

Gender Role: A Challenge for Church Ministry in the Contemporary African Society

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Abstract

There are conflicting ideas on gender role in church ministry. So, why these conflicting views on gender role? A historical approach which surveys the subject matter from biblical perspectives through some important eras of church life to the contemporary times has been adopted. This research reveals that one of the major reasons for these conflicting positions of the church lies principally in the nature of biblical evidences. Thus the need to re-read and re-interpret the Bible, as much as possible in the light of the total teaching of the scripture.

Introduction

Gender is a contemporary universal issue regardless of class, culture, race or religious differences. Different people have varying emotions towards the use of the term ‘gender’. Biblical scholars are sharply divided over gender issue. For some, it evokes images of militant women who forcefully and emotionally want to become like men. For some, the term ‘gender’ calls up images of women who have lost direction and who want to destroy the God-given mandate to be submissive to their husband. The tension is heightened when issues regarding gender equality or gender equity are raised. Thus, gender discusses always degenerate into an argument and a contest.

These conflicting ideas, notwithstanding, gender issue is such that the church cannot run away from. Therefore, this work is focused on gender role in the ministry of the church – an issue that is constantly debated by Christians. A historical approach which surveys the subject matter from biblical perspectives through some important eras of church life to the contemporary times had been adopted. This is aimed at giving a fresh insight to the issue which will ultimately lead to a better appreciation.

BIBLICAL PERSCEPTION OF GENER ROLE

The religion of the Old Testament is a male-oriented, male-focused and obviously patriarchal. The position in patriarchy is that the man has the ultimate place and role in the society, which must not be compromised while the woman plays the submissive/supportive role without asserting her authority or importance. This is well illustrated in the fact that women were not often at the center of national life or given great consideration in the Old Testament. Commenting on Ruth 2:5: “Whose girl is that?” Trible recognizes that the patriarchal nature of ancient Israelite society has left its prints upon the scroll. The question thus presupposes that ‘a young woman must belong to someone; she is a possession, not a person’ (Trible, 1978:176). The implication is that the biblical Old Testament narratives about

women are told from men worldview as Phiri asserts: ‘we recognize that the Bible was written by inspired men within a patriarchal culture’ (Phiri, 1997:54). And through the years the Bible has been interpreted by male theologians who have tended to present women negatively and at the same time make them invisible.

Moreover, women do not have the same social rights and advantages as men. Property was inherited by sons rather than daughters (cf. Num. 27:1-11). They had little legal power (Num. 30:3-16). A woman does not have right to divorce her husband in the Old Testament, when on the contrary, a man was able to divorce his wife if she did not ‘please him’ (Deut. 24:1). If a woman has sex with a man, she automatically becomes a suspect, without consideration of a rape (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22).

Nevertheless, the Old Testament reveals that at creation, the woman shares the image of God with man. It is equally aware of or in fact appreciative of women who distinguished themselves in the male dominated community. These include: Jochebed (Moses’ mother), Deborah, Jael, Ruth, Esther, Abigail (1 Sam. 25) among others.

In the New Testament, the Lord Jesus during his earthly ministry did not call any woman apostle. This has been used to prove a divine order in which there must be leaders (men) and followers (women) for things to move smoothly (Egbogah, 2003:30). What is not being considered is the kind of life that existed between Jesus and his disciples. The disciples were always with him (Mark 3:14). If women were to be among them, would they not have been charged for sexual immorality? That would have ruined Jesus’ ministry completely. Being a wise God, he did not involve women in this selection and that does not mean he discriminated against them. Mary Magdalene (former demoniac) for instance, was actively involved in Jesus’ ministry (Lk. 8:1-3). During his crucifixion and death when the disciples deserted him, Magdalene and some other women followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs up to the cross and at his burial (Mt. 27:56-61). She (Magdalene) also saw the angel after the resurrection (Mk. 16:1-8) and the Lord Jesus himself (Jn. 20:1-18).

