Religious Interpretations, Gender Discrimination and Politics in Africa: Case Study of Nigeria

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Abstract
This paper interrogates the nexus between religion and gender with a view to explaining how certain religious interpretations shape gender conceptions and equally create space for sustained diminution of women’s participation in public sphere, especially in politics. It argues that the intrusion and diffusion of patriarchal interest, sustained through religious fundamentalism and tacitly reinvented in most religious doctrines, forms the bedrock for the marginalization of the women. The paper argues that religious interpretations of certain portions of Holy Books, fuel popular narratives regarding women’s submission to men. Nevertheless, some of these religious texts and dogma have, particularly in recent times, become highly contested. However, the sustenance of patriarchy, mainly through religious fundamentalism still significantly influences the persistence of unequal gender relations. This reinforces the claim that religious interpretations are the social instruments through which cultural norms, values, ideals, and aspirations are transmitted into the public space. To contextualize this claim, the paper investigates the role played by heterodox religious interpretations in restraining women from contesting major political and elective positions in the Nigerian 2011 general election. The paper concludes that patriarchy, religious interpretations and fundamentalisms, rather than religion per se are the bane of effective participation of women in African politics.

Keywords
Religious Interpretations, Christian and Islamic Religious Texts, Gender Discrimination, Patriarchy and Politics, Nigeria
Introduction

Religion is often hijacked, politicized and subsequently used as the basis to justify certain predetermined goals. A critical review on gender discrimination shows that, in many ways, religion is repeatedly implicated. Unfortunately, such gender notions, largely rooted on patriarchy, are widespread in many parts of the world. The result is that the notion of male supremacy has become pervasive, in spite of vigorous struggles made to redress this erroneous idea. Marginalization of women in virtually all fields of endeavor (in private and public domain) is also rife as women are in most places treated like minors whose appearance and participation, especially in the public space must be contingent upon the acquiescence of the men. The author reiterates that this development is the outcome of the politicization of religion, particularly through religious interpretation rather than the outcome of the provisions of religion.

The tradition of extracting specific areas of religious texts and widening such piece of work to assume other meaning is not a recent phenomenon. Creation of new editions from original texts, in most cases, provides new platforms for the production of new epistemologies. Besides value-based judgments of the translator, other variables, particularly those influenced by the environment, abound that often culminate to distortion of original religious text. Wittingly or unwittingly, when new passages and excerpts created from religious templates become acceptable and operational, social relations, political hierarchies as well as diverse economic classes acquire new outlooks. Diverse forms of social relations, including gender relations, have significantly been impacted by multiple religious interpretations.

Across Africa, extant literature has documented evidence of paradigm shift in perceptions and social relations between the men and women. Division of roles and allocation of privileges between the males and the females have had to alter in nature and character mainly as a result of new teachings by religious leaders. Unfortunately, changes in social relations driven mainly by zealous religious teachers and scripture translators have increasingly been to the favor of those in power. This is usually to the disadvantage of those outside the corridors of power, except in few cases where religious revolutions as well as religious reformations have aided radical change in social relations.

With regards to gender relations, the cultural influence of patriarchy has significantly impacted on religious interpretations and has extended patriarchal hegemonies in many societies. Many Christian and Islamic leaders have, for example, espoused teachings and dogma that
declared women as minors in the spheres of religion, politics and governance, economic ownership, and socio-cultural matters. These forms of religious interpretations often reiterate certain portions of religious texts while ignoring other areas in a bid to sustain the institution of patriarchy. Definite religious texts, which clearly describe and explain the nature of social relations that should be encouraged between males and females, often go unnoticed.

This paper draws on existing literature that have extensively interrogated issues on religion, gender, religious interpretations, patriarchy and the involvement of women in politics to contend that the influence of patriarchy on religion, which is often reinforced through unwholesome and egocentric religious interpretations, forms the basis of gender disparity and the marginalization of the role of women, particularly in the public sphere. In view of this, the paper contains four sections. The first section reviews literature on issues bordering on religious interpretation and power relations. It sheds light on historic and evolving patterns in religious interpretation and how such trends impact on social and power relations at different times. The second section contains a synopsis on gender and gender discrimination. It specifically makes effort to identify the key features that characterize gender discrimination. The third section interrogates the linkages between religious interpretations and gender discrimination. The diverse ways in which religion is manipulated in a bid to project ideas and beliefs that uphold male supremacy and the subordination of women under the tutelage of men are identified. Further, the role of religious interpretation in the promotion and sustenance of patriarchal societies are explored. In the fourth section, attention is focused on methods through which religious interpretations and practices are instrumentalized for transmission of cultural norms, values, ideals, and aspirations of patriarchy into the public space. Specific attention is paid to the participation of Nigerian women in politics. The last section is the conclusion.

