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The Genders in Christian Anthropology Vis-À-Vis the Experience of Violence by Women in Nigeria

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Abstract

A cursory analysis of the evolution of human history, right from the time when theogonies dominated as the cornerstone of human thinking, through the Ancient, Medieval and Modern Epochs to the Contemporary Era, reveals that women have for a very long time been relegated to the background of second class citizens or even insignificance. The experiences of Nigerian women, with all its attendant characteristics of subordination, oppression and marginalization in spite of globalization and modernization, has

attracted the attention of scholars, religious bodies, activists, feminists and development workers. This issue keeps reoccurring in every academic and informal discussion in Africa. This paper aims at contributing to the ongoing academic discourse on the socio-economic and religio-cultural experience of women in Nigeria, with particular interest on their experience of violence. It further focuses on such issues as women battering, female genital mutilation and rape. It also explores the causes and effects of this violence against women. It finally adopts a new pedagogy to tackle the problem of violence against women, by focusing on the dignity of the woman in Christian anthropology as a tactic for restoring the dignity of the woman.

Introduction

The African continent is made up of myriads of cultural and tribal entities. Each tribe has its own cosmology and way of relating to it. Consequently, we can safely say that the place and dignity of women in Africa differs according to individual and tribal setups. While not denying the hallowed experience of women in matrilineal societies, and also of women who have enjoyed influential privileges in African history, in most African cultures, especially the patriarchal ones, a woman is regarded as a *bona fide* property of the man and subject to him (Tagwai, 1997). Daughters do not inherit their father's property unless there is no male heir, and in some places, after the death of a husband, the wife has no share in his property. A wife is still considered a stranger, no matter the glamour of welcome associated with marriage ceremonies. Generally, Women are represented by their husbands or brothers (Metuh, 1987), this qualifies them as nameless actors on the stage of life (Tagwai, 1997). The children are the children of the man, and if any becomes a failure, the husband refers to him or her as the child of the wife.

This concept of the woman has led to an increased violence against the women folk. And in recent times, has attracted the attention of scholars, religious bodies, activists, feminists and development workers. This issue keeps reoccurring in every academic and informal discussion. This piece is a contribution to the ongoing academic discourse on the socio-economic and religio-cultural experience of women in Nigeria, with particular interest on violence against women. While not suggesting any intention to trak all the allies of this experience, this piece adopts a new pedagogy to tackle the problem by focusing on the dignity of the sexes in Christian anthropology as a tool for restoring the dignity of women in Nigeria.

The Woman as an Image and Likeness of the Divine in Christian Anthropology

The notion of the woman as an image of God could be correctly regarded as a puzzle resolver to the argument of women subordination and exploitation, this is because it establishes a link between God and the human person, providing a basis for human dignity and inalienable rights for which God is the guarantor (Pontifical Commission Justice and Peace, 1988). It can be seen as a concept that is a *vade me cum* in discussing the dignity of womanhood. This is even more significant because the creation of the human person in the image and likeness of God is the center of gravity of the universe (Egbuogu, 2006). Gen 1:26-27 is one of the verses that should be given due attention in the consideration of the human person as the image of God, for this is the passage where God speaks of the human person as his image and likeness, “Then God said, ‘and now we will make human beings, and they would be like us and resemble us. They will have power over the fish, the birds, and all animals, domestic and wild, large and small’; so God created human beings making them to be like himself”.

In the scriptural translations, where the word ‘man’ is used instead of human beings, the word ‘man’ is generic. It means woman as well as man. And the meaning is that God created human beings, both female and male, in his image. It is only from this understanding does the word ‘them’ of “male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27) make sense. The creation story does not make any distinction between male and female as persons because it immediately continues by saying, “God blessed them, saying ‘be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it’” (Gen 1:28).

In addition, in Gen 1:26-27 the distinctiveness of the human creature, different from animals and other creatures is indicated by their creation in God’s image and likeness. Hence what distinguishes human beings from other creatures of God is this likeness to God, this breathing into his nostrils the breath of life. The idea of ‘image’ (*selem in Hebrew*) used here denotes an exact reproduction, a duplicate and therefore some sort of copy of God. While ‘likeness’ (*demut in Hebrew*) means resemblance, which consists in the spiritual nature of the human person, the intellect and will, which separate him/her from other animals and make him/her analogous to God. It is in this regard that the Psalmist says, “He made them little less than a god; you crowned them with glory and honour. You appointed them rulers over everything that you have made” (6:5-6). This calls for respect in the way

humans treat one another, whether male or female, we are all made in the image and likeness of God.

