THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE SOCIETY AND CHURCH DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT
Women from the early days of the Church have contributed immensely to the development of the society and Church. The need to recognize the contributions of the women to socio-religious and economic spheres of our national life is becoming increasingly urgent, especially now, that Nigeria is in dire need of rapid socio-cultural cum economic development. The work, which is anchored on preference theory, will explore the concepts of the Holy books about women, concepts of African culture and about women; subordination of women, total neglect of women from advent of Christianity in Nigeria; women in Church history, the role of women in the development of society; women in Church Development; factors affecting the role of women in the society and church development and then conclusion. The paper recommends among others that women should always recognize their worth and position in the quest for societal development and national transformation and so should brace up to confront gallantly all the social, religious, economic and political impediments that hold then down.

Introduction

The need to recognize the contributions of women to religious and socio-economic spheres of our national life is becoming increasingly urgent, especially now that Nigeria is in dire need for rapid socio-cultural cum economic development (Eya, 2005). Historical records have portrayed women as important agents of positive change in socio-cultural and religious developments despite several cultural attempts to relegate their contributions to the background (Anaele, 2012). In the sphere of religion, the non-projection of lofty achievements of women in the male dominated systems has been a long standing issue. Most institutionalized religions are patriarchal, meaning that men lead like father figures. Women activities are often relegated to the background as fringes of religious organizations. Their numerous supportive roles in the church and society are hardly accorded a place of prominence in our contemporary socio-religious scheme of things. That therefore reflects existing social distinctions between men and women (Fisher, 2008). In some cases, women are even considered incapable of realization of spiritual goals or dangerous to men's spiritual lives.

However, it is heart-warming and encouraging to note that in recent times several scholars have attempted in no small measure to rectify the anomaly of neglect for women. Their

efforts notwithstanding, some major areas of women activities are still relatively unexplored, under-explored or passively explored. In most orthodox churches in (Nigeria) women are not considered as true missionaries (Kirkwod: 1993). On the global scene, the United Nations Statistical Department (2000) shows that:

> *Women form one third of the world's population, do three-fourths of worlds' work, receive only one-tenth of the world's salary, and own one-hundredth of the world's land, two-thirds of illiterate adults are women, over three-fourths of starving people are women and their dependent children.*

It is on this premise of greater attention for women by the United Nations and other organizations on the empowerment of women for meaningful contributions to socio-religious and economic development of the society in general and church development in particular that this study is focused on women in church development. The study will therefore explore the unrecognized but important roles women play in the society and churches.

Theoretical Framework

Preference Theory

Catherine Hakim (2004), in her preference theory upholds the view that contemporary women have been lifted to a position of authority where they can compete favourably with their men counterparts. She views things from a different angle or perspective. This theory seems to suggest that the destiny of any contemporary women is right now in her own hands. However, in her preference theory she posits that, although women are known in history as victims of discrimination and marginalization in the society, but presently things have changed for the better for women. Hakim observes that before the 1960's a number of barriers made it very difficult for all but a small minority of women to be able to pursue a career on anything like equal terms with men. She listed five changes that have transformed the situation so that there are now better labour market opportunities for women. These changes are:

1. The Contraceptive Revolution: She claimed that from about 1965, the introduction of contraceptives made it possible for women to control their own fertility.

2. The Equal Opportunities Revolution: Which Hakim believes ensured that women for the first time obtained equal rights to access all positions, occupations and careers in the labour market but still maintains that there may still be some instances of discrimination against women.

3. The Expansion of White Collar Jobs which created jobs women find attractive.

4. Jobs for Secondary Earners e.g. part time jobs in which some women can fit in.

5. Increased Affluence has led to a situation in which personal preferences about work have become more important than financial necessity in determining work patterns. Many women can afford to work part time or even not at all. With the arrangement, women have choices to make. Some can decide to combine paid work with family work, others may decide to focus on career development while yet there are some who would rather prefer not to do paid work (Hakim 2004).

