Social Justice for Women and Girls in Africa: Issues, Challenges & Ministry Strategies

Description

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Introduction

This paper is an exploratory and unfolding journey. In it I attempt to look at different layers of religio-cultural beliefs, behaviour and meaning in relation to the status and well-being of women and girls in Nigeria. I do not intend for this to be a purely academic treatise although I refer often to academic writings in gender and development as well as religious literature. Instead I share personal observations, impressions and learning points gleaned from my work in gender and development research, Christian ministry to young people and activism. I reflect on the diverse and complex ways religion and indigenous tradition impinge on social justice for women and girls in Church and society in the Nigerian context. Many of these learning points and reflections are the result of my personal journey in search for answers as a woman of faith working in a secular development policy environment trying to understand why â€˜the woman questionâ€™ persists largely unanswered and maybe even unanswerable. This unfolding journey is by no means a straightforward one.

I am a woman of deep personal conviction regarding the existence of a sovereign, all-powerful and loving God whose divinely conceived offspring was sent into the world to bring eternal salvation to humanity. I am also deeply aware, from a personal and observational standpoint, that religion, including Christianity, has been the instrument of incredible injustice and suffering for women and girls merely for their being female. In Godâ€™s name females have been devalued, degraded, demonized, dehumanized and debarred from the full range of activity, privilege and choice open to men. Womenâ€™s quest for self-determination has met with brutal and systematic repression, ridicule or censorship. Religion appears to be the last bastion of powerfully entrenched resistance to female emancipation. How sad that the church of the Christ, who came to bring liberty, justice, restoration and reconciliation, is often the one that holds up a message of restriction, confinement and oppression for half the human race! Social justice implies that state authority is obligated to ensure equality of treatment in terms of access to opportunity and the distribution of national resources and benefits (Rawls, 1976). Current development practice also insists on equality of outcomes from development

interventions for men and women.

Essentially the woman question is, "Why, almost universally, are women subordinate to men?" Is it because, as is the predominant belief in Africa, God ordained it so and thus fashioned male and female to fit naturally into a pre-ordained gender hierarchy? Or is it, as sociologists argue, due to socially acquired attitudes, behaviour and meanings or even a combination of biological and social factors? Is it, as some theologians believe, due to the inevitable effects of the fall of humanity into sin? Or is it due to something else yet to be considered or properly researched? One's response to the question has a direct bearing on ideas and attitudes towards women as well as gender roles and relations.

However, my intention here is not to answer this vexatious question in any comprehensive way, but to discuss the most prevalent gender theories and practices in African society, specifically in Nigeria, and demonstrate their practical implications for the lives of women and girls. I also argue that gender justice is a credibility issue for the church in Africa, and indeed elsewhere. If the church in Africa wants to avoid the backlash of radical feminism experienced in the West, then it must be at the forefront of the campaign for gender justice rather than be dragged kicking and screaming by the inevitable pull of the global feminist development agenda. Only then will the Church have the moral right to shape the future of the gender landscape rather than be left to pick up the pieces from the ravages of feminist rebellion.

The Status of Nigerian Women in Church and Society

Nigeria is the most populous African country with a population estimated at over 140 million people (NBS, 2006 Census). It is multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural society with about 250 languages and 2,500 dialects (IDEA, 2000). The 2006 National Gender Policy, which was drawn up by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development in collaboration with gender experts and activists to promote gender mainstreaming and equality in Nigeria, traces female oppression to the legacy of African traditional and colonial patriarchy and global capitalism. Nweze and Takaya (2000) further explain that the general orientation towards females is a product of the synthesis of religio-cultural influences from Arabian Islam, Western Christianity and indigenous belief systems leading to an anti-female, sexist outlook. There is ample literature to demonstrate that pre-colonial African women had recognized spheres of influence at times parallel to male power structures, and these were embedded in cultural norms and practices (Okonjo, 1976; Amadiume, 1995; Okome, 2000).

The *Iyalode* and *Erelu* in Yoruba land in Western Nigeria, the *Omu* and *Umuada* among the Igbo in the Eastern region and the famous *Bori* cults in the North have been noted in historical records as systems of authority within traditional society before the advent of Christianity and Islam. Among the Yoruba, businesswomen built lucrative enterprises and travelled the west coast doing trade and Nupe women in northern Nigeria were reputed to be even more economically successful than their men (Callaway, 1997). Gender roles and relations were fluid and not necessarily coterminous with biological sex. However, the situation of women and girls in pre-colonial Africa was by no means idyllic as there is evidence of gender struggles and contestations in family and other social settings. For example, Amadiume tells of the mass emigration of women from one village in the East of Nigeria to found *Idemili* where they established a new religion of river goddess worship. Callaway also explains the killing of witches among the Nupe as male resistance to the emergence of powerful women. Furthermore, the existence of obnoxious traditional practices such as harmful widowhood rites, female genital mutilation, polygyny and the denial of inheritance and property rights in many indigenous cultures provide clear evidence of gender injustice in pre-colonial times.

