

Patriarchal Marriage in Nigeria and the Feminist Struggle for True Liberation of Women: The Role of the Church

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Abstract

This work, *Patriarchal Marriage in Nigeria and the Feminist Struggle for True Liberation of Women: the Role of the Church* discusses the root causes of women's marginalization especially in the Nigerian society. The patriarchal structure of marital relationship is one of unequal power relationship which privileges male domination. This makes the recognition of full humanity of woman on equal footing with men difficult, resulting to maltreatment of women and other forms of abuses. This dehumanizes the women folk and infringes on their human dignity. The feminist struggle in the right sense, is to restore the dignity of womanhood by giving them their right of self-determination. Data were collected using primary and secondary sources, the descriptive-sociological and philosophico-theological methods were employed for data analysis and interpretation. The findings reveal that patriarchy is the basis of asymmetrical relationship between men and women and gives a relational map for continuous subservience of women. This finds justification in certain cultural beliefs and practices of the people as well as some scriptural interpretation and theological stand points. The church has a role play in this struggle as scriptural and theological interpretations which support the dignity of women and recognition of women as sharing in the same humanity with men are obvious too. This work will help the people especially policy makers and religious leaders to tackle the issue. It contributes to the body of knowledge by bringing the aspect wherein the church can help in the dethronement of the ideological foundations that support patriarchy.

Introduction

The mission of Jesus Christ is to bring holistic liberation (body and soul) to humanity both male and female. But certain cultural and religious practices which emanated from the patriarchal domination in some traditional societies have not allowed women to experience this freedom as they have been subjugated for a very long time. The feminist's voices are being raised concerning the situation of women in Nigeria, concerning violence of various kinds which are being meted against them. All that the women are seeking for in feminism is 'freedom from' and 'freedom to'. That is, freedom from barriers that impose limitation upon them and freedom to act in self-determination. Patriarchal marriage militates against this freedom. But the practice of unjust treatment of women cannot stop unless the underlying structures that support it is demolished and overturned. The greatest of these is the change in the ideology and mentality that supports it. If the church should be at the fore front of this struggle for true liberation of women, certain theologies of the church which have supported keeping women in a state of subservience need to be re-interpreted or changed; as there are certain theological stances and biblical presentation and interpretations which the males and even females themselves rely on as foundation for maintaining the status quo in the religious circle. Therefore this work, explains the operations of patriarchy in Nigerian society and how it affects women especially in marriage. The ideological backing which the people appeal for continual domination of women will be looked into in its cultural and religious forms. The feminist struggle for the true emancipation of women is also examined. Finally, the role which the church has in the entire struggle especially in line with its place as an institution which furthers the mission of Christ on earth will be dealt with. The work concludes by making a recapitulation of the key elements in the entire work.

The Nature of Patriarchy in Nigeria

The simplest way to define patriarchy is the "systematic organization of the male supremacy and female subordination."¹ Stories are usually told from the perspective of those who tell them. In making the narrative, the narrators of the stories place themselves at the center and judge every other persons from

¹ Makama Godiya Allanana, "Patriarchy and Gender Inequality in Nigeria: The way forward" *European Scientific Journal*, Vol. 9 no. 17 (2013), 117.

their own prism and as always the case, people will not measure up to them as standards. This is the situation of women in many traditional societies especially in Nigeria. The stories are always told by men and from the perspective of maleness.

The president of Nigeria Muhammad Buhari said publicly on an interview in Germany while standing by the side of a female German chancellor Angela Merkel and answering questions from journalists that his wife has no place in politics that she belongs to his 'kitchen' and his living room and the 'other room'.² The interpretation of this is that women exist for men in order to cook for them and to satisfy their sexual desire. This view of the president can be taken as the representative of the way women are viewed and related with in the Nigerian society. It portends a tradition that does not recognize the full humanity of women and their equality with men. Another member of the Nigerian parliament, Gudaji Kazuare expressed the same view that women should not be given equal opportunity with men because they will overthrow men due of their number during the house debate on how to bring equity to play in the nation's political system by giving opportunities to women to vie for political offices and have political appointments.³

The understanding and worldview of these two representatives just described above can be explained to have arisen from certain points; (1) They are influenced by cultural and religious view and treatment of women (both are Muslims). (2) They live in a patriarchal society which has existed so long and upon which they were raised. (3) They have the privilege of political position which excludes non-privileged others and ensures securing of power by all means. (4) They are coming from a society which neither regards the less privileged nor have plans for the betterment of their life.

