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GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN IBIBIO CULTURE OF AKWA IBOM STATE: CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY RECIPE

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Introduction

Gender discrimination is identified as a cultural issue that places some sense of restrictions to the female gender in Ibibio culture. This work examines these restrictions on female gender as they affect the development of the family life, the church and entire community negatively. The negative influence has affected the leadership in the church and society; since the inception of Ibibio nation and Christianity existence in Ibibio led by a woman named Mary Slessor, no female has emerged as a village head or paramount ruler. This paper examines Christian theology from the study of anthropology tracing that human beings including women constitute the image of God and therefore were created in God's likeness with equal worth. Even though, some churches teach that women should not have a say in the church, theology emphasizes that any form of human discrimination is identified to be cultural not divine. The paper also attempts to examine from theological points, how women should be fully integrated in all spheres of human development because they carry the image of God. It employs the descriptive research method which demands consulting theological materials in the light of biblical analysis.

Gender discrimination is a problem that is hunting seriously the human race. In Africa, it remains a socio-cultural and religious problem that is found in almost every culture and has been a recurring issue till date. In some cultures, it suppresses or subordinates men while others like Ibibio typical culture, the women are oppressed and segregated. In this case, it enslaves the womenfolk and keeps the men free from every form of bondage that ties down the womenfolk. Despite legislative efforts and developmental strides in Ibibio on women emancipation, the typical Ibibio culture has made some of the women to stay back from functioning effectively in the society. This is a form of social injustice meted against the women and is affecting the human society in no small measure. In line with this, Erme notes that "any form of injustice, structured or unstructured, perpetuated against the Nigerian women is an injustice to all" (3).

It logically follows that whatever affects the women of Ibibio affects Ibibio in entirety, and the emancipation of the women of Ibibio is an emancipation of Ibibio holistically. Moreover, proper theologizing of the Christian scripture which underscores male-female relation with God can help in the emancipation of women in Ibibio. It is through this Christian theology which is the science of God and God's relationship to God's creatures, in particular, men and women who are created in God's image, that all can come to know the true position of women in the society. With this awareness, women will be given their rightful place in Ibibio and will contribute effectively to the growth of the society.

This work argues that gender equality will be possible through proper Christian theologizing that is based on the teachings of the Bible. This is to aid appropriate assessment of the place and impact of the Christian theology to curbing the problem of gender discrimination in Ibibio. Hence, it brings to bear the fact that Christian theology can help a great deal to the emancipation of women from all forms of discriminations. Now, women are regarded equal with men in many respects, which was not the case before now. But on the whole, there are still areas of women discrimination that Christian theology needs to address, These areas

include: gender - based violence in respect to the female gender or dehumanizing the women folk, denying women the right to inherit properties left behind by parents and spouses, high bride price payment that sees women as sold commodity and some women refusing to join the cue of emancipation among others. These are urgent issues that Christian theology needs to proffer solution so that female gender could be liberated from the bondages that tie them down in Ibibio. For instance, in Ibibio, women including daughters and wives cannot be given any immovable properties such as land, house and palm trees. This is based on the fact women are not full children; they are married out from the home the parents and are properties of the husbands. The liberation of women will help in the development of Ibibio as well as Nigeria as a nation.

Clarifications of Concepts

It is the opinion of this to examine gender discrimination through Christian theology because no other ways of knowing about Christianity adequately. Therefore the system of theology involves divine and reasoning applications in identify natural situation of man.

Christian Theology: Millard J. Erickson asserts that Christian theology is simply statement of the most fundamental beliefs about the nature of God, about his action, His creatures, and about what He has done to bring us into relationship with Himself (16). In this context, Christian theology is the study of the Christian idea of God as God relates to man and woman as equal creatures.

Gender: Gender to “social expectations about behavior regarded as appropriate for the members of each sex. gender does not refer to the physical attributes in terms of which men and women differ, but to socially form trait of masculinity and femininity” (Giddens 1017). It is “the man-woman distinction” (Lindermann 75).

Gender Discrimination: Discrimination, according to Anderson and Tylor refers to the practices that single some group for different and unequal treatment (365). Gender discrimination is therefore the unjust and uneven treatment of either of the sexes by the more advantaged or superior sex. In the case of this study, it is the unjust treatment of women by men in the society as well as the denial of women equal opportunities and rights by the adverse culture of Ibibio.