It is important to establish this foundation because of the tendency on the one hand, of African idealists to paint a romantic picture of tranquillity and bliss for Africa and Africans before the advent of the White man. On the other hand, the secular west and faith communities (Christian and Muslim) pride themselves with emancipating African women from the captivity of traditional backwardness through education and development and spiritual deliverance respectively. It is the case that women have been rescued from many of the more obnoxious customs through their influences. However, in reality, the complex interplay of the various strands of indigenous traditions, religion and the dominant western political economy have all had a discernible undercurrent of hard core or benign patriarchal philosophy such that women have been on the short end of a male-centric social order. Consequently, I would argue that it is the nature and degree of patriarchal content in a given system of social organization that determines the status and well-being of women within it. I am not suggesting that Nigerian women are helpless victims of patriarchy as they are often active proponents and agents of the patriarchal order, particularly with regards to religion. However, I have described women elsewhere as the custodians and captives of culture which they are duty bound to preserve in order to earn societal acceptance and status (Para-Mallam, 2007).

For instance, most of the harmful traditional practices against women are carried out by women such as FGM, shaving of widows' heads and pubic hair or even insisting on the birth of male children, which is mostly the prerogative of mothers and sisters-in-law. Women marry other women's husbands as second, third, fourth wives and mothers bring up daughters with the understanding that having a husband and getting married is the most important accomplishment in life. In my hometown Ondo some older generation of wives still refer to themselves as slaves of their husbands' families in line with their traditional status and women tend to be more condemning of each other when marital relationships flounder or fail. A national leadership survey * showed that women are just as likely as men not to vote for women during elections such that the term 'Pull her down syndrome' has become a way of describing woman-to-woman enmity. In the church setting, women are entrusted with the duty of teaching the tenets of ideal womanhood by training the younger ladies to submit to their husbands, be excellent housekeepers and adjust to their husbands' programmes, needs, wishes, whims, caprices and idiosyncrasies.

Religion occupies a very important place in private and public life. Like ethnicity, it is also highly politicized as the struggle for political power and economic resources mostly revolves around ethno-

religious identity as well as class affiliation (Ihonvbere and Vaughan, 1995; Olukoshi, 1998). Religion provides women with a profound sense of identity and belonging within strong and tightly knit faith communities. Many pastors and other religious leaders, especially Christians, readily agree that women constitute the majority of regular worshipers and workers who help to sustain the community of believers. But, to a large extent, female (and male) identity is derived through the process of socialization to traditional and religious norms and standards of what it means to be a socially acceptable gendered being. As I discuss later, conventional interpretations of sacred texts converge with indigenous customs and traditions to promote gender discrimination and deprivation, and the cost to females in particular and to society in general is great.

Women in Africa constitute a huge latent human resource base whose full human potential remains untapped due to gender discrimination with dire consequences for the continent. The Sub-Saharan African region has the second worst gender-related development indicators after South East Asia; it also ranks higher than the Middle East in gender empowerment in terms of political participation and representation (Human Development Report, 2007/8). Male politicians and policy makers and even traditional and religious leaders are quick to argue that this is a result of poverty and underdevelopment which affects men and women. However, as I demonstrate in a later section, research has shown that economic growth and development do not always lead to commensurate improvements in women's status. Neither do all poor countries automatically fare worse than rich countries in women empowerment. Saudi Arabia and Rwanda are good examples of this.

Traditional Culture and the Interpretation of Key Texts

In the previous section I showed how the multiple and intricate interaction of tradition, religion and westernization has produced a multiplicity of statuses for women in Nigeria. In this section I will discuss in more detail how tradition and religion converge to keep women within a conservative frame of being according to the demands of a patriarchal worldview. The religious establishment in Nigeria prides itself with existing in a cultural context that is more compatible with the biblical culture than the west, and therefore more pure and spiritual. Consequently, there is an eagerness to preserve this fundamental religio-cultural purity from the corroding and corrupting influences of Western liberalism. Much of this quest lies in the preserving the â€˜divinely ordainedâ€™ gender hierarchy and relationships as specified in Scripture. Hence, in many instances, the desire to preserve and practice the fundamentals religion is tied to strict controls over gender attitudes and behaviour. Tomalin (2007:20) cites *Women against Fundamentalisms* who assert that, â€œAt the heart of all fundamentalist agendas is the control of women's minds and bodies.â€ Numerous biblical texts are used to preserve the traditional status quo.

