

The Struggle for the Liberation of Women in Third World Nations: The Ambiguity of the Role of the Church

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INTRODUCTION

In most developing societies, male supremacy is taken for granted. However, the International Women's Year proclaimed in 1975 by the United Nations revealed that even in the industrialized Western world, women are still underemployed, subjected to the traditional job categories, paid less than men for equivalent job etc. Sex-role stereotyping, the unwillingness of men to implement full equality in the home, etc. are among the problems of women. In some of the industrialized and developed countries of the world, there is an obvious difference between the official government pronouncements and legislation and the actual status of and traditional behavior and attitude to women. In some of these societies, the control of the government machinery, major policy-making agencies, electronic and print media, labor union activities, high level cabinet ministries, still fall within the monopolistic and oppressive power of men.

Nonetheless, women have come a long way even in Third World countries, to compete favorably with their male counterparts, in spite of their centuries-old handicaps. They have begun to develop their consciousness of the need for change. There are many feminist and egalitarian pressure groups in many countries asking for reforms and change of policies that militate against women. The emancipation of women in developing Third World countries seems to be a major concern of feminist non-religious groups without any strong backing from the Church. Often the new-consciousness and awareness of the groups are attributed to the influence of Western education introduced by the Christian Church.

This paper will direct its attention to a critical analysis of the ambiguous roles of the Church in this all-important global struggle for the emancipation of women. By the "Church" in this context, we mean the whole "body of Christians" represented in the various arms of the *Ecclesia* - the Body of Christ. Both the Catholic and other Protestant groups (which are ancient branches of the Catholic Church) as well as the new Independent Churches are brought under the broad umbrella of the CHURCH in this survey.

We shall critically examine some of the doctrines espoused by the Church and assess how policies and practices, ecclesiastical authorities, legacies, tradition, among others, have, all through the centuries, aided or impeded the progress of women in their struggle for emancipation. One obvious fact is that rapid economic, social, political and religious changes provide the background against which the "educated" (in Western conceptual scheme) and the "illiterate" women are struggling to find their new roles. We shall adopt historical, theological, and socio-anthropological and analytical methods in our presentation - thus offering a somewhat 'unified' and 'synthesized' method in our analysis of the available data.

I

The Traditional Role of Women in Primary Societies

Western values and institutions still present ambivalent impacts on the position of women in developing societies. Women in Africa had strong associations that regulated their social and political as well as religious rights. In the traditional and undislocated African societies, for instance, women had their definite place and roles either as mothers, wives, or daughters. Mrs. F.A. Ogunshye, writing on women in Nigeria in the traditional societies, has aptly argued that there were sanctions and means of getting redress for cruelty inflicted upon women.¹ They looked for such redress through their organization which, among other things, settled disputes between one woman and another, (and sometimes between women and men). They could take a collective action to protect their interests against those of men, using songs of ridicule, boycotts, strikes, peaceful demonstrations and threats of invoking the power of the female ancestors if the wrongs against them were not righted.² In East Africa, however, such powerful traditional associations of women are generally non-existent. But it does not suggest that their women were docile. Annie Lebeuf has rightly argued that women in more stratified societies (those with powerful chiefs and kings like the Yoruba of Nigeria, Ashanti of Ghana) had often held important political and ritual roles. For instance, two women had ruled as Oni (kings) of the Holy City of Ile-Ife, which is the highest office a human being could hold in Yorubaland. The City of Ile-Ife is believed by the Yoruba to be the mythical cradle of world civilization and only influential figures could compete for the most revered throne of the land. Besides, the prominent role of Madam Tinubu, the woman Chief of Abeokuta

who commanded a regiment of soldiers that brought victory to her people over King Gelele of Dahomey in 1864 is still fresh in the annals of Yoruba history.³ Dr. F.A. Arinze has described the ritual role of women in the offering of sacrifices at the family altars and shrines as "Mater Familias."⁴

Invariably, a prominent Nigerian woman sociologist Dr. Kamene Okonjo had over a decade ago argued that much of African traditional society can be characterized as having "bisexual" political systems, autonomous male and female spheres of authority. Women of the royal lineage could form the leadership of the women's political and religious institutions; and in the more egalitarian societies like the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria, individual talent and charisma as well as age (and in the more recent times, possession of a university degree) would likely be taken into account.⁵

As mothers and elder sisters in both patrilineal and matrilineal societies, women held considerable authority and influence over their sons and brothers. The influence had some economic base because most families were (still are) polygamous and each woman inevitably provided the basic need of her own "nuclear" family. A woman's role as a trader (engaged in long distance enterprise) or as a farmer made it obviously incumbent on her to provide for the daily needs of her "biological" children while the full responsibility of providing overall protection and occasional meals was that of the father who controls a large compound of many micro "family units" under each mother.