The implication of this theory is that women's fortune in our contemporary time depends on the type of preference or choice they make in life. This is due mainly to the fact that a lot of labour market opportunities have been made available for them by the provision of sound education for both men and women in our present day societies. Women have equal opportunities now to embark on the educational pursuit that will usher them into the career of their choices in future. Women are no longer tied down to their families by child bearing because through proper family planning they can decide the number of children they will like to have and use the rest of their life to engage in their career, full time or part time job. Women because of increase in affluence can also prefer or choose not to work at all or decide to combine paid work with family responsibility. Women who make their preference choices on the ground of the foregoing situations should not be interpreted to have been marginalized or discriminated against by their husbands or the society. Women should therefore make the

wisest choice or preference so as to maximize the available opportunities to contribute significantly to socio-economic development of their families, church and the society at large.

Concept of the Holy Books about Women

Among the several allusions are concepts from the Holy Bible in the book of Genesis where the woman is admonished thus: "Your desire shall be to obey your husband and he shall rule over you" (Fisher, 2008:26). The Holy Quran also directed that men are appointed guardians over women in respect of whom Allah has made some men excel over others and virtuous women are always obedient (Armstrong, 1993). The Holy books have been quoted severally as affirming that the man is the head of the home". Wives are instructed to be submissive to their husbands ... as the perfect will of God. Armstrong argues that none of the major religions has been particularly good to women. They have usually become male affairs and women and their developmental roles have been relegated to a marginal position (1993). Although women may have made significant advances in many areas of life, but a lot of religious and cultural factors have succeeded in relegating all these to the background. Women have continued to be excluded from key roles in many societies and religions. The exclusion of women is supported by the biblical account of creation where Eve, the woman was created out of the bone from the rib of Adam the man as a mere helper.

Concept of African Culture about Women

Apart from theological accounts, the African culture is rich with evidence of male dominion. This as it were, results to constant down playing of roles and contributions of women to the development of African society. Olejide (1996) opined that the review of concepts of culture formulation in Nigeria and in most parts of the world show that women are ascribed a subordinate status. This view she claims, rooted in the social, economic and political structures, is reproduced by the socialization process. Today, one finds out that African family as agent of socialization contributes significantly to gender inequality by providing a male child with rugged playing materials such as football, bicycle, and so on, and the female child with a doll or toy (Benson, 2003). This type of action prepares the male child for tougher challenges while the female counterpart is being treated and psychologically positioned as a weakling. The foregoing finds practical relevance in views expressed by Lengermann and Neibrugg (1995) that gender difference results from the different roles that women and men are taught to play or come to play within various institutional settings. From the family setting, socialization takes cognizance of gender division of labour. By the method of socialization boys are provided towards manhood and girls towards womanhood.

Subordination of Women

Holm (1994), reviewed some of the ways in which women are subordinated or exploited in contemporary religions, though they constitute over half of their total population and contribute immensely to their spiritual, financial and numerical growth. He argues, that "while the classical teachings of many religions have stressed equality between men and women; in practice women have usually been far from equal. It is argued by many scholars that "Women have a role to play in many religions, but it is almost always subordinate to the role of men, and it is likely to be in the private rather than the public sphere (Holm, 1994). In Buddhism, both men and women can have a religious role; as Monks and Nuns, as in Roman Catholic, respectively. However, all monks are seen as senior or even superior to all Nuns. Orthodox Hinduism only allows males to take a full part in ceremonies. In Islam, Moslem women for example, are not allowed to enter Mosques for worship. Holm (1994) agrees that Christianity also has been male chauvinistic.

Total Neglect of Women from Advent of Christianity in Nigeria

Why women role are neglected in Christianity may have started from the advent of Christianity in Nigeria. Christianity made its first incursion into Nigeria in 1842 through the joint missionary effort of the Church Missionary Society and the Basel Missionary Society. Among the officials, there was no record of any woman crew member. The pioneer missionary work was carried out by Henry Townsend, who was the first Anglican reverend (missionary) to visit Nigeria. He did the spade work. Since then, Christianity has made a gradual but remarkable progress from the coast to the hinterland. Women missionaries were not involved at that stage. Christianity was embraced by both men and women in Nigeria but while the role and activities of men were recognized and promoted, the role of women was ignored, even till now.

