

Working Document On Women's Human Rights in
Christian Belief Systems



Draft

Women's Human Rights in Christian Belief Systems

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“You can’t change the past, but you can try to change the future”

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Foreword

From the age of 12 when I was designated to fulfill my family's obligation to the Church by becoming a nun I have questioned the position given to women in the Bible. My sister, who wanted to be an angel, and I had been having a non-ending argument about the personhood of angels: she was determined to be one while I was adamant that she could not be since angels were named Gabriel and Michael and there was no girl angels in my prayer book nor in hers. Of course the argument was not concluded for my sister would not be convinced nor would I give up my position. Thus began my life-long interest in women in religious text, starting with Lot's wife: what was her name? Why were we told that the names Vashti and Delilah were cursed and that girls given those names were destined to be disobedient? Who decided this and why could neither my mother nor my grand-mother answer my questions? They would invariably refer me to the parish priest!!

My search for understanding and answers has been long and the routes varied but also, at times, uplifting. This is such an uplifting time, for I have been fortunate to be a part of the group of women who have given time and energy to this document which provide women a place to start the needed interrogation necessary to debunk the myths routinely preached from various pulpits and by which women live their lives. The misinterpretation of religious texts have given room for serious abuses in the areas covered by this document and women have lived under conditions they *believe* to be ordained by God for they have been told so by men and others who claim to be His representative on earth. Women who access this document will, perhaps, begin to question long-held understandings based on erroneous interpretations and begin to redefine the meanings, actions and spaces of their lives. At the very least they may re-read religious text with an eye to the most option-giving interpretation that will give meaning to their lives.

My search for answers to the above-mentioned questions opened my curiosity and led me to an interesting path in my search for meanings that would enrich my womanhood. Women's Human Rights in Christian Belief Systems is another leg of my journey and brings new vistas for exploration as I travel on my quest. While the document identifies areas for exploration and debate, it is not dogmatic in its assertions nor is it claiming to be an authority on religious text. It simply provides in readable form the sum total of discussions held over a number of years by conscious women and men of faith who lent their intellect and inquiring minds to the task. Personally I find enrichment of my fledgling scholarship and provocation for my inquiring mind in this document and am certain others will be equally enriched.

Sindi Medar-Gould

Introduction

BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights exists primarily to protect and promote the human rights of women under the three systems of laws in Nigeria – customary, statutory and religious laws. BAOBAB is non religious and non-profit making. One area in which BAOBAB's work has been very prominent and for which it has received international recognition and award, is the protection and promotion of women's rights in religious laws. As such, BAOBAB is committed to promoting debates on religious laws and/or policy documents which might adversely impact on the rights of women.

From research and experience, BAOBAB has acknowledged that most violations of women's human rights are justified through conservative interpretations of religion. In Nigeria, there has been much political perturbation specifically about the rights of women under religious laws – accompanied by a great deal of confusion and controversy about what those rights are or might be. In response, BAOBAB holds a series of meetings to clarify the practices, beliefs and laws concerning women's rights in communities of both Muslims and Christians.

These workshops are otherwise known as the Bridge-Building Meetings as they bring together groups of women and men from diverse fields of endeavour, and from Muslim communities, as well as from Christian communities. These participants are selected to include both those for whom religious community is a primary identity marker (for instance Imams or Nuns), and those for whom it is one of a number of facets of identity. As BAOBAB recognizes the role that religion plays in applying the message of social justice in any given society, so also does it recognize the need for constant debate on various dimensions of religious interpretations and practices in relation to the quest for social justice, especially from a gender perspective.

Protecting and promoting women's human rights is often negated by discriminatory laws and practices mostly in the name of religion, tradition and culture which preserve the notion that women are inferior to men and do not deserve equal rights or equal protection of these rights. Therefore, the aim of these meetings is to provide the space for each group to examine its own practices regarding women's human rights, especially in the context of religious laws and interpretations.

The aim of this working document is to look at various aspects of women's human rights and how biblical verses¹ or quotations have been interpreted by society in such a way that it either promotes the rights of women or negates it. As part of culture, religions, (Christianity to be specific) including their teachings, their structures, and their rules for behaviour, have changed through history. As living conditions change and demand different human traits, modes of activity and organization, the messages and structures of religions are reinterpreted to meet the new conditions. Thus it should not be surprising that religious treatment of women has changed throughout history, even within single

¹ The Bible version that was mostly quoted for this document is the Holy Bible, New International Version.

religious communities.² Both pagan culture and Jewish custom insisted that women be kept in their place...opportunities for self-fulfillment, personal development, and for achievement and leadership in public life or organized religion were greatly restricted....Yet, there are Biblical provisions which give women promises of liberation from the chains of custom.³

The document examines the least options which have verses/quotations in the Bible that are conservatively interpreted in relation to women's human rights or that generate controversy. The most options give the best options for women's human rights, and a practical analysis which reflects the daily practice in relation to women's human rights and religious principles.

Each thematic area represents an aspect of women's human rights that has been subject to debate both by religious interpretation and social norms and practices. The "Principle of Equality between men and women" can first be seen from the diverse biblical quotes surrounding the 'creation' (Genesis 1:26-28, and Genesis 2:18) that have over the years generated so much controversy. In looking at "Women's Participation in Decision Making and Leadership," one can see that biblical allusion has highlighted on one hand, the restricted role of women in decision-making positions while on the other hand, it has also extolled notable women leaders in the Bible, such as Deborah, Ruth, etc. An apt symbolical analysis could also be seen in the teaching in Luke 10:38-42, where there is a preference for the role Mary played to that of Martha, when they were visited. However, in a letter by the Vatican to the Bishops of the Catholic Church, whilst highlighting on one hand, the importance of including women in policy making in the society, it reaffirmed the restriction of women's leadership role within the church.⁴ "Women and Work", as a thematic area of discourse, could be seen as relevant to the contemporary divergent views in most societies, of women's role in, and contribution to, economic development, most of which are deeply rooted in biblical interpretations. One aspect of women's human rights that has generated a lot of debate is the issue of the "Reproductive Health and Rights of Women." Some laws in Biblical times specified for instance, the impurity associated with the menstruation of women, (Lev.12:1-8, Lev. 15: 19-30). This was contradicted in another biblical experience as seen in Mathew 9:20-21 where the woman with the issue of blood was healed without being condemned but rather a concern was expressed about her well being. In the area of "Women and Inheritance," the laws of inheritance as depicted in the Bible in Ancient Israel, had it that "only sons had a right to inheritance, with a double portion going to the firstborn (Deut. 21:16-17). If the sons survived the father, neither the widow nor daughters had any share in the inheritance. However, if there were no sons, the estate went to the daughters, and in their default passed to the deceased man's relatives.⁵ The latter was made possible due to

² Christine E. Gudorf, *World Religions on Women: Their Roles in the Family, Society, and Religion*, In *Women and Religion in a Globalised World: A Conversation of Women's and Religious Leaders*, convened by the Peace Council and The Centre for Health and Social Policy. Chiang-Mai, 2004, p19

³ Letha Scanzoni. Nancy Hardesty, *all we're meant to be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation*, Word Books, Waco, Texas, 1994

⁴ Letter To The Bishops of The Catholic Church On The Collaboration of Men and Women in The Church and In the World, Vatican: 2004.

⁵ Letha Scanzoni. Nancy Hardesty, op cited, p44

Zelophehad's daughters' agitation that the inheritance of their father should come to them in the absence of an heir. Inheritance laws and practices in most African cultures remain discriminatory against women.

The issue of "Violence against Women" is very critical to this document, being the most prominent form of human rights violation in any given society. There were experiences depicted in the bible of women victims of violence, especially sexual violence. The main issue remains various notions of what exactly constitutes violence against women. A very conservative interpretation of 'wives submit to your own husbands...' for instance may inadvertently lead to some form of violence against women, in the form of wife chastisement, as the word 'submission' has often not only been taken out of context, but interpreted in a way to subjugate women.

Examination of biblical reflections on the issue of "Marriage," has again exposed some contradictions that have generated debate in contemporary societies. "Men's headship in marriage was similarly understood to allow husbands and fathers the right to inflict physical punishment on women as part of disciplining them....In time, the church came to limit the force used in such beatings....An interesting change on this issue of husbands' control of wives is found in recent papal teaching in Catholicism, in which the late pope, John Paul II, declared that the correct interpretation of the New Testament texts ordering wives to be submissive to their husbands is, in fact, that spouses are to have mutual submission to each other".⁶ A woman's choice to remain single has been seen in general as 'abnormal' in most societies, whereas biblical injunction has depicted that it is in fact 'preferred', in the quest to serve God without worldly distractions. Also, the right to divorce in most Christian marriages is greatly guarded by the Biblical terms of allowing divorce to take place only on the basis of "unfaithfulness." The main challenge for most Christians has been difficulty in defining/interpreting the meaning of "unfaithfulness."

