22). He taught against selfishness, pride, anxiety, anger, oppression and so on.

Despite this beautiful scenario of Christianity, the real status of women in Christianity is more complicated. In the history of religions, 'the voice of women is rarely heard, due to the patriarchal disposition of the societies in which these religions emerged, and which eventually stifled some of the changes in the status of women triggered by new religion' (Klingorová & Havlíček 2015:2). Olaley-Oruene, Leroy and Koeppen-Schomerus et al. (2010) noted that, although African traditional society was purely patriarchal in nature (the man played the controlling agent in the family and women played supporting roles to men), women were treated with respect. But, Mwije (2012) quoting (Uchem et al. 2001:1), posited that with the introduction of new system of government, commerce and education by colonialists, women became marginalised and men were favoured.

That, notwithstanding visible achievements made by Christian Church, has been recorded. The Church is not immune from gender issues because it is composed of male and female believers. Hence, it is bound to be confronted with the challenges of gender dominance like any other human institution. The difference, however, could come from the fact that the Church is regarded also as a divine institution and is seen as the mother of all God's people, who loves them equally and unconditionally, without siding against one over the other. Based on this premise, the church responds to the challenges of gender dominance given in following section.

Pre-marriage counselling

Since most of the gender dominations and violence take place in families and mostly amongst couples, the Church has developed a pre-marriage programme that educates couples on this challenge. Most Nigerian churches, in their pre-marriage classes, engage intending couples on red-light issues that may result in gender dominance like human sexuality, barrenness, no male-issue syndrome, equality of the couple, participation in family decision-making, working parents and physical beating of women. They go further to request compatibility test and genotype from the couples. Sometimes, the couples are advised to make their wills known to their partners. The Catholic Church, for example, makes it known to intending couples that their marriage is null and void if they deliberately hide any

fundamental issues like barrenness, impotence and loss of womb in the case of the woman, or any serious illness from their partners. In fact, 'any of the partners deceived by malice, perpetrated to obtain consent, concerning some quality of the other partner which, by its very nature can gravely disturb the partnership of conjugal life', makes the marriage null and void (Code of Canon Law 1095-1098).

Pulpit preaching

Today, many priests and preachers of the Word are gender sensitive in their preaching, unlike before when they took the subject for granted. This new development is a result of a new gender sensitising curriculum at the seminaries and theological colleges. Improved homiletics teach that every human person, man or woman should be equally recognised, respected and appreciated as people created in the image and likeness of God. Though they are different, they are equal and complimentary (John Paul II 1981). God loves all human beings unconditionally and thus, every one of them is to be given the opportunity to exercise and develop their talents. In view of this development and also the enlightened congregation, many priests and preachers of the Word are correcting the mistakes by being gender sensitive and promoting complementarities amongst the sexes. In their preaching of the Word, they are boldly 'combating cultural practices that oppress women e.g. widowhood practices, wife inheritance and female genital mutilation' (Pemunta & Alubafi 2016:123). More emphasis is laid on themes and teachings that stimulate mutual respect and sincere love for people of both sexes.

Symposium and enlightenment programs

Because of the usual violence associated with gender domination in the homes and the ugly images they create of the church in society, many Christian denominations have sponsored symposium and enlightenment programmes to curb this shameful situation. These programmes emphasise on the rights of the woman to her body and self defence against any sexual and physical violence; women subordination, promoting girl child education, challenging practices that predispose women to sexual infections like Sexually Transmitted Diseases and Human Immuno Virus/Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome and promoting women's sexual and reproductive rights. Evening lessons and catechism classes are also held to educate families on how to live harmoniously for the good of their families without undermining each other in any way.