**Religious Interpretations and Power Relations: An Overview**

This section demonstrates in historical patterns, the prevailing trends in religious interpretations and makes evident how religious interpretations, as well as reinterpretations have often emanated from personal and group interests rather than in isolation of predetermined motives. Politicization of religion characterizes tendencies towards creating new versions of explanation of religious themes. Each epoch in religious interpretation is usually accompanied by
processes of redefinition and application of social relations of power in which one group appropriates collective privileges, not minding the disposition of popular interest.

Within the context of this study, religious interpretation is conceived as processes that involve the transcription of religious scripts and passages, which often culminates to production of new versions of scriptural explanations. Religious interpretation refers to analyses and meanings attached to translations of piece of religious templates as well as the significance of new forms of epistemologies produced. It centers on the reproduction of original religious texts through processes that include transliteration, translation and transformation of the initial provisions of celestial scripts. Brian Stanley’s reflection is striking and accordingly fits into the discourse. Referring to the Christendom, Stanley notes:

Christian history may be understood as the story of how Christian communities in different cultural contexts have focused on some portions of the scriptures more than others, reading these texts alongside, and in some measures through, their own life narratives. They have also utilized the means of communication available to them in their own day to represent the message of these texts to the societies in which they have been placed (2012: 113).

David Kim identifies circumstances that usually predispose societies to various forms of religious interpretations. He notes how certain variables such as personal ideology condition the reading and understanding of literary works. Focusing on the uniqueness of certain religious text read by Korean Christian Diaspora (KCD), he observes that ‘when the KCD read a Biblical text, their specific religio-cultural concept is applied in the reading process. They read the text in terms of their own ideology, as if the sacred canon was written in a divine way for them and their descendants’ (Kim 2012: 118). In a bid to retain cultural affinities, the KCD operate in their host communities in ways that make their ideologies to influence their religious beliefs. They form the habit of reading narratives of characters in the bible rather than reading the laws of God and the commands of Moses. Similarly, David notes that the KCD adhere to the principle that the authority of God resides with the author, the text and the reader; implying, partly that the authority itself is not self activating but is embedded in the religious texts and also that the authority is transferred to the reader instantly at that very moment s/he reads the text. He concludes that the importance and applicability of any religious text, in so far as the reader is involved is what motivates the reader to create a new way of interpretation.
Gerald Reedy’s work on ‘The Reception of a Science of Texts in England, 1658-1740’ provides evidence of processes which demonstrate the workings and manifestations of religious interpretations. For example, he observed and commented on ways in which independent clerics, within the period aforementioned, integrated regulations and often intellectualized scripture studies. Gerald’s work reveals tendencies geared towards utilizing religious interpretations to maintain the hegemony of the Church of England. Excerpts from the scripture were redesigned to attain the goal of approving the authority and institution of the monarch and equally to preserve privileges held through approaches that licensed and allowed only the learned to intellectualize the scripture and espouse religious teachings (Reedy, 2012: 402-403).

The instrumentality of religious interpretation has also been employed by women. Daryl Ireland’s study focused on ways through which Singaporean women embraced both revivalist evangelisms and elements of modernism in constructing new religious platforms upon which they were able to promote interests peculiar to the women. The personality, religious values and the particular bible version used by John Sung made significant impact on these women who discovered new patterns of life, especially in relation to family life. Furthermore, Daryl explored ways through which John Sung’s religious interpretations mediated the religious crisis that engulfed China during the late 1920s and the 1930s. By the late 1920s, Chinese nationalist government set out to halt all forms of religious practice considered non-scientific and which posed threats to modernization programmes in the country. Women were perceived as worst victims since the campaign focused on ‘traditional religion, which was popularly considered ‘women’s business’ (Ireland, 2012: 242). Most of these women resorted to the Singapore revival movement which fed into Sung’s religious teachings.