The role of men like Bishop Ajayi Crowther, C.A. Gollmer and others were highlighted while the women who assisted them in cleaning the church, in prayer meeting, teaching the women and children and so on were omitted.

One is perplexed to observe that in many churches where the women ministries provided a good platform for women to address issues that border on church growth, pastoral welfare, family affairs of church members and sponsorship of various church projects, the church has been unremittingly silent over the activities and achievements of women. Pathetically, women constantly risk their lives in evangelizing under rain and sun, spend their huge financial resources to carter for the needy members of the church, engage in charitable activities of all kinds and so on, yet the whole honour and glory go to the men. it is quite perturbing that little or no mention is being made of the numerous contributions of women to the development of the churches. This unconscious neglect of the women religious, social, moral, spiritual and economic contributions to church development has erroneously made women passive members of the church.

Women in Church History

Sterling (2010), observes that the subject of the role of women in the church has endeared the hearts of many especially those around by present day agitations in society for women to be freely admitted to the areas from which customs and traditions have excluded them. It is also of interest to those at the church's leadership since they have a genuine interest in all those elements making up the total church, and who sincerely desire women to have every opportunity to contribute their full potential to the universal church's growth.

Sterling opines that in the industrialized countries, women complete their family role much earlier in life, than ever before and yet outliving men in general almost everywhere. With the diminishing number of children whom parents find they can adequately support and educate, there is much, women could accomplish in the church. Sterling observes that women have served effectively in such roles as nurses, secretaries and teachers but seldom in church's management though, are women frequently made treasurers and departmental leaders in conferences, local and union. According to Sterling women were to be preferred as physicians ministering to women since they are in better position to understand what their fellow women might be passing through.

Christianity is often criticized for being chauvinistic toward women. However, the Bible portrays a special position for females in the church and society. Christian women shall have a major role in evangelizing and be able to serve because they share the same objective as Christian men: to fulfill God's commandments.

Throughout the bible, women have played significant roles in fulfilling God's plan. They have also held positions of leadership and responsibilities in spreading the gospel.

Paul acknowledged the female workers in the church and their efforts to further the message of Christ; even though he clearly discouraged them from having authoritative involvement in the church (1 Tim. 2:12 and 1 Corth 14:3).

In Romans 16:1, Paul mentions Phoebe, a female deacon or servant in the church. In other books, he refers to women that held churches in their houses, such as Nympha in Colossians 4:15 and Chloe in 1 Corinthians 1:11.

Women have a biblical role in society from helping within the church to fulfilling the Great Commission. The bible encouraged all Christians – both male and female to follow the command of God in telling others about Him. Women can use avenues such as serving in church and political appointments to accomplish this charge. Women in the bible have been variously used by God, and they will continue to be used by Him in the future.

The Role of Women in The Development Of Society

The rate at which women's contributions to the development of the society is being downplayed has become exasperatingly worrisome in the recent time. History has shown that women have contributed tremendously to the development of many societies, including Nigeria, because of their endowment with capabilities and qualities meant to complement those of the menfolk in the society. In line with the above, Onwunyi (2018) has noted that over time in history, a few women who have been entrusted with the leading role to manage human and material resources have more often

than not proved the same that, given adequate backing and free hand they can exceed normal expectations. A look at some of the areas where women have excelled and keep on excelling in their efforts towards societal development will lend more credence to the assertions above.