It should be recalled that the gospel of Lord Jesus Christ was first preached in a Greek cultural and intellectual context. This has great influence on the writing of the New Testament. The Greeks believe in ‘natural’ division of labour based on people’s relative intelligence. Philosophers were seen as the most intelligent seekers after morality and knowledge, and so, were considered the most suitable people for leadership. In Plato (*The Republic*, 1968:118-119), only the philosophic rulers will possess the necessary insight into what is good for the community as a whole. The next class is the ‘Auxiliaries’ who in Plato’s description cannot take initiatives but executive roles. That is to carry out the initiative of the philosophical rulers. The last class is the ‘tradesman’ who produces the material necessities of life – farmers, craftsmen, traders among others. In this work, Plato is not protecting any particular gender. Instead, his interest is on the common good of the society.

For Aristotle (*The Politics*), there was also a class of ‘natural slaves’; that is people with low intelligent quotient. He insists that this class of people can by nature only able to handle ‘maintenance work’ while their masters are involved in philosophy and politics. Aristotle clearly categorizes women into this class of ‘natural slaves’ for he argues that a woman’s reasoning abilities were inferior to men’s and by

nature also, female and slave belong to the same level in a community because ‘among them are none qualified by nature to govern’ (1986:1252b). Hence, the male by nature is superior and so the governor while the female is by nature inferior and should be governed (1254b). In Aristotle, the woman’s authority was limited to her domestic life. The door of philosophy and politics was shut against her.

A very strong voice used for gendered role in the ministry of the Church is that of Paul. He instructed the Church in Corinth that ‘women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church’ (1 Cor. 14:33-35). Writing to Timothy, he insists, ‘a woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety (1 Tm. 2:11-15).

Various interpretations have been given to these texts. Some believe that there is a God-ordained order that is to be the basis for administration and authority (also 1 Cor. 11:3). Women are to be in submission to their husbands both at home and in the church regardless of cultural bias. In line with this view, a timeless order was established at creation. Others think that Paul’s concern is that the church be strengthened by believers showing respect for God and for others as they exercise their spiritual gifts with the context of their culture. This group insists that his purpose was not to define the role of women but to establish a fitting and orderly way of worship (see note on NIV Study Bible 1 Cor. 14:34-35).

Today, some church denominations and great theologians have maintained that women cannot be in the ministry of the church based on these passages. Grudem for instance has argued strongly that throughout the history of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, there is a consistent pattern of male leadership among the people of God. In his words:

It is simply not true that women have equal access to all offices in the church, for Jesus, the head of the church, is a man. And the twelve apostles who will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (see Matt. 19:28), and whose names are written forever on the foundations of the heavenly city (Rev. 21:14), are all men. Therefore, there will be no eternal modeling of equal roles for men and women at all levels of authority in the church. Rather, there is a pattern of male leadership in the highest governing roles of the church, a pattern that will be evident to all believers for all eternity (1992:940).

Just to buttress Phiri’s position above, Grudem no doubt observes that there are occasional examples of women having leadership in government positions such as queen Athaliah, Deborah and Hulda. He quickly remarks:

We should note that these are rare exceptions in unusual circumstances. They occur in the midst of an overwhelming pattern of male leadership in teaching and governance, and, as

such, they hardly serve as patterns for New Testament church office (941).

Can you image this great theologian allowing man's ego so eloquently in his words. Even Paul in whose epistles arguments for women subordination are found could not resist women from the ministry of the church in his time. He actually acknowledged the ministry, partnership, support and help from some women to him. This is well illustrated in his greetings in Romans 16. These include:

- Priscilla and Aquila my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house (Rom. 16:3-4). These names are first mentioned in Acts 18. In fact, in verse 2, the husband (Aquila) was named before the wife (Priscilla), but subsequently the wife's name came before that of her husband's. This may suggest the prominent role of Priscilla in the ministry of the early church.
- To Phoebe, Paul writes: 'I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many, including me' (1-2).
- Moving on to verse 6, he writes: 'Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you....' Interestingly, in the verse that follows, Paul sends greetings to Andronicus and Junias with these words: 'my relatives who had been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. Junias of course is a feminine name. Its introduction here has led to various interpretations of the term 'apostle' used in this verse. For some, 'apostle' is used in a wider sense than the twelve. Others hold to the fact that since 'apostle' is preceded by a definite article, it is an indication that the twelve are in view (Allen, 1986:1345). Going by the later interpretation, Egbogah argues that 'Paul's descriptions of what it takes to be an apostle in sense of 'the twelve' in 1 Cor. 15 without doubt excludes her from that position as Paul and the twelve' (Egbogah, 2003:60).
- In greeting Tryphena and Tryphosa, Paul remarks: 'women who work hard in the Lord' (12). One feature worthy of note in this chapter is the more prominent description given to women.
- Eudia and Syntyche in Philippians 4:2-3 are also worthy of mention in this work. Concerning them, Paul remarks: 'who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers....'