John Sung drew on his advanced academic and scientific learning to interpret religious texts and to ‘distinguish scientific truth from superstition’. This proficiency rubbed off on the brand of evangelical movement he developed. Chinese women who embraced Sung’s religious teachings exploited its doctrines as they, among others, were able to avert their government’s antipathy over their association with traditional religion. These women found it rewarding since Sung’s religious hybrid incorporated some aspects of their familiar traditional practices with the new religion recommended by the State (Ireland, 2012: 241-242).

The tradition of inclusion and exclusion of certain religious passages in order to advance predetermined interests was part of the anomalies identified in Roman authority and control of
the church in the West, during the late fifteenth, early and mid sixteenth centuries. In confronting and correcting religious abuses occasioned by religious interpretations and promoted by the leadership of the Catholic Church, Martin Luther struggled to introduce religious reforms, which afterwards led to the emergence of Protestantism (Mudge, 2005: 1773). In this case also, religious interpretations played out in the rise and development of Protestantism, as it provided space for critical assessment of hitherto accepted and applied religious doctrines and practices. Custody of religious dogma preserved in antiquity by the Papacy was under the influence of new religious interpretations questioned and later abandoned in a new religious movement that gave rise to Protestantism. According to M.H. Khali Timamy:

The whole Christian revolt that spawned the divisive movements of Reformation and Counter-Reformation in the 16th and 17th centuries was pre-eminently a reaction to the dogmatic rigidities of Catholic fundamentalism (2007: ix).

Evidently, religious interpretation has played critical roles in human societies, particularly to the extent that it has often serves as a major instrument in the hands of those privileged with control of power – political, economic, spiritual, social and cultural. Personal and group interests have often motivated devotion and engagements into processes of religious interpretation; precipitating strong urges to maximize narrow-minded benefits; in spite of dispositions of popular interests. When religious interpretations coincide with political, economic or other parochial interests, popular interests are unconditionally ignored. During the Papacy age, the entire church of the West was virtually held captive under the hegemony of the Pope and those clerics who supported his reign. Lewis Mudge observed that the primary goal of theological renditions of the period was to ensure the preservation of special privileges held by the clergy at the neglect of the laity. This purpose was mainly achieved on the strength of Papal doctrine which included claims that only the pope had the exclusive authority to interpret scripture and to summon a council of the church (Mudge, 2005: 1773).

Although, it has been reiterated that Luther’s aim was not to divide the church but only to reassert historic Christianity as it had been before its corruption by Rome, new religious interpretations are widespread. There have been proofs of further religious interpretation as well as reinterpretation of ecclesiological teachings. Leticia Recio’s study of what was described as ‘anti-Catholic rhetoric’ in sixteen-century England provides another indicator on the spread of religious interpretation. In a collection of articles, pamphlets and other religious extract, he
expressed belief that certain claims used in buttressing the anti-Catholic rhetoric were merely inflated (Recio, 2012: 998-999). Tendencies geared towards reviewing and transcribing religious manuscripts, scripts and passages that often culminate to new editions of original scriptural content have, particularly since the rise of Protestantism, continued to spiral. As earlier noted, such zeal and inclinations usually impact on class formations and social relations of power; often resulting to placement of one class above another and production of unequal relations.

Besides religious interpretations within the domains of Christendom, other religions have equally manifested proofs of attempts made to review, translate and transform religious beliefs and practices. Religious interpretation played out in Umar Mohammad Labdo’s study in ‘Application of Shari’ah in Nigeria: Past, Present and Future’. His article demonstrates attempts to avert what was perceived as tendencies towards parochial teachings and applications of Shari’ah. Rather than view Shari’ah as a legal code, he prefers to consider Shari’ah as Islam in itself. He argues that ‘the application of the legal system of Islam will not amount to full application of Shari’ah for it would be a partial implementation of Islam…’ (Labdo, 2009: 61). Furthermore, Labdo, in a bid to correct what he perceived as malicious religious interpretation of the Shari’ah code, allegedly by the Western mass media and Christian Missionaries who supposedly seek to present and associate Islam with violence, identified that the diverse forms of penance administered to those who violated Islamic codes only constitute an insignificant portion of what Shari’ah truly represents (Labdo, 2009: 62). This knowledge again reverberates the fact that whenever religious interpretations coincide with political considerations, certain distortions are infiltrated into the original religious version. The habit of neglecting the broader context in a bid to showcase particular passages of religious wordings is widespread and cuts across different religions. These developments are often preceded by motives tailored towards achieving predetermined objectives.

