Women and Religion in Nigeria: a Reassessment

Leke Oke
Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

Abstract

Religion, which presupposes belief in the existence of a God or gods, cannot exist exclusive of society. Indeed religion has a huge responsibility of shaping the peoples thoughts, beliefs, and values, correcting fallacies, and providing the adherents with the information and guidance to live lives that are more informed. In Nigeria, religion has unconsciously promoted a negative perception and stigmatization of women through its failure to accord women the same status with men. The argument the Church makes against ordination of women and their empowerment is that Jesus did not select any woman to serve among his Twelve Apostles. Since the hierarchy of the Church draws its authority from being the spiritual descendants of the apostles, it follows that like the apostles, the clergy should be male. The exclusively male hierarchy of the Church has the tendency of leading to male dominated decisions that work against the ordination of women. This religious belief and orientation have pervaded most societies in Nigeria to relegate womenfolk into the background socially, economically and politically. However, realities of modern societies and the quest for peace and human development are such that have obliterated any rigid commitment to religious ideals in subjugating the women. If the goal of religion, especially Christianity, is the betterment and upliftment of the human race, therefore women subjugation has no basis in modern public administration. Utilizing biblical evidences and empirical data, this paper contends that equal access of the two genders (male and female) is pivotal to good governance and administration both at the church and the society. It therefore canvasses paradigm shift towards engendering a peaceful milieu and developed nation.

Key words: Religion, women, peace, development
Introduction

In Nigeria today, women constitute almost half of the total population yet their political rights and participation even though guaranteed under the 1999 Constitution does not reflect their numerical strength in the country. They play a minimal role in the area of politics. One major impediment to their active participation in politics is religion: Christianity and Islam. It is also due to the nature of politics in Nigerian, which is highly monetized. A system where money rather than merit determines who becomes what in the political terrain is worrisome. The male because of this advantage seems to have monopolized the field. Even though the constitution guarantees this right, women appear still lagging behind their male counterpart in this regard. In addition, religious beliefs have also contributed significantly through its patriarchal posture of male dominance. Both the Christianity and Islam preach male supremacy, this is in spite of the fact that Nigerian constitution frowns at discrimination in its entirety. The Constitution equally guarantees the right of women in politics and in decision making of the nation. The controverted area is whether a woman can rule a nation or not. Therefore, to shut them off all key positions in Nigeria is inimical to societal health and development. This however does not call for division; after all, in a family unit, which is the nucleus of the larger society, the role of one gender is significant to the other. By extension therefore, women have special role to play in all aspects of human endeavour, be it legislative, executive, health, public administration, security, law, and order etcetera. However, in the Nigerian political terrain, men among other measures have capitalized on religious belief to discriminate against women and subjugate them in societal administration. Uchem¹ writes that very often, religion has been used for providing a rationale for the subordination of one sex to another. As Millet² puts it: “patriarchy has God on its side” that is, Christianity portrays Eve as an after thought produced from Adam’s spare rib. Furthermore, it is held that the origin of gender discrimination began from their sins. Islamic doctrines strictly bar women from some political endeavour – public speaking etc.–that can facilitate their political ambitions. This tendency to perpetuate subordination in God’s name through religious ideologies has been observed in all human cultures and religions in every part of the world. Oduyoye³ succinctly puts it thus:

…religion plays such a key role in enforcing societal norms and ethics
…socio-political participation is truly imbued with religion even when they are not explicitly stated.

---

Uchem\textsuperscript{4} holds that this can be seen in the United States and Europe, where in spite of the achievement of the women’s movement, white male supremacy and female cultural subordination continue to be very much in place due to religious conservatism and the effect of biblical/Christian cultural myths. Thus, literal approach and biblical proofs – texts have been and are still being invoked to support women’s subjugation much the same way that some fathers of the church used the Bible to justify slavery for many centuries before it became eventually outlawed. Specifically, the Biblical injunction in 1\textsuperscript{st} Corinthians chapter 14 verses 34-35, stipulates that:

\begin{quote}
Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home; for it is a shame for women to speak in the church (KJV).
\end{quote}

Thus, in both Christianity and Islam, there is a presumption of the inequality between women and men that did not necessarily exist in pre-colonial religion.\textsuperscript{5} Thus, colonization brought with it Christianity that subjugated women and reduced them to instrument of labour in the hands of their husbands who were the only visible figures and voices during colonialism. In spite of Islamic provisions for the equality of all believers, purdah and polygyny are considered obligatory. Since peasants cannot afford to seclude their wives, these phenomena are linked to class.\textsuperscript{6} In Christianity, the orthodox position is that women should be submissive to men. Women’s restricted access to information in Islam, likewise encouraged them to accept a submissive role. Even in the case of Christianity, education and a re-conceptualization of the role of women is necessary if significant progress is to be made. This paper therefore examines the pivotal roles of women in religion and governance. It also considers the question as to whether a Christian woman possesses the right to rule and hold public offices in Nigeria in view of the restrictions imposed on women by the Biblical injunctions and the surreptitious move by men to use religion to their advantage.

