

Patriarchy and Gender Inequality: The Persistence of Religious and Cultural Prejudice in Contemporary Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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Abstract—This paper examines the persistence of patriarchy and gender inequality in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. This is a problem in contemporary culture as such practice and mentality is not humanizing and supportive of authentic democratic principles. Following critical theological evaluation and descriptive survey method, the authors discovered the drivers of patriarchy and gender inequality: namely, religious and cultural prejudice against women. The persistence is engineered by religious and traditional practices and systems which are closed to conversion, despite theological and cultural renewal in the global context today. This endemic problem calls for a critical approach to socio-religious backgrounds empowered by integral education, which is capable of forging a *hermeneutic of continuity* which is respectful of both science and theology. Any society or institution that continues to raise sexist barriers is invariably unjust, and thus incapable of forging a civilization of love which is fundamental for peace and progress.

Index Terms—Culture, gender, patriarchy, persistence.

I. INTRODUCTION

The roots of patriarchy and its sustaining factors in Akwa Ibom State can be found in Christian religion and in the culture and traditions of the people. Okon rightly notes that: historically, religion has contributed to the marginalization of women. Religion has provided the platform for male domination of the society [1]. The traditional patterns of inheritance, male-child preference and traditional marriage system with often exorbitant bride price have continued to influence social perception of women. In spite of contemporary sensibility, patriarchy and gender inequality continues in the Akwa Ibom State of the twenty-first century. At the global context as well as at national and local levels, several conferences, fora, workshops, seminars have been held, “determine to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of humanity” [2]. These goals have been realized to some degree of success. But in Akwa Ibom, despite the government subscription of 35% affirmative action for elective and appointive positions in the state for women, patriarchy still stares clearly in the face. The 35% affirmative action (itself discriminatory) appears

to be a mere political propaganda. Women are still under-represented at all levels of governance. For instance, on April 18th, 2012, the government of Akwa Ibom State appointed men and women into the State Executive Council as Commissioners and Special Advisers to assist in the political governance of the State. Disappointing, the recent appointment shows unacceptable degree of discrimination against women (merely 15%), and a high entrenchment of patriarchy.

Why patriarchy does persist in Akwa Ibom State today? The hypothesis could be framed thus: patriarchy and gender inequality persist in contemporary Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria because of overwhelming religious and cultural prejudice against women, and due mainly to the logic of men supremacy enshrined in the sub-consciousness of the people. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to test this hypothesis, describing the sustaining factors of patriarchy in the context of religious, social and cultural challenges of the women in Akwa Ibom State. This study will also proffer solutions to fostering gender balanced culture for a humanizing society.

Three methods are employed in this study; the survey method has been used to gather information from a large number of people, the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) has also been used in order to elucidate information from people who have knowledge, insight and experience on the subject matter and the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) for eliciting views and opinions of target group perceptions, needs, problems, beliefs and reasons for the discrimination against women in politics, religious as well as other areas of social life of the people.

II. PERCEPTION OF WOMEN IN OF AKWA IBOM STATE

A brief exposition of how women are being considered and treated in Akwa Ibom State is relevant for a better understanding of the background of this paper. In the traditional and social circles, one can easily perceive strong tides of patriarchy. This could be attributed to the perception of women, and general understanding of what it means to be a female in the society. In this context, culture plays a very important role in the determination of what is ‘masculine’ and what is ‘feminine’ [3], who can do what and who cannot, who can be an insider and who must remain an outsider. In Akwa Ibom State, there is “unwritten role and function” assigned to women which detail study reveals patriarchy and gender inequality as being both culturally and politically enshrined.

In traditional Akwa Ibom society, women are perceived as subordinates and men as boss. The male-child preference is deeply rooted in the culture of Akwa Ibom State. The man is regarded as the head of the family. Men assumed headship

in traditional structures in the villages and in the clans. Of about 2,000 villages in AkwaIbom State, there is none who could appoint a woman as a head. It is almost like a taboo to think of a woman being a clan head. Women are perceived as part of men's property. Hence, a man is free to marry as many women as he can afford, whereas, a woman is not expected to have a friend beside her husband. So, to be married whether as a second or third or fourth or fifth wife is something acceptable [4]. To boast the ego of men, the man is expected to bear the cost of getting marriage alone. In AkwaIbom State, an average cost implication for getting a wife is approximately one million naira for low income people, an amount which an average civil servant cannot earn in a year. Such a high "bride price" keeps women in constant subjugation to men. This situation often encourages domestic violence as the men wrongly consider the woman as their 'talking furniture'.