The Muslims are alone in this type of mentality about the women. The same can be said even of Christians as the place of women in the Christian church is very ambiguous; at one time supporting the dignity of women but in some other engages in certain practices that exclude and demean them. This practice calls for proper examination as we want to undertake in this work. In the northern part of Nigeria that is predominantly Muslim, the penal code encourages domestic violence. It condones the infliction of minor injury on women by their husbands provided it was done as a result of correcting the women.⁴ In the south eastern part which is predominantly Christian, a woman is regarded as property of her husband and should be inherited by the family of the man if he dies before her.⁵ Women are even denied right of inheritance which is a lucid example of not regarding them as fully humans in the level men are regarded. These practices have engendered the abuse of women both physically and sexually especially as it creates inequality in marital relationship.

The patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society has subjugated women from the family level to the wider society. Its influence on them is so demeaning that any government that is serious with the improvement of the life of the Nigerian citizens must do something towards the betterment of the life of women as they remain the most vulnerable group in the country as at present. Makama Allanana captures the dehumanizing effect of the patriarchy in Nigeria thus:

“Women are therefore discriminated upon from, in most cases, acquiring formal education, mistreated and perpetually kept as house-help; the average Nigerian woman is seen as an available object for prostitution, forced marriage, street hawking, instrument of wide-range trafficking and a misfit in the society. Thus, the purported irrelevance associated with the status of women in society has merely reduced and average woman to an inferior commodity.”⁶

²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8NmSmZIVLs&https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/14/nigerias-president-says-wife-belongs-to-my-kitchen>

³<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/261374-video-shouldnt-give-women-much-opportunity-nigerian-lawmaker.html>

⁴ Makama Godiya Allanana, "Patriarchy and Gender Inequality in Nigeria: The way forward" *European Scientific Journal*, Vol. 9 no. 17 (2013), 126.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

Patriarchal society sets a structure which relates with men and women differently drawing differing relational map for each sex. Patriarchal culture relegates women to the background and ensures dominance of male which guarantees keeping men at home to inherit family property, and women married out (even in some cases sold out in certain cases). For this reason, men are “trained for leadership activities while women are confined to domestic activities, roles ascribed to them by culture which affect them later in life, thereby making them to lose self-confident/worth and have low self-esteem in their carrier in adult life.”⁷

Patriarchy circumscribes the educational opportunities of women as parents support the education of male children more than that of female children on the basis that training a female in school would be doing that for the family she would enter for marriage. Not only that, their education is seen as not being profitable since they will end up in kitchen and domestic work in their husbands’ houses. In this sense, marriage to a man is what the society sets as what defines and directs the destiny of females in the society. Women are only considers in terms of motherhood and nothing more.⁸ A woman without a husband is seen as a failure and a social misfit as such; young ladies do whatever is within their powers to hook up with a man in order to get fulfillment in life. This scenario makes it possible for men to mete all kinds of dehumanizing treatment on women without even much resistance from the women since not staying in a man’s house after marriage is considered a misnomer.

In Nigeria there still exists a gender stereotypical vision in some sectors of national life. For example, technical disciplines are still taken to belong to the male folk as it requires high thinking and abstraction which men’s nature are suited for, unlike women who are required to do other things which may not need high speculation and abstraction, which for the proponents are akin to their own nature. This essentialist⁹ understanding of gender role has continued to reinforce the notion that men are rational and women emotional or bodily and has refused to ask pertinent questions on the role of socialization in the gender roles. The resultant effect of women exclusion from some spheres of national life has continued to influence their marginalization in politics and economy. Although women in Nigeria constitute the half of the population and ipso facto, the highest population of voters, they are not given much opportunity to vie for political offices as they have been nurtured to think that politics belongs to men who will always be at the leadership position to rule the women. This also necessitates discrimination in the type of work and salary women receive at their places of work. They may even be paid less for the same work done with men on the basis that men shoulder the financial responsibility of their families. Women themselves also have continued to make themselves financially dependent on men, and this forms their major consideration in choosing a husband. Nigerian women have so much imbibed this dependence on which they are socialized that they move for wealthy men whom they think can take care of their financial needs. In some cases, families also force their daughters to marry certain wealthy men against their wish because of the financial benefits that may accrue from such union.

