

Exploring the Relevance of Feminist Leadership in Theological Education of Nigerian

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Abstract

Feminist leadership is very important in theological education as it would seek to deconstruct stereotypical assumptions about women and gender in Christian theological traditions. Unfortunately, most of the theological schools in Nigeria do not have feminist as leaders. Five reasons why feminist leadership are needed in theological schools have been identified as, the bible teaching that women brought sin and death to the world, servant hood notion of women, scandal of particularity, male domination of ministries and theological methods and process that are full of stereotypes. All this does not provide women a unique opportunity to discover and develop their potential in the church and society. Also, women's relevance and contributions can be hampered if not allowed to put in their optimum. To avoid this, the researcher suggests that theological education should not discriminate against any gender, but should work to bring about gender justice by involving the feminist leaders in theological education in Nigeria. It is hoped that by pursuing these steps, theological education in Nigeria would be preparing the way to sustainable development of the mission of Christ on earth.

Introduction

In many areas of the world, particularly in Nigeria, the church is growing at a phenomenal rate. Although this growth has some advantages for the nation, society and religious bodies as a whole, but at the same time, there are many attendant problems like, wrong doctrines, misinterpretation of scriptures, teachings called sound doctrine that is based solely on abstract proposition known as theology or denomination doctrinal statements that make women's emancipation impossible. With this situation, there is need for mature, well-trained leaders particularly the feminist in the area of women studies, which would anchor mentoring, assessment and impact people in their ministries.

However, over the past century, the church seems to shy away to the inclusion of feminist leaders in theological education. This to a large extent has a lot of implications considering the oppression that women are suffering in our patriarchal culture and through some church laws that discriminate against women's involvement in church programs.

Also there are theological or faith statements that are used to justify basic human problems and certain people, waging war against other people, keeping silence in the face of injustice, such a theologizing does not bear witness to the purpose and plan of God for women.

The burden of this paper therefore is to adduce evidence, as far as it is possible for the need to explore the leadership relevance of feminist in theological education. Be that as it may, the paper will take a look at the basic contributions of feminist in biblical studies. But then, there is need for further clarifications of what we mean by feminist leadership and theological education. This will be considered below

Conceptual Framework

In order to understand the relevance of feminist leadership in theological education, it is important to understand the concept of feminist leadership and theological education. As rightly observed by Tracy Barton, leadership from a feminist standpoint is informed by the power of feminist lens which enables the feminist leader to identify injustices and oppression and inspires her to facilitate the development of more inclusive holistic communities. He further notes that, feminist leaders are motivated by fairness, injustice and equity and strive to keep issues of gender, race social class, sexual orientation, and ability at the forefront.¹ Dawn Ontario in her own view notes that, feminist leadership is women and women's organizations sharing power, authority and decision making in our common pursuit of social, legal, political, economic and cultural equality.²

Flora Crater provides an interesting definition. She says, leadership as a function of growth, is also then, the process of building confidence, not only so that others will attempt leadership themselves... it is especially a form of stewardship.³ Also, *Admira Toolkit* says, feminist leadership is oriented to different arrangement of the human order, re-distribution of power and re-distribution of responsibilities, fighting societal inequalities, changing economic and social structures, beginning in the transformation of psychic structures, bridging personal freedom with collective freedom, aiming at cooperation instead of competition.⁴

Put succinctly, feminist leadership would be something like this:

Women with a feminist perspective and vision of

Social justice, individually and collectively Transforming themselves to use their power, Resources and skills in non-oppressive, inclusive Structures and process to mobilize others- especially Other women – around a shared agenda, of social, Cultural, economic and political transformation of Equality and the realization of human rights for all.⁵

Meanwhile, theological education has been defined as the task to motivate, equip and enable the people of God to develop their gifts and offer their lives in meaningful service. It has been affirmed as theological in the term that it involves people in commitment and ministry, a commitment to the study of God in the sense of God's revelation in the life of Jesus Christ and God's continuous working through the Holy spirit.⁶

Relating the two concepts, it is sufficed to say that they seem to have something in common. Theological education is very interesting because it focus in learning historical facts and this is done by analyzing and reconstructing history, rather than accepting biblical tradition testimonial without suspicion. It also seeks to re-examine the scripture and the written tradition by discovering their endocentric elements. Feminist leaders or theologians on the other hand believe that theology has not taken into account the experiences of both men and women.