For example, Salami (2003) in her book *Emotan* describes how in traditional Benin culture a woman would address her husband kneeling down and declare, â€œMy lord, the owner of my life and my destinyâ€ and in Yoruba culture the husband is regarded as the head and the crown of the wife. Similarly, passages that talk about male headship and female submission (1 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:17; 1 Peter 3:1-6) are hammered on at wedding ceremonies and women's/mothers' days and in marriage counselling sessions and Christian marriage literature. More specifically, 1 Peter 3:6 (CEV)[1] states, â€œFor example, Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him her master.â€ Women's subordinate role is linked to the order of creation â€“ Adam first then Eve â€“ the order of the fall â€“ Eve first then Adam â€“ and the direct words of God to Eve, â€œYou will still desire your husband and he will rule over youâ€ (Genesis 3:16 (CEV). These words

are seen as both prescriptive and descriptive of God's order after Eden. Thus, by design (as help meet) and by default of sin, woman is destined to a subordinate, supportive and secondary role, and this model of femininity is the one most commonly acted out in the biblical narrative. It also appears to be an enactment of the relationship between the King/Lord and the Old and New Testament Church (Psalm 45 and Ephesians 5:22-33). This biblical narrative is the pattern, par excellence, of traditional African gender roles and relations. For example, in most traditional Nigerian cultures, as in Judaic culture, women did not inherit land or property. The thinking was that women would get married, frequently within a polygamous arrangement, and themselves become property of their husbands. This was borne out in one of my research trips in 2003 to a village in Kaduna State in Northern Nigeria where both men and women alluded to marriage as a reason for not granting females inheritance and property rights in their village.

The female subordinate role is also tied to the scriptural designation as 'help meet' in Genesis 2:18. In some indigenous cultures, such as my own Ondo culture, help meet is the polite term for 'slave'. In contemporary parlance this is interpreted to mean 'assistant', 'deputy' and therefore 'secondary' and 'subordinate'. One man I met a while ago was even more courteous; he introduced his wife as his 'minister of home affairs!' I once listened to a dear Christian sister as she explained that 'help meet' implied that the man is the one given the primary and most important task by God and the woman's life was to be devoted to assisting him in the fulfilment of God's call on his life, and this was to be her sole or main purpose, duty and calling. In the same vein another woman, who had a different opinion, recounted how a teacher in a School of Discipleship in Lagos taught that a woman does not have a God purpose or a direct calling on her life and that is why she is required to submit to her husband who does have one. Despite her contrary opinion she chose to remain silent for fear of being tagged a woman out of control and giving her husband a bad image.

Gender roles in traditional society were clearly delineated in principle. The man as head of the family and property owner was also the warrior, family spokesman and potential clan leader or elder. He did not bother himself with the trivia of child care and other domestic duties which were left to women and children. His role was to defend the family and clan against attack and to provide for their material upkeep. For this purpose he could have many wives and children working on his farm, since the agrarian economy was the mainstay of traditional society. Despite the modernizing influences of urbanization and the expanding economic role of women the male 'bread winner' role is still perceived as the standard ideal and practice. Yet, even in traditional society there is evidence that it was more myth than reality, as it continues to be. As I earlier mentioned Yoruba women were adept tradeswomen and so were the Igbo women traders as could be deduced from the 1929 Aba women's riots when market women protested the unjust imposition of taxes by the colonial authority. Women in polygamous settings have often had to compete among many 'mouths' and thus fend for their own children, especially when such wives fell out of favour with their husbands. The male breadwinner myth is vigorously upheld by Nigerian churches. The Bible clearly teaches that, "If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel." In a similar vein, Titus 2:5 instructs that the younger women be taught to be 'keepers at home.' And so whatever, occupation, business or economic increase she brings to the home is merely assistance to the husband to whom she belongs anyway.

Other biblical words or phrases such as, "Let your women keep silent in the churches" (1 Corinthians 14:34), "Women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety" (1 Timothy 2:9), "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection" (1 Timothy 2:11)

and â€œI suffer not a woman to teach or usurp authority over a manâ€• (1 Timothy 2:12) seal the fate of Nigerian women in conservative churches. A discussion about the proper exegesis of these passages is beyond the purview of this paper and has been done elsewhere ( ). However, I find it interesting that such scriptural passages often have proverbial correlates in many indigenous languages and coincide with diverse cultural practices that keep women out of decision-making spaces. For example, among the Igbo a woman cannot break kola nut, a most important and prestigious function accorded to males and required for any meeting or ceremony to commence. Some ethnic groups selected a day that women were forbidden to come out in public and were confined to their homes displaying overt censorship over womenâ€™s freedom of movement. Examples include the *Eyo* and *Oro* masquerade days in Lagos and Ondo States.

