

## Religious Organizations and Gender Inequality: The Catholic View Point

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**Abstract:** In the social sciences, gender relations in contemporary feminist theory have few rivals on top of the agenda. Such issues generally revolve around 3 different but complimentary aspects: the dignity of women, the rights of women and the role of women on the different aspects of societal development. The above issues suggest an awareness which is a far cry from past conceptions, derived mainly from biblical sources which portrayed women not only as second class citizens but as objects to be exploited by men. On the basis of the sexist bias, the study takes a look at the historical development of sexism and the position of the Catholic Church as a major religious institution on the matter. It examines the socio-religious dimensions of the male-female relationship common to certain currents of thought often at variance with the authentic advancement of women thereby inhibiting their full integration into the society. It recommends that in the relational dynamics the biblical conception of woman as helpmate be construed as an active helper and collaborator which demands not only recognition but mutual respect of both the biological and cultural complementarity of women and men. Such conception is capable of enhancing the spirit of teamwork and peace in the interest of all.

**Key words:** Religious organization, gender inequality, socio-religious, catholic church

### INTRODUCTION

Gender equity has become one of the sensitive issues in contemporary social theoretical discussion. Because it is a debate on the social dimension of human society, the involvement of the religious organization as a social institution is certainly appropriate. Theoretically, the sociology of religion examines not only how religion as a social institution is organized but also how its organization and practice affect the members of the society, as well as its relationship with the entire social fabric. One of the contentious aspects of human society is the relationship of men and women in the daily organization of life.

The call for women liberation is far from being a recent development. In fact, feminism-the belief that women are equal to men and should enjoy equal rights and opportunities with their male counterparts-has a long and chequered history. One can easily think of the first Women's Rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York as far back as July, 1848 (Michael *et al.*, 1984). Referring to the above convention William (1972) observed that its delegates which comprised only of women decried the history of repeated injuries and usurpations meant to destroy a woman's confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self respect and to make her lead a dependent and abject life.

The feminist movement as it was then called gradually lost its momentum and subsequent impact in the first half of the twentieth century due to the unpopularity of social reform movements at the time and the inhibiting effect of the Second World War on gender equality demands. However, the movement re-emerged in the 1960s, a period characterized by generalized social reforms (William, 1972), like the Black Protests, Student Protests and the anti-Vietnam sentiments. From the 1960s till the present, women liberation outcries have been echoed from all corners not only in the western world where it all began but globally even to the remotest part of the underdeveloped nations.

In view of the magnitude and global character of the problem and considering the role of religion in social life, this study examines not only the attitude of religion as a social institution towards the gender debate but also its positive contribution towards a sustainable solution. Accordingly, the study is organized according to the following sub-headings:

- Brief history of the development of the problem.
- Some theoretical considerations.
- Current efforts at redressing gender conflict.
- The role of religion-the Catholic perspective.
- Appreciating feminine values in the society.
- Conclusion and recommendations.

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GENDER QUESTION**

Theoretically, contemporary feminist scholarship, which dates a little beyond the decade of the 1980s, is characterized by a precise and well-formulated agenda. It has as one of its major goals the development of a critical theory of society, which seeks to revolutionize and change the social platform towards directions deemed more just and humane. Although, feminism is considered a nascent viewpoint, the pages of history are replete with cultural stipulations with tendencies towards either sexism or feminism, with greater inclination towards the former. Historically, most cultures endorsed positions which painted pictures of women, not as counterparts of men but as second class and subservient citizens whose valid roles are fulfilled only through marriage, child bearing and domesticity.

The debate over the differences between men and women goes back thousands of years, though lacking in any scientific support. Writing, for example in the 4th century B. C., Plato held that ...the gifts of nature are alike, diffused in both sexes; all the pursuits of men are the pursuits of women-but then he added that ...in all of them, a woman is inferior to a man (Carol and Offir, 1977).

In Greco-Roman and pre-industrial societies, for example, it was fashionable to anchor the division of labour on sex differences, a practice which nourished the notion that men are better suited to perform strenuous labour than men. Accordingly, it was expected of women to haul firewood, carry crops to the market and perform simple and delicate household chores because of their weak and tender nature. The emphasis on physical weakness was gradually manipulated until its subsequent translation into social inferiority. Commenting on the woman's enforced status of inferiority, some anthropologists (Sherry, 1974; Ernestine, 1975) have remarked that everywhere in every known culture, women are considered in every degree to be inferior to men.