So feminist leader or theologians have undertaking the task of rethinking traditional theological notions from the perspectives of women's explained above.

Theological education is to analyze and reconstruct history. Particularly, when it has to do with issues about women that are negative in the Bible. This seems not to be so as our theological education are male-dominated. The task of re-working oppressive elements in biblical traditions is not undertaken by male who are mainly teachers of our seminaries and theological schools.

Reasons for Concern

First, the memory begins with the Old Testament story of Adam and Eve; the Bible teaches that women brought sin and death to the world.⁸ in church traditions, sin has been interpreted not only individualistically but also associated with sex and women. Women and other groups often begin with an attitude toward the accepted roles of their culture which may be characterized as the happy slaves. Here a woman sees herself as fulfilled in the accepted roles of mother, secretary, servant and sex symbol. A forthright rejection of such misogamy, including the interpretation of the Adam and Eve story which from this perspective can be seen in many feminist writers, for instance, Mary daily writes:

In the mentality of the fathers woman and sexuality were identified. Their horror of sex was also a horror woman. There is no evidence that they realized the projected mechanisms involved in this misogynistic attitude. In fact, male quilt feelings over sex and hyper-susceptibility to sexual stimulation and suggestion were transformed to the other quality sex⁹.

The second cause for concern is the aspect of incarnation called scandal of particularity” by G. Kittel.¹⁰ According to him, the scandal is not seen by most women in Jesus Jewishness, but most importantly in his maleness.¹¹

Although Christian women can see in Jesus a unique revelation of true personhood, one who helped both men and women to understand their own personhood.¹² The life of Jesus displays characteristics of love, compassion and caring often considered to be cultural characteristics of women. In his own life he was a ‘feminist’ in the sense that he considered men and women equal, equal in their need to be helped and equal in their need to be pointed toward the new future of God’s kingdom (Luke 10 : 38-42, John 4: 7- 30). However, the most important affirmation that the feminist are concern about is that they want women to be accepted as subjects and persons, within whom biological differentiation is a secondary aspect.

The third related problem is the language of servant hood or subordination being used for women. Women and the modern society do not like the idea of servant hood because they see it as an expression of their own powerlessness.

Too long they have been the servants of men. Besides, in the past church women’s groups’ organization have had to settle for the supportive and listening role in matters of theological, social research and leadership in social structures have dictated the subordinate roles which women were allowed to play, and the church male hierarchies have claimed divine sanction for these roles. So debased in its common usage that men and women alike often think of it only as referring to a ‘Band Aid’ type’s assistance. What we are saying in essence is that, now it is time for women to play the listening role of Mary, listening to Jesus and acting out the gospel of freedom, rather than remaining in the church kitchen with Martha (Luke 10:38-42).

My understanding of the above is that, for Christian women in this situation, doing theology is not just an added luxury after developing expertise in other discipline. Doing theology is itself an act of freedom.

It is a critical means of searching out the right questions about the Bible and ecclesial tradition, about God and faith. Instead of accepting a certain text delivered from the father's, serious questions must be raised in order to try to discern what it means to be real life children of God.

The fourth problem, which has become very prominent in recent time, is that of theological methods and processes are full of stereotypes. In other words, there are standardized mental images that are based on prejudicial attitudes or lack of critical judgment. An example of such beliefs would be stereotypes of women as weak, passive, irrational and men as strong, active and rational. Stereotypes of such as these are used to support claims – in theology and in the church as well – that women are inferior to men and thus legitimized relations of male domination and female subordination¹⁴.

Lastly, theological education is still under the umbrella or the influence of some conservative clerical movement. African women who are in theological education are well aware of the reluctance on the part of some churches (Anglican communion, Methodist, Roman Catholic to mention but few) to send some women for theological training. For instance Isabel Apawo showed in her paper, that she was part of the Theological institutions in Indonesia where it was highlighted that there is male domination of the theological curriculum, staff and student members and something must be done to redress the situation. She further observed that, most theological institutions in Africa follow a curriculum that reject the Old European list of classical religion and theological courses Also, most of those courses are taught by male professors and unfortunately very often they end up as a course exclusively for a few women student¹⁵.