Conceptual framework

This study adopts the concept of Democracy as its framework. Women’s ability to actively shape political processes at the national and local levels and better participate in politics is predicated on the existence of democratic institutions and a stable political environment. However, over the past few years there has been an increasing recognition that in conflict situations characterized by instability and weak application of the rule of law, women’s participation in peace processes is essential to ensure their long-term success. Since politics is about conflict and conflict resolution and democracy can only thrive in a peaceful milieu, women have assumed a fundamental role in democratic governance.

Democracy is a form of government organized in accordance with the principles of popular sovereignty, political equality, popular consultation, and majority rule. Democracy is about a system of government, it is about the establishment of certain institutional and procedural characteristics designed to facilitate mass participation in decision-making process and to guarantee accountability and basic material needs of the people. Generally, democracy involves the opportunity to participate in decision-making in the political process. It repudiates arbitrariness and authoritarianism. It extols the consent of the governed and it protects human personality and values. Democracy includes fundamental recognition of popular sovereignty, equal opportunity for all, majority rule, representativeness, minority rights, right of choice between alternative programmes, popular consultation, consensus on fundamental issues and more essentially, periodic elections. The concept of democracy confers the opportunity to participate in decision on all adult citizens. The citizenry enjoys widespread participation in the political process.

Thus in the modern world, the term democracy has assumed a vantage position over all other forms of government, and has been so universally attractive that most nations could claim it as a label to be attached to its name. Hence, an overtly despotic regime still laid claim to being democratic. However, majority of views tend to see democracy from its popular participation perspective from which the power to vote and to enthrone a government flows.

Part of the attraction of democracy lies in the refusal to accept in principle any conception of the political good other than that generated by ‘the people’ themselves. From the pursuit of elements of popular sovereignty in early self-governing republics to the diverse struggles to achieve a genuinely universal franchise in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, advocates of greater accountability in public life have sought to establish satisfactory means for authorizing and controlling political decisions.

---

7 African Report 2006: i

Democracy has been championed as a mechanism that bestows legitimacy on political decisions when they adhere to proper principles, rules and mechanisms of participation, representation, and accountability. In the East European revolutions, the principles of self-determination and consent to government action have again challenged the principle of ‘single person’ or in these particular cases ‘single party’ rule.\(^9\) Democracy has been re-celebrated as a way of containing the powers of the state, of mediating among competing individual and collective projects, and of rendering key political decisions accountable.\(^10\) In political circumstances constructed by a plurality of identities cultural forms and interests each perhaps articulating different perspective regimes, democracy is seen, to offer basis for tolerating and negotiating differences.

Generally, democracy involves the opportunity to participate in decision-making in the political process. It repudiates arbitrariness and authoritaríanism. It extols the consent of the governed and it protects human personality and values.\(^11\) Democracy, whether liberal or African or modern includes fundamental recognition of popular sovereignty, equal opportunity for all, majority rule, representativeness, minority rights, right of choice between alternative programmes, popular consultation, consensus on fundamental issues and more essentially, periodic elections. The concept of democracy confers the opportunity to participate in decision by all adult citizens. The citizenry enjoys widespread participation in the political process. Democracy is seen as the people’s rule, for themselves and by themselves.

It follows then that both sexes should be engaged in rulership.\(^12\) From the foregoing, it is clear that democracy does not favour inequality and discrimination in all its ramifications. Thus, democracy is all about equality of equals. Hence, the notion of gender discrimination, under the guise of religion, and inequality is incongruous to democracy and consequently development.