Many other explanations have been offered, not in support, but in the institutionalization, of gender inequality. Peggy (1974) and later anthropologists believe that the practice originated at a time when our ancestors were hunters and gatherers, when social survival depended on reproduction, the acquisition of food and the need for territorial defence. In line with the belief it became necessary for men to engage in activities which required long distance traveling (in search of games) and exposure to danger, while women concentrated on activities within the home or the camp.

In modern industrial societies both the social and economic environment of uncivilized man no longer apply. Such conditions under which the division of labour by sex

as adaptive have ceased to exist. Few jobs today require brute strength and the nurturing of infants can no longer be seen as an exclusive reserve of women. What then justifies any form of appeal to pre-industrial models that condone sexist standards?

## **SOME CONTEMPORARY THEORETICAL ISSUES**

Albeit to a lesser degree than was the case some 40 years ago before the 1960s the practice of gender inequality and segregation has continued to hold sway in our society. Although, the technological, social and behavioural sciences have failed to provide any clear-cut explanations to gender differences, the biological differences are still being invoked in justification of unequal treatment of women in the society.

Sexism, the belief that innate sex, i.e., biological differences justify discrimination against and exploitation of, women has produced as much negative effect as racism and the now defunct apartheid. In the effort to institutionalize sexism, there are those who, for want of better explanations appeal to an ancient Greek philosophy which maintained that since nature has allowed differences between men and women, it is only natural that these differences be maintained. This expresses the same sexist idea above attributed to Plato.

These views have persistently encouraged the unequal treatment of women in almost every facet of social life. Jean and Johnson (1980) have attempted an analysis of female discrimination as obtained in important sectors of modern society. The analysis is stated in the form of 3 theoretical positions as follows:

**The human capital theory:** This theory holds that women earn less than men because they have fewer assets to sell on the labour market; they have less education generally, less work experience and higher turnover rates than men. Michael *et al.* (1984) have confirmed the reality of this assumption by relating it to the American experience. According to them, although women have established the legal right to equal pay for equal job, their position in the job market has still not changed. For every dollar a man earned in 1980, a woman earned 60 cents. This means that a woman had to work ten days to earn as much money as a man earned in 6 days on the same job. Furthermore, when women go into more prestigious and higher paying occupations it is usually in lower paying and less prestigious positions (Mary, 1979). Gender inequality in the economic market place has led to what has come to be called the feminization of poverty, i.e., the growing percentage of women in the ranks of the poor.

**The over crowding theory:** This is an attempt at explaining gender inequality on the basis of women crowding into a relatively small number of occupations, thereby invoking the economic law of supply and demand against themselves.

The greatest among the theoretical analyses offered by Jean and Johnson (1980) in explanation of gender inequality is institutionalized Sexism. This theory blames gender inequality on established social patterns which have the unintended consequences of limiting women's opportunities. For example, while the official working hour rule may not be intended to act against women, it however makes it difficult for women with small children to hold full-time jobs or pursue careers without interruption, thereby indirectly limiting women's progress. Speaking of career, while the ages of 25-35 are the peak periods for career advancement for men (Lester, 1981), it is also the period when women are most likely to leave the labour force to raise children. Here, they are faced with the radical option between career advancement and parenthood.

Another area of social life in which women face serious gender discrimination is in the family. In this sub sector, women are expected to surrender their legal rights as soon as they get married; they own no property without husband's consent; they make no wills; their earnings can be disposed of by their husbands without their consent; important decisions in the family-the religion and education of children-are unilaterally made by the husbands and the husbands have the right to punish them if they were found to be disobedient. Nowadays, laws have changed with regard to some of these burning issues but not significantly and more so in some societies than in others.