Ideological Foundation for Women Domination

Whenever the way women are viewed and treated in Nigeria is challenged, the explanations for justification that are given come from appeal to the tradition of the people which they have practiced from time immemorial, from the biblical account of creation and presentation of women in Christian theological tradition, and from the biological observable differences between men and women. As I said earlier, people tell stories from the angle of maleness. This has been the situation even within the theological tradition of the church. The church inherited a patriarchal tradition and has continued to struggle with it for a very long time in which the female sex has been disenfranchised.

The genesis account of creating women from the rib of men as a helpmate of the man is interpreted normally in Christian tradition as showing that a woman is from a man and must be under him in their marital home, offering services that he needs. Some scholars are of the opinion that the passage should not be interpreted as subordination but in terms of complementarity in which both are equal sharing in

⁷ Ibid., 116.

⁸ Pope John Paul II in his theology of the body also conceives the dignity of women in terms of motherhood.

⁹ Essentialism is the conception that the observable differences among the sexes have an ontological foundation.

the same humanity. But in the presentation of complementarity, the differences between the two sexes are so much emphasized that it even creates more rooms for the patriarchal agenda.

Dreyer talks about how Christianity has contributed to the subordination of women through its theological views and stands thus:

“Christianity has contributed to the restriction of women rather than helping them to develop. Women are taught to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others and, in doing so, they disappear into the background. In male-dominated societies women are socialized to accept negative images attributed to them by others (weak, passive, submissive or evil and wild – virgin or slut) and internalize this in the form of a negative self-perception which detracts from the possibility of having a meaningful life.”¹⁰

In the quote above, the church assigns and projects certain virtues as specifically concerned with the female sex while not so much demanding them from the male sex even when it is a value that should be associated with every human being. In this, one can see the church taking an essentialist view stand on the difference between male and female. The essentialist view arising from pushing to an ontological level the biological differences of male and female which sees them as having differing natures does not give women opportunity for personal development and maximization of their potentials. It sees women as not only being different from men but also being of inferior nature to them. But this view of radical difference in essence of the two sexes has been challenged by asserting the ontological equality of both, and as such women should be respected. According to Tina Beatle, the consideration of ontological dignity of women without also considering their teleological dignity is not holistic in its approach.¹¹ This is because the subjugation of women mostly deprives them of the freedom for actualization of their full potentials as humans.

The church seems to be talking only about ontological dignity whenever it defends the dignity of women as seen in John Paul II's *Dignitatis Mullieris*. Women should not be boxed into certain activities, they have the potentiality to develop and thrive in other sectors or areas of life. Their capacity and nature is not only defined by motherhood and caring, it goes beyond that. This is what Tina Beatle criticizes in her work. Therefore, in as much as their dignity in terms of ontology should be considered and respected, their teleological dignity which considers their right to self-determination and personal development is also very important. This teleological dignity does not condemn women to certain functions and duties but opens a wide range of avenues for their exploration alongside with their male counterparts.

Following from the essentialist view, in Nigeria, mostly bodily work or services are given as specifically women activities. It is widely held that it is essential to their nature. But a true understanding of this practice can be seen in what Annemie Dillen described as arising from the tension between body-soul dichotomies which is also a reality in the church's theology.¹² Women are held in the context as inferior to men and so are likened to the body which is inferior to the soul. And so, bodily activities like cooking, cleaning looking after the sick, serving etc. are taken mostly to be specifically a feminine duty and less honorable duty as such. Men don't do them because they are demeaning to them and do not match their dignity and social status.

Feminist struggle for Liberation of women in Nigeria

The feminist movement in Nigeria is seen fighting more on the side of emancipation from political subjugation than in religious sphere. Their reason is that if women have their place in the political scene where laws and policies are made, it will give them an opportunity to exercise power and so then can

¹⁰ Dreyer Y., “Women's spirituality and feminist theology: A hermeneutic of suspicion applied to “patriarchal marriage””, *HTS Theologese Studies/ Theological Studies*, vol. 67. no.3 (2011): 2.

¹¹ Tina Beatle, “Dignity, Difference and Rights: A Gendered Theological Analysis”, *Louvain Studies*, vol.40 (2017): 67, 68, 77.