Mariz Tadros’ work adequately acknowledges the agency of Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) as positive agents for the advancement of gender equality and for their roles in generating social change. This view is hinged mainly on the belief that religious leaders and organizations have the power to influence gender norms and values in communities. Again, FBOs enjoy such advantage owing to their capacity to combine the spiritual and material dimensions of human life in the course of delivering their services, which equally has a wider outreach relative to services rendered by secular organizations (Mariz Tadros 2010: 1).
On the other hand, adding to the debate on religious organizations’ engagement with questions of gender, Tadros’ work clearly implicates FBOs in the ritual of religious interpretation. Tadros notes that although each FBO operates as a single entity while delivering their services, it is always difficult to ascertain and state patently the nature and character of their programmes with regards to gender. According to her, this complexity arises because most times FBOs take different standpoints on various gender issues (Mariz Tadros 2010: iii). Such intricacies usually stem from diverse beliefs systems of various members, groups and denominations which usually make up such FBOs.

Furthermore, she observes that FBOs with top-down structures are characterized with the practice of exporting and imposing their religious ideologies and doctrines, rather than making holistic assessments, especially on issues of gender. On the receiving end are communities whose indigenous religious beliefs, especially in relation to gender matters are either distorted or utterly abandoned. Using a case study, Tadros remarked that in contrast to the conservative, rigid and traditional approach to Islamic religion portrayed by Wahabi (an Ultra-Conservative Islamic Sect), the degree of flexibility and openness which the Hanafi School (one of the four established Sunni Schools of legal thought in Islam) allows, demonstrates the extent to which religious interpretation can determine how faith is to be lived. Differing belief systems and practices between these two religious institutions is evident in their teachings and approaches on issues of gender. Whereas the Hanafi School, which is generally known to place serious emphasis on the role and importance of reason, holds views that are elastic and relaxed in the area of gender rights and allows a measure of liberty to women, the Wahabi expounds religious ideologies which emphasize unquestionable submission of women to male hegemony (Mariz Tadros 2010: 16-21).

Generally, there is always the tendency to attempt to manipulate and influence the behaviors of those who would become the beneficiaries of the goods offered and services rendered. This probability grows higher and becomes almost inevitable when the extension of services and assistance is conditional on women’s conformity to the FBOs’ interpretation of religiously appropriate gender roles and behavior (Mariz Tadros 2010: iii). Conditionality may be introduced in order to create space upon which the recipients of goods offered and services rendered by FBOs would be indoctrinated with predetermined religious beliefs.
Gender Discrimination: An Overview

Gender refers to women and men’s role that are defined by the society. It describes the social differences between men and women that are learned and which vary widely among societies and culture (Fabusoro, 2012: 4690). Gender connotes those perceptions, which generally reflect peoples’ belief systems on what should be the ideal role of the males and the females, within a given locality. It is ‘an analytical tool for understanding social processes and variables such as race and class, deployed in the distribution of privileges, prestige, power and a range of social and economic resources’ (Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, 2010: 52). Overall, gender entails people’s cultural parameter used while differentiating between roles, privileges, needs, challenges, and opportunities of the women and the men. This cultural belief and practice which centers on creating dichotomies on duties and privileges between males and females virtually trickles down to every facet of human endeavor. Thus, in politics, economic, social relations, religious practice, and other fields of human endeavor, whether in the private or in the public space, there are traces of gender division. It must be noted that these divisions of roles are not divine ordinations but man-made and culturally shared.

Gender discrimination represents a condition of lack of equal treatment precipitated by the images and interpretations formed and harbored by a particular group of people and which is reinforced by the classification of people according to their sexes and also reproduced socially in roles performed. All forms of discrimination anchored on biological and physical differences, arising from the diverse socio-cultural evaluation of the males and the females, constitute gender disparity. Reeve and Baden describe gender discrimination as the unfavorable treatment of individuals on the basis of their sexes, which denies them rights, opportunities or resources (Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, 2010: 52). In contrast, gender equity postulates that women and men have equal opportunities and thus should enjoy the same status. Gender equity ‘means that both the men and the women can realize their full human rights, their potentials to contribute to national, political, economic, social, and cultural development, and that both can benefit from such results’ (Reeve & Baden, 2000: 7). When there is an imbalance in roles, responsibilities, as well as privileges and opportunities shared between the men and the women, gender disparity is said to have set in. Inequality, negligence, favoritism and marginalization characterize social and power relations of the males and the females whenever there is gender discrimination.
Religious Interpretations and Gender Discrimination: Roles and Linkages

Existing literature have investigated historical patterns in the evolution of different epochs in gender relations as well as explored circumstances that paved way to the emergence of patriarchal and matriarchal communities. In relation to African literature, a number of scholars have identified that most African communities were once matriarchal (Ogbomo, 2005: 16). Claims have been made to indicate that patriarchy was invented by males in a bid demonstrate the failure of female rule.