For instance, in community development and youth empowerment, women have done relatively enough as they do not fail to register their influence in every community development project through their huge financial donations. Women through their annual August meetings raise funds to embark on key projects like reconstruction of community markets, health centres, renovation of community primary and secondary schools, building of community halls, recreation centres and so on, which fast-track development in their communities. They also build skills acquisition centres where unemployed youths and indigent rural women can acquire bread-baking skills, such as fashion and designing, soap-making, pomade-making, computer repairs and programming, hair dressing, GSM repairs, Tailoring, interior decoration, bead-making, barbing saloon and so on. They equally establish rice mills, oil mills and cassava processing centres that help to provide jobs for jobless youths in their various communities. Unemployment and poverty are pervasive among the rural dwellers because the people are backward and undeveloped and cannot afford minimum standard of living (Iheanacho, 2016). Women are the most economically active group in rural communities. They play outstanding roles in national development as well as in rural community development (Obizue, Ogidi & Ejim, 2016).

Similarly, women contribute to the development of society through their active involvement in rural agricultural development. Greater percentage of women in the rural areas is into rural farming, where they engage in food and cash crops planting in different quantities. They are predominantly involved in food production and preservation and other agro-based activities (Obizue, Ogidi & Ejim, 2016). Findings from food and agricultural developing world, according to Meleki and Osaji (2016, p 790), "show that rural women represent approximately 43 percent of the agricultural labour force. With reference to Nigeria, rural women constitute 49.6 percent of the total population and are responsible for 60-80 percent of the food produced in the country. In Africa, 80 percent of the agricultural production comes from small farmers who are mostly rural women. Women are found at various acting points in the value chain in the agricultural sector either as primary producers, processors, input suppliers, commercial buying agents and market linkage providers (Urom, Ibiam, Abu & Chukwu-Oko, 2020). Without women, agricultural activities in general would have been put into extinction in most of our rural communities.

In politics, women have contributed significantly in shaping our national democracy and the entire political system through the creation of political awareness among women and political mobilization for active participation in politics. Women have arisen to demand for more representation in keeping with the principle of representative democracy which holds among others, that elected assemblies should reflect the composition of the electorate (Njoku, 2018).

Women constitute greater percentage of the electorates in Nigeria and other African countries today. Days are gone when women bowed low to political intimidation and marginalization by the menfolk. They have influenced the government to realize that democracy presupposes a genuine partnership between men and women in the conduct of the affairs of the society in which they work in equality and complementarity drawing mutual enrichment from the difference (Njoku, 2018). Women are known for their capability to bring about a paradigm shift in the political landscape of the society. Alapiki (2004) in Njoku (2018, p. 174) remarks that:

> *Experience from across the world where women play key roles in public office has shown that women politics and decision-making contribute to redefining political priorities, placing new items on the political agenda that reflect and address concerns as well as providing new perspectives on mainstream political issues.*

Women are also known for their commitment to community peace and stability. Women are naturally peaceful with high aversion to crisis and social instability in the society. They partner with the menfolk to ensure that there is peace in the community. Peace is the basis of human creativity, societal development and growth (Uyanga, James & Emena, 2019).

Women continuous advancement in contributing to societal peace and stability has impacted on the peace, unity, progress and socio-economic wellbeing of the society. Awe (1990) in Onwunyi (2018) sees the importance of women from their roles as promoters of peace and stability at homes and communities through their inherent managerial abilities.

Another area where women have played outstanding role in the development of the society is in family economic advancement. Women are naturally industrious, creative and finically intelligent. They have succeeded in transforming the bleak economies of their families, communities, local governments, states and nation to vibrant economies through their inherent economic strength, managerial skills, innovative ideas and their capacity to partner with visionary men (Akosile, 2010 in Njoku 2018).

Women, no doubt, are agents of cultural transmission and development in the society. They transmit acceptable values, cultural norms, mores, folklores, songs, dances, work of arts and so on to their children and by so doing help in preservation and transmission of culture from one generation to another. Culture is the totality of the patterned way of life of any people (Amah, 2018). It is the advanced development of human powers, intellectually, physically and spiritually by training and experience (Okonkwo, 2018). Otite and Ogionwo (1979) in Okonkwo (2018) see culture as a complex whole of man's acquisition of knowledge, morals, belief, art, custom, technology and so on, which are shared and transmitted from generation to generation. Culture of a group of people is expressed through language, symbols, norms, material goods, tools, clothing and so on (Okwara, Oluigbo & Okeke, 2012). The family is the first place where culture is taught and learned through the process of child socialization. The mother is the first informal teacher of the child. The bulk of the work of child socialization is done by the mothers in the family.

