

Male Chauvinism in the Pentateuch: The Bane of Gender Inequality in African Culture

Collins Ikenna Ugwu
&
Anuli B. Okoli

Abstract

In the African socio-cultural mentality and practices, males are predominantly superior to women. This has become almost the culture of the people, which has also permeated into the mainstreams of almost all the activities of the people. No doubt, this affects the development of the human society. In religion, the story is not even better. The women are still seen as secondary to men, while the men are the primary constituents of the society. This is typical of every African society especially in Nigeria. Politically, the women are not well accepted as capable of delivering much in the political space. However, there is a huge cry by women and few men to change the scenario. Agitations are on the increase to produce a society that should place men and women on the same level of relevance and acceptability. Regrettably, much has not been achieved on this. This paper is out to find a fundamental cause of this perennial disregard for women. It is found that religion among other factors play a dominant role in perpetuating gender inequality in Africa. In doing that, the researcher uses the Christian religion as a research field. The Old Testament-a part of the religion's scripture is considered for study. It was discovered that the Old Testament where God was reflected in patriarchal imagination provides references of denigration, disregard and profuse expression of exploitation of women.

Introduction

Humanity consists of two sexes-male and female. Right from the creation narratives, we found out that God made man and woman equally for coexistence. However, in most cultures of the world, especially the Jews and the Africans, the idea of equality of gender is a mere day-dreaming phenomenon. Issues as they stand in Nigeria for instance are clear testimonies that women are not fully regarded as being of the same importance as men. For instance, in Nigeria, male chauvinism manifests itself in many ways. Sometime ago, the former Inspector General of Police Mr. Onovo ordering all the female Police officers who are living with their civilian husbands in the respective Police Barracks to immediately vacate their residence (Omorotionmwan; 2010). What explains this action of the Police Boss if not the chauvinistic tendency? What shall be of the Policemen who are living with their civilian wives in the Barracks? That is the fate of women. Does it mean that men and women have no equal opportunities in Nigerian Police? No doubt, this problem of gender inequality has to a large extent retarded a sustainable development in Africa and Nigeria in particular.

Much have been said about it and also invested in the campaign for gender equality. But the problem is why then are not much results coming out of the efforts being made. Considering the vicissitude of this problem, it therefore demands a critical study to reveal the source of this problem.

Meanwhile, the Africans according to Mbiti (1969) are notoriously religious (1). By this assertion, it becomes evident and eventual that searching for the problem of gender inequality taking religion as a factor will bear more fruits than else where considering the religious disposition of the Africans and indeed Nigerians. Taking a critical study of the Old Testament and particularly the Pentateuch, one discovers that it is full of male chauvinistic expressions. These, on their own send laudable signals to the present generation on continuing with the practice of gender inequality.

We tend to be misled in Nigeria that there is a high level of gender balance in Nigeria because of a few women who occupy some positions in the government. The proponents of this view keep mentioning the likes of Ngozi Okonjo- Iwela, Dora Akunyili, Obi Ezekwesili, Cecilia Ibru and a host of others. But the question is what percentage of women does these few women represent in the women population in Nigeria? In understanding the percentage of these few women mentioned above and their likes, we therefore understand why it is still very germane to engage in a critical study of gender inequality in Africa and of course Nigeria in particular.

For instance in Nigeria Federal Universities, we have had just about two female Vice-Chancellors in the persons of Professor Grace Alele-Williams of University of Benin and Professor Comfort Ekpo of University of Uyo. What else can explain the fact that it is only men that head our Universities except for the few just mentioned if not for male chauvinism. The few women that are found at the corridors of power are essentially used to politicize gender equality.

This study has become so imperative today considering number of reasons. One, the potentials in women are so lucrative that if properly harnessed by giving them a pride of place would go a long way in bringing a turn around in the development of our society. Two, a lot of gender related issues are becoming critical to the extent that treating the matter at the surface would no longer bring the expected solution. Hence the need to discover the cause of the lingering problem of gender inequality. Arising from the foregoing, this paper becomes imperative.

In the Bible, we have certain statements and events, which are openly aggressive expressions of male chauvinism. These expressions are the bane of gender equality in Africa. These are found scattered in the Bible in both Old and New Testaments. However, for the sake of precision and a manageable scope, this paper will base its study on the Pentateuch through which the implication of male chauvinism to gender relations will be x-rayed.