At this juncture it is necessary to point out some caveats to the apparently straightforward assertions about the convergence of traditional and biblical dogma. First, the Nigerian church is not homogeneous but quite diverse in history, doctrine and church practices. This diversity has a significant bearing on attitudes towards women and gender roles/relations. I came to know the Lord in the context of a Pentecostal student fellowship where women were encouraged to exercise all the gifts of the spirit and play leadership roles to a greater extent than in mainstream churches at the time. A number of Pentecostal churches, mixed fellowship groups and ministries are led by women pastors, bishops and elders. A Methodist diocese in Ibadan in South West Nigeria has ordained a female bishop and although the Anglican Communion has not gone that far it encourages female lay readers and has a powerful Mothersâ€™ Union. A recent news report said the new Anglican Primate, Archbishop Matthew Oko, said women would now be ordained as deacons (*The Nation*, 08/06/10). The Catholic Womenâ€™s Organization is a major force in church life and social organization. Evangelical churches tend to be quite fundamentalist in interpreting scripture and thus restrictive of womenâ€™s ecclesiastical roles (as is the Catholic Church). Yet, they find avenues for women to participate actively through womenâ€™s fellowships and committee membership.

The second caveat concerns the effect of globalization on Nigerian cultures and religious expression. Due to women and girlsâ€™ increasing access to western formal education, economic empowerment and to general societal exposure to the globalization of western culture gender identities, roles, relations and expectations are shifting and fragmenting at different rates across social class and geopolitical variations. Women are rising to top levels of leadership in corporate and political affairs. There is an influx of females into traditionally male professions like law, medicine, engineering, architecture and banking. It is not uncommon to find women who hold higher qualifications or senior positions to their husbands. The various denominations have to navigate these changing societal realities and attendant expectations of their adherents; gender subordination is no longer an unquestionable given and women are beginning to question their exclusion from Church power structures and politics. Nevertheless, religious gatekeepers still wield significant power to determine or at least sway attitudes towards women and gender in a conservative direction. And external influences, including western education, are not sufficient of themselves to induce far-reaching change.[2] This is essentially because the gatekeepers of religion tend to be male and traditional interpretations of sacred texts protect male status, privilege and power. Religion may well be the last stronghold of exclusive male hegemony that men have to hold on to. Moreover, power and politics are gender coded in church and society to be a male preserve, and women are seemingly â€˜protectedâ€™ from the corrupting influence of both by remaining within the scripturally delineated sphere of home affairs under the leadership of men. Thus, exclusivity in male leadership is vigorously protected.

Permit me to share a few personal examples. When I was living in the UK doing my doctorate I was

occasionally reminded by my Nigerian brothers that I was 'still a woman'. Once when my husband decided to throw me a surprise 40th birthday party a prominent leader of the Overseas Fellowship of Nigerian Christians was called forward to pray for me. Before prayer, he seized the opportunity to remind me that although I was doing a PhD, I should never forget that I was first and foremost a woman and my primary concern was to be my home, as I had no greater life purpose or calling. Later, at my graduation party, the same brother was called upon to pray. In his prayer, he declared that the destiny and progress of a woman were determined by her husband beyond whose station she could never expect to rise. On both occasions I raged inwardly, but like the sister mentioned earlier, I said nothing. After I returned to Nigeria, I was driving to work one day when I got flagged down by a junior colleague at work and stopped to give him a ride. On our way, I was stopped at an army checkpoint. The soldier politely greeted my passenger, walked round the car to stand by my window looked right passed me and said to him, "Ride on sir" as if I wasn't there! When I complained about it later that day to my husband, he couldn't understand what I was so upset about!

In my research among Nigerian women from all walks of life I frequently heard them recount, quite matter-of-factly, stories of subtle or overt belittlement, silencing and put-downs in both public and private spheres of life. These are the normal, daily, routinized injustices and discriminations women face. Yet, we are not expected to complain, protest or even point them out, because to do so would mean to question the authority of traditional culture and religion and even more serious, to question the authority of God who established the 'natural' order of things. Few women are brave enough to risk being ostracized from community on earth or in heaven; and so we cope, endure, act out the patriarchal script as best we can and find diverse creative ways to negotiate or even use it to our advantage. The fear of rejection is common to most women including the educated elite. One business woman, during an in-depth interview, spoke about the deep-seated fear experienced by educated women that compels them to conform to unjust situations against their own inner convictions and why campaign agendas to promote women's rights could not work due to societal intimidation. In her words,

