

Re-Ordering Women Participation in Christian Leadership as a Panacea to the Struggle for Gender Equality in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper explores the gender struggle issue related to women participation in Christian leadership. It considers the struggle of inequality from different perspectives even from the religious perspective. No doubt some Bible passages have also been misconstrued and used in support for gender inequality. However, the paper argues that some of the Bible passages used for the support of such are used out of context and there is need for proper interpretation being conscious of the different genders. This study employed descriptive survey method. And the Theoretical framework considered is the Liberal Feminism Theory, which concept is to create a just society, the protection of freedom and liberty, the creation of a classless society and the creation of a Gender-neutral society respectively. The paper finally calls on the Church to reorder for women participation in the Church because God the Creator has not restricted any gender. To effectively do this the Church need to reinterpret scriptures appropriately, make it more emphatic in women involvement, organize enlightenment programme in form of seminars and collaborate with the government to enhance equal participation. The Church taking such step will no doubt reduce the age long struggle of Gender inequality.

Keywords: Re-ordering, Christian Leadership, Gender Equality and Panacea.

Introduction

Gender issues in recent times have been on the front burner for discussion. It is an issue that has permeated all facets of human life. The socio-cultural, political and even the religious institutions are affected since the related issues also affect the religious domain. It borders on how people of different gender see themselves, act and relate with each other in a given situation. The gender issues create tensions and unhealthy rivalry even in different Christian denominations. The major challenge is the fact that the female gender seem to agitate on unequal opportunities in the leadership of the Church. It has affected relationships and activities of some Churches. The female gender for centuries have felt marginalized, dominated, oppressed and suppressed by the male gender even when the women constitutes the highest number in our Churches. No doubt, many scholars like Bako and Syed (2018:425) have alluded to the fact that marginalization of women is a worldwide phenomenon that has affected the economic development, social and political space, the religious space is not let out as well.

The Issue is not that women are denied participation, but that there is still an obvious gap in the opportunities between the male and female folk. It is against this backdrop that this paper is calling for a re-ordering for women participation in Christian leadership. Besides, it is pertinent to note that the call for re-ordering is not just for an increased participation of women, but that the kind of pressure for equality that will be fronted by Christian women will be with a great sense of responsibility and caution which in turn will send a positive signal to other female advocates. The reality is that no gender is superior to the other because all are created by God with different gifts and talents that can benefit humanity. The advocacy is the need for reconsideration of the Church of the related issues and be at the front line, a major voice in handling the issues.

There is need to acknowledge the fact that women are been encouraged and empowered in the area of leadership in various sphere of life, yet more needs to be done especially leadership among the different

denominations who in principle are custodians of biblical teachings of freedom and equality among believers. Considering some biblical teachings especially among the Baptist denomination like the Priesthood of all believers which indicates that all Christians irrespective of gender, class or race are equal ministers of the gospel with equal access to God and intercession for all humanity, it places the church in a position to reject subordination of women. Again, the doctrine of Soul Competency which is an expression used to indicate that all believers are capable of hearing God; making personal meaning of what God is saying to them in His chosen vehicle of revelation, especially the Bible (Okeyi, 2019). This implies that both men and women can hear from God and understand His commands as revealed in His word. And so, one can clearly say that the Church today do not have any biblical or doctrinal grounds supporting gender discrimination or subordination of women at any level of their church ministry or leadership roles. Although, women are given the opportunity to participate in church life including its leadership roles, as it recognizes the call of God upon their lives, are been ordained as ministers of the gospel to perform the two ordinances of Baptizing believers and conduct of the Lord's Supper and also to perform order ceremonial activities like joining couples in wedding and performing the interment in burial. Women also have the opportunity to rise to professorship in Theological institutions and are allowed to serve in any capacity within the Association, Conference and the Nigerian Baptist Convention. However, this according to (Ayokunle, 2014) is more in principle than it is a matter of practice.

In practice, women are absent from the apex power structures in many denomination. For instance, some denominations still frown at the theological training of women whose divine calls are not in doubt. Where they are not able to dissuade them from being trained, they discourage the engagement of such female ministers as substantive pastors of the churches. In the Baptist denomination for example some churches who dare to call them, call them as children ministers or education ministers or associates even when that may not be their area of calling. And some who call them as substantive pastors, it is in most cases smaller churches that cannot pay them, so they end up doing volunteering ministry, but even at that their testimonies has always been discouraging as some men would not submit to their leadership and will be so bent to create problems that will cause such ministers to leave the church.

Conceptual Framework.