The Pentateuch

Origen used the term “Pentateuch” as early as the third century A.D. in reference to the first five books of the Bible - the *Torah* (Larue; 1997:2). Pentateuch is the Greek name given to the five books commonly called the “five books of Moses”. This title is derived from Greek *Pente* (πεντε), five and *Teuchos* (τευχος) which its meaning originally “vessel”, “instrumentally” etc came in Alexandrine Greek to mean “book” hence the five fold book (Smith; 2006:497). Lindblom (1973) in his own view simply defines the Pentateuch as the technical title given to the first books of the bible” (83).

Pentateuch's literal meaning "five cases" appears to refer to the sheaths or boxes in which the separate rolls or volumes were kept. It explains the origins of the human race and the rise of the Israelites, including the Israelites' miraculous emigration from Egypt. More than half of the Pentateuch is devoted to God's laws and commandments to Israel, hence the Jews call these books the *Torah*, or law, because of its religious precepts and for the model of ethical behavior that the leading characters prescribe. The Jews also see it as the holiest part of the Bible.

The Pentateuch according to Merrill (1991) is a collection of diverse writings. But this does not vitiate the traditional understanding of the collection as Torah or instruction. By story, poem, genealogy, narrative, prescription and exhortation the theological message is communicated with one single objective: that Israel might be instructed as to her meaning and purpose (9). From all these we find that the Pentateuch is those first five books of the Bible and particularly the Old Testament. They are as follows: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

The Pentateuch is considered important because they provide the Jewish people with the Law that God prescribed to Moses - also known as the Mosaic Law. It is seen and taken by the Jews and non-Jews till today as the heart of the Scripture. The Bible is history, but of a very special kind. McDowell (1999) sees it as "the history of God's redemption of mankind and the Pentateuch is chapter one of that history" (401). Therefore, the Pentateuch is very significant to the belief system of the Jews and that we have inherited based on our religious disposition.

Male Chauvinism

This is an integrated word male and chauvinism. Of course male is simply the opposite sex to female. Within the human world, this is often designated man as against woman. Considering chauvinism from its fundamental idea, it is:

... an exaggerated, bellicose [patriotism](#) and a blind belief in national superiority and glory. By extension, it has come to include an extreme and unreasoning [partisanship](#) on behalf of any group to which one belongs, especially when the partisanship includes malice and hatred towards rival groups (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chauvinism>)

The term chauvinism originates from the French word *chauvinisme*, which stems from a likely fictitious person named Nicolas Chauvin.

Chauvin was said to have been a loyal soldier in the army of Napoleon Bonaparte and even after sustaining numerous injuries and little reward, remained fiercely loyal to Bonaparte even after his defeat and the Restoration period of French history. Though there is little historical documentation to support the existence of a real person named Nicolas Chauvin, he was raised to a legendary status after being included in numerous songs and vaudeville performances.

(<http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-chauvinism.htm>)

Chauvinism is, traditionally, a term used to refer to extreme bias or allegiance to a cause or belief often in the face of all reasonable or alternate viewpoints. The term was originally established in relation to political leanings or beliefs, but has since been used in

conjunction with other ideas and attitudes. Chauvinism does not just indicate loyalty or agreement with a group, but typically indicates resentment or hostility toward opposing groups as well.

Male chauvinism is a term used to:

describe the belief that [men](#) are superior to [women](#). The term was widely used by the [feminist movement](#) in the 1960s to describe men who believe or display an attitude that women are inferior to men, speak to women as inferiors, or treat women negatively based solely upon their [gender](#). <http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-chauvinism.htm>

This is an often aggressively sexist view held by some men. The term “male chauvinist” came into popular use during the efforts of feminists and those in favor of equal rights for men and women in the United States during the 20th century. Male chauvinism is generally used to refer to men who believe that men are superior to women, whether mentally, physically, or in any other way. The term was used so often, that many people began to associate “chauvinism” as synonymous with “male chauvinism”

Religion and Women Subjugation

The history of most religions according to Kempton (2009) shows various degrees of violence against women, such as stoning, witch-burning ... and the like (1). Carroll and Turner (2009) opine that the status of women in history and modern times has been formed and influenced in whole, or in great part, from the religious beliefs of the times (1). It is not surprising, considering the almost total gender domination of Church leadership by men, that this status is somewhere between property and personal slave, to those men. Also, the gender domination of power in all levels of society has virtually assured that this status has remained firmly entrenched even in our "enlightened" modern society. With women possessing no power, this religious prejudice is carried into almost every aspect of most women's lives.