The truth of the matter is like we have to address the fear of the Nigerian woman. Our culture has taught us that a woman's ultimate is to be married and have children, that your ultimate in life – if you like you have ten PhDs on top of each other, if you are not married and in your husband's home, [3] *and then with children, you don't have respect. And if we don't address these underlining issues, women can know all these things, you can legislate it but you can't legislate a man's mindset.*

Traditionally, the Nigerian woman, is often described as a resilient shock absorber able to withstand the pressures bound to ensue in her 'husband's house.' The expression 'husband's house' is a very common one full of symbolic meaning. Traditionally, the man was considered the owner (*maigida* in Hausa) and head (meaning ruler *olori ile* (Yoruba) of the household and she is just the 'madam' or 'mother' of the house *iya'le* (Yoruba) *uwar gida* (Hausa). Other Nigerian languages have similar connotations. In contemporary church sermons this is reflected in interpretations of verses such as 1 Timothy 3:5; Prov. 14:1 and Titus 2:5 where the exemplary man rules the home while the wise woman builds and keeps it. Some women, by sheer personal acumen and dint of hard work have learnt to thrive and survive in this rigidly specified patriarchal construct. In development literature women in the low income countries perform a triple development role consisting of reproductive (child bearing/rearing and domestic chores), productive (income earning) and community (care of the sick, welfare activity and social organizing) work. This triple role places

substantial pressure on their time and limits their ability to engage in leisurely or decision-making activities in society. Those women who manage to keep it together, especially in keeping their marriages, are held up as ideal models of successful womanhood for others to emulate.

Still, we all know deep down inside that the assertion of a research participant during my doctoral field work rings true: "The whole world stands on the male ego leg." (Para-Mallam, 2007:212). Consider for instance an insightful remark made by a man from Abayi-Aba community in Osisioma Ngwa LGA of Abia State during another research funded by Action Aid concerning the State and the poor:

As part of our culture, women are never allowed to participate in the process of decision-making in our community […] besides, women, lunatics, social miscreants and those considered to be ostracized by the community are never allowed to participate in decision-making.

I have often pondered very deeply and painfully as to what it is about women, womanhood and femininity that men find so threatening as to need to silence, relegate, trivialize and suppress female persons and essence. My search for answers has led me to the conclusion that men and society have concluded that if he has to be strong, independent and competent she has to be weak, dependent and needy. Her equal strength and competence in the same field of endeavour puts him in a bad light. His sense of self and superiority rests on her different, deficient and delimited humanity. Without this, his masculine identity is in tatters, in question and in crisis. Tomalin's (2007:20) analysis of women and fundamentalism explains that fundamentalist ideology always targets women who are perceived as dangerous others, causing evil and chaos. Women often symbolize the idealized mother whose purity must be maintained or the damsel in distress whose dependency is required to reassert masculinity. In *The Gender of Oppression* Jeffrey Hearn (1987) also draws a similar conclusion and alludes to men's 'mythic fear' of emasculation by the female. Consequently, they set up institutions, laws and systems to regulate all that is female and feminine proclaiming to do this under divine instruction. I find this assertion by cultural anthropologists, Divale and Harris (1979:328), quite poignant here,

In order to rear passive and submissive women, males enlist the aid of the supernatural. Hence women are intimidated by bull-roarers, masked male dancers, and male religious specialists.

I have often heard variants of Hearn's assertion repeated by male and female respondents during field work in Nigeria. The words of the Executive Director of a faith-based organization in Jos are worth repeating here: ""We men, let me put myself there, we feel threatened […] bringing another human being or group on the same platform will mean a loss of status." A one-time Senior Federal Minister described the threat in terms of social pressure. He contended, during an interview, that Nigerian men who do believe in gender equality do not speak out for fear of being accused of class suicide. Consequently, one finds that men, across all social strata, who are the leaders and policy makers in a position to bring about change at all levels of society rely on the biblical language of male headship to blanket out discussion of gender justice and equality, and thereby avoid engaging critically with the issues and challenges this poses to the status and well-being of women. These issues and challenges can be seen in looking at various gender and development rated statistics that indicate the level of disparity between men and women in society.

A Gender Profile of Discrimination against Women in Nigeria

It is helpful at this stage to look at the practical outworking of Nigerian cultural and religious expression in relation to the social and material conditions of women. This section of the paper is reproduced from two research reports on religion and development (DFID, 2010) and State-of-the-State (Action Aid, 2010). On the surface Nigeria appears to be a very progressive nation when one looks at the high profile of certain female political actors, professionals and other prominent women entrepreneurs. Moreover, Nigeria has ratified all major international legal instruments on women including CEDAW (1985) and its Optional Protocol on Women (2004), and the AU Protocol on Women (2004). Underneath the surface the real status of the generality of the Nigerian female populace is a picture of stark gender disparities in formal education, political representation, income, labour force participation, access to healthcare and agricultural inputs etc. These disparities represent a kind of superstructure on top of an underlying structure of socio-cultural gender prejudice and discriminatory practices.