The truth remains that words can mean different things in different situations. It is therefore important to give meanings to some of the words that appear prominent in this paper. These are;

Re-ordering: Re-ordering generally means to re-arrange in a different way. But from the Church's angle, it can be referred to the arrangement and adaption of churches to accommodate changes in religious practice. The idea here is that the Church has made great effort considering what was prevalent before in the area of women involvement in the Church, but there are still obvious limits and boundaries in most Churches. There is therefore the need to reinforce the demand for such involvement. In some instances, the Church may not have any written document to show of her permission in some areas of women involvement. There is no doubt of the validity of oral tradition, but it has become necessary that the Church should go beyond oral tradition to document and give fresh and clear instructions in the gender issues.

Christian Leadership: Leadership is one word that can be defined from different perspectives. According to Yuhl (1994), leadership is "influencing processes affecting the interpretation of events for followers, the choice of objective for the group or organization, the organization to work activities to accomplish the objectives, the maintenance of cooperative relationships and team work, and the enlistment of support and cooperation from people outside the group or organization" (p. 15). Ogonbode (2008) defines leadership as "the act of motivating a group to act or do something toward achieving a common purpose" (p. 57). The definitions presented attempts to reveal the various aspects involved in leadership, but we need to consider it from the Christian perspective. Baumgatner (2023) defines Christian Leadership as a dynamic relational process in which people under the influence of the Holy Spirit, partner to achieve a common goal. It is serving others by leading and leading others by serving

Gender Inequality

Uchem (2005) alluded in a Seminar held at Ahmadu Bello University Zaria in 1982 where distinction was made between sex and gender. According to her, sex refers to biological, physical characteristics of male and female. Gender, on the other hand is the socially defined capacity and attributes assigned to persons on the basis of their alleged sexual characteristic of male and female. Gender is a social and not a biological category. No doubt sex roles are determined by nature or divine plan, and are so perfectly arranged that the problem of inequality would not arise. There is the inherent mutuality or interdependence between the male and female biology. Just as the male and female biological categories play equal but dissimilar roles for the survival of the human species. Jebb (2023) defines Gender Inequality as discrimination on the basis of sex or gender causing one sex or gender to be routinely privileged or prioritized over another. It differentiates between genders in terms of status, power, wealth, health and employment. When these differences are avoided and unfair, it is also known as gender inequity.

Panacea: The word panacea traces its roots to Greek: Panakēs, meaning “all healing,” from pan, meaning “all”, and akos, meaning “remedy.” The Latin designation Panacea or Panaces was in past centuries awarded to various plants, among them the herb today known as *Prunella Vulgaris*, whose common name is self-heal. In current use, Panacea is most often used to decry a remedy that falls far short of what some claim it can do. In this context, panacea is used as a decry for the re-ordering of women’s participation in Christian Leadership.

Gender Inequality in Nigeria

Gender inequality has for many years manifested in the form of gender domination, oppression and suppression of the women folk. But the advocates in recent times for reconsideration have been echoed not only in other spheres but in the religious space as well. The reality that no gender is superior to the other because all are gifted differently and of various talents that can benefit each other is the opportunity provided, and Christianity which is of the foundation of right, justice, fairness and equity deserve to be at the forefront in providing answers to the gender issues. It is necessary to look at some of the perspectives of gender inequality.

Biological Perspective: Some scholars have often used the biological situation as one aspect of gender discrimination that has led to the many injustices suffered by women. In Nigerian society, men are regarded as superior to women, and women inferior to men. Such a conviction may arise out of years of socialization, as a result of which men have come to regard themselves as superior in nature and essence to women, just because they happen to be biologically of the male sex, and women have come to regard and even accept themselves as inferior in nature and essence to men, just because they happen to be born biologically of the female sex. In the words of Umoren (2005:5) “the accident of sexual difference becomes a measure for determining the level of one’s superiority or inferiority as a person and there is little or no attention paid to the fact that juxtaposed by themselves, the male and female sexual organs do not betray any sign of superiority or inferiority since they are both naturally endowed with mutually exclusive but complementary functions”. It is rather proper to see it from the angle that the sexual differences is, a sign that points to the mutual partnership between the man and woman at an equal level, since both equally need each other, and so they came together as equal partners. Thus, discrimination, exploitation, oppression or injustice meted out against women on the basis of biological or sexual differentiation is without any justification, and is ungodly.