The above picture does not preclude the obvious fact that women in traditional societies (which were patriarchal in structure) were to some extent handicapped and subservient to the men. For long, men had recognized the "inherent power" of women, and had carefully devised several means to curb them. Some harsh laws were enacted against women. Some taboos and sanctions were imposed on them and little children. Ironically, many women have not seriously claimed that the political affairs of their communities should be their primary business. Motherhood had traditionally provided them with basic self-identity and they pay high premium on it. Men have, therefore, exploited women's apolitical attitude and continually denied them some basic rights even when the women fight for them. For instance, the Aba Women's Riot of 1929 (organized by the Igbo Women of Nigeria), usually known as Women's War, was a turn of reaction to colonial administrators who, throughout Africa, "sought spokesmen or headmen"⁶ but never 'spokeswomen' and headwomen". Dissatisfaction with European control of the market prices (which were very bad then

owing to the effect of the First World War that destroyed the economy) was among the factors that stimulated the Riot. The War, however, produced reforms in the systems of Native Administration but none that recognized the Women's traditional powerful influence on men in developing societies. They were still handicapped in several areas of life.

II

Colonialism, Christianity and Western Education

That relationship between the colonial administration and the missionaries was somewhat ambiguous. Often they co-operated on certain issues and at times disagreed. The missionaries at times depended on the charity of the government officials for transportation and protection. Occasionally, they quarreled over the immoral life of some of the traders who worked on Sundays and cohabited with African women. Both agreed on the demolition of the traditional symbols and artifacts. The missionaries often advanced into the hinterlands behind the "smoke of the guns" - after the colonial soldiers had pacified the "natives". Urbanization and Western education-products of colonial and Christian presence - are among the chief factors that have had the most destructive effects on the traditional beliefs and practices. The impact of both colonialism and Christianity is ambiguous.

One of the outstanding missiologists, Professor Hendrick Kraemer, had described the missionary as a revolutionary who should not spare any obstacle on his way to evangelization. He succinctly stated:

the missionary is a revolutionary and has to be so, for to preach and plant Christianity means to make frontal attack on beliefs and customs. . . The missionary enterprise need not be ashamed of this . . . Missions, however, imply a well-considered appeal to all peoples to transplant and transfer their life foundations into a totally different spiritual soil and so must be revolutionary.⁷

The colonial administrators, through the anthropologists and ethnographers who were gathering "data for governance", made selective study of the customs and traditions of the colonies. They recommended for destruction aspects of the people's cultures that did not prove helpful to the cause of the government or mission. Both the missionaries and the colonial government officials

contributed immensely in their "civilizing missions" to many parts of Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania. In Africa, for instance, they fought against the harsh and crude laws against humanity in general and women in particular - such included trial by ordeal and dehumanizing treatment given mothers of twins who were often left in the bush to die. They enforced peace in some communities, stopped intertribal and intervillage wars. They built roads and improved life expectancy. Slave trade was vigorously fought against even though it was their people who introduced it and patronized it over a century. Among other good effects of the colonial and missionary presence was the teaching of basic skills and crafts to the people. Western education introduced in Third World countries by colonialism and Christianity turned out to be a basic tool in the hands of those who oppressed women.