In pre-colonial times, women enjoyed reign of power and successfully managed various aspects of community life. Narratives from oral tradition explain series of events that led to discontentment with women’s influence and leadership. Onaiwu Ogbomo explains how processes such as growth in population, increasing need for expansion in human settlement, climate change (particularly, drought) led to problems such as migrations and wars. Coincidentally, the men who had already developed skills in arts of warfare deriving from their specialization in hunting exploited prevailing crises and later reconstructed patterns in gender relations. Besides these internal factors, Onaiwu Ogbomo also describes how external factors such as African contacts, first with the Mediterranean world and later with the New World, under the influence of slave trade and colonialism, opened ways for the introduction of foreign cultures, which among other things radically altered hitherto structured patterns of gender relations (Ogbomo, 2005: 354-356). Colonial legacies, including gender patterns of the West, bequeathed on most of African communities have remained. Thus, in spite of independence, gender imbalance in which the women are victims, have erroneously been presumed as normal.

On the other hand, in a number of African societies, relationships of interdependency existed between men and women. In Nigeria, the Fulbe who are believed to have descended from Usman Dan Fodio and are found mainly in the Northern region of the country, especially in Sokoto, Plateau and Kaduna provide a case study. Mutual and beneficial relationship once obtained among the nomadic Fulbe. According to Chimah Ezeomah:

The nomadic Fulbe in Nigeria have unique ways of dividing responsibilities along male/female and age lines. The spheres of women’s responsibilities … span the social, economic and political aspects. …. Even though one of the virtues of the Fulbe male is that he does not let a woman to control him, there is a definite interdependence between them …. roles of woman are acknowledged and respected by man (1987:357).
It is equally important to add that till date, a number of African communities have been able to sustain traces of matriarchy. There are indications that the early occupants along the West African coast were matriarchal. The Ashante society in Central Ghana has remained matrilineal and matrilocal. Children belong to their mother’s clan and the females within same lineage live in one village (Ogbomo, 2005: 357).

I strongly contend that religious interpretation, rather than religion is the problematic, in as much as effort is made to interrogate ways in which religion mediates gender relations. A critical question to ask is: does religion advocate discrimination, whether in gender or in other forms of class and social relation? A critical review of sermon, across religious divide, shows that religion emphasizes positive values such as love, truth, honesty, oneness, social harmony, fairness and justice. Nawal El Saadawi’s work unequivocally rejects ‘that the oppression of women is directly caused by religion’ (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004: 414). Islam, on many fronts reiterates the importance of fairness to all. Nisaa 4 Verses 177, for example, clearly explains the circumstance under which a man is permitted to marry more than one wife. The need to properly attend to the needs of the orphans was the principal objective. It warns that if a man understands that he may ‘not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or that which your hands possess. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice’ (Haleem, 2000). The message, in this context, underscores fairness and justice in the course of interaction between husbands and wives; rather than discrimination. On the contrary, however, most Muslim women, especially in Northern Nigeria are, from childhood taught ‘that God decreed that they should remain submissive to their husbands irrespective of their behaviours’ (Uroh). Most of these women believe that a woman is meant to be subject to the law and that the interpretation and use of the laws were the prerogative of the men.

Similarly, a review of the concept of ‘Original Sin’, as relayed in the Bible, reveal the rationalization for the indictment and chastisement of the first woman - Eve. Eve’s crime required a punishment and since then, the woman has been paying the price (Anifowose & Enemuo, 2005: 228-231). Interpretations arising from this seem to justify reasons for the devaluation of the women in most societies. Many religious interpreters, including some seasoned scholars, especially the sociologists, concentrate on these assertions as the justification for the position women, around the world (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004: 92). Such gender stereotypes are pervasive in many societies and have contributed enormously to undue
subordination of most women under the tutelage of men (Bola Udegbe 2010: 4). Various forms of limitation to the resourcefulness and potentials of women have, also on this basis, been justified.