It is good to observe that these women along with others not mentioned make their marks in the ministry of the early church. This suggests that what some church denominations hold to today as Paul's warnings '1 Cor. 14:35-38, 1 Tim. 2:11-15 or other related texts) did not prohibit women from the ministry of the early church. Paul himself could not either. Obviously, this does not mean that the New Testament Church whole heartily assigned a place for women in the ministry. It is better to say that the New Testament apportions gender roles to men and women in which the man is the head (leader) while the

woman is the subordinate (the led). Carol Scott-Luckens, in re-appraising women's plight dating to the earliest time submits:

Following the New Testament model of Christ and His bride, the church, protestant culture associated female spirituality most directly with domestic concerns and duties of the virtuous wife and mother, with her traditional responsibility for the religious and practical welfare of an extended household, while also deferring to her husband in all worldly and church matters, as exhorted by Paul (2002:215).

Thus, from biblical time, women were subordinate to men in power and economically dependent on them. The women whose portraits emerge most strongly are those who display unusual courage in rising above conventional role.

CHURCH MINISTRY IN THE MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE AGE

The early church fathers and their medieval descendants also interpreted the gospel according to their Greek background in which they were trained. Writing about Thomas Aquinas (c. 1224-1274) for instance, Bunting states:

One of the most important – and controversial – aspects of Aquinas' work was his assimilation of the philosophy of Aristotle and his re-working of the philosophical foundations of Christianity in the light of Aristotelian categories (Bunting, 2006:706).

For Aquinas, the 'superior work' is concerned with 'the contemplative life' which is a calling from God and which have eternal value. The 'inferior work', that is the active life of caring for the bodily needs of humans, he views as good but only earthly. From Aquinas came the medieval distinction between the 'active' and the 'contemplative' life (van Leeuwen, 1990:194). Active life includes Plato's 'Auxiliaries' and 'Tradesmen'. From the early church fathers till the medieval age (and of course Catholic thinking until more recently), was viewed merely as temporal, while the contemplative life is religiously better.

Interestingly, van Leeuwen points out that the medieval church differed from the Greeks in allowing both women and men to choose between active and contemplative lives. She remakes that 'highborn educated women carried their sense of privilege and authority with them to the convents often becoming powerful administrators of people and property' (1990:194). A good example that readily comes to mind is Mother Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), who:

In spite of intense opposition by local churchmen, finally won papal permission in 1562 to establish her own house and her own order. She was canonized in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV. In Spain she is second only after St. James as patron saint (Barker, 1969:272).

From Mother Teresa's experience, it is clear that while the distinction between male and female was not well pronounced as in Greek culture during the medieval time, it cannot be denied.

The Renaissance of the 15th century ushered in a change in which humans were seen as being created in God's image not merely by reasoning but also by the productive

work which has been overlooked in the past. Concerning this new perception, Hardy elaborates:

To be created in the image of God meant not only possessing an intellect, but hands as well. God created nature out of nothing. Human beings will now create a world out of nature and thus become a demi-god (1990:26).

This implies that the ideal human being is no longer the monk who contemplates or the philosopher who seeks after knowledge but the creative individual who imagines an idea and shapes materials to express it.

GENDER ROLE IN THE REFORMATION PERSPECTIVE

The heart of the protestant reformation message was that one is saved by the grace of God, not through one's work, whether active or contemplative. By this, the reformers dismantled the medieval distinction between religious and secular vocation extending the meaning of religious vocation to include any activity by which a person could serve his or her neighbor in God's love. Both Luther and Calvin insisted that ability to work is part of the creation order, imaging not only God's dominion and creativity, but also the basic way in which he continues to care for us. This agrees with Hardy's statement that:

Having fashioned a world filled with resources and potentials, God chose to continue his creative activity through the work of human hands. Through our work, humble though it may be, people are brought under God's providential care. As we pray each morning for our daily bread, people are already at work in the bakeries (1990:45).