This paper is not ignorant of the fact that barriers to gender equality exist with or without religion. They exist when women do not have, for example, as much of a media voice as men. When they do not have equal participation in leadership as men. When they do not have access to the same financial resources as men. When they do not have access to justice when they are wronged. When they are unable to reach their fullest potential simply because they are thought incapable. The problem with religion is that it becomes very difficult to argue against a faith belief. When a person tells you that God prescribes a particular way of doing things, and said revelation comes from God, there is very little by way of logic that you can offer a counter.

The Old Testament for instance is a great document that believed to be of God. As a matter of fact, this document has great influence also on the adherent of Christian religion. Carroll and Turner (2009) opine that:

the Bible is the problem in our society, in as much as patriarchalism and male domination has been and continues to be interpreted as sacred decree, and mobilized in our lives as such. It is mobilized in ways that are both conscious and unconscious. It is insidious, it is structural, and it is accepted as the way things are. (1)

The Old Testament contains examples where women are exploited, oppressed or otherwise denigrated. These include such situations like Hagar's mistreatment at the hands of Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 16:1-16). Abraham and Isaac each lying about their relationship with their wives just to save their own lives. Societies in the ancient Near East were of the patriarchal type. Israel no less than other nations was a patriarchal society. Characteristic in those societies was the lower status of women. Anyone who has seriously studied the Hebrew Bible is aware of the fact that a woman in the Patristic Religion was regarded as inferior to man. Her status was a little higher than that of a slave. Her husband was her *baal* - that is, lord, ruler, master, possessor, and owner. The wife was the property of her husband. Her husband owned her.

Male chauvinism in the Pentateuch

Male chauvinism is quite rampant in the Pentateuch considering the fact that the Hebrew society was very chauvinistic one when it was written. From the creation narrative, we can see that the Pentateuch is highly loaded with male chauvinistic tendencies. The impression created upon all these cannot be unconnected with the way women are treated today by some Churches.

It is apparent that with the exposure of the people to the pages of the Pentateuch being the word of God, the ill treatment against the women therefore becomes acceptable as the way of God. In turn, we are going to look at the Books of the Pentateuch one after the other to discover few examples of Male chauvinism in them as was observed by Thiefe (2010:1-2).

Male chauvinism in Genesis

Arising from the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, there was an extension of punishment to the entire womanhood. Genesis 3:16 says that all women must suffer great pains during childbirth due to Eve eating the fruit of knowledge. The verse ended by saying that a husband shall "rule" over his woman, stripping the women off all powers in between the sexes. Apart from Eve, what is the crime of other women till today that they should be so punished with labour during child birth?

Genesis 19:8 tells of a man named Lot who offered his daughters to a crowd of would be rapists. Later, Lot impregnated his own daughters after God killed his wife for simply looking back at the remains of her city. If not for male chauvinistic culture, which one was more atrocious to be punished by death: to look behind over the remains of a city being destroyed and for a father to impregnate his own daughters? Yet the woman was killed by transforming her into a pillar of salt while the husband who should be killed for impregnating her own daughter was spared.

Genesis 38:16-24 tells a very interesting story of a man named Judah who lived with his widowed daughter-in-law. His daughter in law was grieving and wearing the veils of mourning which Judah mistook for the clothing of a prostitute. He ended up impregnating his daughter-in-law and she left the city. On a later date, Judah saw the young woman again and demanded that she be burnt for being a prostitute. It was not until Judah recognized the woman as his daughter-in-law and she was with his child, that he decided not to kill her. Judah can commit incest, use a prostitute and impregnate a much younger woman, yet he thinks she is the one deserving of death.

Male chauvinism in Exodus

Exodus 21:3-4 says that if a male slave is given a wife by his master regardless of how long they have lived together, how much they love each other or if they have children he cannot leave servanthood with his wife or children. The woman and children are merely property of the master and their personal happiness or sanctity of family does not matter. Exodus 21:7 God not only sanctions selling one's daughter into slavery, but he also gives out laws on how it should be done. Exodus 21:10 God ordains men taking several wives and even sets up laws as to how multiple wives should be handled.

Male chauvinism in Leviticus

Leviticus 12:1-8 explains that a woman has to be purified after giving birth because she is "unclean". It goes on to say that giving birth to a male is cleaner than that of a female, hence a mother must purify twice as long when she had given birth to a daughter. This is blatant sexism from the point of birth. A woman is dirty simply for being a woman; this is obviously very biased and chauvinistic.

Leviticus 15:19-30 explains that a woman having her menstruation must be avoided to the point of not even touching what she has touched. Such women are not also allowed in the assembly of the people of God having been referred to as being unclean. It is quite curious that women are punished for simply having a biological function which God himself created. Leviticus 18:19 goes onto say that even looking at a menstruating woman is wrong.