#### **EFFORTS AT REDRESSING GENDER INEQUALITY**

The first ever attempt at addressing gender discrimination was organized by women themselves in the United States of America. This was the Women's Rights Convention referred to earlier, held in July 1848 in Seneca Falls in New York. Prior to the event, women were denied all rights-the right to vote, the right to education, the right to property ownership, etc.-despite their obvious huge contributions to the economy especially in the area of weaving, sewing and food production and preservation, etc. Towards the turn of the 19th century, a pro-active group, calling themselves female reformers emerged who argued for women to be given more responsibility in the society. The response of government was the 19th Amendment which was ratified in 1920,

which gave women the vote (Michael *et al.*, 1984). Despite the ratification of the 19th Amendment, the status of women in the U.S. did not improve significantly since, they did not hasten to form political parties nor vote en bloc. Moreover, women's rights continued to attract little attention and sympathy as greater attention was turned towards class and ethnic differences which ran deep in the American society. Up to the 1940s and well into the 1950s, discrimination against women was still high as no one protested the 5% admission quota given to women in medical schools. The fate suffered by women in other sectors of the nation's life, e.g., the economy, politics, workplace, etc. was either the same or slightly better. In fact it could rightly be concluded that by the end of the 1950's feminism appeared to have died.

In the 1960s, along with other social movements of the period, like the civil rights movement, feminism re-appeared and argued for radical social reforms especially in the economic sector. This move compelled President J. F. Kennedy in 1961 to appoint, for the first time in American history, a Commission on the status of women. After the commission one could notice a change for the better in matters of the place of women in the American society until a surprise in 1973 when in the Third National Conference of Women's Commission, the chair refused to recognize a motion by women. This single gesture prompted a group of 28 women to found what came to be called the National Organization for Women (NOW) which gave birth and strength to the contemporary women's movements. This was a grassroots movement as it drew memberships across the various social strata from college students to housewives. In contrast to the earlier movement, NOW, which focused mainly on a single issue, that is, women's suffrage, today's movements address a wide range of female related issues, from equal opportunity in all areas of social life to the right to abortion.

Although, the battle is far from being over, the women's movement has recorded a number of clear victories in certain areas. For example, in the 1980s the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT and T) was reputed to be the largest employer of women in the world. Today, women have now been admitted into such all-male institutions like Princeton and Yale and women have been appointed judges to the Supreme Court as is currently the case in Nigeria.

Despite these all-time remarkable strides, concerns are still being expressed for greater improvement in gender relations. Globally, there is a greater awareness towards the need for more to be done in this direction. Aside from the outstanding role of the United Nations in the matter, the 1995 Beijing Conference in China which dealt

specifically on women issues e.g gender equity, among others, is an historic achievement.

The Beijing Conference has raised the consciousness of nations to the problem and has, in fact, given birth to many women advocacy groups in many countries. That many nations today have taken unprecedented steps to enact policies that directly address feminist interest is a credit to the conference. Still on the global level, current interest in feminist concerns can be recorded. For example, this year's (2005) theme for World Population Day-Gender Equity-sought to address all areas of social life in which gender equality is violated-in politics, education, business, workplace, the family and, even in the practice of religion.

On a more local level, in Nigeria the creation of a separate ministry for Women Affairs at the national and State levels has been described as a step in the right direction. This has led to the rise of such women advocacy groups like the Federation of Women Lawyers, National Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ), among many others, for the defence of women's rights. In Zamfara State (Nigeria) the Government has created a Female Education Board with the sole responsibility of handling all issues of gender disparity in private and public sectors, ministries, agencies and parastatals in order to close the existing gap between men and women for the purpose of ensuring equity. It is hoped that all States within and outside the federation will take a cue from the example of the Zamfara State Government.

#### **THE POSITION OF THE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION: THE CATHOLIC VIEW**

The role of the religious institution on certain aspects of social life has been rather controversial in many quarters. Before the emergence of the Marxist school of thought in the 19th century, religion had already attracted some justified doubts as to its relevance on the social scene. The Middle Ages was the era of inquisition and the imposition of all forms of inhuman treatment on religious deviants, while the Reformation witnessed more excommunication than conversion. The crusades of mediaeval Europe were clear testimonies to the darkside of Christianity and the readiness of Islam to wield the sword against the infidel certainly daints its image. In contemporary times, some of the bitterest strifes have been influenced by religious fervour as is the case in Northern Ireland, India and the 1987 Christian-Muslim conflict in Kaduna State (Nigeria). Until the 19th century enlightenment the authority of the Christian church was so paramount and total that individual freedom was completely suppressed. But with the 19th century came a

change in response to popular demand for the church's self appraisal in order to redeem its true image. Following a change in position, contemporary literature has observed some giant strides on the part of the religious institution towards greater and more positive involvement in the world of human affairs (Umoh, 1996, 1997; Lindt, 1969-70). The American Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s recorded the amount of success they did mainly through the roles played by eminent religious personalities like the Rev. J. Jackson, Rev. M. Luther King, Jr. etc. Concerning the important question of gender integration, one can rightly ask: what has been the role of the religious institution?