In the concept of the reformers, human beings share in God's providential care for his creation through the work of our hands. This is echoed in the Reformation saying, 'all of life is religion' (van Leeuwen: 1990:196).

Coming to gender role, the Reformers stress on the priesthood of all believers meant, at least in theory, that even the most humbly situated man or woman could approach and listen to God directly, without mediation by a church official. They encouraged literacy in all believers because the Reformers view the Scripture as the sole source of doctrinal authority. But in practice, this principle excludes women. Starting from the first reformer – Luther, his commentary on Genesis alone shows that he did not always have great respect for women nor did he think them fit for much beyond their domestic life. Here are two of his comments in 1:26ff and 3:1:

She is only a woman. As the sun is much more glorious than the moon (though also the moon is glorious), so the woman was (created) inferior to the man both in honour and dignity, though she, too, was a most beautiful work of God, nevertheless was not the equal of the male in glory and prestige (Luther, 1958:69).

This presupposes his argument that 'women ought to stay at home... the way they were created indicates this, for they have broad hips and a wide fundament to sit upon, keep house, and bear and raise children Take women from their housewifery and they are good for nothing' (O'Faolain and Lauro, 1973:196-97).

Other reformers share similar opinion about women. John Calvin opines: ‘it is the dictate of common sense, that female government is improper and unseemly’ (1948:468). But he as quickly added:

If any one bring forward, by way of objection, Deborah and others of the same class, of whom we read that they were at one time appointed by the command of God to govern the people, the answer is easy... if women at one time held the office of prophets and teachers, and that too when they were supernaturally called to it by the Spirit of God, He who is above all law might do this, but, being a peculiar case (1948:67).

Calvin has in his commentaries and his Institutes come to a shocking conclusion, at least for his time that – Paul’s restrictions on women were not in the realm of eternal law, but only a matter of human governance. Scripture, he writes, neither forbids nor quires women in church office (Douglass, 1985:77). This does not mean he integrated women into church office. Nay, rather, Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion book four reveals that he regarded social upheaval as anti-biblical, and since expanding women’s church roles would certainly be a divisive issue, Calvin left women on the fringes of church polity in Geneva.

The Anabaptist circle of Protestantism respected both male and female mystics like their medieval predecessors, yet they generally held to same traditional views on women with regard to both marriage and ministry. Irwin, a biographer of Menno Simons (an Anabaptist) writes that his most radical action on gender relations was the denial of a husband’s right to beat his wife. Yet he admonished women to:

Remain within your houses and gates unless you have something of importance to regulate, such as to make purchases, to provide in temporal needs, to hear the Word of the Lord, or to receive the holy sacraments, etc. attend faithfully to your charge, to your children, house, and family (1979:55).

You see, the reformation did not elevate the status of women nor did it relaxed gendered role in the church ministry. In fact, Catholics are of the view that the reformation removed women from all the religious offices which were created for them by the medieval church without setting up any officially sanctioned substitutes. This has left Protestant women in a kind of ecclesiastical limbo where they are floundering till today (Bainton, 1973:109).

GENDER ROLE IN THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH AND ITS CHALLENGES

Male headship in the church and its related institutions has remained a consistent principle and practice of the church. The church does not seem to mind the fact that universally, male headship is longer honoured in practice. Today, unlike in the past, women have gain entrance into the paid work force. And being there, she is paid whatever a man of her training and experience would get and have the authority that goes with the job regardless of sex of her subordinates. Frankly, the church should be changing in a changing world to be relevant at all.

Research has shown that women constitute about 70 – 80 per cent of the total number of worshippers in church congregations (Mombo and Helen, 2012:184). Unfortunately, these women are only meant to be seen and not to be heard. This is

because women are virtually absent when it comes to church leadership. They are brought to the lime light when it comes to ‘minor jobs’ like cleaning, cooking, and caring for the needy – housewifery, the only thing they are good at according to Luther. They may sing and dance, no problem but they cannot preach or teach unless of course teach children in the Sunday school. Being the majority in the church, they are equally active in fundraising. Often their numerical and financial strength does not translate into power in decision-making process. The truth about the relevance of women in the church ministry cannot be overemphasized.

The ministry of the church is obviously a cooperative venture meant for all whether male or female. This is echoed in the words of New Testament scholar Don Williams:

If redemption is real the warfare between the sexes is over. Male dominance, egotism, patriarchal power and preferential priority (are) at an end. At the same time, female seduction, manipulation, and domineering (are) also over, for ‘you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (1997:70).