Although it looks as if the introduction of western education has "lifted" the status of women, especially in Africa, it is rather one of the strongest factors that contributed to their suppression. The introduction and imposition of Western cultural norms was disadvantageous to the women. Be that as it may, education widened the gap between the men and the women. With the introduction of Western education, a new social order and value orientation emerged. Men who received it rose high in the white man's social ranking and used it as a tool to clamp down on the women and other men who did not receive it early enough. Thus, slaves and other social outcasts who received the education first outstripped the sons of chiefs and noblemen. The girls were kept off from the attack of the Western Imperialists. They were highly priced as precious jewels and fertility principle. The attempt to keep women out of school was not initially intended by parents to subdue them. It was out of ignorance - to preserve what you cherish most. It was when the cost of education became high that poor parents sent their sons who would succeed them instead of the girls who would marry out and become another person's profit. What was initially done in the best interest of women later turned out to be to their own disadvantage. When those who first embraced the new form of education occupied high and enviable positions in the new scheme of things, women's position was badly affected.

Worse still, the colonialists had also been accused of making women's education oriented towards teaching them to be better housekeepers and mothers, thus continuing to put them at a disadvantage in modern economic, social and political life.⁸ It is argued that the root of women's gradual loss of power in places like Ghana, other parts of West Africa, and South America is found in the conservative "patriarchal values" that characterized Western

colonialism. But on the surface, it looks as if it is westernism that has definitely raised the status of women in the Third World countries. The biases of Western merchants, missionaries, government officials, anthropologists, and ethnographers led them to concentrate on the male members of the traditional societies⁹ thus giving the men an edge over the women. Barbara J. Callaway has strongly argued that women and men in traditional Ghanaian society were relatively equal, but the growing division of labor in the modern economic sector is widening the gap in productivity and in income between them. Women's status is, therefore, lower in relation to that of men.¹⁰ Probably, if Western education had not changed the people's value orientation, women who did not embrace it early enough would not have been handicapped when it became the index of civilization and power in the new social system.

III

The Church and the Struggle for the Liberation of Women

When women later embraced education, however, it became a tool in their hands to struggle for a recovery of lost grounds. It generated an awareness in them that they had for long been suppressed by those who hold the intellectual power. They, therefore, began a struggle for liberation. But this did not start all at the same time in every society.

Hendrick Kraemer had described the missionary as a revolutionary. The Church has been known for a consistent policy of the equality of individual persons before the law and before God. Ironically, in the struggle by women for "equal rights", the Church is found to be exhibiting an inherent "patriarchal attitude." This attitude, argued Lewis H. Morgan, an American ethnologist, was based on the belief that the primacy of man depended on his physical strength. This belief has deeply affected the Catholic Church down through the ages. The countries with very strong conservative Catholic traditions, such as Italy and Ireland, therefore continue to feel the impact of the Church militating against any fundamental redefinition of the roles of women in the modern context. Besides, the Church views the new struggles put up by women as being socialist or communist-oriented and motivated and as such anti-God. The capitalist nature of the Church as an institution, therefore, makes her suspect to the genuine efforts of women for liberation. Besides, Pauline's anti-feminist stance on husbands as heads of families and women's basic roles as those of "Wives and mothers" still prevail to a large extent in all church programmes.¹¹

It may appear that husband and wife have equal consortial rights under Canon Law but in effect a wife's canonical status depends on that of her husband. Before the Vatican II, Pope John XXIII was said to have been annoyed when he realized that the fundamental rights of women as persons were still not respected everywhere. He consoled women by advising them to take heart, and that they should be assured of the fact that the end to which God has made them is maternity. Where lies the 'revolutionary' stance of the missionary in this 'patriarchal attitude' which had been in some traditional as well as industrialized societies?

Although the polemics of the ordination of women to the priesthood is beyond the scope of this paper, it is nonetheless important to inquire why the Church has consistently barred her door against women into the Holy Orders. The Catholic Church, for instance, has Women's Orders which have for centuries provided employment and opportunities for higher education. The Blessed Virgin Mary is hailed more than any other Saint for being the "Oeotokos" (Mother of God; God Bearer). The Virgin herself was not a priest, and, in spite of her piety, prestige, and immaculate purity, she could not serve the Mass - a duty which is often given to ten year-old boys. Policy-making positions in the church are reserved for the clerics and no lady is among them. The Church has, therefore, carefully and consistently set a rigid example of the exclusion of women from the administrative hierarchy. A decree in 1972 from the Vatican insisted that only men may be admitted to Orders, major and minor.¹²

Even among the Anglicans with their vibrant and democratic policy, the ordination of women is still causing confusion in many countries. Canada, North America, and a few other countries had ordained women tentatively, and the prejudice against this action is still on. Many other countries and provinces of the Church are playing it safe. The Presbyterians have also ordained women in Canada, North America and about two in Nigeria. Yet they are experimental exercises. The same prejudice is still exhibited in many new Independent African and Aladura Churches where a good number of women had risen to prominence in their ability to pray, see vision, heal and prophecy. The old prejudice that the "end to which the Creator has ordained womanhood is maternity"¹³ still holds in many Christian Churches.