Politically, women are perceived as not being worthy of exercise of power and authority in the society. Local traditional sayings empowered this perception. For example, there is a saying that: "*owo-nwanisidataanyin, asidatitit*" (a woman can only be active in bed). Such ideas exclude women from public domain and deny them participation in governance. To this end, of 25 cabinet positions in Akwa Executive Council, only three are occupied by women. The recently concluded Local Government Council elections paint the same picture. Of 31 Local Government Areas (LGA) in the State, only 3 women won election as chairman, meaning that only three L.G.As are being headed by women. This situation is more terrible in councillorship positions.

Religiously, in a traditional set up, it is a taboo to think of women leading or being in charge of a community shrine. The common religious ritual is the pouring of libation, a form of invocation and imploration of the ancestors for blessings and protection. No woman can dare to attempt to perform this ritual, even if she is the eldest and most religious in the community. Hence, women are perceived as being religiously inferior to men, and where there is no male child, a family deity is in a way of extinction as a female would not be allowed to minister.

The above synopsis reveals that the old is very strong through the future is not gloomy. The traditional attitude persists, which could be considered as the main reason contributing to less than agreed quota of women in political offices. On a positive note, the women of AkwaIbom State have experienced some level of emancipation as a result of the various women empowerment campaigns, programmes and education. There is a ministry of government now dealing with women affairs and social welfare. Few government policies like 35 per cent affirmative action in employment and political offices are meant to protect and encourage women. Although at the moment a very little percentage of women in AkwaIbom State have served as leaders at the Local Government levels, State Executive Council, and national level, nevertheless, there is a glimpse of hope for a positive perception of women [5]. It should be noted here that the majority of people in AkwaIbom State are Christians. Therefore, one will expect the Christian faith to have influenced the perception of women in the State but rather the contrary is the case. One

can therefore postulate that the "disadvantaged position" of women in this society indicates that religious and traditional institutions are the real factors empowering patriarchy and gender inequality in contemporary AkwaIbom State.

III. THE QUESTION OF PATRIARCHY AND GENDER INEQUALITY

In AkwaIbom State in particular, it has been observed that two factors have sustained patriarchy and encouraged female subjugation and intimidation. These include: religion and traditional culture. Ukpong observed that: religion is the strongest element in the society and exerts probably the strongest influence upon the thinking and life of the people [6]. The women in AkwaIbom State are in a complex religious situation characterized by multifarious denominations and religious leaders that are not necessarily well trained both intellectually and culturally. Inadequate theological education has affected negatively the question of patriarchy and gender inequality. The contemporary AkwaIbom society is characterized by deep religious faith. That is, many people in the State identified with one religion or the other, and they do participate actively in religious rituals regularly. But their attitude and assessment of patriarchy and gender inequality are not often in harmony with acceptable humanistic evaluation of the relations between male and female today.

There are certain fundamental presuppositions (maleness of Jesus, creation of Adam before Eve) which tend to favour the male self-hood, disadvantaging female and placing women at inferior level. Very often, the promotion of male ideals implies debasement of female spirit and authentic impulses of self-actualization. For instance, in MbokpuEyokan, a village in UrueOffong/Oruko L.G.A of the State, there is a case of a title woman who was assigned leadership position over only women in the village. The village council made up of only men unilateral took away the responsibility from her without reference to any woman. Many women considered this an agonizing reality too difficult to overcome. Moreover, the public opinion sees nothing wrong with such practices, as some consider this a natural and divine legislation, condemning women to servitude and making them the pawns of the society. Can the Christian bible illuminate this situation and practice?

IV. THE BIBLICAL INVESTIGATION OF PATRIARCHY AND GENDER INEQUALITY

As we observed above, AkwaIbom State is a religious society and the prevalent religious faith is Christianity. The Christian scripture have tremendous influence on the question of patriarchy and gender inequality in the state. In the New Testament for instance, some biblical passages have been used to either challenge or support patriarchy. It is difficult to decide whether the Bible is in favour of gender inequality generally because an integral reading of the scriptures promotes the dignity of every human person, begin created in the image and likeness of God.