Similarly, women contribute to the development of the society through children moral development. Women take the duty of children good up-bringing and sound moral development as part of their primary responsibility. They show high concern in producing children who when they grow into full adults will contribute meaningfully to national development, using their fully developed potentials (Awusaku & Ugwulebo, 2013). Adult citizens of proven integrity are products of sound moral training (Kitause & Gemade, 2020). Children's sound moral training mainly comes from their mothers. Every mother carries with her such inherent power, influence and capacity to exercise real control over her children and steer their lives to any direction she wants (Thomas, 2016).

Women in Church Development

In most churches both orthodox and Pentecostals, women contribute immensely for the development of the churches. In our dispensation, women have become the bedrock of the church contributing significantly to the development of the church. Women are involved in church cleaning, choir, Sunday school minister prayer, giving huge donations towards the building of churches both in cash and kind, caring for the widows and indigent members, feeding the priest's family etc. no church presently can claim to survive without the women ministries. The ministries of the women in the churches today can be properly described as one of the strongest arms of the church. Women contribute to build Nursery and primary schools, church stalls or stores that give financial benefits to the churches. Women organize long vacation programmes for the youths in their churches. Women also install water projects for the churches and pay fees and hospital bills for children of indigent members and widow in their churches.

Women especially in most churches e.g Anglican Churches are solely incharge of youths' organizations in the churches. Time and time again, the women organize academic programmes during long holidays to keep the youths busy. They organize moral education classes where they teach the children especially the youths to prepare them as future parents. They inculcate in the youths' respect for elders, fear of God, hard work, principles of morality. Women have been playing significant roles in church development, women overwhelmly support every church project. They shoulder most of the financial, spiritual and social responsibilities of the church.

The role of women in socio-religious, cultural, economic and political development of any society cannot be underscored. In various churches today, women constitute the bedrock on which the foundation of church growth is anchored, which encompasses, development in

physical structures, spiritual, moral, numerical and financial aspects of the church.

Women contribute to church growth and development through grassroots evangelism. Today, it is clear that churches in Nigeria are replete with women who are active in ministry. These women organize themselves into special units in the church in order to address issues relating to their life and growth of their churches (Anyanwu 2000). Examples of such units are Anglican Mothers Union, Women Guild, Girls' Guild, Catholic Women Organisation (C.W.O), Good Women Association (G.W.A) of Christ Apostolic Church, Baptist Women's Missionary Union and so on. These women, who are energetic and enterprising as the men, work in synergy with the men folk in church leadership to move the church forward. Women are usually zealous, active and timely in actualizing their set financial targets for the up-keep of the church (Anyanwu 2000).

More so, women contributions to church growth and development take anchorage in their role as mothers, nurturers and children's moral educators. Christian women make more converts at home through Christian child-rearing practices which prepare children from grassroot as future dedicated members of the Church of Christ. Through conscious exercise of their maternal vocation, Christian women preserve certain Christian values in Children which make them active members of the church and responsible citizens in the society. They are thus called to contribute to church growth and society's values by inculcating in their children Christian values (Ihuagwu 2013:61). The above roles notwithstanding, women have not been seen by many scholars as playing pivotal role in church development.