Many intelligent women with forceful personality have for years been mobilizing others in their struggle for "equal payment for equal job", leave allowance, tax relief etc. Yet the Church which stands as the 'Standard Bearer' for the liberation of the oppressed, downtrodden, the weak, the outcast, etc, has not championed or

supported such moves by women for the welfare of the generality of womanhood.

In Africa, the Church has been fighting against polygamy. Jesus nowhere in the Bible specifically condemned polygamy as he did divorce and adultery. It is unfortunate that the Church has not condemned polygamy on a very rational and radical ground - that of subjugation of women to a low status. It is another form of slavery for three or four women to live under a man and 'serve' him. They do not live with him in the same home as "equal partners". It is on the ground of this that the Church should condemn polygamy as a crime against humanity. The Church should endorse the practice of one man one wife on the grounds of social equality and mutual understanding. Two or three women living under one man as their husband cannot see him as 'equal partner', as each is treated as a part of the total number of the women in the partnership.

Feminist associations are often advised by eminent Church leaders to subscribe to second place in society as "befits women". More often than not any radical movements and demands made by such associations for the emancipation of women are opposed by the Church. For instance in Italy, the Union of Italian Women (U.D.I.) an association formed to champion the struggle for feminine emancipation was strongly opposed by the Catholic Pontiff because the association was suspected to have some socialist and communist sympathies which were considered anti-God. Yet the Church would encourage some Church-oriented women's organizations like Women's Union of Catholic Action, Center for Italian Women (C.I.F.) whose basic aim was maintaining the status-quo--the place of women in the family and society as subordinate citizens under the men.¹⁴ Such organizations that maintained the status quo only endorsed the secondary position of women in the society. Pope Pius XII in his fatherly message to the inauguration of one of those new women's groups vehemently warned:

the equalization of rights with men has with the abandonment of the house where she was queen, subjected the woman to the demands of work. It is not in the interest of her true dignity.¹⁵

This message has been considered for many years as the Magna Carta for Catholic Women and its influence on Catholic women in the world has been immense. The negative attitude of the Church is still persisting. The women are invariably encouraged to take the position of 'submissive and obedient wives' beside their husbands - a type of a "glorified house girl".

It is this ambiguous position of the Church towards the emancipation of women that was transported to the Colonies where the missionaries found themselves. For instance, the Napoleonic Code of 1804 which drew heavily from the Roman Sources provided only a domestic role for women and a subordinate one for that matter: The obedience of wives to husbands was a legal obligation and for a long time, French women had the legal status of minors. This was a model of what was transferred to the colonies despite the official government proclamation of equal rights for all men (human beings) under the law. The Church basked comfortably under this oppressive law in spite of her mission for salvation for the "whole man". It is encouraging that real progress has been made in the legal status of French women since 1945 especially with the enactment of the laws giving them equal rights. But the Church has not pioneered any open campaign for the rights of women. Her stance against birth control (through artificial means) and abortion has never been on the grounds of equality of rights of women but primarily on the grounds of murder. Even the more liberal Catholics and Protestants are not against artificial birth control and family planning.

William Blough had once remarked that politically-powerful men in Mexico struggled for years to deny the women the opportunity to exercise their voting power. This to him was partly due to the fact that men felt that women had not developed a bit of "revolutionary conscience" and that they were subject to the conservative influence of the Catholic Church.¹⁶ On her part, Evelyn Stevens had argued that the male dominance in Latin America is only a myth - implying that the males feel inferior and insecure - thereby posing a false power to cover up their inadequacies.¹⁷ Her observation may be true not only of Latin America but also of many parts of the world.