The Nigeria gender profile shows stark disparities. Female representation in parliament currently stands at 6.85%.[4] The *Poverty Profile for Nigeria* (National bureau of Statistics, 2005) provides statistical evidence of the disproportionate female poverty as a national phenomenon across rural and urban areas. Gender disparity is evident across all variables except in the incidence of poverty among male-headed and female-headed households which at times shows higher incidence among the former. Other statistics attest to female disadvantage: Adult Literacy rates: Males (78.6%) females (60.1%); overall school enrolment: Males (61%) females (51%).[5] The *World Bank Gender Stats* (2002-5 data) showed male labour force participation (MLFP) to be 65% and 35% for females (FLPP). Other gender statistics are shown in Figs. 3&4. The 2007/8 *Human Development Report* gives Nigeria a 2005 Human Development Index score of 0.470 and a ranking of 158 out of 177 countries and a Gender Development-related Index score of 0.456 and a ranking of 138 out of 156 countries. The GDI score is an improvement over the 2001 score of 0.450 (*HDR*, 2003). The 2009 Social Watch Gender Equity Index ranking for Nigeria is 147th out of 156 countries surveyed with a score of 44 out of 100. This is less than the 2006 GEI score (45) and lower than the Sub-Saharan average (53).

The index measures gaps in three dimensions education, economic activity and empowerment in relation to participation in decision making. Each score carries a maximum score of 100. Fig. 1 compares the scores of Nigeria (44), Ghana (58) and Rwanda (84) for each indicator. They demonstrate that Nigeria lags behind the other two countries in all three dimensions and underscore the extent of female poverty and exclusion in Africaâ€™s most populous nation (*Social Watch, 2009*).
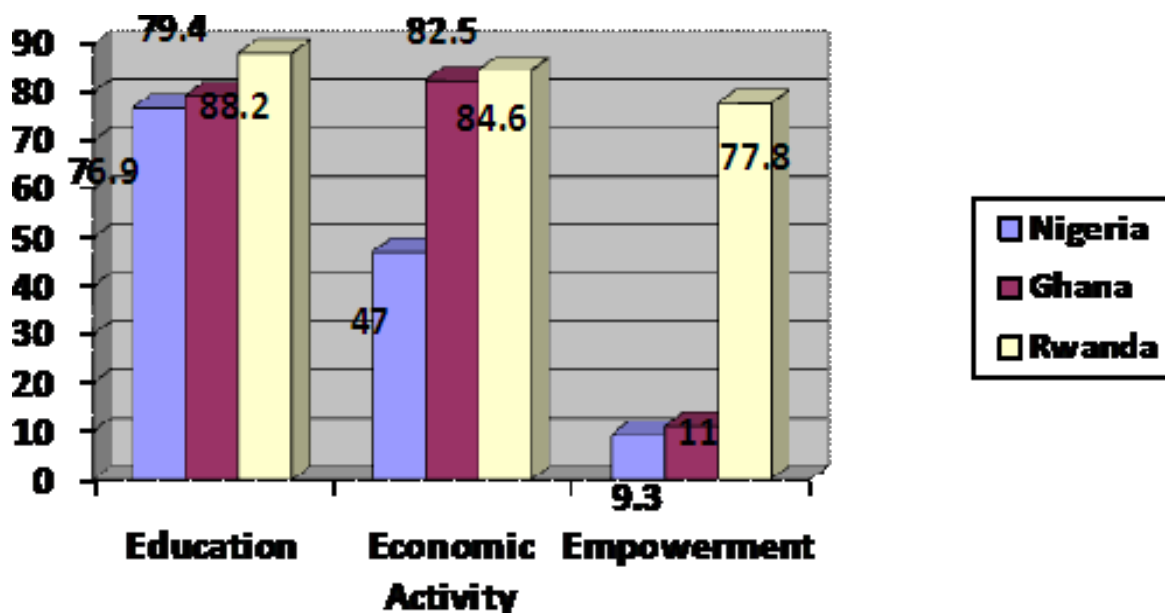
Fig. 1 Gender Equity Index scores for Nigeria, Ghana and Rwanda

This national gender profile clearly demonstrates that there is inequality of access to opportunities and development outcomes for males and females in the Nigerian context. The next section will look at some of the strategies adopted by government and non-government agencies over the last two decades and their levels of success.