Pastoral teachings

The different Christian denominations have responded to the gender dominance and persecution of women in their churches by writing pastoral letters, statements and teachings against the abuse. The Catholic Church has severally, through the years, reacted against abuse on women through the hierarchy's apostolic teachings. As

early as 1966, Pope Paul VI (1988) stated the following at the close of the Second Vatican Council:

The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling.' (p. 1)

Pope John Paul II made this appeal as one of the central points in his papacy. In his apostolic letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the dignity and vocation of women, 1988) through a breath-taking phenomenology of the countercultural behaviour of Jesus towards women, he reiterated the need to respect and accord women their rightful place in the world. This apostolic message has continued to re-echo and replicated in all Catholic dioceses of the world. In 2013, the plenary session of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria held in Abuja, the Catholic diocese reiterated the Church's defence of human rights (*Gaudium et Spes*, 27:no. 10), especially those that touch on 'gender, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children, and degrading working conditions, where human beings are treated as mere tools for profit rather than responsible persons'. The conference went on to accuse the government of the day of not doing much to avert these dehumanising situations Nigerians find themselves (*Gaudium et Spes*, 27:no. 12) and ended up declaring one of the dioceses, Maiduguri diocese, of a pastoral emergency (*Gaudium et Spes*, 27:no. 15). This issue has actually become part of all the Conference's communiqué as Nigeria continues to be bedevilled by dehumanising human rights gender issues.

Inclusive interpretation of biblical passages

Inclusive language and interpretation of scriptural passages have become prominent in many churches. Unlike before, when literally interpretation of passages aided gender domination against women, Church authority is handling some gender dominant passages skilfully and sensitively. A good example of this is John Paul II's comment in Genesis 3:16: God said to the woman 'your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you'. For the Holy Pontiff, in his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the dignity and vocation of women) this does not mean that man and woman are not equal, or the latter a slave to the former.

There is unanimous affirmation amongst religious people that passages that request women's submission to men like Ephesians 5:23–24, 1 Timothy 2:11–14 and 1 Timothy 2:8–15 are no justification to suppress women, or intimation to accept oppression. Some of these teachings were initially addressed to a particular assembly at a particular time and, thus, cannot be universal and all times binding. More so, they are not the exact words of Christ, and thus, cannot be said to be fundamental, or a measure of Christianity. Actually, in marriage, whatever is said of one of the couples applies to the other because they are no longer two persons but one.

Christian marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman 'who affirm before God their commitment to love, to respect and to cherish one another in all of life's circumstances' (CCC. 1601 & Can. 1055 § 1). So, anything that infringes on this covenant in terms of gender dominance, violence and abuse of partner is a violation of this covenant. It pulls apart the marriage bond.

With this initiative of inclusive interpretation of the scripture, many people are aware that the scripture cannot be used to condone evil or discriminate against anybody. Christ's salvation as well as scriptural texts is inclusive and not exclusive to any gender, people, race or language.

Collaborations with governmental and non-governmental agencies

The Church in Nigeria has agencies like Justice Development and Peace, Pastoral Care centres and Legal departments, that engage both Governmental and non-Governmental agencies, are dedicated to women and children who are defenceless in the difficult Nigerian society. Some of the Christian denominations also run shelters and homes where they house sexually abused women, counsel and take up their cases in court against their aggressors. Sometimes, the Churches together with the agencies put up paid publicity in the mass media against evils done to women. They highlight the constitutional provisions for the prevention of gender dominance and discrimination, and the consequential penalties for defaulters. There is always a hotline phone number dedicated to victims to reach out for help by these agencies.

The effect of gender inequality on development

Development in Nigeria has been affected by the rising tide of gender inequality. Some of the effects are hereunder stated.

Socio-economic effect

Meaningful human development is impossible without gender equality. As long as women's activities are undervalued and underpaid, they will continue to depend on their husbands for their economic welfare, thus creating a dependence syndrome that will douse any significant role they would have made in the production of wealth in the family. When women are denied equal rights, employment opportunities, job security and benefits available to their male counterparts, they slip below the poverty line. This is as a result of their inability to provide the basic necessities of life for their families. Sibani (2017:438) noted that 'the more senior position, the lower the proportion of women'. It was equally pointed out that Sibani (2017):

[W]omen take a number of disadvantages in paid work, tend to be paid less than men, are more likely to be in part-time work, and tend to do particular type of jobs usually those with a low status. (p. 438)

Against this background (Sibani 2017):

[T]he important role and contribution of women in the process of development was not recognised and consequently nothing was done to harness the potential of the women folk in the Nigerian quest for economic development. (p. 438)