In the real sense, a woman should be able to reach women (who form majority of church membership) more than their male counterparts in the ministry since in many ways she shares their experience. One may ask at this point, ‘why then do we have our churches’ pews overwhelmingly filled with women and a few men, while men occupy the pulpit? Well, in the actual sense, the number of men and women in theological colleges is far from equal. A survey of the Theological College of Northern Nigeria’s statistics for the last five years shows that an average of 11 female students are admitted compared to an average of 158 male students who are admitted every year.

The reason for few women doing theology includes the connection between theology and ordination. The TEKAN churches that have not accepted female ordination and others whose male students study at Theological College of Northern Nigeria would not send women to study theology. There is also the economic implication of this; since theological education is seen as an economic investment. So, when the Church has to choose whom to invest in, they will rather invest in a man who can be ordained.

Coming from the background of these conservatives, a woman can not be a theologian. Those who endeavored to be trained as theologians are relegated to the background even when they are better than their male counterparts. An instance is this citation from a woman theologian:

My Church, the Reformed Church of East Africa (RCEA), does not ordain women and the pulpit is reserved for men. I studied theology and graduated with a theology degree, but I have remained on the margins of the church. My studies exposed me to the realities of the church life and helped me to analyze the situation of women in the Church, especially single women and widows. With my training I chose to work from the grassroots by organizing a school and running small income generating projects for vulnerable women (Mombo and Helen, 2012:185).

Eventually, some church denominations are gradually dismantling the masculine tradition which has wedged a cog in the wheel of church ministry’s progress. It is no longer surprising that women are taking active and important roles in church

leadership structure in some Pentecostal and Evangelical churches. Presbyterian Church of Nigeria is one of the churches in Nigeria which has seen the women ordination as one of the great issues of Christian justice for women (Okore, 1996:240). This door was opened by the church in 1979 when her synod resolved to accept mature, qualified women as reverend ministers or pastors. Consequently, the first woman minister (Rev. Mgbeke Okore) was ordained and inducted to the charge of a parish. With the life and ministry of this woman and her other women successors in the church, the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria and other church she has related with at the ecumenical context can attest to the fact that God calls men and women alike to the work of the kingdom.

Awolalu have examined the gendered role situation and trend of events in the church ministry and affirms:

If men be a bit more accommodating and less selfish and can encourage women not only to participate fully in, but to also lead religious worship, our religious institutions will not be the poorer for it, but would rather be richer and much more edifying than they are now (1976:103).

It is plausible to note that some women have said no severally to their degraded status in the church. In the same vain, some church denominations have vehemently opposed women ordination or leadership at all cost. But can women be resisted forever? It should be noted that if women's claim of being called into the ministry of the church is from God, then, the church should act wisely and responsibly like Gamaliel advised (Acts 5:34ff). For if this venture is from God, we should endeavour not to be found fighting against God and his move in this century. Moreover, following Julius Nyerere's admonition to the church: 'At a given and decisive point in history men decide to act against those conditions which restrict their freedom as men' (Nyerere, 1987:111), a time is coming when women will start opening churches meant for women or even agitate for women oriented congregations within a local church setting. Certainly that will not mean well for church ministry.

CONCLUSION

This research discovers the vital aspects of African Women's potentiality and their experience of God in emerging realities of Africa and the entire globe. It also reveals that church ministry has been gendered towards the orthodox and rigid adherence to patriarchy. However, the wave of change in the contemporary society has shown that masculinity is no longer rigidly held to. Also, one of the major reasons for these conflicting positions of the church on the role of women lies principally in the nature of biblical evidences. The Old and New Testaments seem to affirm and deny at the same time leading roles for women in the church. This has become one of the thorniest issues in current theological studies. There is therefore an urgent need for the church especially biblical scholars to re-read and re-interpret the Bible, as much as possible in the light of the total teaching of the scripture. The church as a body should as a matter of urgency reconsider her 'male leadership' affirmation. Since by this God who has always used both men and women to accomplish his purpose is portrayed as being limited by the seemingly limitation of his calling to men. Above all, denying women this God given privilege (divine

calling) amounts to injustice and marginalization – the very things the society itself abhors.

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