The issue of "Dress Code" for women in most Christian communities has been another major subject of debate on women's human rights. Stemming from St. Paul's teachings (1 Cor. 11:2-16) the issue of women's dressing especially pertaining to head covering, was given prominence in the Bible. Whereas some believe that Paul's teachings about dress code for women must have been largely influenced by the cultural context of that era, others have believed and adapted this teaching to the dress code instituted for women in most Christian sects till date.

Men were regarded as the head, leaders in Christian gathering, decision makers, and no doubt, in the exercise of the affairs of the family, the society and the Church. These trends are obvious in today's modern world in spite of the shift from the non secular to a secular society. Most biblical texts are interpreted from the male perception and this has further sown the seed of subjugation in the lives of women via their teachings. Women are assigned subordinate roles, inferior status, restricted at the private domain and required to be submissive.

⁶ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women), August 15, 1998 #10, quoted in *Women and Religion in a Globalised World...*, op cited, p35

An overview of some biblical texts, their interpretation and how they relate to women in practice have adversely influenced the weight given to women's human rights issues in terms of equality, equity and justice. In this regard, this background document will be frequently updated based on further research and/or as a result of the outcome of discussions and consensus reached at each bridge building meeting on various women's human rights issues as the debate continues.

1. PRINCIPLE OF EQUALITY BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

Equality of humankind is one of the key tenets of human rights and justice. This concept of equality is found in virtually all human rights documents and they leave no room for discrimination between sexes. “Inequality in the status and treatment of women derive from the traditional values based on social cultural belief and attitude about the physiological, psychological and social inferiority of women”⁷. In Christendom, the Bible is seen as the reference point for leading any meaningful Christian life. Religious interpretations of text over time have arisen from patriarchal points of view and these have no doubt influenced the meaning ascribed to some of these texts. A plethora of biblical options which exist in the Bible have been used as suppressive means of relegating women to the background, infringing on their rights as well as reinforcing their unequal status with men.

On the issue of equality of the sexes, most patriarchal Christian communities place emphasis on the account of creation related in the 2nd Chapter of Genesis, which is quite different from the account of Genesis Chapter 1.

In many Christian traditions, most men opine the following:

- That in the sight of God, men and women are not equal because Adam was created first before Eve
- Man being created first is indicative of a natural inferiority of woman
- God is the head of the man and the man is the head of a woman
- Man is superior to woman because the man is from God while the woman is from the rib of man.
- God’s ultimate plan for women is that they serve their husbands

Least Option

“So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man and he brought her to the man. (Gen. 2:21-22)

“For man did not come from woman, but woman from man, neither was man created for woman, but woman for man” (1 Cor.11:8-9)

Most Option

“Then God said "Let us make human in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air ... So God created human in his own image, in

⁷ “Women’s Right as Human Right”, 1995, a Publication by Legal Research and Resource Development Centre edited by A.V Atsenuwa page 25

the image of God he created them, male and female, he created them. God blessed them...” (Genesis 1:26-28)

*“The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helper suitable for him’.
(Gen. 2:18)*

“She shall be called woman... therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife and they shall be one flesh. (Genesis 2: 23-24)

“And if his offering for a sacrifice of peace offering unto the Lord be of the flock; male or female, he shall offer it without blemish”. (Leviticus 3:6)

“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning, the Creator made them male and female ... (Matthew 19:4)

“And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” (Acts 2:4)

“In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God” (1 Corinthians 11:11-12)

“For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband:...”.(Gal 7:14)

“...For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed your selves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:26-28)

“Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.” (Ephesians 5:21)

“After this, Jesus traveled about, from one town and village ... The Twelve were with him, and also some women...” Luke 8:1-3)

Practice

In Nigeria, as well as many other societies across the globe, women and men are not accorded equal status both at the defactor and dejure levels. Although international human rights instruments and national laws such as the Nigerian Constitution have recognized principles of non-discrimination on the basis of sex, yet this is not fully integrated into practice as well as some laws. In Nigeria, some policy and legal measures have been put in place e.g. the National Gender Policy, and Acts banning obnoxious cultural practices against women in some states, however patriarchal values most of which are deeply rooted in conservative religious interpretations and cultural norms have continued to negate the implementation of the principle of equality between men and women. Some believe that women and men should not be accorded equal status, because

according to them men are recognized as the ‘Head’ of the family, and as such should assume ‘superiority’.

This lack of recognition of equality between women and men has led to discriminatory practices against women –such as (but not limited to) male child preference, denying women their inheritance rights (under some customary laws in Nigeria), emphasis on educating a male child in situations where there are limited financial resources in the respective family and other forms of discrimination. Discriminatory laws also arise from this patriarchal ideology of non equality of the sexes, e.g. some Nigerian Statutes such as the Police Act, Personal Income Tax, as well as some aspects of the labour laws in Nigeria, like the prohibition of the employment of women on night work in certain professions –e.g. mining.

A rigid adherence to the account of creation as stated in the second chapter of Genesis is systematically used to negate equality of the sexes. It is wrongly assumed that as help mate she has to be domestic but we should be mindful that God created them to have dominion over all the earth and subdue it. He did not specifically command man; He created them male and female and gave both dominion.

Moreover the *Catholic Voice* notes that the church’s androcentric approach to human rights contributes to the violation of the human rights of women. The dignity that the church grants to women is not equal to the dignity it grants to men.

A critical look at this situation and biblical references as well as other contributory factors such as culture, traditions and so forth depicts the foundation of women’s limitation in terms of their development and human rights. There is no doubt that women’s human rights concerns will be raised in the analysis of these issues.

2. WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS, DECISION-MAKING AND LEADERSHIP

Women, till date have had limited opportunities to strategic decision-making spaces in the society. In most, if not all communities, men are perceived as dominant and women as subordinate and this subordination of women is further reflected in their exclusion from leadership positions in political spaces (as well as private spheres) and within the church. In most communities, it is men that make decisions in the family and this is often justified within the context of biblical provisions that the man is the 'head' of the family.

Conservative religious views have given women access to little outside the domestic realm. The Bible contains some biblical quotations that have been used conservatively to undermine the possibility of women participating effectively or playing a leading role in the church and societal affairs. However, the leadership role of women has evolved over the years and more and more recognition is being accorded to women, albeit somewhat slowly, partly as a result of further reflection of some provisions in the scriptures depicting women in leadership positions. In recent times, there is a variation in both the status and leadership roles of women in the church. There seems to be a shift in most churches as women and young girls play more active roles than before. In some Christian sects, women are not allowed to minister in the church during major services, but they play some administrative roles in the church, while in some churches, women are ordained Pastors. In some catholic churches in Nigeria as elsewhere, women are now allowed to administer Holy Communion, while young girls also serve at the Altar, both practices which were unheard of in previous times, although women are not yet ordained as priests in the Catholic Church.

Least Option

"So he told her everything. ... When Delilah saw that he had told her everything, she sent word to the rulers of the Philistines ... Having put him to sleep on her lap, she called a man to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him . And his strength left him" (Judges 16:17-19)

"Let your women remain silent in the churches, for they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church." (1 Cor. 14:34-35)

"A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I (Apostle Paul) 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" (1 Timothy 2:11-14)

“The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things. That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children.” (Titus 2:3-4)

Most Option

Moses’ mother, an astute minded woman, for fear of her son being killed by the Egyptian, made a basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch and placed the child among the reeds along the bank of the Nile, while his sister stood aside to see what will happen. Moses life was spared and he grew up leading Israel for forty years. Exodus 2, 2-4,

“But the woman (Rahab) had taken the two men and hidden them. ... our lives for your lives!’ the men assured her. “ if you don’t tell what we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the Lord gives us the land.” (Joshua 2: 4-13)

“Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided” (Judges 4:4-5)

“Barak said to her, “ If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go. Very well, Deborah said, “I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours, for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman ... But Jael, Heber’s wife, picked up a tent hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.” (Judges 4:8-21)

“Abimelech went to the tower and stormed it. But as he approached the entrance to the tower to set it on fire, a woman dropped an upper millstone on his head and cracked his skull. Hurriedly, he called to his armor-bearer, “Draw your sword and kill me, so they can’t say, “A woman killed him” (Judges 9:52-54)

“Saul sent men to David’s house to watch it and to kill him in the morning. But Michal, David’s wife, warned him, “if you don’t run for your life tonight, tomorrow you’ll be killed. So Michal let David down through a window, and he fled and escaped” (1 Samuel 19:11-13)

“Then the woman went unto all the people in her wisdom. And they cut off the head of Sheba, the son of Bichri, and cast it out to Joab. And he blew a trumpet, and they retired from the city every man to his tent. And Joab returned to Jerusalem unto the king. (2 Samuel 20:22)

“The King said to Queen Esther, “The Jews have killed and destroyed five hundred men and ten sons of Haman in the citadel of Susa. What have they done in the rest of the King’s provinces? Now what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? It will also be granted....Esther answered, “give the Jews in Susa permission to carry out this day’s edict tomorrow also, and let Haman’s ten sons be hanged on gallows.” (Esther 9:12-13)

“He said to them “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.” (Mark 16:15-18)

“There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher....She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying...she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.” (Luke 2:36-38).