Political effect

In the political arena, the participation of women in democratic processes (membership of political parties, elections) and appointments into policymaking positions is poor and not encouraging globally with Nigeria as one of the lowest in performance. Omodia, Esidene and Abdul (2013) are of the view that:

[F]rom contemporary perspectives in Nigeria, it would appear that women had never been influential in the realm of Nigerian politics. In the past, and even in the present democratic dispensation, there has been and there is still, some fair share of recognition of the increasing role of women in the Nigerian society, that the place of women in politics during the pre-colonial period is sufficiently familiar. Thus, the exploits of legendary women like queen Amina of Zazau in Zaria, Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan, princess Moremi of Ife, and princess Inikpi of Igala and Emotan of Benin readily comes to mind. During the colonial period, women asserted and expressed themselves politically. Some women who make political marks at that period included Margaret Ekpo of the famous Aba women riots of 1929, Tinubu of Lagos and Egba land, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of the Abeokuta Women Union of 1948, and Hajia Swaba Gambo of Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU), to mention but a few. It is however worthy of mention here that though women enjoyed higher level of authority in Southern Nigeria, men have always been dominant in the political structure with women playing sedentary roles as inferior and subordinate partners. (pp. 90–91)

Although the prospect for increased representation of Nigerian women in political leadership appear strong, a look at the data on the political representation of women in Nigeria carried out by (Orji, Orji & Agbanyim 2018) indicates that gender gains of the last decade have not reflected in the level of women's representation in political leadership. This was traced largely to women's lack of resources, traditional values and norms, community expectations, conservative family upbringing, lack of good education, lack of work or professional experience, structural and physical violence against women, and discriminatory roles assigned to women in the political parties.

Religious effect

When assessing male/female leadership in contemporary Christianity, 'it is important to distinguish between different denominational positions (e.g. the Church of England adopts a different stance to the Roman Catholic Church, and even within the Anglican Communion different positions are held) (Joynes 2019:1). Joynes (2019:1) posits that 'in contrast to the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church still restricts the priesthood to men alone'. According to him (Joynes 2019):

[P]ope John Paul II's 1988 apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitate* acknowledged the growing need to address the role of women in the Roman Catholic Church, and concluded that women are equal to men, but different. He affirmed the important place of women with extensive reference to key roles played by female figures in the Old and New Testaments. Nevertheless, despite such positive affirmations, he concluded that in calling only men as his apostles, Christ acted in a completely free and sovereign manner. In doing so, he exercised the same freedom with which, in all his behaviour, he emphasized the dignity and the vocation of women, without conforming to the prevailing customs and to the traditions sanctioned by the legislation of the time. The Pope went on to affirm the position of the declaration *Inter Insigniores* with regard to the admission of women to the priesthood, asserting that in the sacramental ministry of the Eucharist 'the priest acts "in persona Christi" and it must therefore be performed by a man' (*Mulieris Dignitate* 1988:26). Notwithstanding this position, there remain a significant group who continue to campaign for women priests in the Catholic Church. (p. 1)

In a study carried out by Okoli (2007), there is an indication that the priesthood is controlled by men, and there is a greater proportion of males as priests as against women in the Orthodox Churches. In the traditional setting also, there is evidence that females play some roles as priestesses and prophetess, but not in the same capacity as males. For instance, when it comes to performance of certain rites and rituals men have the upper hand. This could be seen when prayers are offered and kola nuts (*Cola acuminata*) broken, or during the pouring of libation to ancestors. For Muslims it is unheard of that women should take the duties of an Imam. Rather many of them are in Purdah. The Bible and Koran are given a masculine interpretation. Hence there are many religious practices that are discriminatory to women. With such exclusions, women's religious potentials are inadequately harnessed. If the 'relationship between religion and society is reciprocal, religious system in Nigeria are expected to advocate for women liberation' and freedom; for the 'the women' to contribute their quota in the developmental process of Nigeria (Sibani 2017).

Recommendations

The following suggestions will serve as part of the roles of Christianity in gender issues in Nigeria.