Socio-Cultural Perspective:

Gender roles, which are socially and culturally determined, influence the different behaviour, roles, responsibilities and expectations of men and women. They influence to resources and information, as well as the power to make decisions, both individually and within communities (MacPherson, 2012:2). In Nigerian socio-cultural settings, the male child is given greater preference over the female child, and in general, much more is done for the upbringing and welfare of the male child in contrast to the female. Even within the family setting, women and girls are generally expected to conform to the certain defined

traditional routine roles of cooking, fetching water, cleaning, washing and other menial jobs. Some societies still specify certain crops that are to be cultivated by women and those crops that are to be cultivated by men.

It is perhaps on this same basis of inequality principle that some cultures deny women the right to own, keep or inherit money and property, especially fixed property; the right to participate in decision making and leadership; the right to attain certain educational heights, the right to freedom of expression, and the right to choose one's life partner. In denying women these God-given rights, the excuse usually is; "you are a woman..." or "as a woman..." And in other to enforce inequality, some societies and families invent cultural directives, practices, taboos, mores and myths overtly or covertly targeted at women. The effects of gender inequalities has taken such deep roots in a lot of Nigerian societies that in some family circumstances, women are forced automatically by both men and women to bear the blame for many problems and failures even before the facts are known. Thus, despite medical evidence to the contrary, hardly would society blame a male partner for childlessness or having only a female child. A one-sided apportionment of blames can only arise in a situation where partners do not see themselves, or not seen by others as equals, and so the "superior" of the two is always and automatically right, while the "inferior" is wrong. Such societal prejudice has done more harm than good.

The opinion of some early philosophers about the equality of men and women has continued to be an influence in some later thinkers. One would have thought that such thinkers would have been critical and more objective in their thought knowing how resounding it will be to others, most of them also presented a truncated perspective of men and women. Plato ascribed to women the second best-state. Aristotle sees the nature of men and women to be totally different requiring therefore different functions. To him women differ fundamentally from men in their physiological characteristics and social competence. Based on the human soul, he believes that women, like men are capable of virtues and understanding but these are not of the same quality and strength in both. He further notes that the temperament of a woman and that of a man are not the same, nor their courage and justice, as Socrates thought, but that one is the courage of command and the other that of subordination, and the case is similar with the other virtues. He definitely leaves no doubt as to the subordinate nature of female to male. As between the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, and male ruler and female subject. And the same must also necessarily apply in the case of mankind generally (Udebunu, 2013:451).

Legal Perspective: The legal system in Nigeria also promotes inequality. Despite the presence of many female lawyers, magistrates and judges and legislators, there are complaints of the inadequate insensitive nature of the legal system to crimes committed against women. These issues which involve inheritance, land acquisition, widowhood practice, affirmative action and state citizenship are not adequately tackled in it. When such issues are brought to court, they are in most cases not properly addressed. The issue of court bail for example is one that is so glaring. Though in few instances, women are allowed to bail, the predominant practice is that women cannot bail those in need of bail. A wife cannot just bail her detained husband even though she is his next of kin. Such laws no doubt also breeds injustice and discrimination, oppression and untold sufferings to the female gender.

Religious Perspective: In most religious organizations, the adherents in one way or the other betray the human idea of equality of men and women. Some of the practices of the gender inequality are a reflections of prevalent sociocultural realities and has nothing to do with the divine. In the Christian faith for example, despite the good news of liberation, peace, justice, and love preached by Jesus, there are still observed human imperfections that does not allow the reality of God's intention to be seen in the lives of Christians. Towing the patriarchal line, many Christians transport such ideas and institute them in the Church that breeds oppression and discrimination. The issue of how the Bible presents men and women in terms of their roles in the Christian community need to be clearly understood. Christians who belief in, preach and practice gender inequality usually look to the scriptures for confirmation of their belief, teaching and practice. Many are also unaware of the Christian teaching that while it is the word of God and written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Sacred Scripture is communicated in

human fashion, using human language, experience and literal forms (Umoren,2005:13). Therefore, the interpretation of sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words (Flannery:1981). Because of poor understanding and interpretation of the scriptures, many Christians have “successfully” found passages of scriptures which suit their already socio-cultural conditioned minds that men and women are not equal.

Patriarchal Structure: The long patriarchal structure has been a long standing order in Nigeria. Almost in every institution even when the women are majority, it is obvious. The difference is that it was handed down by our forefathers and has remained an heritage to maintain. This is true in Christianity as well; after all it is easily rationalized as God’s plan with the support of the claims in some Bible verses. Some have argued that this structure is as old as creation making reference to the creation of Adam and Eve and that man was asked to have dominion over all other things (Genesis 1:27).