**Women in the Bible**

Biblically, leadership is the calling of God for service to humanity. The leaders, kings and judges in the Old Testament are specifically called by God to deliver their people. Though men are mostly called to this service, God has equally shown that these leadership qualities are found in women.\(^13\) The book of Judges Chapter 4 gave a vivid

---


account of the roles played by Deborah in liberating the Israelites from Sisera. But for Deborah, the leader of Israel would have lost in battle with Barak to save Israel from the terror of Sisera (Judges 4:1-24). Though ignoble, Jezebel performed the task of a great warrior in her day. She championed the priests of Baal, and she found herself confronting the Israelite prophet Elijah. In a dramatic showdown on Mount Carmel, hundreds of her priests were slaughtered by the Jahwist devotees led by Elijah. Jezebel swore revenge, and Elijah went into hiding for a time. Despite her modern reputation as a floozy, Jezebel seems to have been fiercely loyal to her husband Ahab. He was almost constantly engaged in leading the army and fighting battles, and Jezebel would often have been in charge of keeping government on track while he was away at the battlefield. She grew used to exercising power (1 Kings 16:29-34, 18:17-40, 19:1-3, 21:1-16, 22:29-40, 2 Kings 9:21-28, 9:30-37).

Furthermore, Miriam was a prophetess who led Israelites women in celebration after their triumph in Egypt. She was listed as one of the national leaders in the book of Exodus (Exodus 20:20-21). In addition, Elizabeth was a formidable woman socially and spiritually. The Bible recorded that she was well placed. She came from a long line of priests, and was eminently respectable and well connected. She had married sensibly too - her husband, Zechariah, was a member of the priestly order, and so they enjoyed a high social status (Luke 1:5-80). Esther: a beautiful young Jewish orphan who is cared for by cousin Mordecai. Chosen to be a possible wife for the great king Xerxes I. Becomes wife of the Persian emperor, who does not know she is Jewish. Intelligent, discreet-the perfect wife. She Saved the Jewish people from the danger of an ancient Holocaust (Esther chapters 4-10). In addition, Martha and Mary were women who, with their family members, provided hospitality for Jesus and his disciple. The book of Luke (10:38-42) gives a chronological account of this episode as follows:

Now it came to pass, as they went, that he (Jesus) entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she helps me. And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her (The Bible passage is from KJV).

It is clear from the above that Jesus Christ himself acknowledged the epochal role played by Mary; a woman of whom he said has chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her. This same Mary later took a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair (John 12:3) towards his

---

14 The Holy Bible. KJV
(Jesus) crucifixion and resurrection. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome were the first to see Jesus Christ when he resurrected and became the first bearers of the good news (Mark 16:1-8, Luke 24: 26-28).

Thus, God created man and woman equal in everything: intelligence, humane and leadership qualities. It has not been established anywhere that man is superior to woman naturally. In fact, God the creator commissioned both the man and woman to replenish the earth and subdue it and by implication, the duo was commissioned to rule and administer the earth and the nations therein. This is evidence in the book of Genesis (Chapter 1:27-28) as follows:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God bless them and God said unto them, be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

Odinamadu (1988) in Nnoruga\textsuperscript{15} gave credence to the natural equality between man and woman when he maintained that ‘man and woman are inseparable in their make up and functions and none can claim superiority over the other from God’.

**Women and Christian Religion in Nigeria**

Like gender, religious inhibition is a social bump erected by the male leaders of the church to subjugate and control women and was never implied by the creator- God when he created the woman out of the man. In fact, Jesus Christ himself acknowledged the contributory role of Mary towards the accomplishment of his task in fulfilling the scripture (Luke 10:38-42). The complementarily of sex roles in family living should permeate the society towards enhancing good governance and societal development. This will in no way desecrate/pollute the church of God since the result is righteousness, peace, fairness, and development. The ten commandment of the almighty God were discretely given to both the man and the woman and are expected to be obeyed samely. Thus in Exodus chapter 20 verses 3-18, God gave the Ten Commandments to his adherents as follows:

I am the Lord thy God, which have brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shall have no other gods before me. Thou shall not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth…. Thou shall not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy…. Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth

thee. Thou shall not commit adultery. Thou shall not steal. Thou shall not bear false
witness against thy neighbour. Thou shall not covet thy neighbour’s house; thou shall not
covet thy neighbour’s wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or
anything that is thy neighbour’s (Holy Bible, KJV).

The literature is replete with women founders of great churches. Mother Florence
Crawford established the globally recognized Apostolic Faith Church in USA. The
Church has ordained women as its pastors. Similarly, Aimec Semple Macpherson
founded the Four Square Gospel Church with women and men as pastors. In the same
vein, Ellen, J. White founded the Seventh Day Adventist Church (Nnoruga 2009:5). These
churches utilized Biblical precepts and injunctions and they all have men and
women ordained as pastors.