However, some opinions suggest that women's role is biblically defined as helpers and should not compete with man, a superior sex. Some of them have limited the role and activities of women to the home as mothers and wives. The first and most basic nature of humanity is that human beings, both male and female, have been created in God's image and likeness. They were given a joint task to have dominion over the rest of God's creation. This was why Thurston (1998:28) asserts that "man without women cannot represent the complete man, so man without woman cannot render a complete ministry"

Factors Affecting the Role of Women in the Society and Church Development

Women role in the society and church development is being constrained by a number of factors which include among others:

Lack of Proper Education

Lack of proper education is one of the factors impinging on women's ability to play meaningful role in the development of the society and the church today. Education is the process by which individuals are trained to be mentally sound, emotionally stable, physically fit and socially well adjusted (Bisong, 2020). Lack of quality education affects individuals in all ramifications (Obanya, 2014). Illiteracy has incapacitated some women and made them begin to see themselves as those destined to always depend on men for almost everything. For such women, they cannot contribute to their personal welfare let alone contributing to societal and church development.

Cultural Prejudices

There are several cultural prejudices, stereotypical beliefs, and notions about women in the society today. In some cultures, women are not allowed to take up leadership roles where there are men, their leadership role are only restricted to women groups. They are not allowed to speak in the public, bless or break cola nuts, and pour libation as in Igbo society; they are restricted to the kitchen and other household chores, and child bearing. Women are believed to be inferior to men, second class citizens, weaker sex, who are meant only to seen and not heard (Kalu, 2018). These culminate in the general feeling that development of the society and church is the responsibility of the men and not the women. The above challenge is rooted in the patriarchal nature of our society which made the men lords and heads over the women.

Financial Incapacitation

Most women are not financially buoyant enough to engage in certain development programmes, either in the society or in the church. This is as a result of certain traditional values that hold sway in most African societies. For instance, in Igbo land, women are not given any inheritance in their father's house, and everything a woman possess in her husband's house automatically becomes that of her

husband. (Onwunyi, 2018). Thus, their noble ideas and wonderful aspirations become mere day dreams amidst lack of wherewithal to make them a reality.

Home Challenges

Women are always bogged down in the heaps of household chores, the care of children, general home management that constant draw their attention away from social and religious activities. Naturally a pregnant woman or a nursing mother may not be able to take up certain responsibility in the society or in the church (Onwunyi, 2018).

Conclusion

The need to recognize the rights and dignity of women in the society and church is becoming very important. In the social and religious affairs, the exclusion of women in the male dominated system has been a long standing issue. Historical records have portrayed women as important agents of change in socio-cultural and religious development despite several cultural attempts to relegate them to the background.

Some biblical teachings such as 1 Timothy 2:12, 1 Corinthians 14:3, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, stand as road block to women serving as elders in the church. All these are opposed to the views of proponents of egalitarianism which states that men and women are the same with respect to their roles, not just equal before God. The proponents of this theory believed that women should be allowed to hold any position in the church just as men (Ephesus 5:21).

Women are playing very significant roles in the society and church development in spite of the hindrances. It is high time such impediments that have allowed the men to occupy and enjoy all the positions of honour in the society and churches be removed so that women would come up and take leadership positions in the church. If we should go back to the drawing board, one would equivocally and clearly agree that the society and the church cannot stand strong without the contributions of the women.

Recommendations

In order to enhance women capacity to play more efficient roles in the society and church development, this paper makes the following recommendations:

1. Women should always recognize their worth and position in the quest for societal development and national transformation and so should brace up to confront gallantly all the social, religious, economic and political impediments that hold then down.

2. The government and the church should take practical steps to emphasize and at the same time make special funds available for girl-children education in the society, especially those from the poorest of the poor, to enable them have access to quality education. This has become very imperative because of the importance of quality education in unlocking women's capacities for meaningful contributions to the society and church development.

3. The government and the church should synergize efforts to douse the flame of inequality kindled and fanned by the patriarchal structure of our environment by creating a platform of equality and inclusiveness that will enable men and women have equal access to decision-making structures, organizations and institutions that affect their lives.

4. Members of the society should cooperate and give unflinching support to the women folk in their efforts to contribute diversely to the development of the society. All the wrong notions, cultural biases and stereotypical beliefs about women should be thrown overboard in order to fully harness the galaxy of their natural endowments for national development.

5. The church should see the need to incorporate women of substance or high endowments among them into their decision-making desk so as to explore such wonderful endowments for church development.

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