It has also been argued that the Bible has clearly demonstrated this in the sense that it was written by men, for men and about men. In the view of Dorr (1991), women in the Bible have always been presented as playing subordinate roles that mainly serve to develop and support the programmes of men. Besides, that women and children are not usually counted in scriptures. Also, God has always been addressed as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with no reference to their wives. This patriarchal disposition has made women not to have a voice. The Church cannot claim that it is free from the challenges of the gender issues. The Church, no doubt, is a divine institution, but it is human that form and operate this divine institution and must therefore also address the related challenges. Again, patriarchal domination has profound effect on the development of the economy and society. It results in the destruction, distortion or neglect of the female potential of our country, with devastating consequences for social and economic development. According to Nkondo (2000:298-299), this is evident in the career paths offered to women and the effect this has on women motivation even in serious involvement in economic matters. The social system founded on domination, and the control required to sustain it, has generated needs, satisfactions, and values which produce the servitude of women.

Quest for Power and Privileges: It is usually claimed that gender roles are assigned to persons according to the dictates of their own sex. Uchem (2005: 32) observe that this reflects in the fact that the male folk usually assign less strenuous roles to women to suit their imagined weak physiology and physical disadvantage. This pretentious claim gives the impression that women are restricted to role stereotypes out of goodwill. This does not represent the reality of the situation. This assignment of gender roles is thus designed to favour men. The underlining fact is that it is not the biological consideration but the quest for power and the desire for undue privileges that dictates the classification of roles. The will for power and the desire for privileges therefore lays at the root of all partiality and manipulations associated with gender inequality.

Women Subordination and Marginalization: Women’s subordination which refers to cultural claims and customs maintains that men are primary and pre-eminent, and that women are secondary, subordinate and under men. It is a belief, which excludes women from public leadership of family, Church and society, most especially, from decision-making and from officiating at cult/ritual and political leadership position. Subordination is distinguished from marginalization in that the latter is an offshoot of the former. Women therefore in marginalization are relegated to the periphery and margins of society economically, socially and politically as a result of subordination of men. The Women’s Conference held at Beijing corroborated this fact when idea was declared that “there is no nation under heaven, where women are not subordinated, that the status of women has advanced but that inequalities and obstacles remain” (Beijing Declaration, 1995, paragraph 4).

Objections of Women in Leadership on Biblical Grounds

The question of women being subordinate to men and so cannot hold leadership position has been justified by some people using some biblical texts. The question is, by close observation, does such passages clearly show the intentions or different from the popular usage of them. Also how does the Bible present men and women in terms of their roles in the Christian community. The best place to

begin is from the creation account. The first account of creation tells us that God created humans as male and female (Gen.1:26-27). Both were created at the same time, in the image of God and given dominion over other creatures. The second account (Gen.2) continues the same thought of equal worth and value of both the male and female but adds the element of complementation. The male and female were created to be companions or partners (Gen.2:18). Some consider the second creation account as putting in place a principle of male priority or superiority over the female (Kaiser,1996:667). This does not seem to be a correct interpretation. It seems that the two accounts of creation presents a picture of man and woman in two different aspects of their relationship. The first presents man and woman as human beings and in their equal humanity. The second, on the other hand, paints the same picture of equal humanity but in the context of a marriage relationship, and even here the principle of superiority is not tenable.

The description of women in the second account, that is suitable helper, does not connote inferiority. Kaiser (1996:667) notes that there is no sense in which this word connotes a position of inferiority or subordinate status. It is needful to note that the relationship between man and woman deviated from the obvious divine pattern of partnership because of sin. This pattern of domination and competition manifested not only in male-female relationships but between men and men, women and women. These are by products of the fall to the extent that they deviate from the divine ideals of partnership and complementarity. Furthermore, Hauke (1988:346) also maintained that the Jewish tradition did not have a high opinion of women. The prayer in which the Israelite man is encouraged to praise God daily that he was not created woman is an indication of the poor view of women.

Theory of Feminism

Feminism as a movement was started by women to eradicate all forms of feminist oppression by men that are prevailing in a patriarchal society. It is considered as a politics to achieve gender equality in all spheres of the society. As an ideology that demands an equal right of men and women in terms of politics, decision making, and career as well as social, cultural and religious domains. According to Ferree (2006), feminism is characterized by the activism for the purpose of challenging and changing women's subordination to men. Feminist believe in the social, political, economic and even religious equality of the sexes. Bryson (2007) notes that most feminist categories advocate for the elimination of misconceptions, sexual inequalities, restrictions and oppression faced by women.