Woman as Corresponding to and Equal to Man in Christian Anthropology

In the second account of creation in Genesis 2:4-7, God having created all other things, now created man from the dust of the ground. God further provided a garden for man and placed it in his charge with an instruction not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. However, with all the beauty and grandeur of creation, for “God saw that it was good” (Gen 1:25), there was something not right. “The aloneness of man was not very good... the creation of this man implies incompleteness, aloneness, and a yearning for completeness of human community, at least from the logic of Gen 2:18” (Mbanusi 2008, p.25). Out of the necessity for God to resolve the puzzle of man’s aloneness, God decides to create a ‘helper who would correspond’ to man (*zer kenegdo* in Hebrew). In marriage, man and woman reach their completeness; the personalities merge and become one. Man’s strength is completed by the woman’s beauty, and man’s aggressiveness is completed by the woman’s passivity, man is enriched by the woman’s purity of conduct, her patience, her devotion, her goodness, her generosity, her silent suffering, her attention, her love, her understanding, her sense of order and proportion etc; the woman is also enriched by the man’s sense of objectivity, his strength, courage, and protection and security which he gives. Man recognizes the woman as his helper when he shouted joyfully the “bone of my bones and the flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23), because he sees in the woman one who can give him a companionship the animals cannot give. The word *zer* which means ‘corresponding to’ or ‘equal to’, is modified by *kenegdo* which means ‘helper’. As such, the helper that God made for man is one that corresponds to and is equal to man, and not inferior or superior to man (Mbanusi, 2008).

At the creation of the woman, the man recognizes her as the “bone of my bones and the flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23). Pointing to the reality of a relationship; when he speaks of her as “bone of my bones and the flesh of my flesh” he recognizes in her an ally and not simply a creature created from his rib. Creating the woman from his side, and not from his foot or his crown, is pregnant with meaning. That she was created from his side is a mark of equality in dignity, complementarity and support. The “bone of my bones and the flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23) is a covenant formula that speaks about

communality of concern, loyalty and responsibility (Mbanusi, 2006). And the fact that the scripture tells us that “God blessed them, saying ‘be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it’” (Gen 1:28), it means that dominion belongs to men and women alike and equally too.

Very significant in the story of creation is the naming of other creatures, including the woman by man. This act of naming does not in any way imply man’s authority or dominion over the woman. There is a distinction between giving a name to a place and giving a name to fellow specie. In the former, the giver of the name establishes authority over the named, but in the latter, giving a name to specie which shares the same nature with the man as in the case of Adam naming Eve, in calling her woman Adam was not establishing power over her, but rejoicing in their one essence and mutuality (Mbanusi, 2006). Moreover, the naming of a person or thing in Old Testament Studies was a product of an event or circumstance rather than a conscious attempt to dominate (Okure, 1972).

The Experience of Violence by Women in Nigeria

Violence against women can be understood as any “physical, sexual and psychological behaviour occurring in the family, community or condoned by the state. This includes wife-battering/beating, sexual abuse of female children, dowry related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices that are harmful to women. It also includes, sexual harassment at work or within educational institutions, trafficking in women and forced prostitution” (UNIFEM, 2002), which “results in humiliation, open ridicule and torture” (Ugwu 200, p.20). Violence against women and girls is today’s most pervasive human rights challenge.

In many cultures in Nigeria, women are treated as inferiors and second class citizens. This violence varies from 20% in adult relationships and 81% of all married women (UNIFEM, 2002), and until recently violence in a marriage situation is not treated as a crime against the woman, this is because it is often seen as the prerogative of the man to tame the woman. Our African marriage ritual predisposes the man in the marriage relationship towards violence against the female partner by the customary emphasis on the headship of the man over and above the woman (Uchem, 2008). The unfortunate thing is that after women are violated by their male counterparts, the men do not get the adequate punishment for their crime from the court.