Today, women occupy strategic positions in the church of God as pastors,
reverends, church founders, deaconess, lay readers, church treasurers, interpreters etc.
The Christ’s Faith Mission has Mrs. Benson Idahosa, a woman, as Bishop. In fact, most
of the wives of pastors and reverends now administer the church in conjunction with their
husbands as pastor Mrs. or reverend Mrs. as the case may be. Nnoruga (ibid: 6)16 opined
that the Anglican Communion have accepted in principle the ordination of women as
pastors. Citing Odinamadu (1988), Nnoruga maintained that the United States of America
has produced first woman Bishop as Rev. Barbara Harris. It is also noted that Canada has
ordained over two hundred women as pastors and over five hundred have been so
ordained in England while Kenya, China, and parts of Asia have ordained women as
pastors.

Therefore, relegating women in the name of religion (Christianity) symbolizes
taking them back to the forbidden Egypt: into the house of bondage for oppression and
subjugation. This will no doubt negates the Biblical injunction of pursuing peace with all
men and be at peace and in love with one’s neighbour. For the church of God to progress
and the society to develop, these Godly commandments must be obeyed and women must
be accorded their rightful place in governance and societal administration. Not until then,
development may remain a toll order in Nigeria.

Women and Political Participation in Nigeria

Political participation thrives on democratic acquisition and utilization of state
power as well as its dispensation towards the collective good of all the citizens. As one of
the tenets of democracy, Political Participation is liberal and unrestricted. Subscribing to
this, Okolie perceives political participation as “freedom of expression, association, right
to free flow of communication, right to influence decision process and the right to social

16 Nnoruga, T. N. 2009. The emerging Leadership Roles of Women in Religion and Politics: A means of
17 Ibid. P.6
justice, health services, better working condition, and opportunity for franchise”\(^{18}\). The cogent activities involved are holding public and party office, being a candidate for office, soliciting party funds, attending a caucus or strategy meetings, contributing time in a campaign. The citizenry (men and women) must participate fully on equal basis in all the activities of political participation before it can be said that they are participating in politics. Although, findings have indicated that the involvement of women in Nigerian politics is largely noticeable at the level of voting and latent support. Adeniyi has identified violence and other forms of electoral conflicts perpetrated and perpetuated by men and male youths as the major barriers confronting and inhibiting women active participation in Nigerian politics.\(^{19}\)

Governments, in conjunction with women’s organizations and political parties, have a vital role in ensuring women’s empowerment. They do so by promoting gender-sensitivity among officials or establishing comprehensive women’s policy forums such as women’s ministries and equal opportunity bureaus. It is opined that what matters most in terms of a government’s response to the needs and interests of women is not simply the number of women in parliament but that of equal importance are institutional mechanisms, such as support from political parties for women’s rights, and the strength and coherence of women’s organizations.

On assumption of office in May 1999, President Olusegun Obasanjo showed that women are the focal point of his administration as significant numbers of women were appointed into the administration. These women who to a large extent demonstrated the capability of women in position of authority, among others, included: Obiageli Ezekwesili (who has worked in the Budget Monitoring and Price Intelligence and Implementation office under the presidency as well as minister of Solid Minerals Development and Education), Leslye Obiora (Mines and Steel Development), Inna Maryam Ciroma (Women Affairs), Helen Esuene (Environment and Housing), Esther Nenedi Usman (Finance), Joy Ogwu (Foreign Affairs), S.A. Jankada (Youth and Development) Halima Alao (Minister of state for Health) and Grace Ogwuche Minister of State for Agriculture and Water Resources). Before the above women, there were Dr. Ngozi Okonjo – Iweala, Princess Funke Adedoyin, Mrs. Becky Igwe, Mrs. Pauline Tallen, Hajia Ndalolo, Obong Rita Akpan, Dr. Kema Chikwe, Mrs. Chikwe Obaji.

The ministries of Education, Finance, Solid Minerals, and Foreign Affairs, for the first time since independence have women as ministers. Some women were also appointed by the president to head extra - ministerial departments and agencies and they equally distinguished themselves. They included Professor Dora Akunyili, Director – General of the National Agency for food, Drugs and Administration and control,


NAFDAC, and Mrs. Maureen Chigbue, Director General, Bureau of Public Enterprises, BPE. Simbo Akintimilehin described them as “lionesses who have threaded where lions were reluctant to dare” (Newsworld, 2007:17).\textsuperscript{20} The success of these women in the various ministries and agencies has humbled many of the male counterparts.