This ambivalent position is clearly represented by St. Paul. Sometimes, Paul writings depart from patriarchal

mentality, thus championing an all-inclusive culture, where male and female contribute towards the building up of the kingdom of God, coalescing gender differences. In the Letter of St. Paul to the Galatians, patriarchy is challenged:

You are, all of you, children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. All baptized in Christ, you have all clothed yourself with Christ, slave and free, male or female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus. Merely by belonging to Christ, you are the posterity of Abraham, the heirs he was promised [7]

This passage from Galatian should make a major change in the patriarchal society of the predominately Christian area of Akwalbom State, but unfortunately, the situation is not so.

Unfortunately, St. Paul also has some discriminatory messages in the scripture which served as the oil and grease of patriarchal theology and the fulcrum of discrimination against women. A proper casual analysis of Pauline textserves as a patriarchal gun-powder. Paul writes:

As in all churches of God's holy people, women are remaining quiet in the assemblies, since they have no permission to speak: theirs is a subordinate part, as the Law itself says. If there is anything they want to know, they should ask their husbands at home: it is shameful for a woman to speak in the assembly [8].

V. PRACTICES OF CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

From the political antecedence, we have to look at the Churches attitudes towards the question of patriarchy and gender inequality in contemporary society. The Christian denominations who are pruned to supporting patriarchy find numerous passages in the Bible to buttress their stance. The gospel of Matthew is the favourite reference:

These are the name of the twelve apostles: first, Simon who is known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James the son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas, and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Theddaeus; Simeon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who was also his betrayer [9].

Here the calling of only men to the Apostolic College remains a typical locus for the exclusion of women from ministerial position by the Church. Such position and exegesis needs a re-examination in the context of contemporary sensibility, and from the perspective of doctrinal development. Perhaps, this is where the Church is called to a decisive conversion.

The Blessed John Paul II once said: *Jesus freely chose and established the apostles as priests; hence, Jesus' exclusion of women from the Twelve determined their unsuitability for priesthood* [10]. Such statements need to pass through the crucible of "hermeneutics of continuity and development". The priesthood is the fundamental will of God for the Church of the new covenant, who historical present was imbued with the cultural vestry and human sensibility of the epoch, a product of cosmological and biological understanding of the sacred authors. The will of God in the context was communicated through the cultural limitations of the sacred authors as human and accidental instruments of divine revelation. The Church should not condemn herself to cosmology, biology, politics and

language of the ancient world. Such condemnation is of disservice to Jesus who is out to search for the lost sheep, who did not tell the apostles everything and who promised to send the Spirit who will lead the Church gradually and systematically to the whole truth of God and humankind.

Let us look at the religious and ecclesiastical arena of Akwalbom State, in order to highlight the practice of patriarchy and gender inequality. The women in Akwalbom State are affiliates of the five existing blocs of Christianity, namely: Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), Pentecostals Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC) and the EvangelicalFellowship of West Africa (ECWA). The Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), is the organ that coordinates all Catholic Christians in Nigeria, Catholics maintain a very rigid patriarchal structure in their administrations. Women are greatly discriminated against in the leadership of the Church. Although following the example of Jesus in His attitude towards women, and as the result of the truth He taught, women are allowed equal rights with men in achievement of education, art, literature, social services and in missionary activities. They are discriminated against sacramentally, precisely in the reception of the Sacrament of the Holy Order. Women are not considered fit for this sacrament. Unfortunately, the Church has no other sacrament that is reserved for women exclusively. Why this sacrament is reserved for male Catholics only is a testimony of deep and profound prejudice against women. This discrimination is considered as a fact for which the Church has no control. This challenges God himself, who created humankind male and female in divine image and likeness, inviting them both to share in the life of grace, rewarding them all with the gift of salvation.

Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) has a liberal attitude towards women. In most of their conglomeration, women have equal rights as men and can be ordained as deacons, priests, evangelists, bishops, archbishops, etc. Much of these congregations are private initiative of their leaders. Therefore, they tend to follow personal whims and fancies of their leaders or founders. In such groupings, ecclesiastical practice could easily be decided in consensus by the husband and wife through a simple family agreement. There are some women founders, who made themselves bishop without qualms. Example is Mrs. Josephine Eggah, of the New Birth Bible Church. The Redeemed Christian Church of God, the most popular and fastest growing Pentecostal congregation in Africa, challenges patriarchy seriously. Ukahnotes that the status of women in this community has witnessed from the time of Josiah when they were not ordained to the 'new era' of Adeboye as leader when they started climbing up the hierarchy of the church's leadership ladder. He introduced the ordination of women as deacons and assistant pastors and then as pastors [11].

The Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) is made up of churches like Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian, Qualboe, and Lutheran Churches of Nigeria. Their stand on patriarchy is not uniform. The Methodist and Presbyterian Churches give women equal right in their ministry and do ordain any woman deem qualified to the rank of priesthood

though slow to promote them to episcopal order. But the Anglican and the Lutheran Churches in Nigeria hold rigidly to patriarchal structure of excluding women from the ministerial priesthood, thereby encouraging the patriarchal structure. It should be noted that the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC) do not exclude women from administrative positions. Generally, patriarchy is not encouraged in these denominations. Likewise, Evangelical Fellowship of West Africa (ECWA) encourages equal opportunity for males and females.

What is observed from the practices of Christian churches is not uniform. The practice of patriarchy and gender inequality is like a monster in churches with historical stability and developed theology and ecclesiastical discipline. Whereas in the communities and movements of recent history, there is an impressive attempt to recognize in ecclesiastical life and ministry the fundamental and ontological equality of every human person. But this has not translated into a formation of new culture of equality in Akwalbom State and in Nigeria [12], due to deep-rootedness of religious and cultural prejudice against women.

VI. WAY FORWARD FOR A GENDER BALANCED SOCIETY

To successfully address the issue of patriarchy in the study area, strategy and result oriented actions need be followed. The traditional methodology of addressing these issues through workshops, conferences and dialogues can be substituted with the following dynamic options. In the first instance, formal education and training women in assertiveness to be able to challenge the patriarchal structure of the society is important. After assertiveness training, women will be empowered to take their lives into their hands and ask questions in the community on gender discrimination and other humiliating practices against women.

This not all, another sure way of breaking patriarchy is embarking on education of women on Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and training women to understand the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. Incorporating this form of education in official school curriculum will ensure an enduring way of breaking through patriarchy. This form of education can strengthen the role of women groups in promoting human rights, democratic reforms and all forms of discrimination against women.

Facilitating women to demand for structural changes in the different levels of governance and addressing issues of discrimination is another envisaged strategy of breaking patriarchy for an all-embracing and inclusive governance based on a gender balanced structure, equality, equity and right. In this vein, grassroots women require economic empowerment. This will give them the impetus to demand for their rights and to fight all discrimination against them. The rural grassroots women are constrained by poverty and are not empowered to fight for their rights.

In addition, this paper recommends that there should be a communal support of actions and development of local structures that can serve as platforms allowing for the

participation of women in the political processes. This will result in the increase in the number of women elected and appointed into political offices. The action will also support the peaceful conciliation of women groups. The actions taken will strengthen the role of women groups in promoting human rights, democratic reforms and elimination of all forms of violence against women. The educated women in politics still need political empowerment and motivation to fight all forms of discrimination against women and to encourage a gender balanced society.

Religious leaders have a big role to play in eliminating patriarchal mentality and involving everyone irrespective of gender in governance. Therefore, the religious leaders have the responsibility of encouraging their members to actively participate in politics. Positive examples of women in the Judeo-Christian tradition should be used in religious education instead of focusing on issues and examples that will further subjugate women to the background, thereby encouraging patriarchy.

VII. CONCLUSION

To dethrone patriarchy and build a gender balanced society, all hands most are on deck. Men and women need to question traditional practices that discriminate against women. Women can and have contributed immensely towards nation building. Justice and equity demand that they be given equal opportunity to participate in governance. Gender discrimination is a monster that should have no place in contemporary sensibility. Its persistence in Akwalbom State is due mainly to *archaic biblism and unproductive traditionalism* champion by some religious and traditional bigots which is not in harmony with authentic and holistic hermeneutics of continuity, but rather, products of theological framework resisting conversion. From a careful exegesis of the Christian scriptures, it would be discovered that Christianity meant full emancipation of every human person, and wherever Christ is recognized as Saviour and His truth is obeyed, woman is esteemed in her ontology. Her functions should be respected and fostered for a humanizing culture in the modern world.

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