Among the Yoruba of Nigeria where the husband is the most important person followed by the members of his own kin. The woman is thus exposed to a great number of possible assailants. This is because the family is patriarchal in nature. Traditionally, it is also an extended family unit, housed in large compounds (*agbo ile*) where the eldest male was usually the head (*baale*). The Yoruba also practice polygyny. Within this family unit, a woman is a member of a number of dyads which expose her to more than the husband/wife, or child/mother type of violence seen in the nuclear home. Thus a co-wife, the child of a co-wife, a resident mother-in-law or sister-in-law are possible assailants besides a husband (Pearce, 1992). Added to all these is the indigenous patriarchal code of husband/wife conduct which can also itself trigger violence.

Traditionally, a good Yoruba wife should be respectful and obedient to her husband and never quarrel, oppose or argue with him. She should keep his secret and guard his property as her own. She should do many things without being told. She should be prepared to do anything she is asked to do, rapidly and well, even if she must do it in the middle of the night. However, she should be receptive to her husband's sexual advances. In short, please him in every way (Salami, 1987, p.9).

Women do not only face violence in their homes, they are constantly harassed outside the home by men in authority for sexual favours. This is worsened by the fact that Government institutions are slow at accepting domestic violence as a crime even with the UN's treatment of domestic violence against women as a crime in 1995. Moreover, regardless of the official codes of conduct, violence is accepted among many Nigerians as a way of making an erring wife listen to reason.

Rape

Section 357 of the Nigerian Criminal Code (only applicable to Southern Nigeria) defines rape as "any person who has unlawful carnal knowledge of a woman or girl, without her consent. If the consent is obtained by force or by means of threat or intimidation of any kinds, or by fear of harm, or by means of false and fraudulent representation as to the nature of the act. Or in the case of a married woman, by impersonating her husband, is guilty of an offence, which is called rape". Karl Peschke puts it more simply; rape is

“illicit sexual intercourse with a woman against her consent” (Peschke, 2004, p.479). Rape can be committed with the use of physical or moral force (grave fear, reverential fear, deceit or fraud); likewise by a sin committed with a woman who has not the use of reason, who is either insane or intoxicated.

Many women are raped by their husbands; but in Nigeria there is no such thing, your wife is like your personal property. Many girls have also been raped by their parents, by relatives and friends, housemaids raped by husbands, wife’s relations by husbands, mother-in-laws by their daughter’s husbands, and so much of this are hushed up to protect the family name; teachers raping their female students in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions, armed robbers rape many women on the highways and worst of all by security agents, in whom the weak should find comfort and protection. Girls are detained overnight by the police, only to be gang-raped through the night. Prostitutes who stand by the roadside are constantly arrested by the police and taken to the police station where a punishment of free sex is imposed on them.

Rape is a grave offence, because the woman’s right over her body is violated. This violation can bring about social dishonor or impede a future marriage. The sound of the word ‘rape’ sends shivers down the spine of most women. It is the most painful experience a woman can go through. It is bad enough for a person to make away with a woman’s valuable goods, and it is very devastating when you encroach on her most valuable, carting away with that which cannot be replaced in a life time. How do you even present the terror of rape, that moment of utter cruelty on the victim’s psyche? How do you capture the helplessness, fear, emptiness and loss of faith in humanity? And because it is a thing of shame and taboo to be raped in Nigeria, most girls who are victims do not disclose it to anyone, but not without a flash back of the incident.

There are many reasons why women refuse to disclose rape. Rape in Nigeria carries a heavy social stigma, sometimes resulting in rejection by family and community members; the police are sometimes unwilling to make official reports; victims also fear reporting cases of rape when the police men are themselves the perpetrators. Some women are unable to obtain a medical examination and some do not even know how to go about it.

Minors are not left out of this rampage. Suleiman Abba, the Police Chief of Kano State lamented the escalation of the rape of minors in the state, as is the

case in many states in Nigeria. In most cases he said the victims are gang-raped. The suspect's ages ranging from 45-70 while the victims are mainly girls between 3 and 11 years of age, and many of these cases he laments are not reported, to save the family from embarrassment, but to the detriment of the womenfolk. Abba revealed that in some cases, the rapists are buoyed by a conviction that sleeping with minors, especially virgins, would cure them of diseases such as HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. At times they do perpetrate such atrocities as part of fetish rituals to get rich. It is therefore not surprising that some of them use handkerchief to wipe the vagina of the children after raping them. Since most rapes are not reported, it is difficult to give an estimate of the problem. However, four years ago, police statistics show that 4-6 females are raped daily in Lagos, however, 60% of sexual harassment in the area is unreported officially. Subsequent official and newspaper reports indicate that the frequency of rape, especially of minors, has rapidly increased nationwide, particularly in such cities as Lagos, Kano, Enugu and Cross River States. By official estimate, 70% of the cases were not reported.