Gender Sensitivity: According to the “Article – Gender 101”, gender sensitivity is a conscientization strategy concerned with increasing people’s sensitivity to the implications of gender inequality and demanding that problems of gender discrimination be identified and overcome in policies and programmes. It takes into consideration the fact that gender issues are not overlooked. This, it does through creating awareness and keeping everyone vigilant on gender issues. It is a call to actions that favour and support the marginalized groups in the society. It especially works towards the attainment of equality between men and women in the society. Hence, it seeks not to be discriminatory. This is simply because it seeks equality and equilibrium between the dominant (the men) and the marginalized or subordinated (the women) in the society.

Thus, gender sensitivity is not against biological difference that exists between women and men but their differences created by culture. Cultural differences reinforce the notion that men are superior to women and women inferior to men. It is in this view that the “Article Genesisder101” also notes that gender sensitivity involves:

The process of making people aware of the lower status of women and the possibility of raising this status. A way to enhance people's perception of unequal gender relations. A process of creating awareness of women's issues and the disadvantaged status of women in society (sic).

The act of gender sensitivity gives one the ability to identify problems that come about as a result of gender inequality and discrimination, as well as the allocation of differential task, roles, responsibilities, and activities to men and women based on what is taken to be socially and culturally appropriated. It is also worthy of note that gender sensitivity is the understanding and consideration of socio-cultural factors underlying sex-based discrimination. The term also applies to attitudes that socialize girls and boys into certain behavior or opportunities.

Gender Equality: This does not imply equality in sex or biological roles but rather gender roles equality. "the notion of gender equality rests on an appreciation, dignity and rights of women and men as persons, giving both male and female an equal ground to be themselves and exercise their abilities and God-given talents without any suppression based on biological distinction" (Umoren 60).

Ibibio: The Ibibio are people that speak Ibibio language (Ojo 111). Ibibio refers to both a people and a culture (Udok 207). As a people, Ibibio people are recognized as Akwa Ibom citizens. Traditionally, they constitute the proper Ibibio, Annang and Oro. But recently, there is an ongoing debate showing distinction of Annang and Oro from the Ibibio. Generally, Ibibio people occupy Akwa Ibom State in South-South Region of Nigeria. The traditional Ibibio constitute three basic ethnic groups known as Ibibio proper, Annang and Oro (Udok 208). The three ethnic groups share a common worldview which is religious. They believe in Abasi Ibom (the Supreme Being) and his messengers, divine and human (the ancestors and humans who are still alive). This belief paved way for Christian missionary impact in Ibibioland. Today, Ibibio is predominantly Christians and it is not an exaggeration to relate Christian theology to abhorrent cultural practices in the land such as gender discrimination.

Moreover, the Ibibio culture is practiced by citizens of Akwa Ibom State. Ibibio language is spoken generally by Ibibio, Annang and Oro. The three ethnic groups in the state share same economic, social, political systems (Udok 208). They practice patrilineal system and a family system where the father becomes the head of the family whose decision on issues affecting the family is final.

Gender Discrimination in Ibibio

A number of issues that culminated gender discrimination are hereby discussed below

Masculinity and Leadership in Ibibio Society: The Ibibio believes in the masculinity of the society, that men are superior to women while the women are inferior to men. This belief has led to discrimination against women. Only men can occupy leadership position in the family and the community as a whole. It is not surprising to see that men only constitute the Elders-in-Council, the decision making body in any village in Ibibio. Also, village heads, clan heads and paramount rulers so far are drawn from among men. Stoller notes that people are generally characterized into male and female due to their physical characteristics, such as: external and, internal genitalia, gonads (the organs which produce sex cells), hormonal states and secondary sex characteristics (9). These characteristics make women capable of bearing and suckling children, while men are not. Also, due to the differences of physique

between men and women, it is conceded that men are stronger than the women. This goes as far as ascertaining that biological differences in men and women cause differences in their ability as well as the roles that they play in the society. The different roles should be seen as complementary roles and not to be used as means of discrimination.

Murdock puts the biological differences between men and women as the basis of sexual division of labour in the society such as the biological differences that may include physical strength of men and the fact that women bear children leads to gender roles (7). This position of Murdock is very significant since it holds that gender role differences simply lead to division of labour. In the words of Murdock;

Man with his superior strength can better undertake the more strenuous task, such as lumbering, mining, quarrying, land clearance and house building. Not handicapped, as is woman by the physiological burden of pregnancy and nursing, he can range farther field to hunt, to fish, to herd and to trade. Woman is at no disadvantage, however, in the lighter tasks which can be performed in or near the home, e.g. the gathering of vegetable products, the fetching of water, the preparation of food, and the manufacturing of clothing and utensils (7).

This is to say that no sex or gender role is less important and that gender or sex division of labour is universal.