Although, it may not be fairly representative, this study focuses on the role played by the Catholic Church as a major religious institution in matters of gender equity and equality. This position can be defended because aside from doctrinal differences, other Christian religions have tended to tow the same line of the Catholic Church on important social matters since after the split.

In his letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on The collaboration of men and women in the church and in the world, Pope Paul (2004) asserts that the church is an expert in whatever concerns men and women. Speaking as the sole head of the Catholic Church and a sincere feminist, the Pope observes that in recent times, much reflection has been given to the dignity of women and to women's rights and duties in the different areas of civil society and the church. In line with the above sentiments, the Pope emphatically declares that...the church is called today to address certain currents of thought which are often at variance with the authentic advancement of women.

For a better understanding of the man-woman relationship, a little theology may be necessary. There is no doubt that Christian anthropology is heavily indebted to the Hebrew scriptures according which, as a consequence of and punishment for, the sin of Adam and Eve the way in which the original couple lived their sexual difference has been upset. God's decisive words to the woman after the sin express the kind of relationship which now characterizes man and woman: your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you (Gen.3:16). This new order negates the original divine plan according to which Eve was given to Adam as a helpmate. But the Hebrew term helpmate, Ezer, does not suggest any degree of inferiority but rather a vital helper. It carries no implication of exploitation if we remember that God too is at times called Ezer with regard to human beings (Cf. Ex. 18::4; Ps. 10:14).

Later biblical scholars and the whole of Christendom were then to conclude that, resulting from the tragic

situation of sin, the equality, respect and love that were to typify the man-woman relationship were lost in the process. Today with greater self-understanding and the increasing need to make herself relevant to contemporary society, the church has drastically revised her teaching and shifted her centuries-old positions of dogmatism and tradition in order to accommodate the views and needs of her adherents. Today, it is the church's view that the problems related to sexual difference, whether, in the public or private level, should be addressed by a relational approach and not by competition or retaliation.

Currently and unfortunately, in matters of the relation between man and woman in social life, 2 tendencies or attitudes can be clearly identified, all in utter violation of the relational approach advocated by the churches new found awareness. The first tendency emphasizes strong conditions of subordination which result in antagonism between the sexes. This means that in order to be their true selves, women must make themselves the adversaries of men. This attitude can only lead to opposition and conflict between men and women, in which the identity and role of one are emphasized at the detriment of the other. The second tendency is closely linked to the first. In order to avoid the domination of one sex by the other, their differences tend to be denied. In this perspective, the physical difference by sex is minimized while the cultural element, gender, is emphasized. The attempt at obscuring the difference between the sexes itself has obvious implications. Most importantly, it undermines the prominent role of the family as a 2 parent structure of father and mother with distinctive social roles. To trivialize the differential roles of man and woman in the context of the family suggests the idea that the liberation of women entails criticism of the sacred scripture, which would be seen as handing on a patriarchal model of a male-dominated culture.

Whether, such criticism is justified or not is of little value today because every idea or logic is conditioned by the social climate in which it is produced. The important point is that today the church speaks and enforces the idea of active collaboration between the sexes while acknowledging the fact of the biological difference between man and woman.

In a very natural sense, it must be admitted that men and women are distinct and will continue to remain so for all eternity irrespective of any degree of rationalization to the contrary. To emphasize equality by blurring the obvious difference between man and woman is to use a false premise in the search for solution. The basic difference, of course, is not to be seen as a source of discord to be overcome by denial or eradication but as an effective means of collaboration through mutual

respect. This is the only tendency that can lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the dignity of woman and her indispensable complementary role in the human society. This is the only outlook that can lead to the understanding of the unique value of the woman in the family.