From the statistics given by CLEEN, 2,241 cases of rape and indecent assault were reported in 1999; 1,529 in 2000; 2,284 in 2001; 2,084 in 2002; 2,253 in 2003; 1,626 in 2004 and 1,835 in 2005. According to the report of Amnesty International, between 1999 and 2006, more than 13,000 women were raped in Nigeria. According to police and media reports, almost like an invading army rapists are on the prowl, raping about 100 unsuspecting women weekly in Nigeria.

During times of peace, rape is a problem, but it is worse during periods of violence. Reports have also shown that between 1990 and 1998, because of the violence in the Niger Delta, Ogoni women, mainly girls under 18 years have been subjected to serious sexual violence perpetrated mainly by the members of the security forces. At the Oputa Panel hearings, Hadiza, who was 12 years old at the time, described how she was repeatedly raped and held in sexual slavery for 8 days in April 1994. She said the soldiers invaded their house in the night and took her to their station, during which six men repeatedly raped her and beat her continuously until she lost consciousness. When she gained consciousness, she wandered about until she met a fellow victim of rape who took her to a makeshift center in the bush. Hadiza expressed disappointment as the panel's investigations led neither to the prosecution of the perpetrators nor a reparation for the abuse.

Nigerian women are powerless where rape is concerned. Even the section of the criminal code dealing with rape was written by men. It doesn't favour the woman. It further exposes her to humiliation. She is required to prove that she was raped. In the courts there will be the call for medical examination and proof of penetration, and absence of consent. This makes it difficult to prove a case of rape that has lasted for a month or two. How many women will even have the courage to allow such an exposure? It is from this perspective that Amnesty International (AI) released a report titled: "Nigeria: Rape-the Silent Killer". It stated that rape is endemic in Nigeria due to the abject failure of the Nigerian authorities to bring perpetrators to justice. According to the Criminal Code Act, anyone who runs foul of the law of rape would be punished with life imprisonment. Going by the Criminal Code, section 359, the penalty for attempting rape is 14 years imprisonment, with or without caning. The Criminal Code Act, section 218 stipulates life imprisonment for anyone who has unlawful carnal knowledge of a girl under the age of 13 years. Section 221 of the code states that anyone who has unlawful carnal knowledge of a girl who is above 13 and below 16 years of age will be liable for two years imprisonment, with or without caning. The same penalty is applicable for anyone who has unlawful carnal knowledge of a woman who is defective, say an imbecile. The question people continue to ask is: Are these punishments ever effected?

Female Genital Mutilation

Female genital mutilation also known as female circumcision is another form of violence against women. It is a traditional practice which involves the partial or complete removal of the external female genitalia, sometimes by someone unskilled or a health worker. This may be for cultural or therapeutic reasons. Today some cultures in Nigeria practice female circumcision not for therapeutic reasons but for cultural reasons. The practice dates back to the time of the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt (Adebajo, 1992). There are basically three categories of female genital mutilation; it varies from one country to another, from one ethnic group to another. There are conventionally three types, namely:

Type I: Sunna

This involves the excision of the prepuce, without removal of part or the entire clitoris. It is the least severe form of the practice. The prepuce of the

clitoris, or the clitoral hood, is removed, preserving the clitoris itself and the posterior larger parts of the minora.

Type II: Excision or Reduction

This is a severe form of female genital mutilation. It consists of the removal of the prepuce and the glands of the clitoris together with adjacent parts of the labia minora or the whole of it without including the labia majora and without closure of the vulva.

Type III: Infibulation or Pharaonic

This is the most severe form of the practice and consists of excision and infibulation of the vulva. Excision involves the surgical removal of the whole of the clitoris, the labia minora and the adjacent medial part of the labia majora in their anterior two-thirds. The two sides of the vulva are then stitched together. The introitus is obliterated leaving only a small opening to allow urinary and menstrual flow. This stitching together of the vulva after excision is called *infibulation*.

While male circumcision is generally practiced for hygienic reasons, no convincing reason has been presented for female circumcision. However, the most common reason readily presented, especially by the Urhobo people of Nigeria, to justify female circumcision is that it aids curtailing sexual promiscuity among women, by denying the genuine romantic feelings during sexual intercourse. This reason is unfounded. A woman who wants to mess around or sexually misbehave will always do so whether circumcised or not.