The Church is not completely apolitical. There are political wranglings even within the ranks and files of the Church hierarchy. The salvation for the "whole man" involves every aspect of human life. In Columbia, the radical stance of Camilo Torres, an unusually bold and outspoken priest, has been looked upon by his colleagues as heretical. Fr. Torres addressed himself specifically to the campaign for the emancipation of women - an aspect of his understanding of the Theology of Liberation. Although this was not an official stand of the Church, it is on record that a priest had for once, spoken fearlessly and consistently against the suppression of women and had taken up his stand in favor of the restoration of their political rights.

The bold effort of FR. Torres had been preceded earlier by that of Ricardo Uribe Escobar. He was a writer and a one-time rector at the Universidad de Antiquia. His doctoral thesis was on the plight of women. The work was considered too radical by the Church and the enraged Archbishop of Cayzedo did not only declare it heretical but also ordered the dismissal of three eminent liberal professors who supervised and approved it. This was one of those open manifestations of the Church's strong opposition to the struggle for a radical transformation of the status of women. Progressive and steady successes are being registered in many countries despite the Church's lukewarmness and open hostility. At least a strong awareness has been generated in many women in the developing countries of their need to unite and fight for their rights.

IV

An Analysis

Jesus Christ was a revolutionary.¹⁸ His early apostles were accused of subverting the nation. Yet the Church which is a body of the followers of Jesus, degenerated into conservatism after a spell of few years of vibrant and dynamic revolutionary life. For instance, the decision of the Council of Jerusalem in 49 AD made the Church stand out as an independent group and not a sect of a national cult (Judaism). It had a far-reaching sociological and theological implication on Christianity as a Catholic Faith - a Universal and Transcendental Faith and not a national or ethnic faith.

The most dominant and persistent aspect of the "Patriarchal thought-pattern" is a belief in male superiority and female inferiority. Recognition accorded to the informal distinction between men and women undergirds the sex-bound division of labor usually associated with all societies. It was Aristotle, the famous Greek philosopher, in his POLITICS, who authoritatively stated in 5th century B.C. that biologically, the world is a hierarchy composed of ruling and ruled elements and that women fit adequately by nature into the second category.¹⁹

Religion is typically conservative in nature. The radical stance of the young Church got structurally-stratified after a time. Even the vibrant Protestantism fell into rigidity of policies after a few years. Patriarchal ideology is validated and authenticated with religious factor. Most world religions - Judaism, Islam, among others still stress the imperfection of the world through the frailty of woman character. Women are therefore indirectly associated with sin, immorality, impurity, pollution and imperfection.

Consequently, the Catholic Church had after a few centuries adopted compulsory celibacy as a higher state of spiritual life for men who want to render a perfect service to God. Religious bias against women as sources of pollution and ritual impurity had persisted. Menstrual taboos, pregnancy and other laws presenting women as "unclean element" were prevalent in the distant past and have persisted in Asia, Africa and other areas. The Church has, however, abrogated some of these forms of prejudice. But it is rather disappointing that the Church Fathers of the middle centuries could not change the obnoxious and false impression of women. They rather added legitimacy and authority to the "Patriarchal Ideologies" of the ancient world and affirmed "that the mental and moral frailty of women dwelt upon the vexations of marriage and reviled the body and sexual desire".²⁰

Conclusion

We have tried in this essay to give a historical analysis of the social position of women in the traditional societies ere the advent of colonialism, Christianity and western education. We have discovered from available historical data that there are ambivalent impacts of westernism in the developing countries. It on the one hand improved the lot of women but on the other rendered them impotent. In some societies, the traditional privileged authority of women was adversely affected because of the contact with the external change agents. In others, some obnoxious and harsh laws against women were removed because of the effect of the Western education.

The Church in particular whose mission is proclamation of the good news of liberation for the oppressed, the captives and handicapped, has not escaped the usual conservatism characteristic of other religious systems. Although her Lord and Master, Jesus Christ came forth with a revolutionary message and was also accused of subverting the nation, the Church (which is his bride) has succumbed to the temptation of maintaining the status quo.

