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GENDER (IN)EQUALITY: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE CHRISTIAN AND ISLAMIC RELIGIONS AND LITERATURE

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Abstract

Gender (in)equality is presently a topical issue in both academic and social discourse. This is because of the increasing wave of campaigns and activism from different parts of the world, especially from women and feminist movements that are clamouring for a paradigm shift. Many of these people belonging to different schools of thought believe that gender (in)equality has its roots in both the Christian and Islamic religions. In their views, the Supreme Being instituted gender disparity. In this work, the authors, through a textual analysis of the Bible and the Koran, look at the position of both religions and religious scholars on (in)equality between men and women and the cases for and against as professed by both religions. It concludes that it is a matter of interpretation as there are cases in both literatures that promote both positions and are interpreted differently by the different scholars depending on the side of the divide they stand.

Introduction

Gender discrimination is as old as human history and cuts across different societies, cultures, and religions. From the time of creation to the present day, there has been no time when both males and females were considered equal or seen to be so by society. People (both men and women) have come to live with it as they see it as the norm.

Even some societies have accepted it as *fait accompli* and that any struggle for equality between men and women is not possible. God ordained it (Egboh, Obioji and Agbata, 2010). This thinking may be a result of the resurgence of religiosity either of Christianity or Islam, as both preach the superiority of men. According to Ajayi and Omosule (2017), “None of the three major religions in Nigeria namely: Christianity, Islam and traditional religions endorse equality between men and women.” In Nigeria, for instance, the rights of women have been subsumed and suppressed by gender arrogance couched in the garb of religion and culture (Omonubi-Mcdonnell. 2003)

But, this apart, there has been a persistent hue and cry over the years for the emancipation of women from the shackles of male domination. Gender inequality in all its guises has led to the growth of feminist movements, especially in the West, which have been making efforts to combat cultural patriarchy in different societies (Trisnawati, 2016). This is aimed at attaining gender equality, which, according to Elias (2018), comes from the root meaning “to be equal.”

As agents of gender socialization, different religions create a worldview in the minds of the adherents, and these are passed from one generation to the other through socialization. However, as a result of the growing consciousness in different parts of the globe, women have argued that they are not getting their share in the social space due to some historical claims and jaundiced interpretations of recorded history despite the provision of the Holy Bible and the Qur’an which emphasize the equality of all beings.

In Nigeria, for instance, the clamour for the emancipation of women from male domination is as old as history. Even before independence and immediately after, some

women, such as Queen Amina and Fumilayo Ransome Kuti Eyo Ita, to mention but a few, championed this course. Later, different pressure groups, such as the National Council of Women Society, the Association of Female Lawyers, the Association of Female Journalists, etc, sprang up to promote the cause of women. Sajo (2019) traced an organized clamour for gender equality in Nigeria to 1985 when the late Miriam Babangida launched her pet project, *Better Life for Nigerian Women*. The programme, apart from mobilizing rural women for economic emancipation, harped on their ability to achieve their life potential despite their sex. Hence, she came up with the slogan – *What a man can do, a woman can do even better*. This spurred the women to agitate for a greater opportunity to excel beyond their male counterparts.

Religion as Agent of Gender Socialization

Religion or the place of worship is one of the institutions where people are “indoctrinated” to change their worldview, behave differently or reinforce their existing worldview. Because of this influence, religion is said to be the opium of the masses. Different religions and religious groups and their guiding literatures have different views about the roles men and women should play within the church and the larger society. Religious leaders preach this to the adherents who, after assimilating, later transmit the acquired beliefs to others through socialization.

Different religious groups, despite their general belief in the equality of all humans as children of God, still hold the view that men and women were created to be different with different roles in the church and society. Right from the story of creation, the Bible teaches that, from the beginning, God created us male and female. Such biblical teachings with an emphasis on gender distinction and discrimination show that, though males and females are both the same as human beings, at the same time, they are different, and this “difference” should be reflected in their activities within the church and beyond.

Apart from preaching the words of God, when the Church assigns different roles to male and female worshippers, they are passing a message of gender inequality. For instance, when a church says a woman must cover her hair while a man should not cover his while in the church, the church is passing a gendered message.

Perspectives from the Christian Religion

The oppressive situation of women, starting from ancient times, is reflected in the Bible – the compass that guides the Christian religion. The Books of the Bible, understood as divinely inspired and without reference to the cultural context in which they were written, have served as powerful instruments for the reinforcement of the subjection of women in most communities. They have been used by religious authorities down through the centuries as a guarantee of divine approval for the transformation of women’s subordinate status from a contingent fact into an immutable norm of the feminine condition.