**Appreciating feminine values in the society:** Women have been known to be endowed with the capacity for transforming lives in many facets of human life. Anthony (1992) portrayal of women as emotional revolutionaries of modernity is a perfect conception of women's role concerning their capacity for intimate relations in human experience. Commenting further on the women's natural ability to give intimacy, Giddens stresses that the democratization of such intimate relationships can lead to the democratization not only of interpersonal relations in general, but of the macro-institutional order as well. When feminine intimacy is properly channelled, there is an immense benefit in psychic as well as social and institutional changes. Therefore, gender emancipation and liberation rather than suppression can be the means for a wide-ranging emotional re-organization of social life (Anthony, 1992).

Another value uniquely linked to the woman is the capacity for the other. This intuition is associated with the woman's capacity to give life. This capacity is a reality that structures the female personality in a unique way. It allows her to acquire maturity very early in life and gives her a sense of the seriousness of life and of its responsibilities. This endowment makes woman more than the man to possess a unique capacity for perseverance and to appreciate the value of every human life.

Motherhood is also a special defining element of women's identity. Yet such endowment must not be conceived of from the sole perspective of physical procreation. Such an attitude would result in a purely quantitative notion of biological fecundity and could engender a serious disrespect for the status of women. This is so because in the ontological sense, womanhood can still find full expression without physical procreation. Along this line of reasoning, we can understand why the role of the woman in human relationship in both family and social life is irreplaceable. It is the woman's role in the family that accords her a prominent position because it is in the family that its members acquire (the) basic teachings that will direct future social relationships. It is in the family that the members learn to love and to respect, through the feminine engineering of the woman. Whenever these basic attributes are lacking, society as a whole suffers violence and social solidarity is jeopardized.

In the world of work and in the organization of society women are constantly present. Therefore, society must allow women access to positions of responsibility in order to allow them to inspire public policies which encourage and inspire solutions to economic and social problems generally. However, it must be acknowledged that the demands of balancing family responsibility and the organization of work outside the home present a greater challenge for women than for men. This issue goes beyond legal technicalities to that of mentality and culture. Given the proper understanding, those women who attempt the heroic role of combining domestic and civil responsibilities should be aided and encouraged with appropriate and flexible work schedule, while those women who prefer to give the totality of their time to domestic demands should not be stigmatized nor punished through financial deprivation. As sufficiently demonstrated by Paul (1981).

It will redound to the credit of society to make it possible for a mother without inhibiting her freedom, without psychological or practical discrimination and without penalizing her as compared with other women, to devote herself to taking care of her children and educating them in accordance with their need, which vary with age.

Although, the values mentioned above are fundamentally human yet women are more appropriately attuned to them than men because of their nature.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The foregoing analysis has attempted to address the important issue of feminism in modern society. It is the major premise of this study that promotion of the cause of womanhood in the society is in the interest of the entire social fabric. Accordingly, the advocacy for women liberation and emancipation which has for centuries been treated as an insignificant issue must be understood as a necessity and an indispensable part of humanization. Consequently, every outlook which presents itself as a potential conflict between the sexes must be seen as an illusion capable of inducing a dangerous standpoint within the system. Such attitude would end in segregation, discrimination and unhealthy competition between men and women and would only promote a solipsism nourished by a false conception of freedom.

The intention here is to advance the course of womanhood beyond the present primitive portrayal. Particularly necessary is the need to dismiss the current wrong notion which presents men as enemies to be

overcome by women. Collaboration between men and women should characterize every instance of interaction that brings the 2 sexes together whether, in the private or in the public sector. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that in the formulation of social and public policies, especially in the areas of education, work, politics, family and access to service and civic and religious participation, all efforts should be made at eliminating instances of actual sexual discrimination or the use of any form of language that might suggest same. That is the only way in which the aspirations of all citizens can be protected and public confidence won towards the effective promotion of human dignity. State and Local Governments should follow the example of the Zamfara State Government referred to above which reflects the position of the Federal Government and create similar ministries, structures and agencies that look into cases of gender disparity and propose effective working solutions. Ministers of religion should take advantage of their unique position of closeness to the grassroots and incorporate into their homilies and religious programmes strategies that enhance feminine issues which promote woman integration and equality for the benefit of all.

Finally, in consonance with the words of the Fathers of the Second Vatican council who observed with dismay some forms of social and cultural discrimination in basic human rights on the grounds of sex, it must be underscored that social disparity between the sexes is a source of scandal and militates against social justice, equity, human dignity, as well as social and international peace (Flannery, 1975).

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