“As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!’ Martha, Martha’ the Lord answered ... Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:38-43)

“And many of the Samaritans of that City believed on him for the saying of the woman, which testified, He told me all that I ever did. (John 4:39)

“They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers” (Acts 1:14)

“In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see vision and your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servant both men and women I will pour out my spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.” (Joel 2: 28-29) (Act 2: 17-18)

“Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately” (Acts 18:24-26)

Practice

Women's participation in religious affairs, decision making and leadership in the communities needs to be critically analysed. Although the general notion from a patriarchal view holds sway that women are to be 'seen and not to be heard', History is replete with examples of women leaders both in the bible and the society. In Nigeria for example, we have Queen Amina of Zazzau, Moremi of Ife, Emotan of Benin, Margaret Ekpo of Calabar and so forth. These women were formidable leaders in male dominated societies and should be recognized and emulated. Conservative biblical interpretations and teachings have placed a constraint on the capacity and capabilities of women in ordering that they should be silent in churches, be in full submission and not teach or have authority over a man. With such biblical interpretations, it is no wonder that women in Christian communities were excluded from many occupations, professions and positions of leadership until recent. "Women were virtually invisible among the great prophets, high priests, jurists, judges and theologians that constructed the majority of religions around the world"⁸.

In most Anglican traditions, only men are members of the Council of Elders while the women are only deaconess. This is also similar in the Catholic traditions where the Pastoral Councils are led by the male parishioners. Altar servers in the Catholic traditions are male dominated –especially as evident in Catholic Churches in Nigeria. Some mythical beliefs include that -

- Women are not equipped to assume leadership roles⁹
- Women must not teach or preach to men in church settings.
- Women must obediently submit to their husband in all situations.

However, the level of women's participation in leadership and decision-making in the church varies from one denomination to another. In the Catholic and Protestant churches, there are agitations from different quarters for female leaders in the church. Some Pentecostal groups are beginning to ordain female Pastors while a few other churches are being established by women.

Women's participation in religious affairs, decision making and leadership in the families or communities no doubt has been affected by a myriad of cultural or religious trends. Despite the fact that many women at different points in history played strategic roles in defending their communities with their courage and wisdom, yet, in most Christian communities they are excluded from decision- making and leadership positions. They are usually visible in areas involving service like catering during festivities, social welfare, etc. According to the African Bible¹⁰, Jesus indicated that there should be no fixed roles for men or for women by preferring the woman who listened and learnt from him as a disciple would rather than one ready to serve him in a woman's traditional capacity. His attitude towards women when measured against the social mores of his time advocates the equality of sexes.

⁸ Christine E. Gudorf, "World Religion on Women: Their Roles in the Family, Society and Religion", In Women and Religion in a Globalized World: A Conversation of Women's and Religious Leaders, convened by the Peace Council and Centre for Health and Social Policy, Chiang Mai Thailand, Page 20

⁹ "Ten Lies the Church Tell Women" <http://www.godswordstowomen.com>

¹⁰ The African Bible, Biblical Text of the American Bible, Pauline Publications Africa, 2004 Page 1743

Many women are blessed with the power of prophesy and speaking in tongues but they are most often than not undervalued or not reckoned with completely. We have more men than women that are popular as prophets and prayer warriors in most religious settings.

Not only are women, as a group, systematically discouraged from taking leadership roles in the public sphere, but our societies are also biased in terms of recognizing the leadership qualities of women as individuals¹¹. In the opinion of Christine E. Gudorf “Religions of the world will not be able to support the dignity and the welfare of women until women are both recognized as being full members of the religion and integrated into decision making roles within the religion”¹². According to Olutoyin Mejiuni¹³, “...after gender and character, women in the formal and informal economies defined themselves in terms of their religious identities. Some identified themselves first by their religious identities and flaunted their religious identities. It can be gleaned from this that women are deeply committed to their religious practices and this has implications on the development and the human rights of women. Women have the right to participate in leadership positions and decision making processes in the society but what is obtainable is undue discrimination, exclusion, restriction and differential treatment on the basis of sex and gender.”

2.1. Opposing Wrong Decisions and Unjust Laws

From centuries back women have opposed unjust laws and systemic discrimination against them. During the colonial era in most parts of the global south, women opposed colonization and some lost their lives in the cause of nationalist struggles. This is reflected in biblical verses as evidenced by the role that Esther and Vashti played.

Least Option

“And he said who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” The man said, “The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” (Genesis 3: 11-12)

“Then Rebekah took the best clothes of Esau her older son, which she had in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob. She also covered his hands and the smooth part of his neck with the goatskins...(Genesis 27:14-16)

“So Ahab went home, sullen and angry... His wife Jezebel came in and asked him, “why are you sullen? Why won’t you eat... Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up I’ll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite” (1 Kings 21: 4-7)

¹¹ Feminism in the Muslim World Leadership institutes 1998-1999 reports, p.65-66

¹² Christine E. Gudorf, “World Religion on Women: Their Roles in the Family, Society and Religion”, In Women and Religion in a Globalized World: A Conversation of Women’s and Religious Leaders, convened by the Peace Council and Centre for Health and Social Policy, Chiang Mai Thailand, Page 21

¹³ In a paper “Religious Fundamentalism, Globalisation and Women’s Emancipatory Learning”, delivered at a National Discussion 2006, organized by BAOBAB for Women’s Human Rights

“His wife said unto him, “Are you still holding on to your integrity?, curse God and die!” He replied, “You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” (Job 2:9-10)

Most Option

“Now bands from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman’s wife. She said to her mistress, ‘If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.’ Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel has said. (2 Kings 5:2-4)

“On the seventh day, when the heart of the King was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Habona...who served in the presence of king Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing her royal crown, in order to show her beauty to the people and the officials, for she was beautiful to behold. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king’s command brought by his eunuchs, therefore the king was furious and his anger burned within him.” (Esther 1:10-12)

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish. (Esther 4:15-16)

“...And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me Justice against my adversary.’ For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming!’ (Luke 18: 3-5)

Practice

There is a general notion that men are cool headed, rational, and capable of rendering sound judgment, as well as a belief that they have physical strength and therefore appropriate as heads of households and societies. In a contrasting view, women are seen as nurturers, emotional and weak. However history is replete with the possibility of women and men sharing similar qualities such as intelligence, creativity, the ability to lead and teach. While there are biblical references promoting the strength, grace and courage of women in leading and making decisions, conservative Christians rigidly interpret the acts of Eve, Rebecca and Jezebel negatively, and use this as the yardstick for unduly measuring women in general. Women are known for their ability to stand for justice and fairness in their dealing with the society. There are numerous examples of women of exemplary attributes who stood for the right decisions and justice in their

relationship with their families and the society at large. Some practices within the Christian faith reflect the stereotypes that -

- Women who exhibit strong leadership qualities have a spirit of Jezebel and are seen as not submissive
- Women are blamed for men's inappropriate behavior and rash/irrational decisions
- Women are more easily deceived than men
- Women are less rational and more emotional than men and should be prevented from making important judgments.

The foundation of this lies with the act of Eve in the Garden of Eden, where it is alleged that Eve was the one deceived and not Adam. This has constituted one of the hearts of the case against women. Eve's alleged weakness is being blamed for causing Adam's fall and thus for humanity's fall into original sin. There is a paradox twist to this story because Adam being alleged to be the head before the fall of humankind was also in the Garden with Eve at the material time when the tempter spoke to her. Adam failed in his responsibility in obeying the instruction of God not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He out rightly disobeyed God in the first instance by not reminding Eve who he was with while the tempter was with them (Genesis 3:6) and secondly by eating of the fruit that Eve gave to him. There is no doubt that Adam was present with Eve in the garden and he was directly given the instruction by God.

3. WOMEN AND WORK/FINANCIAL SECURITY

One of the greatest set-backs for women over the years has been limited access to economic resources often leading to their economic disempowerment. This is also largely due to women's work not being valued or their work undervalued in comparison with their male counterparts. Furthermore, women have less access to credit facilities, and economically disadvantaged due to institutionalized forms of discrimination e.g. denial of the right to own land or property under some customary laws and practices.