¹² See Annemie, Dillen, “The Complex Relationship between Body and Mind as a Key for a Renewed Catholic Reflection on Diaconal Work.” In Wiener Forum fur Theologie und Religionswissenschaft, vol. 9, *Exploring the Boundaries of Bodiliness. Theological and Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Human Condition* (Göttingen: Vienna University Press, 2013).

begin to influence other areas through formulation of laws that are beneficial to and ensure women flourishing. The political platform will give then voice to speak in other areas of concern including religious ones. Their argument for making the move is that:

“women in Nigeria represent half of the population and hence should be allowed a fair share in decision-making and the governance of the country. Secondly, that all human beings are equal and women possess the same rights as men to participate in governance and public life. The right to democratic governance is an entitlement conferred upon all citizens by law.”¹³

Although in the recent times there is an increased participation of women in politics, still, there are hitches to women’s participation in politics but not only in politics, but also in other spheres of the national life, which is mainly religious and cultural ideologies as explained above. That is why any real handling of the issue must look at this issue of ideology that tends to subordinate women and treat them as second class humans and citizens especially in marriage relationship which is a microcosm of the societal relationship between the two sexes.

On the academic level especially among female theologians which mainly comprise of consecrated religious women in Nigeria, there is an emphasis laid on feminist theology. Their primary audience is the church as they seek to challenge and awaken the church to the reality of women’s maltreatment in the family, in the society and in the church; and for the church to look inward to know how to address the issue if it will still be an authentic voice of the voiceless in its mission and existence. One important fact which feminist theology raises is that theology is and should be contextual and as such women’s bodily experiences have to be taken seriously in theological enterprise. The feminist theology has brought to the fore and emphasized that there are various factors which influence and affect the life of people especially the women arising from the fact of human situatedness and bodylines; thereby calling for a critical examination of these conditioning features which have kept women in such state as seen in patriarchal marriage in Nigeria. Joyce Ann Mercer gives insight of the task of this feminist theology thus:

“Recognizing that persons are always situated in social, political, and cultural contexts, feminist practical theology moves beyond a focus solely on individual persons, to critical reflection on practices of communities and society- particularly those that distort or resist the freedom of women.”¹⁴

There is this misconception about feminist struggles which has caused its opposition in the Nigerian context. Many see it a movement that seeks to overthrow men and counteract everything maleness. The truth is that; it cannot be denied that it is a reaction against the order that relegate women to the background. But the struggle for women liberation by feminist movements should be viewed and understood from the point of view of dethroning unjust structure of all kinds in the human society. It is not just for liberation of women alone, it is for the freedom of all the marginalized in the human society aimed at flourishing of the humankind. It tries to give voice to the subjugated minority. This intersectionality in feminist theologies is a great advantage for the movement as injustice against one is an injustice against all.

The ambiguity in the fight for liberation of women in Nigeria from certain obnoxious practices which subjugate and dehumanize them like the patriarchal marriage is that women themselves seem to be the most ardent defenders of these practices. The most lucid explanation that has been given to this attitude is that from the principle of habituation.¹⁵ The women have been so long socialized in that environment of subjugation by men that they have imbibed the practice as right and fitting for them. So doing anything that will subvert their usual and known practices pitches the person against them as the person

¹³ Makama Godiya Allanana, “Patriarchy and Gender Inequality in Nigeria: The way forward” *European Scientific Journal*, Vol. 9 no. 17 (2013), 123.

¹⁴ Joyce Ann Mercer, “Feminist and Womanist Practical Theology” in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology*, ed. K. A. Cahalan & G. Mikoski (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 97.

¹⁵ The principle states that constant repetition of an action makes it to be ingrained in the performer in a way that it can be considered as the person’s second nature such that the action is performed with easy and even unconsciously.

is termed a rebel and destroyer of culture and tradition. They have accepted the place given to them by the patriarchal society. Certain *petit bourgeoisie* women who are gaining from the order but not much affected anymore because of their opportunity to have been enlightened through education are sometimes the persons who mount resistance to any wind of change for the amelioration of the situation.¹⁶ For example in certain parishes, women mainly are those who would refuse that women (including religious sisters) should help in the distribution of Holy Communion. Some others could accept sisters on the ground that they are virgins and not defiled by sexual activity since they have no husbands. So, for this set of people sexual relationship even for married people is defiling. Again some argue that they excrete menstrual blood which makes them unclean,¹⁷ substantiating their claim by quoting from the book of Leviticus. Some churches in Nigeria (like cherubim and seraphim) do not allow menstruating women into their church to avoid contamination of the house of God and others around. All these are as a result of indoctrination that has been going on for quite a long time now both in the church and cultural spaces.