The authors of the Old and New Testaments were men of their times whose actions were influenced by their historical and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, it would be naïve to think they were free of the prejudices of their epochs. The Bible contains much to jolt the modern woman. For instance, in virtually all the books of the Old Testament, women emerged as subjugated and “inferior” beings.

Christian authors placed importance on the account of the creation of Eve. Combined with the story of the fall of man, they presented irrefutable evidence of women’s essentially

inferior intellectual and moral status. This impression did not end in the Old Testament but was reinforced in the New Testament and has served as a basis for their perpetuation throughout Christendom.

The creation account of Genesis 1: 26-29 and Genesis 2: 15-20 in the Bible shows that Adam was more fundamental than Eve because it is the man who was created in the image of God, not the woman (Ajayi & Omosule, 2017).

The story of the creation apart, the Bible tells us that the wife addresses her husband as a slave addresses his master, or a subject, his king. In the Decalogue, a man's wife is listed among his possessions, along with such items as his ox and his ass (Exodus, 20:17; Deuteronomy, 5:21).

In Hebrew culture, which some books of the Old Testament reflected, misconduct on the part of a wife was severely punished among the ancient Hebrews. Infidelity on the part of the man was punished only if he violated the rights of another man by taking a married woman as his accomplice. In view of what women suffered then, Hebrew men always pray, "I thank thee Lord that thou hast not created me a woman" (Daly, 1991).

The most striking anti-feminine passages are in the Pauline texts. It seemed important to him that women should not have a predominant place in Christian assemblies and that they should not "speak" in public or unveil their heads. Paul went further and provided theological justification for the prevailing customs. He insists that:

A man ought not to cover his head since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man (1 Corinthians 11:7ff).

Also, 1 Timothy (2:11-15) says:

Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

Also, Ephesians (5:24) says: "As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives be subject in everything to their husbands."

Also, the language of the Bible is gender-blind and does not consider women as part of society. Statements such as "the son of man" and "man shall not live by bread alone," etc, create an impression that all are men and that women are not part of the human race. In addition, the Christian religion created different vocations for men and women. Though this is changing in some Pentecostal churches, the Orthodox churches still discriminate as women are ordained into a different vocation apart from that of men.

Despite these provisions, some rights crusaders believe that in the Christian religion, God did not discriminate as He created only one man (Adam) and one woman (Eve). However, another School of thought believes the dichotomy started right from creation when God created Eve from a rib pulled out from Adam. They argued that despite the numerical equality, the quality is not the same since Eve was created from Adam, an account Daly (1991) describes as a hoax. Also, the use of non-gender-neutral statements such as "man shall not live by bread alone" shows bias against women.

Some of the biblical texts that support the marginalization of women, according to Umoren (2005) include:

Gen. 2:18-25 - Woman created out of man as man's helper.

Gen. 3:16 - The woman's husband shall lord over her.

Eph. 5: 21 -33 - Wives should be subject to their husbands and

1 Tim. 2: 11-15. – No permission for a woman to have authority over a man.

But, many authors and commentators have said that the biblical references are not God's wish for the people. According to Uchem (2005), the authors were not immune to the infection of their anti-women cultural legacies. The author writes:

These divine messages and lessons were expressed in human terms and mindset reflective of the culture and times of their human authors and, in fact, enmeshed in the cultural matrix of their original location and context.

However, despite these claims, the church is presently bidding farewell to her past and waking up to the task of championing the campaign for gender equality. For instance, Pope John Paul II, in his letter to women at the Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing, China, asked for the women's pardon for all that the church has done to them to rob them of their dignity Nnamani (2005).

Perspective from the Islamic Religion

Within Islamic ideology, biological differences between men and women are recognized, and the relevance of womanhood is extolled. Contemporary Muslim elites strongly believe that Islam as a religion is inherently gender-neutral and promotes gender equality (Sajo, 2019). In Islam, women and men have equal status as servants of God who were created through the same production method (Yaswirman, 2020).

But, just like in Christianity, the Islamic religion has been accused of being unfair to women and Muslims are faced with the challenge of staying true to their faith while responding to the criticisms. Izadi (2020) states that:

Some chapters of the Holy Qur'an speak of a preference of men over women such as 2:228, 4:34 and 43:18. One can ask whether men and women have the same essence or whether man has certain characteristics that make him own a different and superior essence.