Gender Based Violence and Discrimination

The issue of gender violence, discrimination, inequality, oppression, subordination, subjection, and oppression is found in many societies right from when humankind came to realize themselves as conscious creatures but this may be typically exemplified in what is happening in Ibibio community. As an African community, Ibibio supports patriarchy and gender inequality. This gives rise to the issue of injustices and maltreatment against women. Violence and discrimination against girls and women are found in the home (family), schools, communities, workplace, classroom, at worship place, and play ground. The most outstanding expression of gender violence and discrimination is the overall preference of the male child to the female child in Ibibio culture. This situation has exposed many women to various forms of dehumanizing imposition of guilt (Nnamani28-29).

Personal interview with Edet Akpan Inyang, the paramount ruler of Itu reveals that there is male domination ideology in Ibibio society where there is the ability of men dominating and controlling their wives or women is the criterion of defining maleness or manhood. This idea of male domination has grown up to the extent that men tend to be unkind to their wives and female children, all in the name of exhibiting authority (15-03-2017). In line with the above thoughts, in another interview, Ime Udousoro, the paramount ruler of Ibiono adds that women are dehumanized in many ways. They are confronted with intimidation and coax to submissiveness and compliance to the demands of the men. This frightens them and makes them not to rise to their full humanity. They are therefore seen as sub-humans and they have no choice but to accept their fate and conditions (05-03-2017). Elimination of gender violence will require a transformation of the societal structure.

Furthermore, Uchem argues:

The most fundamentally significant expression of women's oppression is the persistent use of exclusively masculine words and male images to speak to and about God and all human beings... God is imagined and presented only as male

and addressed in public worship only in masculine language. Many people feel it is normal to speak of God in terms of “He” or “His” to God (41).

This is to say that Christian theologizing is totally masculine and does not include the feminine language. This discourse or illustrations of women’s experiences in African culture can be grouped as political, economic, psycho-social, cultural and religious/spiritual expression of marginalization and subjugation” (Uchem19). All of these call for attention and need to eradicate them from the communities within Ibibio. This stresses the need to examine the contribution of Christianity in this direction. In doing this, it will be discovered that through the effect of the Church, some of these gender problems are now issues of the past.

Women Discrimination Cultured

Discrimination against women and girls is an issue that is found in almost all aspect of Ibibio culture. It is somehow seen as normal in the society. Some see it as what God has sanctioned to be in the society and that it should not be tempered with. This bad practice has remained so for a long time that even the women themselves see this discrimination done against them as something that should continue. This is to say that they do not see it as evil in any way. They therefore enjoy the place that the society has kept them and wish to remain there without complaining. Men are seen as the norm of the society. They are the ones to take decision on issues that concerns them as well as the women. Decisions are always taken in their favour not minding that the women are indispensable in the society and that their presence and roles in the society count in no small measure. Based on the fact that men are the norm for humanity, women are psychologically destabilized and are unable to see themselves as equal to men in any respect. With this, the women are silenced, their achievements are minimized, women’s human dignity is jeopardized; they are therefore regarded as inferior why men are considered superior. Women feel that any attempt to rise against the status quo will be a threat to the society’s good and growth.

Genesisder Discrimination in the Bible

Many churches and Christians in Ibibio accept gender discrimination and claim that it has its root in the Bible. In the words of Harawa-Katumbi, “one finds ample (biblical) texts that refers to women in very negative ways (sic)” (110). The Genesis story has often been used as evidence to woman’s propensity for sin and their inferiority to men. Women are sometimes portrayed as sexual predators (1 Kings 11; Judges 16; Genesis 19:30-36; 39:7-20), as deceitful and untrustworthy (Akintunde 82). In the view of Otu, “the Jews had the idea that women were unclean during the period of menstruation and should remain so for seven days (Lev. 15:6-24), because it involves contact with blood which is prohibited by the Hebrews” (16). Women were defiled by usually long menstruation, profuse bleeding, or intermittent hemorrhaging (Harrison 634). It was also held that child birth leads to the mother becoming unclean for some weeks (Lev. 12:2-5).

With the rapid growth of the Jewish state, men assumed overall head of the family. Women were not freely accepted into the governmental office. The roles of women began to change in the negative direction during the exile or after the exile period (Clark 239). Here, the roles of women were defined as what to do and what not to do. Men do not regard consulting their wives before marrying another wife and divorce was not usually granted her; marital communication was a taboo at home; they had no family worship together except during religious celebrations. She was not allowed to attend to a visitor. Hurly notes that the rule among the Jews was that “don’t talk to a woman in the public, don’t talk to her if she is not your wife” (59-60). The usual echoes from the Rabbis brought about segregation in social

and religious life to the disadvantage of women. It brought decline in the value of women. This finds its climax in the rabbinic quotation such as “may the words of the Torah be burned, they should not be handed over to women” and “thank God am not a woman when they [men] are in the temple” (Hurly 59-60).