Another reason adduced to substantiate the practice of female circumcision is that it facilitates fertility in women. For instance, the Eza people in Ebonyi State of Nigeria perform the ritual of circumcision in a barn because of their belief that it is the habit of the god of fertility. So the mere carrying out of the act in a barn is an assurance of fecundity. In some other customs it is widely believed that unless a woman is circumcised, she cannot have a safe delivery.

In most traditional societies, this act is carried out by traditional practitioners with crude and rusty instruments, which render the victims prone to infections. In this age of HIV/AIDS one can imagine the fate of the victims; most of the time the victims are placed at the risk of permanent deformity.

The Causes of Violence against Women in Nigeria

The causes of violence against women are many. In many men, violence towards women is a learned behaviour. In the sense that men who abuse women grew up in homes where their mothers or sisters were abused: “Violence against women in the home has particularly serious repercussions. When the woman is a mother and the violence takes place in front of her children, the stage is set for a cycle of violence that may be continued from generation to generation” (US Bishops 1992, p.1). Psychiatrists hold that cases of psycho-physical disorder could trigger cases of violence (Uchem, 2008). There are also cases when abusive men tend to be jealous, possessive and easily angered (US Bishops, 1992). Alcohol is a strong contributory factor in many cases of domestic violence (Uchem, 2008).

The Effects of Violence against Women in Nigeria

Rose Uchem gives three types of the effects of violence against women. They are the physical, psychological and spiritual consequences. As regards the physical consequences, she argues that violence on women could lead to permanent physical disabilities or even death. After sexual abuse, some women commit suicide, while many are infected with one STD or the other. The psychological impact involves intense fear that the violence would happen again, low esteem, guilt, depression, hatred, pregnancy wastage or complications in some instances and shame are generated in the woman as a result. This is most times followed by the desire for revenge. Spiritually, the woman feels unappreciated and exploited. This affects the whole of her being and sets in her the fire of spiritual hunger and emptiness (Uchem, 2008).

Revisiting the Problem of Violence against Women

Some scholars have attributed the suffering of women and sexual differences to the Hebraic account of creation (Gen 1:27) and Nigerian traditional creation stories, which she argues places the man above the woman (Oduyoye, 1995). There are also many who have misinterpreted the biblical account of creation where Eve, the woman was created out of the rib of the man as the divine sanction of woman inferiority. And so all the horrible treatments which they receive are seen as being part of the nature and cross given to them by God, and since it is from God, nothing can be done about it. Even here, this view could be challenged, because nowhere has sexual differentiation both in Hebrew scripture and in Nigerian creation stories

suggested maltreatment or subjugation of the weaker. Rather men in the patriarchal era have seized upon their sexuality to subjugate and maltreat women (Chidili, 2005).

The book of Genesis, rather than be one of the causes of women oppression is a 'puzzle resolver' of the experience of violence by women. The fact that God created the woman just as he created the man in his own image and likeness, already creates an equal platform for man and woman in dignity and respect. As God's images, there is something sacred about the and thus must be treated with respect. The scripture emphasizes the man's need of the woman and not the woman's inferiority, and from this understanding, it is difficult to understand how men in history have assumed so much superiority and domination over and above the women folk. It is wrong to think that the woman as a creature to be violated simply because she was created out of man. If the man is taken to be superior to the woman because she was created out of him, it would follow by this logic that man is subordinate to the soil since he was made from it. Man and woman are naturally and essentially equal, because they have been created in the image and likeness of God, and have been endowed with intelligence, will, freedom and inalienable rights and duties proper to the human person. They all have equal opportunities for choice (Agostani, 1997). This is not to deny the essential difference women possess from men in capabilities, inclinations, in-born qualities, abilities, character and physical and psychological structure, which is uniquely proper to their nature (Buytendijk, 1969) and uniquely complementary, but to emphasize the dignity due to both sexes.

Conclusion

From the account of the dignity of the sexes in the book of Genesis, it is obvious that attempts to trace back the inferiority of women and the treatment that goes with it to the book of Genesis, is a selfish project rather than divine. The book of Genesis liberates rather than enslaves the woman. It gives the man and the woman the same dignity and removes every room for any kind of violence, either against the man or the woman. Rather than create atmosphere of discord, it creates one of complementarity and respect.

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