Doubtlessly, the Nigerian democratic government since the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999 impacted on women participation in politics. In 1999, there was one (3 percent) deputy governor, and in 2003, two (6 per cent). There was 3.3% female representation in the lower house of the National Legislature in 1999, 6.4% in 2003 and 7.5% in 2007. In the 1999 Senate, 2.8% women representations increased to 3.7% in 2003 and further increased to 8.3% in 2007 (Field Research). Findings from the tables below clearly attest to this:

### Table 1: No of Women elected in 1999, 2003, 2007, and 2011 Nigerian Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Number of Available Seats</th>
<th>Number of Women in 1999</th>
<th>Number of Women in 2003</th>
<th>Number of Women in 2007</th>
<th>Number of Women in 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Presidency</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>House of Reps</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Governorship</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Deputy Governorship</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1 (out of 26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>36 States Houses of Assembly</td>
<td>990</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1532</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Fieldwork 2011.

However, the just concluded General Elections (April 2011) revealed the peculiarity of the Nigerian Democracy; it showed that the country’s democracy is still largely patriarchal with most actors abhorring democratic political culture and values that could sustain the gains of women in Nigerian Politics. Consequently, therefore, the numerical gain by women in elective positions over the past four elections has waned especially at the level of the National Assembly. Thus, the number of elected women in the elections diminished both at the Senate and at the House of Representatives. This is in spite of government’s commitment to implementing various treaties at international, regional, and national levels, in particular, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPFA), which provides for the Affirmative Action Policy, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) as well as the National Gender Policy. Despite these commitments and the numerical strength of women, they still occupy less than eight per cent of elective and appointive positions at all levels of governance in the country. Although the 2011 general elections witnessed an increased number of women stepping forward to contest their parties’ primaries, only few emerged as candidates and fewer still won any of the positions they contested. Female candidates, for instance, constituted 9.1 per cent of the total number of those who contested the last National Assembly election from all the political parties. Thus, out of the 3,306 candidates in this category, only 302

\textsuperscript{20} Newsworld, 2007:17
of them were women. Worse still, only seven of them won seats in the 109 seats Senate representing about 6.4 per cent. The story is not different at the House of Representatives where, out of the 360 available seats, women, accounting for about 5.27 per cent, won only 19. This is an abysmal drop in the light of the success recorded in 2007, 2003 and 1999 elections, where the figures were respectively 27 (7.5 per cent), 21 (5.8 per cent) and 12 (3.3 per cent). Similarly, out of the about 348 governorship candidates across the country, only 13 women, about 3.7 per cent of the total number, contested in 10 states, and none of these was successful. In addition, only one woman: Mrs. Joke Orelope-Adefulire from Lagos state was elected as a Deputy Governor out of the 26 states where elections took place. What that means is that to date, Nigeria, is yet to produce a female governor. Except, of course, for the brief period when Dame Virginia Etiaba held forth for Governor Peter Obi in Anambra State. Likewise, there was only one female presidential candidate in the person of Mrs. Ebiti Ndok of the United National Party for Development. Mrs. Sarah Jubril, a presidential aspirant on the platform of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) earlier lost out at the party primaries held in Abuja where she succeeded in getting a self-vote (one vote). This scenario represents the exclusion of about half the population of the country from mainstream political activities and such exclusion fails the basic test of democracy and cannot facilitate Nigeria’s achievement of its commitment to the MDGs and women empowerment. As with all other factors affecting women political participation, the effect of religion as an inhibiting factor can be mitigated by aggressive education of the female gender. It is doubtful if a woman-professor, or doctor can be caged politically by veiling her face and avoids her profession in the name of any religion. The composition of the seventh National Assembly revealed that in spite of the religious inhibition, women (of various religions) composed of 23 members in the House of Representatives and 6 members in the Senate.

Conclusion

Thus, there is a continuing trend of male domination of political and other public positions. Other than religion, lack of internal party democracy has created a conducive atmosphere for discrimination against women based ostensibly on cultural and patriarchal perceptions of inequality, roles, and potential between women and men. In addition, weak compliance with democratic ethos has encouraged corruption and violence against women within the political parties. Political parties encourage women’s nomination as deputies thus conforming to the notion of censored participation and second fiddleism of women in Nigerian politics.

21 Fieldwork 2011. Gubernatorial Election was not held in ten states of Kogi, Bayelsa, Adamawa, Cross-River, and Sokoto where the Court of Appeal ruled favourably on the one year tenure extension for the governors. Also, the Election did not take place in Anambra, Osun, Edo, Ekiti and Ondo states due to the victory of the incumbent governors at the Election Petition Tribunals.
References


- The Holy Bible. KJV