Many passages abound that accept gender discrimination. Theologically, these passages have cultural agenda and if given proper exegesis, will condemn discrimination of all kind. genderdiscrimination has damaging implications for the women, the Church and the nature of God at large since men and women were created in God’s image with equal worth and dignity. Thinking otherwise will portray God in the bad light. In Pauline epistles, Paul directed woman to remain silent in the church and ask their husband thereafter if they have challenges about the church magisterium. 1 Corint.14:34.

Denial of Inheritance Right

Gender discrimination in Ibibio brings about the denial of women’s rights in the family as well as the society. It is rightly observed that a woman has no right over her father’s property. To this, Umoren, an Ibibio indigene adds that:

The right to participate in decision making and leadership; the right to attain certain educational heights; the right to gainful employment; the right to freedom of expression; the right to freedom of religion; the right to freedom of movement; the right to choose one’s life partner; the right to hold an opinion; the right to higher promotion. In denying women these God’s-given rights, the excuse usually given is: “you are a woman...” (63).

This would mean that an Ibibio woman does not have the basic fundamental human rights that are engraved in the Nigerian constitution in actuality, in as much as the position of women and their treatment and pains are concerned. This is seen in the situation where the communities or societies “invent cultural directives, practices, taboos, mores and myths overtly or covertly...targeted at women” (Umoren 63).

Umoren further buttresses this situation as he notes that;

The same partially goes for the traditional handling of cases involving fornication, adultery, rape and abortion. In many such cases, the weight of socio-cultural anger, condemnation, blame, and punishment is on the woman who is expected to be better behaved and to practice self-control more than the man (65-66).

Eya also notes, “there is only one summary, men look down on women and do not think that women should have any rights” (20). Ibibio women surrender their rights and powers for men to toil with them.

Women as Properties

In Ibibio, even with Christianity and civilization consciousness, some married women or housewives are designated as house properties. What a debasing situation for those women? This situation does not make them full humans. They are below the men who are true humans. This idea that women are equal to house properties that have no relevance outside the house can further be justified by the idea of payment of bride-price. Umoren captures this thus:

They demand, for example, that a bride price be paid for a woman before marriage, until the effect that in marriage, the woman is perpetually expected to

justify the amount of money paid to purchase her by being productive for him. Payment of bride price, no matter how small the amount is, is a cultural sign of the superiority, pre-eminence and domination of the man over his wife such that, from then, he cannot see himself treating his wife as equal and neither can the wife see herself as her husband's equal (64).

Commodification of women in its worst state in Ibibio is described in high bride price. This alone gives the men the opportunity of seeing their wives as not only objects of sexual satisfaction and baby making machines, but objects of beautifying the house. Hence, the women are meant to remain in the house and do the menial jobs.

The Focus of Christian Theology

Christian theology is the scientific determination, interpretation and defense of those doctrines in scriptures, together with the history of the manner in which the truths it revealed had been understood, and the duties they imposed are performed by all Christians in all ages (Hodge 15). This is to say that theology is not just biblical but also historical. It is in other words, an interpretation of the Scripture as it relates to issues with each epoch. This agrees with the view of Tillich, which states that

A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every generation. Theology moves back and forth between two poles, the eternal truth of its foundation and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received. (3)

This goes a long way to show that theology is not bad or evil as some may think. This wrong motive of people about Christian theology is better expressed in the words of Erickson that:

Indeed theology seems to have certain disadvantages. It complicates the Christian message, making it confusing and difficult for the lay person to understand. It seems to hinder, rather than help the communication of the Christian truth...theology divides rather than unite the Church (29).

Erickson immediately counters this belief as he notes that "theology is important because "correct doctrinal are essential for the relationship between the believer and God" (30). Theology is indeed very significant for the Christian church and her members. This is to say that "the theological enterprise functions within the life of discipleship" (Grenz 2).

According to Strong, "the aim of theology is the ascertaining of the fact respecting God and the relation between God and the universe, and the exhibition of these facts, their rational unity, as connected parts of a formulated and organic system of truth" (2). Here, it is worthy of note that all facts do not constitute the truth. The truth which theology seeks is one that is based on revelation. This revelation is not any kind of revelation but a right kind of revelation; such that leads to the right study, interpretation, and application of the Word of God. It is a theological reflection that is embedded in God's thought and will. Strong notes this thus "a true theology thinks over again God's thought and brings them into God's order" (2). In this vein, theology rethinks on the Scripture with respect to the issue of gender (especially as it borders on the female gender) in order to interpret it in the light of God's inspiration or illumination. With proper interpretation of the scripture, it will decipher that both the male and the female sexes are equal before God. Moreover, the theological paradigm imported to relate with gender discrimination is theological anthropology.