Some would interpret the biblical reference of a virtuous woman as indicative of a woman who earns a means of livelihood, and is economically and financially empowered. There is also a biblical reference to women using their skills to jointly work with men to do what God had commanded.

Least Option

“So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, “Quick,” he said “get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread.” (Genesis 18:6)

“So Tamar went to the house of her brother Amnon who was lying down. She took some dough, kneaded it, made the bread in his sight and baked it. Then she took the pan and served him the bread, but he refused to eat.” (2 Sam 13:8-9)

Most Option

“She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands.(Proverbs 31:13)

“She considers a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vine (Proverbs 31: 16)

“She sets about her work vigorously: her arms are strong for her tasks. She sees that her trading is profitable and that her lamp does not go out at night.”(Proverbs 31:17-18)

She maketh fine linen, and selleth it; and deliver girdles unto the merchant. (Proverbs 31: 24)

Give her of the fruits of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates. (Proverbs 31: 31)

“But by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may supply their lack, that their abundance also may supply your lack-that there may be equality...He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack.” (Cor. 8:14-15).

“She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls. (Proverbs 31:14)

*“All who are skilled among you are to come and make everything the lord has commanded: the tabernacle with its tent and its covering, clasps, frames, crossbars, posts and bases; the ark with its poles and the atonement cover and the curtain that shields it...Every skilled woman spun –blue, purple or scarlet yarn or fine linen. And all the **women** who were willing and had the skill spun the goat hair (Exodus 35: 10-12, 25-26)) (emphasis added)*

“Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife’s full knowledge, he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles’ feet.” (Acts 5:1-2).

Peter asked her “Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?” (Acts 5:8)

“If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.” (Timothy 5:16)

‘In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor’. (Acts 9:36)

Practice

Although women are occupied with productive, reproductive and community work, their income for these triple role is much less than that of the average man who is engaged in the same or even less roles –as reproductive roles are usually the responsibility of women.

It has been noted that women are more vulnerable to chronic poverty because of gender inequalities in the distribution of income, access to productive inputs such as credit, command over property (as customarily practiced in most communities) or control over earned income, as well as gender biases in labour markets.¹⁴

The labour of women had been used on a small scale in the formal sector of the economy as a result of the gender based division of labour and social discrimination in education. It has become obvious that the marginalization of women has reduced their access to substantial, regular income and social status in the society¹⁵. It is necessary for the woman to be empowered to assist in running the affairs of the home and partner with the man to fend for the family. Christian conservatives particularly rely on biblical texts that reinforce the servitude of women and her ideal place to be the home.

¹⁴ Nulifer Cagatay, Trade, Gender and Poverty, UNDP, 2001

¹⁵“ National Policy on Women” a Publication by Women’s Aid Collective, page 14

In some of the Christian traditions, conservatives have a common understanding on the economic nature, functions and purpose of women in the society. In their opinion,

- The place of the woman is in the house, she should not work outside the home.
- The woman should be economically dependent on the man who is the “breadwinner”.
- The woman is the help mate to the man, to raise children and take care of the family.

Gender division of labour depicts the woman’s role to be that of cooking, rearing children and basically taking care of the home, while men hold all the important positions of leadership, creativity, and responsibility. Women’s work is ‘unimportant’, ‘unspecialized’, and often unpaid.¹⁶ The economic value of the work the women do in the home is not recognized.

The trend concerning women and work is becoming more dynamic and more women are taking up the responsibility of ‘bread winning’ for their families, partly also due to the prevailing global economic crisis.

¹⁶ Letha Scanzoni. Nancy Hardesty, *all we’re meant to be*, op cited, p81

4. WOMEN AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS

The most critical family issue in improving the welfare of women in all religions and cultures involves recognizing women's rights to control their own bodies; to consent to marriage, to have freedom from both physical and sexual abuse inside and outside of marriage, and to control their own reproduction. The Christian religion have recognized only a woman's right to consent to marriage, and in most parts of Nigeria this right is not fully implemented. Marital rape is not recognized in Nigerian laws. Religious teaching on the headship of men in marriage has supported understandings of wives as obliged to obey men in every aspect of life, including reproduction.

Women according to the traditions of the Biblical Old Testament era were viewed through patriarchal eyes. They were not given the same rights as men. They were mere objects, meant to please and serve men. Their main function was to run the home and raise the children. Even in Catholicism in which Pope John Paul II has espoused that the correct interpretation of the New Testament text ordering wives to be submissive to their husbands, is in fact, that spouses are to have mutual submission to each other, the teaching of the headship of men is still preached across religions, thereby denying women control of their bodies.

Interestingly enough, while there are some major differences in the way that the text of world religions have understood the nature of women, they agree almost totally on the purpose of women, their function in society; they are to be wives and mothers, they are under the protection and control of men, and their usual place is in the home. This understanding generally results from women being defined in terms of their differences from men, rather than their similarities with men, and the basic difference noted is reproductive biology. Often this biological reproductive difference is interpreted to mean not only that women were created for reproduction, but also that because they were created for the physical and material task of reproduction, women are less rational and more emotional than men, and should be prevented from making important judgments.

While at one level this description of women is fairly consistent in religious texts, it is often contradicted at other levels for instance while Leviticus 12: 1-4 speaks of a woman's exclusion due to menstruation, the story of the woman with the issue of blood speaks about Jesus Christ not discriminating against women under this circumstance. When we consider how important religion has been in forming and maintaining restrictive concepts of women as limited to sexual, reproductive and housekeeping service to men, it is striking how little religions have been involved in contemporary reforms in these same areas.

The divinely ordained laws concerning marriage, divorce, adultery, rape and so on, allow for the regular and orderly transmission of women from the homes of fathers to the homes of husbands, or, if need be from one husband to another. In some conservative churches women still sit separately from men and are refrained from sexual contact

during menstrual cycles or for seven days. In some instances, women are considered not 'pure' when they are menstruating and are therefore excluded from entering places of worship. In some Cultures women who are menstruating are not allowed to cook.

The most common response of religions to initial social and legal trends toward respecting women's bodily right is strong organized resistance, followed by a capitulation which takes the form of simply falling silent on these issues. Very seldom have a religion ever formally repudiated former teachings oppressive to women, very seldom have they put forth new interpretations of either problematic sacred texts or theological and philosophical teachings in order to support women's integrity and body right, while the few repudiations and reinterpretations that do exist are seldom publicized or made a part of the regular media through which religion is transmitted.

4.1. Health and Purity

Some laws in Biblical times specified for instance, the impurity associated with the menstruation of women. They were viewed as 'unclean' during menstruation and after childbirth. This further isolates them from society and from active contribution and participation on events that affect them as citizens.

Least Option

Rachael said to her father, 'Don't be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence, I'm having my period'. (Genesis 31:35)

A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. (Leviticus 12:1-2)

A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she will be unclean during her monthly period... Then the woman must wait three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification (Lev. 12:1-4)

'When a woman has her regular flow of blood the impurity of her monthly period will last seven days, and anyone who touches her will be unclean till evening'. (Leviticus 15:19)

'Do not approach a woman to have sexual relations during the uncleanness of her monthly period' (Leviticus 18:19)

Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had redeemed from the earth. These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They followed the Lamb

wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as first fruits to God and the Lamb. (Revelation 14:1-4)

On the contrary, Jesus welcomed women, (John 4:9-10), (John 20:15-17) thereby going against prevailing traditions and attitudes toward women. Men did not speak to women in public, did not allow them to serve. Jesus conversed with women, had compassion on women of old who were described as ‘barren’, healed them, discussed with them, listened to their opinions, taught them and loved them without judgment. A specific example included Jesus having compassion on a woman whom the community had labeled a ‘prostitute,’ a practice unheard of in that society. (John 8 3-11)

Most Option

Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, ‘If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed. (Mathew 9:20-21)

Practice

Numerous rituals under customary practices govern a woman’s life during her menstruation. In some societies, no one speaks of it publicly. Some tribes associate menstruation with ‘evil spirits’, while some claim that it brings ill-luck.

Certain cultural practices still isolate women who are menstruating from participating in, or performing, certain functions. Also, some Christian belief systems forbid women who are menstruating from cooking and from attending church services. In the Celestial Church a woman who is menstruating is not allowed to enter the church or wear the white robe which signifies ‘purity’. Women are isolated from church functions until after menstruating, when they are considered ‘clean’ again.

