

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON GENDER EQUALITY: AN INVESTIGATION INTO RELIGIOUS MILIEU IN AFRICA

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Abstract

God created male and female to complement each other in a religious circle without undue competition or discrimination. This paper investigated the biblical perspective of gender equality within the religious landscape of Africa. With some particular discussions on the three religions in Africa. The purpose of the work is to scholarly define key terms, discuss biblical perspective on gender equality, historical contexts of gender inequalities in Africa, contemporary religious situation on gender equality. The writer adopted chronological analysis of some relevant passages in both Old and New Testaments. The research provided a nuanced understanding of how religious doctrines shape attitudes, behaviours, and institutional structures pertaining to gender dynamics in Africa. The paper presented some barriers that hinder equitable access to religious engagement of females. Through a biblical lens, this work unraveled the underlying dynamics that perpetuate religious inequalities in Africa. By foregrounding the voices and experience of diverse communities, the study amplified areas where females were marginalized and challenged dominant narratives that reinforce gender hierarchies in religious circles. Ultimately, this article contributed to ongoing efforts aimed at fostering greater awareness, advocacy, and action towards achieving gender justice and inclusivity in religious milieu in Africa. The author eventually made some recommendations on how females could be given further ample access into religious worship, services, and leadership across Africa.

Keywords: Gender Equality, African Religions, Biblical perspective.

Introduction

God did not create mankind for rivalry, inequality, discrimination, injustice, and maltreatment but to complement each other in all facets of lives for his purpose to be established here on earth and in heaven. God is just and loving but customs, traditions, and rules of mankind in some parts of Africa are posing threat to female gender because of some factors they have identified and accepted as norms. However, creation shows the creative act and love of God towards both male and female.

The disheartening experience which some females and males are subjected to in parts of Africa calls for a biblical investigation. Gender equality connotes the state of equal access to resources and opportunities regardless of gender connotation (Friedan, 1963). Gender equality involves ensuring that both male and female have equal opportunities and rights in all areas of life. (United Nations, 2015).

Africa is viewed as the second –largest and second most populous continent on earth, after Asia. It covers about 30.37 million square kilometers or 11.7 million square miles, including adjacent islands and has a population of about 1.3 billion people as at 2018. Africa is known for diverse cultures, languages, and ecosystems ranging from deserts like the Sahara to dense rainforests in central Africa (Ajayi, 1989). The continent of Africa is rich in natural resources, oil, and arable soil, but it is confronted with significant problems such as poverty, terrorism, political instability, economic overturn, outbreak of diseases, unemployment, drug abuse, cyber-crimes, and *Japa* syndrome (relocation of experts and inexperienced to other nations for greener pasture). (Meredith, 2005). Olubintan (2014), also identifies poverty, political corruption, illiteracy, crimes, and poor economy as some of the challenges confronting a fraction of nations in Africa.

Another significant term in this paper is religion. Religion means the ability of mankind to recognize the existence of a supreme being who is in control of the universe. This understanding may sometimes challenge mankind to develop a sense of trust and dependence on this supreme being across Africa in particular and the world at large when life issues become critical (Olatundun, 2014). In this work, ‘biblical perspective’ connotes how gender is described in both Old and New Testament perspectives.

Biblical Perspective on Gender Equality

Biblical perspective on gender equality is complex and multifaceted, reflecting various historical and cultural contexts within the Old and New Testaments. The Bible contains passages that both uphold the equality of males and females and those that seem to support traditional roles. These dual perspectives have led to diverse interpretations and applications within Christian communities in Africa.

Old Testament Account

Creation story is as old as the existence of mankind in different religious context across Africa. In the biblical creation narratives, of Genesis, Ammons asserted that mankind was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Philips Ricky and Ehusani Richard also affirmed that humans were created in the image and likeness of God, not in the physical sense but to reflect his positive attributes particularly when *selem* and *demut* were considered in the interpretation. The creation of women from the rib of Adam as encapsulated in Genesis 2:21-23 is perceived symbolically by some scholars to indicate companionship, or partnership, rather than from a hierarchical or patriarchal stance. In fact, this creative act of God is about companionship and does not suggest slavery or serving as second fiddle of females to any gender. Robert asserted that men and women were created to help each other in missions. Genesis chapters one and two project gender relationship as the original plan of God for male and female.

Humans were created to reproduce their kinds. The experience may be easy or hard in some contexts. Erroneously, some perceived women as domestic beings created for only childbearing. Taking a cue from the scenario of Leah and Rachel as encapsulated in Genesis 29: 31-35. Ancestry line reveals that Haggai and Sarah had a son each before Leah, who gave birth to seven sons.

Women are often vulnerable during crisis or war. Virginity is a requirement for priesthood in the Old Testament. In Leviticus 21:7, it was submitted that a priest must not marry women defiled by prostitution or divorcee. This is because the vocation which priests are doing is sacred. (Lev. 21:7ff.; Carol, 2014, 8-27). A priest in the bible always abstains from extra-marital affairs because it is against their vocation (1 Samuel 2:12-17). On the other hand, some contemporary priests who

had engaged in immorality could seek God's forgiveness and take up the role of shepherds. Therefore, if such converted immoral male could be absorbed into priestly office without stigmatization, female counterparts should not be prevented from serving God.