Leviticus 19:20 says that if a man has sex with a slave or betrothed woman, she must then be "scourge". Scourging is a term for a severe flogging or whipping. Yet the man goes free for the deed. Leviticus 21:9 explains that unchaste daughters of priests must be burnt to death. What about his unchaste sons? Nothing! Leviticus 27:3-7 God places a dollar value on human life; with women worth less than men. From this, we find that the bible provides the bench of inequality between the two sexes.

Male chauvinism in Numbers

Numbers 1:2 is the basis for the sexism that remains rampant today. In this verse, Moses took a poll of all the men who are able to fight in war, women are not even counted in the census. Apparently, back then, just like today, women are considered the weaker species and unfit for battles. Meanwhile, during the time the Pentateuch was written women in Pagan cultures were feared and revered as the more powerful sex. It is because of this patriarchal religion and it is offshoots that women have been reduced to cowering sub-humans.

Male chauvinism in Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy 20:13-15 states kill all the men and boys in the cities that God "delivers into your hands," but keep the women for raping. Deuteronomy 21:11-14 states if you see a pretty woman among the captives then just take her home and "go in unto her."

Deuteronomy 22:23-24 is one of the cruelest and sexist passages of the Torah. It says that women who are raped and fail to "cry out loud" in a populated area are most likely enjoying the attack and should be killed. In Deuteronomy 22:28-29 a rapist must buy his victim from her father for 50 shekels. What about the victim here, what if she does not want to marry the man who raped her? All that matters is her father receives payment for his "property".

It is apparent that with the exposure of the people to the pages of the Old Testament especially the Pentateuch being the word of God, the ill treatment against the women therefore becomes acceptable as the way of God. In this regard, whosoever, does it worse is only acting in line with sacred book. This can explain the irresistible attack on womanhood by the male folk within our culture and the general society.

The Implication of Male Chauvinism on Gender Relations vis-à-vis Sustainable Development

There is a great confusion about what it means to be a man or a woman in our society. So many studies carried out on gender relations showcase men's chauvinistic attitude towards women. The implication of this attitude has brought about teething problems of which women feminism is one. Feminism according to Schneir (2004) is the belief that women should have economic, political and social equality with men. Goodman (1996) posits that "feminism is politics: recognition of the historical and cultural subordination of women (the world wide majority to be treated as minority) and a resolve to do something about it (x). Chukwu (1999) also opines that "feminism connotes a struggle, a fight and a resistance against discriminations and exploitations" (12).

As earlier pointed out, the issue of women feminism has generated a lot of crises and conflicts in male and female relationship. Agbakoba (2000) listed the following problems of feminism:

1. A decreasing number of successful marriages in the west and its attendant burden on children such as poor performance in positive areas, deviancy, delinquency and criminality...
2. An increasing percentage of single parenthood with the attendant social problems.
3. An increasing homosexual and lesbian relationship in personal heterosexual relationships (8).

These problems highlighted are mainly seen in the post-industrial society of the West but because the world is becoming a global village, the echoes of these problems are gradually reaching other parts of the world especially Africa and Nigeria in particular.

Another effect of male chauvinism could be seen in continued exclusion of women in ministerial priesthood. Uchem (2001) and Obasi (1994) both observe that women are excluded from ministerial priesthood particularly the Roman Catholic Church. This has also generated a lot of tension among the genders especially women as majority of them could not see enough reasons why position such as priests should not be accorded them.

In support of this position, Stott (1984) posits that:

women called by God to ministry hardly need any demonstration. For ministry is "service"(diakonia) and every Christian male and female, young and old is called to follow in the footsteps of him who said he had not come to be served but to serve (249)

Onwu (2004) however, is of the view that women ordination is not a creative change and even cautioned that the church should not succumb to the pressures of this movement to ordain women because women were not among the twelve disciples of Jesus (56). But it should be noted that it was to women that Jesus revealed himself after resurrection and entrusted the good news of his victory (John 20:10; Matt 28:8ff).

The implication for this exclusion remains that women's spiritual potentials as priests are untapped and it is worse for the society. On the other hand, the fight for them to be recognized and accepted as partners with men in progress ranges on. A fight against attitudes that are ingrained in the society; a fight against traditions that have chained them and unless the society rises to the occasion, there will be crises, division, ill feelings, trouble and so on in the society.