4.2. Fertility Issues

With regards to childbearing, while it is recorded in the New Testament that ‘women will be saved through childbearing, the bible records Jesus pointing out that motherhood does not necessarily confer blessing, instead he insists that ‘Blessed are those who hear the word of God and heed it’

Least Option

To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly increase your pain and you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you’. (Genesis 3:16)

“And Sarai said to Abram, behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing; I pray thee, go into my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened unto the voice of his wife”(Gen. 16:2-3)

When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb, but Rachael was barren For she said, 'It is because the Lord has seen my misery, surely my husband will love me now' (Genesis 29:32)

When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. So she said to Jacob, Give me Children, or I'll die! (Genesis 30:1)

Jacob became angry with her and said, 'Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?' (Genesis 30:2)

'This time my husband will treat me with honor, because I have borne him six sons' (Genesis 30:20)

She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said 'God has taken away my disgrace'. (Genesis 30:23)

And because the Lord had closed her womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the Lord, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat (Sam 1: 6-7)

Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children are a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of warrior are sons in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate (Psalm 127:3-5)

Your wife will be a fruitful vine within your house; your sons will be like olive shoots around your table. Thus is the man blessed who fears the Lord (Psalm 128:3-4)

"The Lord has done this for me, 'she said, 'In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people" (Luke 1:25)

Most Option

God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.' (Genesis 1:25)

'Elkanah her husband would say to her why don't you eat? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?' (1 Samuel 1:8)

"For it is written, 'Be glad, O barren that bears no children; break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labour pains; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband.'" (Galatians 4:27)

Practice

In most African societies and across religious sects, women who are sterile are discriminated against and treated in an inhuman and degrading manner. Women are considered child bearers before being considered as women. In many cultures, women are still blamed for a childless marriage, and put under severe pressure. In such situations, some women feel a sense of obligation to allow their husbands to marry other women as a means of pacifying the man and the family, thereby securing her stay in the family. There are cases when men have married women with off-springs who become heirs to this family, though they are not the biological children of the family.

In most cultures and across religions, women have to obtain the consent of the husband before they can seek reproductive health care services, and in some cases husbands refuse to consent that their wives undergo surgery pertaining to reproductive health matters – even when it is medically certified that they require it. The excuse for such denial is the fact that it signifies a sign of weakness on the part of the woman, and the belief that labour pain is the joy of childbirth. There are biblical interpretations encouraging women to give birth like ‘the Hebrew women’ (Exodus 1:19) despite the dangers this might pose to their health. Some cultures also condemn women who are unable to go through child birth through the natural method and have to resort to caesarian section, without consideration to possible health implications. There is also reluctance by society for childless couples to take advantage of benefits of scientific progress and to access available reproductive health technology and gender sensitive research.

There are reports from research in the field of sexual and reproductive health rights confirming that women experiencing fertility issues are mocked. Their challenge extends to being denied inheritance under customary laws and practices. Properties are mostly inherited by children who are products of a marriage. Some arguments held that most sterile women ‘are not women’. They are treated as ‘outcasts’ and their conditions are attributed to ‘witchcraft’ either from them or their family.

4.3. Family Planning

Some Christian sects have accepted women’s right to use contraception, and some denominations, a right to abortion under certain circumstances, while other sects oppose certain contraceptive options for women. “The hierarchy of the Catholic church uses ‘Conscience Clauses’ to exempt itself from laws that require them to provide emergency contraception to women who have been raped or women who simply want to retain control over the reproductive parts of their bodies.” (Conscience: 2003 p5).

Least Option

“Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one’s youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.” (Psalm 127:3-5)

“Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your sons will be like olive shoots around your table.” (Psalm 128:3)

Most Option

“The wife’s body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband’s body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer.... I say this as a concession not as a command.”(1 Cor. 7:4-5)

Practice

In practice most churches still have controversial views with regards to contraception and birth spacing in families. Abortion is viewed as a taboo, while family planning is not acceptable to some faiths. Teachings in both Catholic and Pentecostal churches frown at abortion and women who engage in it are condemned.

The Nigerian laws do not support abortion, according to provisions of Section 228- 230 of the Criminal Code Act, abortion is allowed only when the health of a woman is endangered.

4.4. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

None of the communities in the bible practiced circumcision (female genital mutilation) on their female children.

Most Option

“This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised.... (Genesis 17:10-12)

“So Joshua made flint knives for himself, and circumcised the sons of Israel at the hill of the foreskins...And this was the reason why Joshua circumcised them: All the people who came out of Egypt who were males....”(Joshua 5:3-4)

So he raised up their sons in their place and these were the ones Joshua circumcised (Joshua 5:7)

On the eighth day when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. (Luke 2:21)

‘Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. If those who are not circumcised keep the law’s requirements will they not be regarded as though they are circumcised (Romans 2:25-27)

Circumcision is nothing and un-circumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commandment is what counts (1Corinthians 7:19)

Yet not even Titus who was with me was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek (Galatians 2:3)

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love' (Galatians 5:6)

Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh'. (Galatians 6:12-13)

Practice

In predominant Christian societies -up to the 19th century, some 'rebellious' women in Europe were circumcised to render them more docile. In some parts of Nigeria, Female Genital Mutilation is practiced. The practice is common in South-South and some parts of South-West of Nigeria. The practice is an affront to women's reproductive well-being, their bodily integrity and has serious health implications. This practice embedded in culture is done with the belief that a woman's sexuality will be controlled. It is also done with the belief that a woman's chastity will be maintained before and after marriage. It has gradually evolved to an economic activity yielding income to the perpetrators. In some cultures, women are required to undergo circumcision before they get married or are fully accepted into womanhood. In some other communities children are circumcised on the 8th day following biblical injunction which stipulates that this should be done for men. However most churches have come to the realization that circumcision for girls is not recognized in the Bible. Some African countries such as Somalia and Ethiopia have outlawed this practice making it a punishable offence –though there remains a huge gap between law and practice. Although outlawed in some states in Nigeria, this practice persists as a result of lack of awareness on women's human rights.

5. WOMEN AND INHERITANCE

The case of inheritance of properties and possession by women was not given prominence and only once where women allowed inheritance in the bible. The daughters of Zelophehad pleaded their case to be allowed to inherit their father's property and this was accepted. (Numbers 36 3-10). This acceptance however was because the man had no male children.

Least Option

Now the firstborn said to the younger, "Our father is old, and there is no man on earth to come in to us as is the custom of the earth. Come let us make our father drink wine, and

we will lie with him, that we may preserve the lineage of our father.” Thus both the daughters of Lot were with child by their father. (Gen.19: 31-36)

“...If a man dies and leaves no son, turn his inheritance over to his daughter.” (Numbers 27:8)

“Now suppose they marry men from other Israelite tribes; then their inheritance will be taken from our ancestral inheritance and added to that of the tribe they marry into. And so part of the inheritance allotted to us will be taken away. (Numbers 36: 3).

“Every daughter who inherits land in any Israelite tribe must marry someone in her father’s tribal clan so that every Israelite will possess the inheritance of his fathers.” (Numbers 36: 8)

“...Moses told us that if a man dies without having children his brother must marry the widow and have children for him. Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother right down to the seventh. Finally, the woman died... at the resurrection whose wife will she be of the seven since all of them are married to her? Jesus replied...At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like angels in heaven.”(Matthew22: 24- 30)

Most Option

“Our father died in the wilderness, but he was not in the company of those who gathered together against the Lord...and he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be removed from among his family because he had no son? Give us a possession among our father’s brothers.” (Num. 27:3-4)

God responded through Moses “The daughters of Zelophehad speak what is right; you shall surely give them a possession on inheritance among their father’s brothers and cause the inheritance of their father to pass to them.” (Num. 27:7)

“They said “When the Lord commanded my lord to give the land as an inheritance to the Israelites by lot, he ordered you to give the inheritance of our brother Zelophehad to his daughters.”(Numbers 36:2)

“So Joshua gave them an inheritance along with the brothers of their father, according to the Lord’s command. Manasseh’s share consisted of ten tracts of land beside. Gilead and Bashan east of the Jordan, because the daughters of the tribe of Manasseh received an inheritance among the sons.” (Joshua 17: 4-6)

“Nowhere in the land where there found women as beautiful as Job’s daughter, and their father granted them an inheritance along with their brothers. (Job 42: 15)

“The widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food...choose seven men from among you... We will turn this responsibility over to them” (Acts 6: 1-6)

“Give proper recognition to the widows who are really in need, but if a widow has children and grand children these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family...The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God...but the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even when she lives” (2Timothy 5: 3-5)

“Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” (1st Peter 3:7)

Practice

Certain cultural practices negate women’s rights to inheritance due to the inequality between men and women. This is corroborated by deliberate acts of some churches who emphasize some portion of the verse of the bible supporting and focusing on women’s submissiveness, without reference to the provision which also stipulates the man’s duty as a partner. This act reinforces the inferiority of women. Consequently such teaching will hardly concede equality of share in inheritance, hence militate against a woman’s right to inheritance.