Unfortunately, these religious interpretations and social constructions are at variance with the principal message of Christ who is the pioneer and leader of the Christendom. In one of Paul’s epistles to the Ephesian church, a holistic presentation on the nature and character of interaction between men and women is provided. Nevertheless, love and submission which are paramount in Paul’s theses (The Holy Bible) have largely been misinterpreted and misapplied. Love, fairness and cordial relationship which form the principal features in the message are usually ignored; since submission which favors male hegemony is unduly emphasized. Excessive focus on submission to the authority of men has become the bane of the struggle to mainstream the women in societal life. Love, which provides space for accommodation (rather than discrimination), fairness (rather than injustice), inclusion (rather than exclusion), is virtually neglected. The quality of love exemplified by Christ, which is instructed to be the guiding principle for the type of relationship expected between men and women, is not given proper attention. El Saadawi blames the religious hierarchies that grew and fattened on the teachings of Christ for these lapses (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004: 415). Devotion and submission to men is constantly emphasized. Women are subsequently considered subordinates rather than coordinates in the process of family, institutional and nation building. These acts of omission and oversight have been reproduced in gender division of roles. Division of roles in the private and public sphere follows after these religious interpretations and formations.

Reflections on the above discourse reveal subtle strategies through which religious interpretations provide ground for the survival and sustenance of social and political institutions which themselves transmit cultural norms, values, ideals, and the aspirations of the patriarchy. By so doing, many people erroneously assert that religion, rather than religious interpretations ‘render authority to social institutions and reinforce norms with supernatural sanctions’ (Ogbuagu, 1997: 56). The entrenchment of patriarchy and its sustenance through religious interpretations which underpin gender discrimination is the root of marginalization of women; not religion. El Saadawi states that ‘religion started to become patriarchal through the misinterpretation of religious beliefs by men’ (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004: 414).
Religious Interpretations and Women in Politics: Nigerian in Perspective

Regardless of the fact that Nigerian women constitute about half of the country’s population (Osaikhiuwu and Adeleke 2012: 4752), they are in most communities subjected to various kinds of discrimination, negligence and abuse. Due to patriarchal beliefs often advanced through egocentric religious interpretations, many Nigerian women have concentrated their activities, occupation and also built their life fortunes around their homes. Regrettably, although household work constitutes a major impediment to their effective participation in public life, studies show that domestic works hardly receive any consideration when national Gross Domestic Products are measured. Low valuation for women’s work further diminishes their socioeconomic status (Ngozi G. Egbue 2010: 20). The public space is virtually left under the control of men. Discriminatory religious interpretations have been so internalized that many women neither believe their abilities to effectively participate in activities in the public sphere nor their political capabilities to compete at top elective positions. When, eventually they engage in politics, ‘it is usually at the peripheral level’ (Agbalajobi, 2010: 75-82).

There is no doubt that the long period of military rule in Nigeria had serious negative impacts on human rights concerns, gender relations and women’s rights and equally destabilized the operations of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) committed to civil liberty. An assessment of various forms of inhuman treatment suffered by various CSOs such as the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO) in the late 1980s, including several abuses meted out on many others which include the Constitutional Rights Project, the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights, and the Campaign for Democracy in the 1990s, gives an idea of the huge sacrifices made towards improving on human rights in Nigeria (Innocent Chukwuma 2005: 3-4). Nevertheless, after about a decade and half of Nigeria’s ‘re-democratization project’, not much progress has been made with a view to realizing the lofty promises of expanding the democratic space and mainstreaming women agenda, especially in relation to their exclusion from sensitive political positions.

We must acknowledge that the Nigerian government, in conjunction with international and regional agencies, has been investing heavily into programmes targeted at achieving gender balance and also attempting to provide the enabling environment necessary to empower Nigerian women. The international commitments among others include efforts made through the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the
Beijing Platform for Action, the AU Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality, the Protocol to the
African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa etc. However,
in spite of huge funds expended and diverse policy framework designed, the wide gap between
policy formulation and policy implementation has made the goal of women empowerment illusive (National Gender Policy Strategic Framework 2008: 34-42). Furthermore, there have been persistent struggles by CSOs targeted at improving the status of Nigerian women and also including them in decision making processes (Bola Udegbe 2010: 2). In Nigeria, CSOs, especially the FBOs, are usually faced with problems of strong, diverse and opposing religious beliefs. For example, the introduction of health programmes, such as Family Planning, specifically in religiously conservative communities are often embroiled in intense controversies which in many cases frustrate or undermine the success of such programmes (Calyn Ostrowski 2011: 2). Undeniably, the underlying issues have remained intractable. Religious interpretations which condition women to remain unquestionably under male hegemony are pervasive in most Nigerian communities.