Feminist thinking has been associated with various dominant political theories at different stages. The categorization of feminism usually also followed the differences in the ideological positions of its major proponents and the issues prioritized by them. This then gave birth to the different theories such as the Liberal, Marxist, Social, Radical, and Ecofeminism. However, the liberal theory is adopted in this work being that it is broader in perspective. Liberalism is a political and economic principle that stresses individual, independence, equality of opportunity, and the protection of individual rights. It supports rule of law, civil and human rights, secularism, democracy, freedom of speech, press, religion and property. Still, Giddens (2001) notes that it is a theory that believes gender inequality is created by lowering access for women and girls to civil rights and allocation of social resources such as education and in respect to this work, religious. Liberalism originates from the liberal political theory, and is motivated by the French Revolution, and focuses mainly on equality. It is a product of the liberal political philosophy with the ideas of autonomy, universal rights, equal citizenship and democracy.

Liberal feminism first emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries in the Western countries to educate women with liberal ideas and later expanded to the rest of the world. It has risen as a theoretical background to nurture the feminist movement. It is inclusive and socially progressive. The proponents as noted by Herouach (2019) were Mary Wollstonecraft (1759- 1858), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), and Harriet Taylor Mill (1807-1887) who acts for woman rights and liberation, when the economic and social positions of European women was very low. The feminism's basic slogan is creation of a just society, the protection of freedom and liberty, the creation of a classless society and the creation of a gender – neutral society respectively.

Re-ordering Women Involvement in Leadership as a Panacea for Inequality

Our understanding of the need to accommodate both men and women in Church leadership has been stretched. The question is then what can the Church do in a way to reorder the women involvement in leadership. Some of the things the Church can do are;

i. Inclusive Interpretation of Biblical Passages: Increased knowledge in the biblical language has helped in the better interpretation of scripture passages. Today, the inclusive language and pattern of interpretation is adopted by many preachers. The skillful and sensitive handling of the gender dominant passages has been profitable. The idea that the passages that request submission of women to men like Ephesians 5:23; 1 Timothy 2:11-14 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 does not mean the suppression of women or intimidation. The balanced interpretation of these intended for the unity of the couples makes a better meaning. God loves every one as all must be given opportunity to demonstrate their gifts and talents. We are to search the Scriptures for the liberating word of God, which lies embedded in the human, cultural and time-bound elements in the scriptures. There is need to interpret the scripture passages in a manner that takes account of the insights from modern science and biblical archaeology, which reveal the world behind the Bible. There should also be the use up-to-date biblical scholarship, coupled with the principles of the of women involvement (Uchem,2002:60).

ii. Pre-marital Counselling: Okoli (2020) has identified most Nigerian Churches to have highlighted Gender problems from their pre-marital counseling. In the process, red-light issues like human sexuality, barrenness, no male issue syndrome, equality of the couple, participation in family decision making, working parents and physical beating of women have been highlighted for intending couples to be conscious.

iii. Symposium and Enlightenment Programme: Many Christian denominations today create opportunities to engage both men and women in discussions in related matters with the intention of enlightenment. These programmes clearly present the rights of women to their bodies, self-defense against sexual and physical violence, and education of girl child, handling sexual transmitted and other diseases.

iv. Pastoral Preaching and Teaching: Preachers and teachers of God's word are sensitive today in their presentations. Right from the point of training of the ministers in the seminary or Colleges of Training, curriculums are designed to accommodate such sensitive issues. Different Christian denominations now take time to teach couples against abuse and all forms tendencies that suppresses the woman. They have made statements and some restrictions that is reducing such tendencies and teaching inclusive and not exclusive messages.

v. Collaboration with Governmental and Non-Governmental Agencies: Beyond the inclusive seminars by our clergy, the Church today collaborates very well with governmental and non-governmental agencies to promote individual rights, provide justice to the sexually abused and assistance to people without shelter. Training opportunities are provided for entrepreneurship in such cases.

vi. Need for policy and Regulations: The Church sometimes adopt principles that are not written down. These oral principles, as good as they may be, are quite easy to deny or find a way out of it when there are problems. There is therefore the need to have policies that are documented that others can refer to and shall be a guide for all. The awareness and effort geared toward raising the status of women should be increased (Osigwe, 2001:116). In other words, the church should use all available openings to promote the re-ordering of women participation in Christian leadership for the benefit of all.

Conclusion

This paper has examined some of the gender issues that have been a long worrisome issue with socio-cultural, political and religious implications. It is shown that there is no justifiable ground for limiting the participation of any section of the Church on the basis of gender. In the Church, both men and women are needed to complement each other, and this makes both domination and competition impossible in the Church. Domination describes what male chauvinism does. Competition describes what the liberal feminism does. Complementarity also frowns at the mentality of exclusivism. Therefore, for any Christian to insist on gender inequality as God's decree is only a sign of human hardening of heart.

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