Politically, leadership is mostly in the hands of men. Uchem (2002) observes that "irrespective of personal talents, women are not usually appointed as chairpersons at social functions" (20). Presently, male predominance as policy makers disadvantages the females and denies them involvement in government decision process. If women are to be involved in larger capacity, they will be able to inform the government about laws, those to be amended, abrogated and entrenched to safe guard the rights and interest of females. For instance, those suggestions will take care of the eradication of child marriage, female circumcision, assault of women by rapists, maltreatments of widows and all other kinds of inhuman treatment meted out on women just because of their gender. In fact, with women fully involved in politics and their rights protected their full participation in the development of the society must surely be felt.

Economically, discriminatory practices against women in areas of extreme patriarchy explain women's generally low levels of labour force participation. Work in the public domain, particularly in waged employment favoured men more than women. That means a loss of status for women, little or no contribution to their household upkeep. The end result becomes more stress to the men and poverty to the family, which naturally will affect the entire societal life.

The Way Forward

Having underscored the point that the Old Testament especially the Pentateuch is rich in denigration of women and possibly accounts for the resilience of gender inequality in Africa, we shall not leave it there. Though the Pentateuch may not be rewritten, there is the need to revolutionize the system. Within the biblical reality, the generic term testament as used in the Old and New Testament, is interchangeably with the word "covenant". Covenant can also stand for formal, solemn, and binding agreement. According to Carroll and Turner; (2009)

In our modern world, this (covenant) is known as "contract". Logic defines 'Old' as what was and "New" as what is. In the context of the Bible, the Old Testament is the former contract God made with man, specifically the nation of Israel. The New Testament is the current contract God made with all mankind (2)

Arising from this standpoint, we have to look up to Jesus who is the incarnate God in the New Testament. His approach to women should prevail over the arrangements in the Old Testament. That does not in any way suggest that the issues in the Old Testament have been nullified. The implication is that any issue found in the Old Testament but has seemingly developments or reforms in the New Testament either by Jesus himself or any of his apostles should be approached with the stand of the New Testament. We have to identify with any biblical issue with the New Testament stand.

In this regard, the stand of Jesus becomes clearer concerning women and their position in life.

Jesus and the Women

The manner with which Jesus dealt with the women of his day gives undeniable evidence that the oppressive treatment of women, by the edicts of the old contract, was ended. Jesus nullified many centuries of oppressive Jewish law and custom. He clearly treated women and men as equals. He ignored numerous Old Testament edicts, which specified inequality. He consistently violated the rules, concerning women, of the three major Jewish religious groups of the day: the Essenes, Pharisees, and Sadducees. The treatment of women by Jesus was nothing short of radical for his day. Jesus was an advocate for women's freedom and equality.

Recommendations

In view of some negative effects of male chauvinism on the women and Nigerian society, the following recommendations are made.

1. Socio-religious ethical values found in virtues like the fear of God, love, respect for life and persons, hospitality, honesty cooperation among males and females especially couples should be adhered to.
2. In the areas of spiritual functions and assignments, observation so far showed that women are discriminated against. For purpose of equity in spiritual matters, women like men should be allowed into priesthood to be able to exhibit and translate all their spiritual gifts into service with much reference to the Main Line Churches.
3. Women should realize that no matter how enlightened and well positioned they may be, there is always the need to exhibit their natural feminine traits of showing care and concern to their fellow men or husbands. Men are also advised to exhibit their own masculine traits to uplift the image of their family through a responsible approach to their wives and general women.
4. The Church should organize retreats and conferences where teachings on foundation of a healthy marriage life and its benefits to the society should be expounded at a regular intervals.
5. The Nigerian Constitution, which professes all types of rights to all its citizens regardless of the gender involved, should be strictly adhered to by the interpreters of the law.
6. Finally, the government should set up a monitoring team at National, State and Local Governments levels to ensure that perpetrators of human abuses on account of one's gender are brought to book.

Conclusion

The women folk as we have today is a gift to humanity. Their roles in enhancing the welfare of the society and the entire humanity cannot be overemphasized. They are fundamentally part and parcel of the society. Incidentally, during creation, according to the Biblical tradition, the woman came to make for perfection while the man remained imperfect. There was the need for completeness since the man was in the state of incompleteness hence the emergence of women.

Arising from this standpoint, it becomes an aberration to look down on the very personality that brought completeness and perfection into humanity. Owing to the degradation, which the Old Testament has brought against women, there is a cause for improvement considering the activities and orientation Jesus brought in the New Testament. Providing the women their ideal position is not a project in futility. It will not end in regret, instead it will bring the long awaited completeness into place. Those hanging on the Old Testament to denigrate women should look forward to the New Testament and turn a new leaf towards appreciating and welcoming the women into the mainstream of the entire gamut of human and societal lives.

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