Secular Interventions to Promote Gender Equality

State policy towards women since the 1970s and particularly since the 1980s has been pushed along by pressure from two parallel and interlinking movements. On the one hand, the global feminist agenda to enhance women's access to development benefits and to promote women's human rights has increasingly been adopted by the international development establishment as a matter of economic productivity and efficiency and a social justice issue. Various frameworks for ensuring the benefits of development interventions accrue to women either by providing welfare, basic needs, income generation or increasing female empowerment such as the women in development (WID) and women and development (WAD) approaches were used during both decades by national government machinery and NGOs. These approaches are still popular in development interventions. In the 1990s it became more common to speak of gender and development because the focus shifted from a woman-centred approach to an understanding to the power relations between men and women and how they impact on the status and well being of girls. Unequal domestic and public power relations between men and women, it was argued, lay at the root of numerous poverty and underdevelopment indicators.

WID, WAD and GAD all made important achievements in promoting women empowerment. Government and non-governments organizations came on stream to address the practical and strategic gender interests of women, especially the latter which are deemed less controversial. Practical gender interests are those that concern women's basic survival requirements such as water, sanitation, health, income generation etc. On the other hand, strategic gender interests relate to

needs that arise due to subordinate gender positioning and which if met are likely to bring about structural changes in power relations such as increased political representation and law reform for women's rights. However, it has been observed that practical gender needs could have strategic implications as is the case with income generation and reproductive health. The strategies adopted by secular groups revolve around skills acquisition, training, awareness raising, media and legislative advocacy which are most often currently promoted within a human rights-based framework. In spite of the noticeable successes of secular initiatives they suffer a backlash from anti-feminist and anti-western proponents who see them as an imperialistic agenda to foist western standards of human rights on developing countries and thereby erode traditional cultures and religious values. Consequently, faith-based groups working in development have often had greater receptivity and success in working with grassroots communities.

Faith-Based Strategies towards Gender Harmony

Within the world of international development there is a growing realization of the centrality of the role of culture and religion to development outcomes. Tomalin (2007) rightly observes that gender and development approaches had always been secularist and materialist ignoring the spiritual dimension of human life and its tangible outworking in social and material conditions. Development agencies are now recognizing that faith-based groups have a wide sphere of influence in developing countries and have for a long time played a vital role in development work, particularly in relation to the provision of basic needs such as health, education, water and sanitation and to working for social justice for the poor and excluded. Because they are deeply rooted in communities and social life, increasingly FBOs are viewed as potential development partners whose peculiar agendas, styles and approaches to development need to be acknowledged and even learned from by the global development establishment. Kate Marshall (2005) of the World Bank sums up the current thinking in international development circles that:

The missions of the wide array of faith institutions and development agencies across the world are linked in important and intricate ways. Poverty and social justice are the most immediate and central areas of common concern; ancient core concerns of virtually every known religion, they lie at the very center of the work of the development institutions generally, and the World Bank more specifically. This focus on poverty is a strong bond that ties both faith and development communities to the global consensus that underlies the 2000 Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals.1 Between the worlds of faith and development there is a shared focus on poor people, patterns of exclusion and the disappointment of unfulfilled human potential. This important common ground opens opportunities even as it poses an array of practical challenges.

In my recent research with FBOs I found the general focus to be on development projects that seek to address practical needs among poor and underprivileged communities. Similarly, the mainly address the practical gender needs of women and pay little attention to issues of social justice, human rights and gender equality. In fact, one male gender facilitator I interviewed said anytime the term 'gender equality' is mentioned among male religious leaders attending his workshops it was like declaring war! In several gender and development workshops i have conducted both Christian and Muslim men would always refer to verses in the Bible and Koran as justification for female subordination and disadvantage. However, FBOs such as the Christian Rural and Urban Development Association of Nigeria (CRUDAN), the Rural Urban Council of Nigeria (RURCON) and the Justice, Peace and Development Commission (JPDC) of the Catholic Church are devising means around the stiff cultural

and religious blocks to gender. These include the following:

1. Use of male gender facilitators to minimize antagonism and facilitate openness to the subject matter. It is actually better for men to champion the cause for gender equality in strong patriarchal societies.
2. Use of alternative terminologies and concepts, as opposed to controversial ones (e.g. gender equality and women's rights), such as male and female made in the image of God, gender harmony, complementary roles, partnership etc.
3. Treating gender as an economic and efficiency issue to demonstrate that it makes sense to expand female participation as a pragmatic development strategy.
4. Encouraging a gradual expansion in the roles women can play in church settings, as well as role flexibility in all other spheres of life.
5. Emphasizing gifting and talents for the enrichment of church and society over biological sex in the allocation of roles.
6. Appealing to the humane and compassionate side of men.