These five causes for concern – sin and death associated with women scandal of particularity, servant hood, stereotypes and domination of ministries by men of are integrally related to one another and together constitute a single 'interlocking global crisis for women.' the question is have feminist leadership anything special or relevant to offer theological education. The answer is in the affirmative, yes. This will be considered we after the other below.

Relevance of Feminist Leadership

Although, some feminist believes in the reinterpretation and reconstruction of scriptures and choose to work within existing denominations, others prefer to create their own empowering religious texts and organizations. However, as a matter of emphasis the African feminist particularly in Nigerian did not see possibility in the reconstruction of biblical text as this cannot change the patriarchal teachings and ideas in our society. Rather, it is their priorities were to identify women in theological institutions and work towards creating theology that seeks the liberation of women from oppression and discrimination¹⁶.

Then, if the above is the case, it could be said that theological education can be enriched if feminist leadership in Nigeria is employed. Feminist leadership means the ability to influence agendas even without the formal power or authority to do so. They can make contributions to the unfinished dimension of theology. Feminist leaders will add to the understanding of the Christian growth, not to replace the other insights that have been contributed in the past. This is very important to a Christian church that has been dominated by white western male perspectives of God. Women would add their small piece of experience about the way God is known to them, so that theology becomes more wholistic and comprehensive. Feminist leadership is grounded in mutuality and equality not in hierarchy.

They would promote the teaching of gender issues in the theological curriculum. This means making gender as a concept in theological analysis. A gender approach to theology refers to exposing the injustices that exist in the church, culture and the Bible in the relationship between men and women. It acknowledges that human beings construct culture, therefore cultural practices in the Bible should not be confused with the will of God. Feminist leadership is a group centered not authority-figure centered. They will work with theological institutions to promote the employment African women as lecturers of theological disciplines in permanent positions.

Feminist leaders are generally sensitive to people's needs and to emerging situation. They will play advocacy role for the provision of good accommodation that is conducive to the process of learning for female theological students. They will also play advocacy role by connecting African women with funding agencies, who are interested in promoting the theological education of African women. Also, their presence would afford them the opportunity of encouraging many women to enroll in theological schools.

Lastly feminist leadership is visionary. It aims at empowerment and liberation, not only for the feminist themselves but also for others knowing what it is like to be oppressed, exploited and discriminated. Feminist women generally feel deeply for those who are in such a situation and would work so that no one is in such situation any longer. Hence they will encourage more production of theological literature on gender for the academic use of theological institutions. This in a way will be done in such a way to enhance total human developments. The challenge of feminist leaders is to enable members to be equipped as leaders in their own right, hence the possibility is there that they will clamor for the increase in the way God is known to all, so that theology become more understandable.

Conclusion

There is a great need for more feminist leaders in our contemporary society and theological schools, who will throw more light to issues affecting women. Their motivation will be thoroughly Christian- a vision of the God who cares about justice, compassion, honesty freedom in society, and a vision of humanity. It would be God and love for their fellow women. They will make no attempt to conceal the truth, and all the time, their target will be the shaping of public opinion about women.

Addressing the need for a balanced theological education of all people, Isabel had written:

If indeed the church acknowledges that God gives gifts to both men and women for the common good of the church, then it needs to transform itself to support theological education of both men and women. This requires the realization that according to the signs of our times, theological education should no longer be seen as training of soldiers of Christ to wade off heresy, but servants of Christ willing to build a community of men and women¹⁷

A Loades concluded that feminist theologians needs to position itself as it were, within the open space, of empty tomb and the open road to Galilee to experience and proclaim divine and life enhancing power¹⁸. When the above ideas begin to trickle down into the minds of ordinary in our churches, the cry for feminist leadership in theological education may last. Therefore, for the Nigerian church to be strong, it is recommended that theological education must be a necessary part of its mission. This is because; it is the best way to prepare natural leaders for the church, which will help women to see her place in God's redemptive plan.

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16. Those who have this objective are the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. The missionary of the Circle is to undertake research writing and publishing on African issues from Women's perspective. The vision of the Circle is to empower African women to contribute their critical thinking and analysis to advance current knowledge.
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