Western education and the abrogation of certain inhuman rules were part of the contributions of Christianity in her "civilizing mission". Yet when an oppressed class (like women) makes use of certain aspects of the education they received to fight for liberation, the Church seems to look indifferent to their struggles. It is incumbent on an agency like the Church committed to the cause of freedom for the "whole man" to pioneer the crusade for the liberation of womanhood from the oppressive rule of men. The Church should be more pragmatic and articulate in her support for

the total liberation of any oppressed class. That is the Mission of Jesus. (Luke: 4:18-19 cf Is. 61: 1-2). For the Christian Church to continue to encourage women to accept a 'second position' in society is a travesty of the real ministry of Jesus who came to elevate the status of the fallen humanity.

¹F.A. Ogunshye, "The Women In Nigeria", Presence Africaine Nos. 4-5 (1960) p.33.

²Udobata Onunwa "The Paradox of 'Power' and 'Submission' of Women in African Traditional Religion and Society", Journal of Dharma, Center for the Study of World Religions, Bangalore India, (1987) Forthcoming.

F.C. Ogbalu, Igbo Institutions and Customs (Onitsha Nigeria: University Publishing Co., N.d.) p.28. Leon Francois-Hoppman, "The Image of Women in Haitian Poetry", Presence Africaine Vol. 6-7 p.187-213.

Annie Lebeuf "The Role of Women in the Political organization of African Societies" in Denise Paulme (ed), Women In Tropical Africa (Berkeley: University of California Press, (1961) 112-114.

³See Udobata Onunwa 'Ibid'.

⁴F.A. Arinze, Sacrifice in Igbo Religion (Ibadan, University of Ibadan Press, 1970) 24-25.

⁵See Kamene Okonjo "Political Systems with Bisexual Functional Roles: The Case of Women's Participation in Politics in Nigeria" (Paper presented at the American Political Science Association Meeting, Chicago 1974. Cit. by Judith Van Allen in Lynne B. Iglitzin and Ruth Ross (Eds.) Women in the World (Oxford: Clio Books, 1976) p. 33 (The bracket is the present writer's own addition).

⁶Marjorie J. Mbilinyi, "The 'New Women' and Traditional Norms in Tanzania", Journal of Modern African Studies 10, 1(1972) p.61. See J. C. Onwuteaka, "The Aba Riot of 1929 and its Relation to the System of Indirect Rule" Nigerian Journal of Economic and Social Studies (1965) p. 278ff. A. E. Afigbo, The Warrant Chief: Indirect Rule in South-Eastern Nigeria 1891-1929 (London: Longman's 1972)

⁷Hendrick Kraener, The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World (London: The Edinburgh House Press, 1938) 342.

⁸Judith Van Allen 'Ibid', p.35.

⁹In Lynne B. Iglitzin and Ruth Ross (eds). op.cit. p.186.

¹⁰Op. cit. p.189.

¹¹1 Corinthians 11: 6-12; 14: 33-34; Col. 3:18; 1 Tim. 2:9-15.

¹²Commission on the Status of Women, Report to the Minister for Finance Chapter 4 and Interim Report on Equal Pay. (Dublin: The Stationary Office,

1971) "The Civil Rights of Irish Women" pp.51-56; European Community p.9.

¹³See Pope Pius XII. Allocations of 10 September, 1941 and 25 February, 1942. Pope John XXIII, Gaudium et Spes (Encyclica) 1962.

¹⁴See Carla Bielli in Iglitzin and Ross (eds) op. cit. p.111.

¹⁵Cit. Carla Bielli, Pius XII La Missione della donna (discourse given 21 October 1945 to C.I.F.).

¹⁶W. Blough "Political Attitudes of Mexican Women" Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs vol.14, 2(May 1972) 203.

¹⁷Evelyn Stevens, "The Prospects of a Women's Liberation Movement in Latin America" Journal of Marriage and the Family 35 (May 1973) 315-16.

¹⁸The Claims of Jesus and his work challenged the traditional Jewish Faith. Hence, the opposition from the orthodox Jewish religious leaders, scribes, priests, pharisees, etc. who saw him as an "out-law". See Mark 2: 1-end; 3: 1-6; 20-30, Matt. 5, 6, 2.

¹⁹Aristotle, POLITICS (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949) Book 1 chapter 5.

²⁰Tertullian, Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. IV. Cit. Katherine H. Rogers, The Troublesome Helpmate (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966) p. 15.