Under customary laws in some societies, women are unable to inherit, own or sell land. This has devastating consequences for the economic, social and cultural rights of women, particularly widowed women who are often required to leave the land that they have tended during their married life, because they have no legal title to the land in their own right. This is against biblical injunctions which advocate care for widows.

However under statutory marriage, where a man has left a Will, the woman can inherit. There is however a gap between law and practice. Frequent importation of native laws and customs of inheritance in the execution of Wills of a testator duly made under the WILLS ACT results in hardship to even women married statutorily. For example, if a testator bequeaths his matrimonial home to his wife in perpetuity, objections are raised to the execution of that bequest on the ground that native law and customs of the Igbos for instance stipulate that a man’s dwelling house belongs to his eldest son or male next of kin at his demise.

In most customary practices in Nigeria, girl children are denied inheritance rights. In some practices in the South East of Nigeria, the first daughter in some cases is expected to remain in the father’s home to bear children (male children). The reason for this is to ensure that the father’s name is preserved from generation to generation. In these cultures, it is a belief that a man who has only female children loses his name at death.

On the issue of wife inheritance, in a situation whereby there was no offspring in the marriage, the woman is inherited by a brother-in-law in some cultures in Nigeria. In some other cultures such as some parts of Okitipupa in Ondo state, at the demise of a husband, a woman is ‘given’ to another male member of the family to ‘take care of her’. In some other parts, the woman is seen as part of the man’s property and inherited alongside his

other properties. However, daughters' inheritance is recognized by some communities in Nigeria for instance in some Yoruba culture, and some parts of Cross River and Bayelsa states. The predominant practice however is to disinherit daughters on the basis that they will get married in the future.

6: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The issue of Violence against Women is the most prominent form of violation of women's human rights in any given society. Various violations exist in the bible ranging from sexual violence, domestic violence, emotional and psychological violence and various others. Christianity while expanding has absorbed local traditions. The variety in interpretations of religion, as well as in indigenous culture and traditions, obviously has repercussions on women's lives and rights; but above all, there is a political use of both religion and culture to continually suppress women. Violations are widespread without condemnation from women who cannot differentiate between what pertains to culture, religion or to politics thereby making it difficult to challenge and seek changes. In this biblical reference, there is no consideration to the woman's thoughts or feelings as she is given to a husband's brother.

“Then Judah said to Onan, ‘Lie with your brother’s wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to produce offspring for your brother.’ But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so whenever he lay with his brother’s wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from producing offspring for his brother. What he did was wicked in the Lord’s sight; so he put him to death also (Genesis 38:8-10)

Sexual Violence

Least Option

He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. (Gen. 16:4)

When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, the ruler of that area, saw her, he took her and violated her. (Genesis 34-2)

Then the Lord said to Moses, speak to the Israelites and say to them: If a man's wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him by sleeping with another man and this is hidden from her husband and her impurity is undetected (since there is no witness against her and she has not been caught in the act) and if feelings of jealousy come over her husband and he suspects his wife and she is impure - or if he is jealous and suspects her even though she is impure The husband will be innocent of any wrong doing, but the woman will bear the consequences of her sin. (Numbers 5:11-31)

When you go to war against your enemies and the Lord your God delivers them into your hands and you take captives, if you notice among the captives a beautiful woman and are attracted to her, you may take her as your wife. Bring her into your home and have her shave her head, trim her nails and put aside the clothes she was wearing when captured. After she has lived in your house and mourned her father and mother for a full month, then you may go to her and be her husband and she shall be your wife. If you are not pleased with her, let her go wherever she wishes. You must not sell her or treat her as a slave since you have dishonored her. (Deut. 21: 11-14).

...And the young woman's father shall say to the elders, "I gave my daughter to this man as wife, and he detests her. Now he has charged her with shameful conduct, saying, "I found your daughter was not a virgin", and yet these are the evidences of my daughter's virginity." But if the thing is true, and evidences of virginity are not found for the young woman, "then they shall bring out the young woman to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death with stones, because she has done a disgraceful thing in Israel to play the harlot in her father's house." (Deut. 22:16-21)

If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married, and he sleeps with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death- the girl because she was in a town and did not scream for help, and the man because he violated another man's wife.(Deut 22: 23- 24).

"If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her... however, if a man does not want to marry his brother's wife... she shall ... take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, "This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line" (Deut. 25: 5-9)

"While they were enjoying themselves, some of the wicked men of the city surrounded the house. Pounding on the door, they shouted to the old man who owned the house, "bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him." The owner of the house went outside and said to them, "No, my friends don't be so vile. Since this man is my guest, don't do this disgraceful thing. Look here is my virgin daughter, and his concubine. I will bring them out to you now, and you can use them and do to them whatever you wish. But to this man don't do such a disgraceful thing... So the man took his concubine and sent her outside to them, and they raped her and abused her throughout the night, and at dawn they let her go... When her master got up in the morning... and stepped out to continue on his way, there lay his concubine, fallen in the

doorway of the house... he said to her "Get up; let's go." But there was no answer then the man put her on his donkey and set out for home. When he reached home, he took a knife and cut up his concubine, limb by limb into twelve parts and sent them into all the areas of Israel." (Judges 19: 22-29)

"They said kill every male and every woman who is not a virgin" (Judges 21:11)

"And when she had brought them unto him to eat, he took hold of her and said unto her, come lie with me, my sister. And she answered him, Nay, my brother, do not force me; for, no such thing ought to be done in Israel: do not thou this folly."(Sam 2 13:10-12)

And Amnon said unto Tamar, "Bring the meat into the chamber that I may eat of thy hand" And Tamar took the cakes, which she had made and brought them into the chamber to Amnon, her brother. And when she had brought them unto him to eat, he took hold of her and said unto her, come lie with me, my sister. And she answered him, Nay, my brother, do not force me; for, no such thing ought to be done in Israel: do not thou this folly." And I, whither shall I cause my shame to go? And as for thee, thou shalt be as one of the fools in Israel. Now therefore, I pray thee, speak unto the king; for he will not withhold me from thee. How be it he would not hearken unto her voice: but, being stronger than she, forced her, and lay with her. (2 Sam.13:10-14).

... "You will set fire to their fortified places, kill their young men and dash their little children to the ground, and rip open their pregnant women." (2 Kings 8; 12)

"As for younger widows do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge." (I Tim 5: 11)

Most option

"But if out in the country a man happens to meet a girl pledged to be married and rapes her, only the man who has done this shall die." (Deut 22: 25)

Do not degrade your daughter by making her a prostitute, or the land will be turn to prostitution and be filled with wickedness (Leviticus 19:29)

"...David arose from his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself: and the woman was very beautiful to look upon. And David sent and enquired after the woman. And one said, is not this Bathsheba, the

daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite? And David sent messengers and took her: and she came in unto him, and he lay with her: for she was purified from her uncleanness: and she returned unto her house. And the woman conceived, and sent and told David, and said, I am with child...And it came to pass in the morning that David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. And he wrote in the letter, saying, set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die....And when the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she mourned for her husband. And when the mourning was past, David sent and fetched her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord. (2 Samuel 11:2-27)

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for her...so husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself.” (Ep.5: 25-28)

Domestic Violence

Least Option

The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, And she said to Abraham, Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.’

The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. But God said to him “Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring’. Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the desert of Beersheba. (Gen. 21: 8-14)

Most option

“...You flood the Lord’s altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask “Why?” It is because the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.” (Malachi 2:13-14)

Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. (Malachi 2: 15-16)

Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. (Malachi 2:15)

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21)

Practice

Domestic violence is widespread in Nigeria. Though there has been enactment of laws in some states in Nigeria criminalising domestic violence, e.g. Lagos State has the “Protection against Domestic Violence Law 2007,” domestic violence is still not regarded as a criminal offence by a majority of the society including law enforcement agents. There is no law specifically prohibiting marital rape. Even when there are interventions by social workers and NGO’s, this must be done with the consent of the woman. In most cases women are either too shy to stand and proclaim that their husbands or partners raped them or hit them, due to fear of being stigmatised. Also in some cultures it is almost an abomination for women to report cases of violations to non-family members let alone law enforcement agencies.

Physical Abuse

Least option

If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as men servants do. If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself, he must let her be redeemed. (Exodus 21: 7-8)

The anger of the Lord burned against them (Aaron and Miriam), and He left them. When the cloud lifted from above the Tent, there stood Miriam, leprous, like snow (Numbers 12: 9-)

If two men are fighting and the wife of one of them comes to rescue her husband from his assailant, and she reaches out and seizes him by his private parts, You shall cut off her hand. Show her no pity. (Deut 25: 11-12).