Promises of gender mainstreaming in the political sphere have, to say the least, remained as mere paper work. This situation has raised serious doubts with regards to the nature and version of democracy operating in Nigeria (Alumona, 2010: 1-8) where patriarchy and the politics of godfatherism continue to put aside popular participation. Godfatherism, which in itself is largely rooted in patriarchal tradition, usually employs a huge amount of force and violence to sustain male domination. This type of political culture in which the most powerful and highly connected men (in terms of economic, social, cultural and political power) invest enormous resources and employ all manner of political tactics, fair and foul, to sponsor candidates of their choice, to a large extent, constitutes great obstacle to successful inclusion of women in Nigeria’s politics. Most times, results of elections are orchestrated and predetermined, notwithstanding the disposition of public opinion. This political culture evokes extreme violence; erodes proposal towards expanding the country’s democratic space; and furthermore reduces the possibility for gender mainstreaming. Damilola Agbalajobi’s observation is apt on this question. She identifies that:

Some consensus has been of the belief that Nigerian politics is based on high political virility – those who have all it takes to compete in the turbulent environment; those who possess the wherewithal to take it by force when force is required; those that can march violence with violence… This consensus is also constructed by societal norms and
values, which through socialization has defined different gender roles according to biological differences (Agbalajobi, 2010: 75-82).

A revaluation of the post election turmoil that engulfed one of the component units within the Nigerian federation (Anambra state) during the 2003 general election reveals the high level of violence and devastation inherent in the politics of godfatherism (Alonge, 2005: 426). This political culture feeds on patriarchy and is promoted by godfathers, and is extremely antithetical to the chances of women embarking on successful political contests. Moreover, there is no vigorous strategy promoted on the strength and prospects of ‘godmotherism’.

Reproduction and extension, into the public space, of belief systems which are mainly the offshoots of religious interpretations built on patriarchy have infiltrated the Nigerian political system. Artificial dichotomy is created to preserve gender discrimination in politics. Islamic injunctions are usually cited as the justification for the confinement of women in Purdah (Anifowose and Enemuo, 2005: 228-231) where they are quarantined from participating in public life. This religious idea and practice cannot be overruled when accounting for reasons why there is a higher rate of poor performance by Muslim women in the Northern part of the country. A survey of 1999, 2003, and 2007 elections confirms this fact; particularly for states (component units) like Adamawa, Katsina, Kebbi, Nasarawa, Sokoto, Yobe and Zamfara. In these states, no single woman was elected as member of the State House of Assembly or to other higher elective offices. (Agbalajobi, 2010: 75-82). The influence of Shari’ah is also implicated in the poor performance of many Muslim women in politics. Oni notes that serious female politicians in Zamfara (one of the component states in Nigeria) state experience huge difficulties in pursuit of their political ambitions. Women, in Zamfara state suffer many restriction and are not allowed to ‘mix with men in public’ (Oni, 2011: 23-29).

Prior to 2011 general elections, a number of women had contested and won seats in the legislative houses. However, the result of Nigeria’s 2011 general election proved abysmal when considered from perspective of preparations and promises made to integrate more women. The Federal Government of Nigeria adopted the National Gender Policy (NGP) in 2006 to replace the 2004 National Policy on Women. As part of the key strategies designed to open ways for women’s engagement in the public sphere, the NGP aimed at giving massive support for the effective representation of women in all areas of political, social, religious, cultural and economic life of the country. Specifically, it targeted the pursuit of 35% affirmative action in
favor of women to bridge gender gaps in political representation in both elective and appointive post at all levels by 2015. The NGP, according to Irabor, recorded little progress on account of the slight improvement in the number of women who won elective positions in the 2007 general election (BAOBAB, 2011)

By the end of 2007, fresh promises of expanding the democratic space to include more women were made (Bungudu, 2008). Nevertheless, the 2011 general election showed that the performance of the women fell far below expectation. The number of women that emerged victorious was less than what was witnessed in the 2003 and 2007 general elections. Commendably, a female presidential aspirant (Ebiki Ndok) emerged under the platform of the United National Party for Development (UNPD). Similarly, the participation of Sarah Jubril on the platform of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), – the most powerful political party in Nigeria, although unsuccessful, is also worthy of mention, given the risks associated with PDP primaries. However, on a general assessment, one must state that the negative image attached to the participation of women in politics equally played out. The men have continued to overshadow political activities while the women have relatively continued to play the second fiddle role as they only succeed in taking up lesser elective and political positions.