Anthropological Anthropology

The concept, anthropology is derived from two Greek word namely *anqrwπoc* meaning man or humankind, *logoc* meaning science or study. Hence, anthropology is the science or study of human being. According to Layton, “anthropology is the science or study of people” (1). In Christian theology, anthropology is the fundamental teaching of Christian doctrines and human relation to God (Berkhof 51). In this type of teaching, humanity is to be regarded as the apex of the system of living things (Hammond 60).

Thus, Christian theology is the doctrine of the Scripture as to human’s relation to God. It is this doctrine that gives a detail account of human origin, sin, salvation and eschatology. It also focuses on human’s nature – that is, human’s constituent nature. This aspect of Christian anthropology has led to a lot of controversies, because there are three groups of scholars affirming the three human constitutional natures namely, *trichomism* affirms that human beings are composed of body soul and spirit, *dichotomism* affirms that human constitutes body/ soul and spirit or body and soul/ spirit and monism that support is compose of one nature, body, soul or spirit is seen one. In the view of Berkhof in *Systematic Theology*:

It is customary especially in Christian circles to conceive of (hu)man as consisting of two, and only two, distinct parts, namely, body and soul. This view is technically called *dichotomy* alongside of it, another made its appearance to the effect that human nature consists of three parts body, soul, and spirit. It is designated by the term *trichotomy*. (191)

These positions have been firmly defended by theologians and scholars of various stages. In this work, it is therefore held that humans consist of two natures namely; soul (spirit) and body. Both male and female possess the nature.

Christian theology also notes that humans are created in the image of God. This is to say that humans are “God-related” (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* 202). It is worthy of note that the entire human race – both male and female are created in the image of God. This is why humankind is called the *imago Dei*. This designation, the *imago Dei* is not in any way restricted to the males but it applies to both male and female in equal measure.

The above position points to the fact that male and female are equal before God and should be treated as such. Also, the equality of male and female can be deduced from the assertion that male and female consist of the constitutional natures. Both consist of soul and body. With this, one should not have any reason to discriminate against either male or female. They are both equally created in the image of God.

Recommendations

The church where theology is taught should be a strong voice to the oppressed and the voiceless. The church should rise and speak against individuals and laws or customs that encourage gender discrimination. This is possible through good theological reflections that address the issue of Genesisder.

The church needs to know that there is the need for counseling ministry for women who are discriminated against in the church and the society as well as counseling and prayer center. This group of people is passing through and experiencing frustration, anger, fear, and so on. Counseling and prayer will help them come out of it and realize their full humanity. This will afford the counselor enough space and time to address this issue using the Bible.

The church should float support groups under Non-Governmental Organizations known as Christian NGOs to cater for the indigent women and other vulnerable groups who are affected by gender discrimination. This is where they can freely air their fears and pains as well as drawing support from other mega support organizations, individuals and governments.

The church should try to get involved in empowering the women that are being discriminated against. The church should teach them how to stand up against the challenges and fears and stand as complete humans like their male counterparts. The church should encourage the females both spiritually and financially in politics, business, academics, and so on.

Conclusion

The researcher argues that gender discrimination has some adverse effects on the individuals, the family and the society at large. According to the information gathered from the field, it is realized that gender discrimination has led to lack of individual development and progress, lack of family development and malfunctioning of the society. It has hindered a lot of move in the society which could have brought about growth and development in every sphere of the society's life. This is due to the fact that women are not given their full rights and opportunities to use and apply their potentials and talents which could have help the society in no small measure. Research also posits that gender discrimination is found in the cultural, social, religious, and political spheres of Ibibio.

The work finally notes that all hope is not lost with regards to the issue of gender discrimination. It therefore noted that Christianity and Christian theology is the possible way out of this problem of gender discrimination. Hence, the work posits that Christianity has helped a great deal to solve the problems of gender discrimination in no small measure. It therefore holds that Christianity has made all to know that male and female are created by God equally. This is to say that Christianity foster equality between male and female in the society. The paper concludes that all are equal before God and both male and female are created equally to complement each other and to compete against each other. There is therefore no need of asking which gender is superior or inferior. It is God who has created human beings to be of different sex and that there should be no dispute about that.

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