And Jephthar made a vow unto the Lord...whatever comes out of my house to meet me when I return in triumph... will be the Lords and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering... (Judges 11:30-31)

Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and he is saviour of the body (Eph. 5:22-23)

Most option

“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say? ...When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her....At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, ...until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus ...asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? “No one, Sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Emotional and Psychological violence

Least Option

“Then Sarai said to Abram, “My wrong be upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The Lord judge between you and me.” So Abram said to Sarai, “Indeed your maid is in your hand; do to her as you please.” And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence. (Gen. 16:3-6).

...They said to Samson’s wife, “Coax your husband into explaining the riddle for us, or we will burn you and your father’s household to death. (Judges 14: 15)

“No Widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband and well known for her good deeds such as... and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.” (I Timothy 5: 9)

(Weaker vessels) Husbands... be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers- (1st Peter 3:7)

Most option

“Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge” (Deut 24: 17)

“When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow...”(Deut 24: 19-21)

When you have finished setting aside a tenth of your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give it to...and the widow so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied. (Deut 26: 12)

“Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless and the widow”(Deut 27:19)

“Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need” (I Tim5: 3)

“So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander...if any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.”(I Tim 5: 14-16)

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”(James 1:27)

Practice

To date, violence against women is prevalent in many societies of the world. It seems to be on the increase, ranging from sexual assault, rape, wife battering etc. Such violence is oftentimes justified on the basis of non-progressive interpretations of biblical verses. In recent times, cases abound of children and even infants being raped.

Many women in various societies are conditioned to just keep quiet in order to preserve peace in their marriage. Battered women e.g. within a marriage find it difficult to end a marriage. They stay in such marriages for the sake of either the children or because it is perceived to be against Christianity to seek divorce. For instance, The Catholic church does not permit divorce and discourages separation. Women are counseled to simply endure. Pope John Paul the 2nd some years back beatified a woman who endured years of battering and was finally killed. This is not too different from what is practiced in Pentecostal churches, where a woman is counseled to endure abuse, especially if there are off-springs to the marriage.

Maltreatment of widows and other forms of obnoxious rites such as forcing a widow to drink the water collected from bathing the corpse of her deceased husband, and making her sit on a bare floor with tattered and/or dirty clothes on, have persisted over the years albeit of less magnitude than before due to promulgated laws against these practices. Despite the fact that these have no biblical backing, they are practices that some women victims cum survivors might not protest against having internalized the most conservative interpretation of the biblical text on ‘Wives submitting to husbands’ and believing that resisting such practices might be tantamount to disobeying divine orders.

Neglecting and/or denying the wife her conjugal rights as a punishment, is prevalent in certain cultural practices. This is supposed to serve as deterrent to a ‘stubborn wife’ since

women both married and single are not supposed to make sexual overtures, the woman remains like that until the 'ban' is lifted.

The practice of keeping concubines still persists in many customary practices in Nigeria. In some communities it is said that a man that restricts himself to one woman is planning an early death. Women who dare challenge unfaithful husbands are reminded that the man provides all their needs and should be allowed to be a 'man'.

7: MARRIAGE

From the earliest period in Christianity, marriage was understood to require the consent of both the woman and the man. This was undoubtedly due in part to the multitude of Christian virgin martyrs of the first centuries, who died rather than accept the marriages arranged for them, and instead insisted that they were brides of Jesus.

Christianity did not permit divorce until relatively recently, and Catholicism still does not permit divorce, for either men or women. Women have traditionally had no right to refuse sex to a spouse on a number of different grounds. Church teachings understood that marital sex was created for reproduction and to prevent lust from leading to serious sin, such as fornication or adultery. So a wife had the moral obligation to provide sex for the husband lest he be otherwise tempted to adultery.

There are three systems of marriage in Nigeria: Customary, Statutory and Religious (Muslim personal laws) marriages. The statutory marriage is characterized by consent of the two parties to the marriage. Statutory marriage in Nigeria confers on the husband and wife rights and obligations that are peculiar to persons who have acquired that status. These rights and obligations relate, inter alia, to consortium, maintenance, property, and other civil matters. Customary law marriage often requires in addition to the consent of the intending couple, parental or guardian consent and in some cultures, giving of bride price by the groom's family. There is usually no ready and reliable record of customary law marriages that are kept which a court called upon to determine the existence of such marriage may rely upon. Unlike statutory marriages, no compulsory and reliable system of registration exists for customary laws.

Least Option

Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over... For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him master.... Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you with the gracious gift of life... (1 Peter 3:1-7)

'but go to my fathers' family and to my own clan, and get a wife for my son... See, I am standing beside this spring if a maiden comes out to draw water and I say to her, 'Please let me drink a little water from your jar', and if she says to me 'Drink and I'll draw for your camels too.... (Genesis 24:38-50)

Most Option

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and they will become one flesh." (Gen.2:24)

The disciples said to him, if this is the situation between husband and wife, it is better not to marry. Jesus replied, Not everyone can accept this word, but only to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it. (Matthew 19:10-12)

"Submit to one another, out of reverence for Christ, wives submit to your husband as to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, his body, of which he is the savior. Now as the church submits to Christians so also wives should submit to the husbands in everything. Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." (Ephesians 5:21-25)

But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world – how he can please his wife and his interest and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs....(1 Corinthians 7:34-35)

The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and each woman her own husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time....(1 Corinthians 7:3-5)

"Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord, Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them." (Colossians 3:18-19)

"When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven." (Mark 12:25)

“But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage.” (Luke 20:35)

“So I counsel young widows to marry to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander.” (1 Timothy 5:14)

“Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife, but if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries she has not sinned.” (1 Corinthians 7:27-28)

“Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun – all your meaningless days. For this is lot in life and your toilsome labour under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 9:9)

Practice

The concept of marriage is still to date, a broadly debated issue as relating to diverse contexts. In relation to the rights of women, varied definitions and concepts of marriage but pre-dominantly male oriented societies often put women at a disadvantaged position. This inequality in marriage has been often justified on the basis of biblical interpretations. According to Dennis McCallum, it seems that Paul believed the pattern of sexual roles established in Genesis 3 for the marriage relationship also applies in general to the church¹⁷.

In different spheres of life within many societies, unmarried women are often stigmatized and are not accorded the same respect as married women. In some communities most women have their husbands chosen by either their parents or guardians on the basis that the parents have prior knowledge of the other family’s history (medical etc). Some churches also perpetrate the practice of ‘match-making’. This has led some women who are denied the opportunity to marry a man of their choice to frustration. In some instances women have been given out in marriage to offset loans taken by their parents or to seal up other some other business deals between respective families.

7.1 ADULTERY/FORNICATION

In Nigeria as most other societies, women are fundamentally expected to be remain faithful to their husbands regardless of whether the principle of fidelity is reciprocated.

¹⁷ Dennin McCallum, Against the Traditional Fundamentalist View on the Role of Women in the Church”, A Biblical Non-Traditional Views of Women’s Role in the Church, <http://www.xenos.org/essays/women.htm>

Biblical provisions also reflect that women are more admonished for committing adultery than men. This was revealed in the case of the woman who was accused of committing adultery and almost stoned to death before Jesus intervened and stopped the male-dominated crowd by questioning their fidelity. Church teachings often reflect that marital sex is created for reproduction and to prevent lust from leading to serious sin, such as fornication or adultery. In this regard, a wife is morally obligated by the society to provide sex for her husband lest he be otherwise tempted to adultery.

Least Option

If a man's wife goes astray is unfaithful to him by sleeping with another man, and this is hidden from her husband and her impurity is undetected...may the Lord cause your people to curse and denounce you when he causes your thigh to waste away and your abdomen to swell(Numbers 5:12-22)

Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, 'No my friends don't do this wicked thing, Look I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you and you can do what you like with them (Genesis 19:6-8)

"But while he was still living, he gave gifts to the sons of his concubines and sent them away from his son Isaac to the land of the east." (Genesis 25:6)

But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and gave her to Jacob, and Jacob lay with her. (Genesis 29:23)

Then Judah said to Onan, "Lie with your brothers' wife and fulfil your duty to her as a brother-in-law to produce offsprings for your brother." (Genesis 38:8)

"So he went to Ishmael and married Mahalath, the sister of Nebaioth and daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham, in addition to the wives he already had." (Genesis 28:9)

"In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the King's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name." (Esther 2:14)

Most Option

"May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer, may her breasts satisfy you always and may you ever be captivated by her love ...why embrace the bosom of another man's wife?" (Proverbs 5:18-20)

"Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act." "Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do you say?" But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with his

finger, as though He did not hear. He raised Himself up and said to them, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.” (John 8:3-11)

“I will not punish your daughters when they turn to prostitution, nor your daughters in-law when they commit adultery, because the men themselves consort with harlots and sacrifices with shrine prostitutes – a people without understanding will come to ruin!” (Hosea 4:14)

Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. He said to the woman “Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?” She said “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said to her, “Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more.” (John 8: 3-11).