More dedicated efforts

The Church needs to openly tell the truth about women's oppression and violence, without fear of, or compromising their voice. The Church's zero tolerance and criticism of it can serve as a resource for victims and abusers. Possibly, the Church should develop theologically based material that emphasises gender equality at all levels of Church administration. Moreover, the Church must be seen to be seriously against gender domination by penalising its members who indulge in it.

Diversity

Men and women have different viewpoints, ideas and life insights, which enables them for a better communal living and problem solving. Hence, if the Church promotes

gender diversity, it will not only help in higher church's structural organisation, but also in her outreach to the world. There are things women will always do better than men and vice versa, thus, necessitating complementarities. In the Church, every human person whether a man or a woman should be seen as an instrument for the accomplishing of the divine Will. This is the essence of human creation and redemption.

The Church as an agent of positive change

The Church has always been known to be in a key position, having an influential voice to transform attitudes within communities as in the case against slavery and apartheid. The Church is everywhere and respected everywhere, thus can be a veritable agent of positive change. As Onwunta (2009) pointed out:

[T]he kingdom of God is about justice and the Church cannot effectively talk about justice when the women in the Church are treated unjustly. The Church should indeed be an agent of change.... By so doing the Church can nurture a community of faith that can give hope to the hopeless. This community of faith is one that will not only sympathise with the poor but also empathise and work in solidarity with them. (pp. 120–121)

Gender domination should be seen by the Church as crime against humanity. It is an injustice that contradicts all that the Church stands for and preaches. It must not be consigned to theological nuances but, practically, everyone in the Church must be involved.

New creation in Christ

One of the chief Christian beliefs is that Christ's incarnation has changed the world order. With his presence in the world, a new world order has started which Paul summarised in his letter to the Galatians 3:28: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus'. This new creation established in the person and mission of Christ should be made the primary duty of the Church. It should be indicative of the presence of Christ in any given Christian assembly or community. With Christ there are no exceptions, and no inequalities. All people of God 'alike, no matter their race, status, or sex, stand on the same footing of children before God. There is a unity, or solidarity' (Ellicott 2004:1). If this new agenda is adhered to, surely, Christ's wish that God's kingdom come on earth will be easily realised and witnessed by all.

Articulate planning and trained personnel

The Church must have a comprehensive programme that successive Church leaders must follow in order to realise the objective of zero tolerance to gender domination. If this noble agenda is left to individual leaders it will be difficult to accomplish. It must be seen as the project of the Church for all times, and for all people. This will in turn require that the Church train personnel, especially

future Church leaders, who will dedicate their entire time and life to this mission in the world.

Investment in human resources development

Government should make efforts to address women's political inclinations full representation in Nigeria. This could be done by enacting national legislation that will facilitate women's access to elective and appointive, policy-making positions. 'Among other things, educating women, mentoring them, expanding their networks and providing them with financial assistance' will be of immense help for their political pursuits (Enekwizu 2019:1). NGOs and CBOs should play crucial roles to increase women's political awareness, sensitisation and participation. Empowerment of women politically will enable them to see the enactment and enforcement of laws that will eliminate all harmful traditional practices meted out on them. They will also be in a position to see that there is an increased advocacy for women's rights.

Conclusion

This article has discussed Christian church, gender issues and development in Nigeria. It considers the causes and effects of gender domination in the developmental process of Nigeria as an issue that the Church needs to pay particular attention to and eradicate, because it goes contrary to the person of Christ, his mission and the Church that evolved from his teachings, death and resurrection. The existence of gender domination in the society and even in the Church is a big indictment to the Church and all that it stands for. However, it recognises the efforts the Church is making to eradicate such practices in its folds. This article maintains that it is still not enough, and that more should be done. It highlighted the hindrances to the Church's effort to tackle this anomaly. Based on this, this article insists that gender domination should be enshrined in the life and constitution of the Church as one of its priorities. Every member of the Church should be empowered to fight it. In this way, the Church would be coherent in preaching and practice.

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Authors' contributions

A.B.O. and L.O. contributed equally to the writing of this research article.

Ethical considerations

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