Islam is a powerful religious force that shapes Nigerian society's socio-political and socio-ethnic milieu. Women's rights to inheritance under the Islamic legal system are limited. While the Qur'an makes provisions for women's property and inheritance rights, the general rule is that their share is half that of their male counterparts. To put it more rightly, a daughter is only entitled to half of her brother's share of inheritance (Udoh, Folarin and Isumonah, 2020). This inequality is drawn from the assumption that the man has more financial obligation towards the woman.

The bias against women in Islam is not only evident in inheritance. It permeates most fields of human endeavour, such as in providing evidence, the offence of rape etc. The Islamic rule of evidence is discriminatory against women since the evidence of a woman has a lower value than that of a man. For instance, in the social contract, two male witnesses are required, but "If there are no males available, then a man and two women so that if one of them errs, the other can remind her." (Nwammuo & Amarube, 2022, p.226).

Also, to prove an offence of rape, the evidence of four men is mandatory. This means that the evidence of women only is not sufficient to prove an offence of rape. In divorce, the Islamic religion favours men. While a man can unilaterally divorce his wife, it is not the same for women.

Regarding leadership, Islam is very clear about who is to lead either in the family or the larger society—Salat in a congregation or administrative leadership comprised of both

men and women. An authentic hadith reported by Abubakar (RA) in Sahih al-Bukhari narrates that a nation that assigns its leadership to women can never prosper (Sajo, 2019).

Sajo (2019) states that as a result of the increasing wave of feminism and feminist movements, many people, including Muslim women, were brainwashed that they started agitating for equality with men in all sectors. According to the author, Muslim women in Nigeria, especially the elites, were “brainwashed and are trying to defend gender equality from the Qur’an and sunna to make them feel equal with their male counterparts.”

The Opposing Viewpoint

Despite the general belief that the Islamic religion supports male superiority over women, some people, especially some gender equality crusaders such as Yaswirman and Fendri (2020), argue that women and men in Islam have equal positions as servants of God created through the same reproduction method. The authors argue that if there are interpretations that are not in line with the principles of justice, such interpretations should be reviewed both textually and contextually since, “in Islamic view, women position is equal to men, as humans.” Also, Kharroub (2015) argues that:

The mainstream interpretation of Qur’anic text that consider men superior to women are therefore not objective but subjective human interpretations heavily influenced by historic and geographical conditions. In addition, Qur’anic verses in many instances are revealed in very specific circumstances, and need to be understood based on contextual terms.

The rights activists believe that despite the misogynistic Islamic interpretations of the Quaran that subordinate women in Moslem Societies, the prejudiced reading of Islam is not inherent in the texts but is a product of their time and place.

The writings of innumerable authors in various fields attest to the existence of inequality between men and women in every society. Starting from ancient times, the oppressive situation of women is reflected in the Bible. The authors of both the Old and New Testaments were men of their time and were not free of the prejudices of such times in history. Indeed, the Bible contains much to jolt the modern women, especially the equal rights crusaders and advocates who think of themselves, at least to some extent, as autonomous individuals.

Right from the beginning of human existence, the Old Testament recorded the woman as an inferior being or the weaker sex created out of the single rib of a man. This story of creation, which could be said to be the origin of the inequality contest, has been a reference point used by advocates of male superiority. Coupled with the story of the fall of man, also recorded in the Bible, they provide irrefutable evidence for advocates of male superiority. Daly (1991) refers to the creation story as “an androcentric myth ... taken as straight historical fact. According to the author:

A psychoanalyst who is also a student of biblical literature has summarized the situation succinctly: ‘The biblical story of Eve’s birth is the hoax of the millennia’.

The author argues further that some of the present cultures are rooted in the Greek misogyny and reflected in the New Testament serve as a basis for their perpetuation throughout Christendom. Again,

For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man (1 Corinthians 11:7ff)

Conclusion

Both Christians and Moslems worldwide believe in the equality of all humans as created by the Supreme Being. However, the Holy books used by these groups in different sections contain statements that oppose the equality of men and women as ordained by the Supreme Being. These provisions have attracted criticism from both men and women who strongly believe in gender equity and equality. These gender advocates argue that history played an essential part in the contents of these books, which were written based on the historical perspective of the time. To these advocates, these provisions were not intended to discredit the creator's work but were interpreted based on the time and environments in which they were written.

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