“If a man is found sleeping with another man’s wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die” (Deut. 22:22)

“Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his/ And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.” (Malachi 2:15)

“Do not have sexual relations with your neighbors wife and defile yourself with her.” (Leviticus 18:20)

“You shall not commit adultery.” (Exodus 20:14)

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery. But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Mathew 5:27-28)

“Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will Judge the adulterer and the sexually immoral (Hebrews 13:4)

Practice

While women are required to be faithful in their marriages, most times men are not sanctioned when they are found otherwise. Most societies make excuses for men and describe such men as being ‘polygynous by nature’ this statement and others exonerate men who cheat on their wives.

In some societies women who are suspected to have cheated on their husbands are made to face serious sanctions such as the Yoruba culture in Nigeria, where men are said to place ‘magun’¹⁸ on the wife suspected of infidelity.

¹⁸ A system practiced by some under the Yoruba culture that is allegedly used to detect and punish an ‘unfaithful’ wife.

In most societies also women who choose not to marry are regarded as ‘women of easy virtue’, and not taken seriously. In some situations, women’s control or decision-making over their sexuality is seriously limited. These decisions are either made by their husbands or their guardians. This leaves them in no position to negotiate safe sex. In some cultures, widows are inherited by a male member of the deceased husband’s family. In most of such unions the men who ‘inherit’ the women would already have their own wives and this leads to a competition for recognition and attention between the women especially when the ‘inherited’ woman has no option to opt out of such an arrangement.

7.2. POLYGYNY

As far back as the middle of the sixth century, western monarchs practiced polygyny just as practiced in traditional African societies. Under most customary laws and practices in Nigeria, polygyny is practiced. In the Old Testament, there were polygynous practices such as Jacob’s, David’s and Solomon’s experiences. However, although the New Testament reflects that monogamy is the accepted or ideal form of marriage, it does not expressly prohibit polygyny except in the case of a bishop or a deacon.

Least Option

“So he went to Ishmael and married Mahalath, the sister of Nebaioth and daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham, in addition to the wives he already had.” (Genesis 28:9)

“In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the King’s eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name.” (Esther 2:14)

Most Option

“A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well”. (1Timothy 3:12)

“An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.” (Titus 1:6)

“Now for the matter you wrote about, it is good for a man not to marry. But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.” (1 Corinthians 7:1-2)

“Haven’t you read, he replied, ‘that in the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God had joined together, let man not separate.” (Matthew 19:4-6)

Practice

Monogamy prevailed as the only legitimate form of marriage in Greece and Rome, though it cannot be said that Christianity introduced obligatory monogamy in the western

world.¹⁹ Polygyny is justified in many cultures in Nigeria as well as in other African countries. However, some Christian faiths may not openly permit the practice of polygyny, but they accept members who marry polygynously in their church. In some cases, the respective members (i.e. men who married polygynously and their wives) are asked to take a ‘back seat’ role within the church.

7.3. DIVORCE

In Nigerian tripartite system of marriage –customary, religious (Muslim personal laws) and statutory systems of marriage, divorce is permitted, although in most (if not all) Christian sects, divorce is prohibited. Married couples are expected to endure whatever challenges they are facing within their marriage even at the risk of their lives (in the case of domestic violence) and this has been justified through interpretations of the scriptures.

Least Option

And the Pharisees came to him, and asked him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife? Tempting him. And he answered and said unto them, what did Moses command you? And they said, Moses suffered to write a bill of divorcement, and to put her away. And Jesus answered and said unto them, for the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife. And the twain shall be one flesh, so they are no more twain but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together let no man put asunder. And in the house the disciples asked him again of the same matter. And he saith unto them, whosoever shall put away his wife and marry another committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband and marry to another, she committeth adultery. (Mark 10: 2-12)

“Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and not break faith with the wife of your youth. I hate divorce, says the Lord God of Israel, “ and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,” says the Lord Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit and not break faith.” (Malachi 2:15-16)

Most Option

“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.” (Mathew 5:31-32)

When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her

¹⁹ Okey F. Eni, “Polygamy and the Rights of a Married Woman in Africa: Nigeria As a Case Study, Ibadan, 1998, page 211

a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife. (Deut. 24:1-2)

Practice

The issue of divorce remains controversial in most religious belief systems in our society. What is meant by 'marital unfaithfulness' as provided in the Biblical text is still subject to various forms of interpretation.

The Catholic Church is still not disposed to granting a divorce to couples, and even in extreme situations, they grant 'annulment' (i.e. as if the marriage never happened). The process of granting the annulment is also bureaucratic and takes a long process, as it must be approved by the Vatican. In some Pentecostal faith, at the threat of life of a woman, they may allow divorce and remarriage.

8: DRESS CODE

The issue of dress code has always been debated and has also been the basis for further control of women's sexuality. Over time, it is women's dressing that is most often regulated on the basis that dressing that exposes certain parts of the body can distract the men, although this argument does not apply the other way round. There is no one uniform dress code for women, but different institutions and churches have defined dress codes for their members. Until recently, women were restricted to certain dress codes in some churches.

Least Option

"A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment, for all who do so are an abomination to the Lord your God" (Deu. 22:5)

"Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonours his head. But every woman who prays or prophesizes with her head uncovered dishonours her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved." For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn or shaven let her be covered. For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. (1 Corinthians. 11:4-7)

"For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man." (1 Cor. 11:7)

"I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. (Timothy 2:9-10)

Most Option

“But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her, for her hair is given to her for a covering. But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.” (1 Cor. 11:15-16)

Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.” (Exodus 32:2)

Practice

The dress code being dictated to women based on religious interpretations has been mostly a Jewish cultural practice. Cultures change in history, adapting to new circumstances in the natural environment, production, politics and economics. As part of the culture, religion including their teachings, their structures and their rules of behaviours have always changed through history....As living conditions change and demand different human trait, modes of activity or organisation, the messages and structures of religion are reinterpreted to meet the new conditions²⁰.

In practice, the issue of mode of dressing for worship varies from one context to another. Some Christian belief systems say that there should be a particular mode of dressing for women. For instance, that women should not wear ‘men’s’ clothes. On the other hand, some people are of the opinion that there should not be a rigid distinction between a man’s mode of dressing and that of a woman, so long as the person is decently dressed. The dynamism in dress code is reflected in Aaron’s speech (refer to ‘Most Option’ column), where sons and daughters both wore earrings.

In Malawi for instance, there are some Christian groups who dictate that women’s dresses must be of a particular length, for instance during the reign of Kamuzu Banda. In some churches in Nigeria, women are not allowed to wear trousers. In many other societies today, women’s mode of dressing has been used as an excuse for sexual harassment and rape.

There is an emerging trend in some Nigerian institutions of higher learning and amongst state agents to institute dress modes and codes for women. In Lagos –a cosmopolitan city and commercial centre of Nigeria, there was a period during which law enforcement agents reportedly arrested innocent women going about their normal businesses on the basis of ‘indecent’ dressing. These women were unlawfully arrested and detained for so long having failed to meet the bail requirements that had been set at the Police stations.

²⁰ Christine E. Gudorf, “World Religion on Women: Their Roles in the Family, Society and Religion”, In *Women and Religion in a globalized World: A Conversation of Women’s and Religious Leaders*, convened by the Peace Council and Centre for Health and Social Policy, Chiang Mai Thailand

Conclusion

BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights continues to provide opportunities for further debate on women's human rights and religion. Recognizing that interpretation of religious texts and practices have been used as a platform to negate women's human rights often due to the application of the most conservative interpretations of these texts. This document further revealed varying degrees of interpretation and application of the provisions of the Biblical text in relation to women's human rights. Discussions at BAOBAB's series of meetings on Women's Rights and Religion, otherwise known as the 'Bridge-Building' meeting were extremely resourceful to the compilation of the document. In looking at the day to day practices, it was observed that some instances where women have been excluded in the past, based on religious interpretations were no longer the case today. For instance in the area of women's leadership, some Christian sects are slowly beginning to encourage women to take on leadership roles in the Church, while this is still forbidden in other Christian sects. The infusion of culture into religious interpretations is well reflected in this documentation and BAOBAB with other like-minded women's human rights organizations, continue to seek dialogue to ensure that women's rights are not compromised in the course of conservative religious interpretations.

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