It is obvious that not much has been done to extensively engender veritable strategies that will redress the fundamental problems that underpin the exclusion of most Nigerian women in the public sphere. Peripherally, the Nigerian government has over time attempted to initiate national policies aimed at accommodating women, however, the cultural and religious fabrics that prop gender discrimination are rarely considered while establishing strategies to correct gender anomalies. Concerning Nigerian women, Mercy Erhun observes that:

Although women have been given equal rights and opportunities for full participation in theory and legal terms, there is a wide disparity between acclaimed recognition of women’s rights and the accrual of these rights in fact … The position of women is still inferior … (2013: 62).

There is need to emphasize that, although the establishment of legal frameworks aimed at improving women’s status is crucial, the various forms of religious and cultural fundamentalisms against effective representation of women in politics, cannot be adequately redressed by mere legislations. Regrettably, the multiple systems of law in a heterogeneous country like Nigeria where differing values and practices are entrenched in the Customary, Islamic and Statutory
Laws pose great threat to any possible harmonization of policies towards women empowerment. Thus, strategies outside national legislations are imperative.

Within the context of this discussion, religious reinterpretations constitute an important strategy. God never recommended any form of discrimination between men and women. In fact, Genesis, the first book of the Bible clearly explains God’s initial plan concerning humanity. God designed that both the man and the woman shall jointly rule and dominate the earth. They were meant to have dominion over every other creature, including animals. However, the disobedience of both man and woman distorted God’s initial plans and affected the mode of social and power relations between man and woman. Nevertheless, Christ’s primary mission on earth was to restore this lost opportunity; and He did. Throughout Christ’s ministry, love and social harmony were emphasized as the greatness commandment (Holy Bible).

Various religions of the world constantly preach love, fairness, justice, and social harmony and extremely abhor all forms of gender disparity. Unfortunately, politicization of religious creed has become widespread. A critical review of religious texts with a view to having a holistic reassessment of the meanings, inferences, connotations and significance which they imply, is required. As mentioned earlier, Martin Luther painstakingly reexamined the teachings and religious interpretations which were hitherto monopolized by the Pope and his clerics and thus paved way for the entire Christendom to rise up and to challenge the status quo. Ever since, further religious interpretations have continued, as led by the Protestant Church. Well meaning women activists must find ways to counter religious interpretations, symbols and practices which reinforce gender imbalance.

Conclusion

Erroneously, there are notions that religion is liable for the many setbacks confronting the women, especially in relation to their chances of emerging and engaging successfully in the public space. On the contrary, a critical review of original religious texts across different religions of the world reveals that religious interpretation, rather than religion in itself, is culpable for the plights of the women. Religions, across the board, are generally known to preach love, fairness, equity, justice, social harmony, and togetherness. Unfortunately, injustices and various forms of discrimination are prevalent in many societies. Selfish pursuits, group interests and exclusionary tendencies are widespread. Religious interpretations underlie these problematic. Religious interpretations are universal and have often been employed to achieve
certain egoistic aims. As revealed in this study, individuals, organized groups such as Faith-Based Organizations and governments have, at different periods in history, been implicated in the ritual of religious interpretation aimed at achieving power, hegemony and other gains.

The study also notes that patriarchy permeates religion through the instrumentality of religious interpretations and tacitly entrenches male domination. Specific portions of divine texts are usually extracted and transcribed to reinvent and promote beliefs that women are meant to be under the tutelage of men. The infusion of patriarchal interests in the processes of religious interpretations inevitably reproduces gender divisions and a virtual placement of ban on the potentials of most women.

In most of Africa, the use of religious interpretations and practices have become social instruments through which cultural norms, values, ideals, and the aspirations of patriarchy are transmitted into the public space. This study focused on the participation of Nigerian women in the 2011 general elections. Results show that, in spite of interventions made, especially by the federal government through its National Gender Policy, Nigerian women continued to perform below expectations. Politics of godfatherism which is largely rooted on patriarchy and promoted through religious interpretations continues to shrink available spaces for women’s engagement in political processes due to high risks and violence involved.
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