General inheritance laws in the Old Testament favoured male descendants, but there are notable exceptions where female children could inherit under special situations. In ancient Israel, inheritance laws were largely patriarchal, with the first sons receiving a double portion of the father's estate, while other sons received equal shares as contained in Deuteronomy 21:17. A significant exception to the male-centered inheritance laws is the case of the daughters of Zelophehad, who had no sons, and his daughters petitioned Moses for the right to inheritance of their father's property. God instructed Moses to grant their request, establishing a precedent that daughters could inherit if there were no sons in a marriage. These daughters remained part of their descendants. This law is also applicable in Levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5-10). (Fensham, 1962).

Sometimes, sexual harassment moves came from male as encapsulated in (Genesis 34), (Speiser, 1964), (Judges 19-21), (Niditch, 2008), and (2 Samuel 13), (Anderson, 1989). (Irmtraud, 2024). Sexual harassment is real in Africa at different quarters. It is visible in among religious leaders. It is also traceable to the main religions in Africa. It is also found in some public domains across Africa and beyond. The writer opposes sexual harassment against both male and female in Africa. Purity should be upheld in every community in Africa.

New Testament projects male children as highly priced as mighty, superior, and honourable than their female counterparts (1 Timothy 2:12-13). In some settings, women were also viewed as unclean because of monthly menstrual cycles (Leviticus 15:19-20) (Olagoke, 2019). It could be deduced from the above that there are some elements of inequality in the treatment of female in the Old Testament. This actually negate the purpose of creation of mankind to complement each other on the surface of the earth.

New Testament Narrative

Jesus lived in a social-cultural context of Jews and Greco-Roman worlds, where the male treatment of female was negative and they were restricted to domestic activities. Women were viewed as fragile elements. Despite these perceptions, Jesus treated male and female with sense of dignity (Scholer 1992). In the other way, the author projects that Africans should understand that Jesus was born by Mary, a woman of integrity, purity, and reference. (Schnackenburg, 1990). Just as Jesus related well with his mother cautiously and vice vasa at Cana of Galilea, Africans should emulate this attitude in their environments.

It is significant to note that Jesus had women disciples such as Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James and Mary the mother of Cleopas (Matt. 19:25-27, Mark 15:40-41, and John 19:25) who responded positively to his teachings in Galilea and Jerusalem (Scholer, 1992). Jesus' interactions with women, such as the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar as contained in John chapter 4. He equally related with Mary Magdalene, who was the first to witness and proclaim his resurrection as encapsulated in John 20:11-18. Moreover, attitude of the contemporary believers' is a radical departure from how Jesus related with both genders with care caution and honour. Assertions above revealed that Jesus did not discriminate between genders. Therefore, inequality in the perception and treatment of females should be discouraged at all levels of human endeavour.

Paul was contextual in his epistles but many contemporary readers are misapplying some of his letters in their contexts in Africa. For instance, Galatians 3:28 states that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This passage is quoted

mostly to underscore the spiritual equality in all human races, transcending social and gender distinctions (Grenz and Kjesbo, 1995). Women should be allowed to serve God with their potentials. Conducive atmosphere should be accorded them like their male counterparts (Spencer, 2004).

1 Timothy 2:12 posits that “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.” This was addressing women who were ungodly, unbelieving, and unethical in their dispositions in private and public gatherings and wanted to display the same attitude in the temple (Grenz and Kjesbo, 1995).

In Ephesians 5:22-33, ideal relationships between couples were highlighted. Paul enjoyed wives to submit to their legal husbands and husbands should be reciprocal in their affection to their wives Keener (2016). The above assertions showed that couple should admire themselves and relate with love, respect, submission, and honour. Therefore, contemporary interpreters should understand the context of the passages before they unleash unusual discrimination on any of the genders – male and female.

Historical Contexts of Gender Inequalities in Africa

Gender inequalities in Africa have deep historical roots that span pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods. Under pre-colonial period, social structures in many African societies are patriarchal, with men typically holding positions of power in both the family and community. However, women in some societies such as Yoruba in Nigeria, held significant economic and social roles. There was a clear division of labour based on gender. Men were often engaged in work like hunting, warfare, and trading (Ayo, 2016 & Olufunmilayo, 2023).

During colonial period, European colonial powers imposed new social, economic and political systems, often undermining roles and status of women in Africa. Traditionally, the female-child was devalued and relegated to agricultural functions. Inheritance right and educational opportunity were uneven during this era (Elise, 2024).

Many African nations gained independence in the mid-20th century, but political power remained predominantly in the hands of males. Women slowly started participating in politics through activism and legislative changes. Economic inequality was a reality during post-colonial era. At that time, women were restricted to gaining access to credit, land, and markets. The cultural norms in most African nations were patriarchal, this further entrenched inequalities between both genders (Berger, 1997).