FBOs resort culturally acceptable language and strategies to push a gender agenda, albeit more slowly than the secular approaches. These alternative methods help FBOs working in gender and development to get a foot in the door and at least enter into discussion with deeply conservative religious gatekeepers who would otherwise not entertained any notion of gender justice.

Crisis, Conflict and the Move of God's Spirit

As helpful as the FBO interventions and strategies are, they stop short of engaging with the root cause of conservative, gender-biased religion which is the culturally-biased interpretation of sacred texts. To my mind, this is where the greatest challenge lies, and this is the most urgent need. African women, Nigerian women are groaning under the weight of patriarchal Christianity, and some more than others depending on the degree of patriarchy that operatives in the home, the surrounding community or local church body/denomination. There are two looming crises in Christianity in Nigeria, and possibly in Africa in relation to gender. First is the crisis of institutional integrity. In Isaiah 58 the God of Israel makes it clear that true religion and genuine righteousness are about promoting justice, removing oppressing and setting the captives free. These are also the key thrusts of secular development goals, although the value assumptions may differ. How can it be that the Church would have less concern and compassion for women than the 'worldly' establishment? Well the short answer is that God is sovereign and rules over the affairs of all humanity and so can carry out his righteous purpose through an ass if he so decides. But the long answer is that the Church has abandoned its mission of compassion and justice to half the human race.

The second crisis is that of masculine identity. What does it really mean to be a man in contemporary Nigerian society? Today's men are having to address this question, if not publicly, at least at the psychological level. Women's expectations, opportunities and roles are changing giving rise to new realities that are quickly eroding traditional concepts of male and female. It appears to me the Church is not helping men come up with answers that will promote gender harmony but rather fuel conflict. Christian marriages are under intense strain to conform to a model of gender relationships that does not work for everybody although it may indeed work for some. The issue here is choice. Can couples, men women, boys and girls choose to be different, to explore to simply be themselves allowing their God-given peculiarities, gifts, talents and inclinations to unfold and benefit humanity?

This is where I hope my work in faith, gender and development will take me. I want to join in with others who are contributing to an emerging discussion on the Gospel of Christ in action and what it means for social justice for women and girls. I am confident that the Spirit of God is moving in this direction both on the secular and religious scenes in Nigeria. In any case, with God there is no dichotomy between the two. Godâ€™s Spirit appears to be working in the development world and in the midst of traditional society to free the spirit of religion from the outer casings of patriarchy and bring about renewal and restoration of human society. In â€œCultures, spirituality and developmentâ€• Verhelst and Tyndale (2002:9) make the powerful point that,

Religions themselves have a fundamental message to deliver about an integrated vision of the world, a different approach to knowledge and the basic values that hold human societies together. But it is painfully obvious that religious institutions, sharing, as they do, the flaws of all humanity, have often failed to act in accordance with their vision. Inter-faith violence, â€˜communalismâ€™Â¸ aggressive proselytising, and unpalatable manoeuvring for power or money are real obstacles to social and economic well-being in and of themselves. They embody challenges which repentance and renewal, for a return to the original fire of each faith.

In the late 19th century a Church missionary, Mary Slessor arrived on the coast of Nigeria calling that part of the world to repentance from idolatry, and barbaric and inhumane practices. Now the world returns the call to the Church; It is a call the Church in Africa desperately needs to heed.

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[1] All Bible quotations are taken from KJV unless otherwise stated.

[2] I make this argument in an upcoming article titled: â€œPromoting Gender Equality in the Context of Nigerian Religious and Cultural Expression: Beyond Increasing Female Access to Education.â€• Accepted for publication by *Compare International Journal of Education*, University of East Anglia, UK.

[3] The phrase husbandâ€™s/his house/home was used repeatedly by grassroots and elite women when referring to marriage/marital home.

[4] Compare this with Mozambique whose national parliament comprised 250 men and 102 women as at 2003 and Rwanda whose Chamber of Deputies increased to 48.8% by 2007. These were accomplished using affirmative action measures.

[5] 2005 data

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Funmi lives with her family in the city of Jos in north central Nigeria, the Plateau state capital of about a half million people. It is in the northern region of the country that ethno-religious conflicts have been rampant leading to loss of life, property and livelihoods. There have been many incidents of violence in and around this city in recent years and in 2010 fresh outbreaks of violence began on January 17th with attacks by Muslims on Christian residents and Churches. Sadly this then lead to reprisal attacks on Muslims by indigenous groups who are predominantly Christians, thus escalating the violence. Muslims, including Fulani cattleherders, have continued to attack rural villages leading to deaths in the hundreds, particularly of women and children, and more reprisal killings. Silent and secret killings persist around the city and environs. There are widespread allegations of military complicity in the violence and killings under the watch of the a Muslim Commander, heightening the tension and insecurity.

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