But the problem I find with the present day feminist movements is that it does not speak in unison and have variegated and conflicting agendas. Some seem to be advocating for a licentious life style than seeking for a responsible freedom for women. It is not really focused in a specified fight and objective but includes a plethora of even divergent and contradictory view points and positions which makes the whole issue more complex and complicated. The over-reactionary disposition and tendency of some has made it to even oppose and attack sound and rational basis that advocates for the dignity of all humans. This situation makes the feminist struggle to be looked upon with suspicion by the church hierarchy in Nigeria as in many other places.

The Role of the church

The church has a great role to play in dealing with the issue of patriarchal marriage in Nigeria and its dehumanizing consequences. Any church that is serious with the message of redemption or salvation must be at the fore front for reclaiming the battered humanity of the Nigerian women. The Christian church as at the moment has great influence in the Nigerian society such that any change in the activities of the church brings corresponding consequences in the society.

The church's involvement which will have a multiplier effect and deal successfully with the issue is in the area of intellectual fight. If the church adjusts its theological position which gives backing to the domination and marginalization of women, it will help to change practices in the society, affecting even other areas as economy, social and political. Richard Quebedeaux suggests that the church should do away with fundamentalist and literalist interpretation of the scripture and emphasize the use of the contextual interpretation of the scripture which recognizes the historical and cultural realities surrounding the biblical texts. For him the facts identified by Osiek are good to consider:

“The Bible is part of human history and has been used as an instrument of power. The church should recognize this and eliminate the abuse. Biblical hermeneutics is not just an abstract academic enterprise; understanding the Bible should therefore happen in constant interaction with the experience of faith communities. Biblical texts originated within specific traditions and continue to function within specific traditions. Tradition determines how people understand their reality in light of a specific biblical text and, consequently, biblical texts are understood in light of the specific situation in which people find themselves. Contemporary hermeneutics should therefore focus equally on experience and theory.”¹⁸

¹⁶ See Makama Allanana, *art. cit.*

¹⁷ For a comprehensive treatment of this issue of women and blood see Anne-Marie Korte, “Female Blood Rituals: Cultural-Anthropological Findings and Feminist-Theological Reflections” in Kristin De Troyer et al eds. *Wholly Woman Holy Blood: A Feminist Critique of Purity and Impurity* (TPI).

¹⁸ *The Post American* (1972); in Richard Quebedeaux, *The Young Evangelicals* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1974), 114.

The church should follow the example of Jesus Christ who gave women place in his ministry and challenged the obnoxious tradition which limited women in his male chauvinist society. Quebedeaux captures Jesus' revolutionary actions thus:

"That Jesus considered women on an equal plane with men is clear, we are told, from the manner in which He taught women. Consider His visit to the home of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42): Martha took the typical woman's role: "Martha was distracted with much serving." Mary, however, took the supposedly "male" role: she "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching." Martha apparently thought Mary was out of place in choosing the role of the "intellectual," for she complained to Jesus. But Jesus' response was a refusal to force all women into the stereotype: he treated Mary first of all as a person...who was allowed to set her own priorities, and in this instance had "chosen the better part." And Jesus applauded her: "it is not to be taken from her."¹⁹

The church should give women voice to theologize about their own experiences and tell their own story and from their own angle. It should also help in educating the rest of the society just as Jesus did to Martha to move away from stereotype and to relate with women in equal footing with men as they are truly and fully human like them, needing to be treated with dignity and respect. The church should incorporate an inductive methodology which takes seriously the experiences of people in their life situation. In this sense, the marriage and sexual theology of the church which is highly deductive and so aloof from the real and actual experiences of women should be changed. The real experiences of people are embodied and it is only from this angle that their problem can be clearly understood and dealt with. Again the church as the sacrament of God on earth especially in the Nigerian context should show good example to the social, cultural and political spheres by eschewing segregation of women and starting involving them in the administration and organization of the church's affair to show that they are equal by the virtue of their baptism which the church preaches.

Conclusion

The Nigerian women are marginalized in the social, political and religious spheres occasioned by patriarchal marriage which is supported by cultural and certain religious ideologies. They are outside the domain of power which does not grant them access for their voices to be heard and their concerns to be considered. The struggle for liberation in Nigeria will not be so complete unless the experiences of women are taken into consideration. Overcoming dualism and dichotomized thinking will help to instill justice in our system in which everyone is valued and regarded and not given what is considered a low or demeaning place permanently. Feminist theology is in line with this as it is moving for a theology that will take the experiences of women in their various contexts seriously. The struggle may not be easy but with consistency and perseverance in pushing for a theological voice, the voices of women will be heard. This is why the church has a stake in the real and actual liberation of women in the Nigerian society from the negative clutches of patriarchy.

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