Contemporary Religious Situation on Gender Equality in Africa

Religion in Africa is patriarchal in nature. There are preferential treatments in the way males are treated. Christianity, Islam and African Indigenous religion are not exempted from this milieu. Each form of religion has their bias and beliefs which negate equality and justice towards both genders. This religious debacle has led to reoccurring debates in Africa over the years. This is because women had been relegated to work at home in the kitchen, participate at social events and serve as children’s teachers in some churches in Africa. In the Seventh-Day Adventist about 10-15% of women were considered fit as members of leadership. Furthermore, in the Catholic church, women were not ordained as priest in Africa. This is visible in the percentage of females in Catholic church leadership today.

Holmes asserted that in Islam, the participation of women in leadership varies significantly across different cultures, schools of thought, and sects. Take for example, in the “imamate” (Prayer

Leadership), women were not allowed to lead men in prayers but can lead fellow women. Ulema (Islamic Scholars and Teacher) of women and children. Female scholars' percentage in religious leadership in Egypt is 10% as at 2010.

(Akintunde, 2005) posited that the Bible is oppressive to women championed by some misogynist who were both males and females. She submitted that Bible suppresses womenfolk and portrays them as complementary. (Akintunde, 2005) added that females were viewed as callous and unfit for leadership positions in the church.

Some men believe that male should not be their substantive pastor otherwise the female pastor may not enjoy full support of the congregation. This notion is gender discriminatory. In some churches there are demarcation on the extent at which a woman can serve at the altar. Some orthodox churches are reluctant to recommend females for ordination (Chris, 2005). From the assertion of Chris, it was revealed that some women are not enjoying full support of male counterpart in church leadership. This negative practice is reducing the extent of women in apex leadership roles in the household of God in their various communities.

Some Islamic beliefs also reveal some iota of negative dispositions to women in Africa. (Afolayan, 2022) a Muslim in an interview submitted that those who are in hell included women who did not submit to their husbands. She added that men are indispensable in the lives of women. She added that Quran opposes religious arrogance. Afolayan asserted that a woman in her menstrual circle or breast feeding her baby cannot enter mosque for worship. Ojomu also stated that Muslims also hold that female cannot assume the office of an Imaam who can lead a Jumat service (Adepoju, 2023).

African Indigenous Religion encompasses a variety of spiritual beliefs and practices that are residual in Africa. Some of those beliefs include patriarchal structures where women are excluded from significant spiritual roles and leadership position in the shrines (Nnaemeka, 2005).

Another significant belief by African Indigenous worshippers are ritual purity and taboos. Women are restricted from some religious activities during menstruation and childbirth. Women are viewed as impure and can bring bad luck to the people at such periods (Amadiume, 1987).

In her scholarly work, Olajubu argued that a traditional worship priest posited that the woman in her menstrual period was debarred from certain religious rituals so as to avoid a power clash because the period of menstruation showed her power to procreate and the power she wields as a woman. Olajubu and Olupona also perceived that menstruation is a conduit for potential life and, by extension, power. This perspective underscores the profound respect and reverence for women reproductive capacities in Yoruba culture (Olajubu & Olupona: 2012).

In her submission, Berger stated that women were treated as commodities especially in terms of their labour, sexuality, and marriage (Berger, 1997). Makinde corroborated Berger that some Africans treat issue of Bride Price and Dowry payment as transaction of female folks which sometimes undermine the way males treat females in some matrimonial homes. (Makinde, 2004). Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a practice and belief in Africa setting which is meant to control the sexual urges of women. Nnena in her own book provided a comprehensive analysis of the practice of female genital mutilation in Nigeria. She focused on cultural roots, health risks associated with it. Nnena similarly referred to the legal and social dimensions towards eradicating it (Nnena, 2015).

Widowhood rites in some African communities are detrimental to psychological and health status of more or less women. This has subjected some women to second fiddle status unnecessarily in

certain settings. (Nwogu, 2015). Inheritance laws in some African societies favour male descendants and relatives but leave women disadvantaged. This practice perpetuates economic dependency and limits women's financial autonomy (Oduyoye 2001). All the above beliefs are detrimental to the free involvement and participation of women in religious activities.

Conclusion

In this work, through critical investigation into biblical stand on gender equality, the author has delved into some Hebrew, Jewish, and African religious rules, biases, and cultural practices that are giving upper hand to male gender and restricting female gender from participating in religious, educational, and political landscape in Africa. The author discovered that God is just and loving to both male and female. The work also revealed that Jesus broke cultural barriers which held female hostage during his earthly ministry. Following the lifestyle and ministry of Jesus Christ, the writer recommends the following for the use of contemporary Africans in religious, educational and political arenas:

First, Africans should avoid being patriarchal and detrimental to the freedom and involvement of females in religious, educational and political functions. Secondly, Africans should avoid domesticating female child instead of allowing them to showcase their God given potentials in religious, educational, and political arena. Thirdly, detrimental marital culture and practices should be eradicated to allow women to also contribute their quotas to the national development in their various communities. Fourthly, restrictive beliefs and laws should be revisited for possible review to allow equal participation in religious, educational and political landscape of Africa. Fifthly, women should also behave maturely in all facets of human endeavours to prevent being underrated by their male counterparts.

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