

**RELIGION AND RELIGIOSITY OF WOMEN IN
THE SCRIPTURE AND AFRICA:
A STUDY OF A LIVING PARADOX**

Gisela UZUKWU

Three major issues hamper the situation of African women with regards to seeking new inclusive ways to understand, practice, and experience their religion as well as live out their religiosity. The first is the Christian tradition, namely, the Judeo-Christian heritage view of femininity and womanhood. The second is the socio-cultural and religious attitude of the Christian man towards the Christian woman. The third is the position and attitude of the Christian woman towards change. Given these three areas of interest, this article has two major sections. The first articulates the triple jeopardy the African Christian woman faces regarding her religiosity. The second section suggests theological and pastoral recommendations to realise some of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church on strengthening and promoting women's role in African Christianity.

Triple Jeopardy as African Christian Women's Living Paradox

A methodological note is necessary here given that Christianity is diverse in Africa, and there are various approaches and responses to the triple jeopardy mentioned above. This article does not claim to cover the whole of Christianity in Africa. On the contrary, it locates its discussion (statement of the problem and recommendations) within ongoing conversations in Catholicism in Africa, with special attention on Nigeria that is the article's immediate *locus theologicus*. Furthermore, religion here is understood in the sense of Catholicism. Religiosity is understood

in the sense of how women experience God's presence in their lives, understand the question of their place within the Church's worship tradition, wrestle with the divisive question of gender and femininity and live out their religious experience within their religious communities, family and society.¹

The Church and the African Christian Woman

In the different areas the Church has sought to appreciate and emphasise the role of women in the Church,² her teachings and attitude have come with some resistance and reservations about the extent women can engage in the mission work. This leaves us with a certain dualistic understanding of the position of the Church towards women. On the one hand, the Church wants to stand out in its acknowledgement of the role of women in the Church and in the African society. On the other hand, the Church has its past and even present histories of negative and confusing attitude towards women. This attitude together with some of the Church's misrepresentation of the message of the Gospel has hampered the present Church's mission on women and evangelisation.

As argued in earlier writings, the Christian theology that was developed in the West and later brought to Africa was a Christianity that had so many biases about femininity and womanhood. At that time the understanding in Christian tradition was that women were the cause of sin. Hence, women should be under the complete control of the male head of the family, since they were the legal properties of men, beginning with their fathers and then their husbands. Additionally, women were

1. I acknowledge the critical remarks of the anonymous reviewers who sought clarifications on this methodological issue and other pertinent ones. They have helped to sharpen and enrich this article.

2. In the latter 20th century and following the Second Vatican Council, the Church has echoed its voice in this regard. To give some examples, confer, Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes: The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (1965), no 29; John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994), no 10; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World* (2004); Benedict XVI, *The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "Africae Munus" on the Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace* (2011),

not regarded as true image of God.³ Descriptions of women, such as women are "the gateway of the devil,"⁴ "a defective and misbegotten male...destined to live under man's influence"⁵, or the temptress are found in Christian writings. When Christianity came to Africa, the African converts adopted not only the existing Western cultural views about women but merged the new tradition with their own cultures and values. The result was the double phenomenon of the origins of the oppression and the suppression of women and the total chaos of the religious, political and socio-cultural views about women that surfaced later.⁶ While this erroneous idea of Western Christianity is phasing out in the West, African Christianity continues to live with its impact. For instance, it is not uncommon to still hear religious leaders in Africa preach that it was the woman who tempted the first man to sin. So she should not be allowed to gain control again lest she lead today's man to more sin. Furthermore, when some of these religious leaders want to express their opinions on issues concerning men and their failures or disappointments in life, they often impute the women. This type of reflection has had strong influence on our family and societal settings, not to mention the fact that it has taught the Church, the society and the men to devalue women.

Yet the Church has not been entirely right in her teachings

3. See Susan Rakoczy, *In Her Name: Women Doing Theology* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2004), 30-33.

4. "And do you not know that you are (each) are Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to die." Tertullian, "On the Apparel of Women," trans. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. IV: Translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), Bk 1, Chap. 1.

5. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 13 (London: Washbourne, 1912), Ia, quae. 92, art. 1, obj. 1.

6. As stated by Philomena Njeri Mwaura, "Western Christianity and 'civilisation' came to Africa with its male dominated hierarchies which had negligible opportunities for women in their ministerial structures. Although women were subjected to men in the traditional African set-up, western culture brought them additional burdens." Philomena Njeri Mwaura, "Women and Evangelization: A Challenge to the Church in the Third Millennium," in *Challenges and Prospects of the Church in Africa: Theological Reflections of the 21st Century*, eds. Nahashon W. Ndung'u & Philomena N. Mwaura, ESEAT, 1 (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), 119-144, at 140; Amba Oduyoye, "The African Experience of God through the Eyes of an Akan Woman," *The Way* 37 (1997): 195-206, at 201.

and biblical assumptions about the role of women in the New Testament, in the early Church and today. To begin with, there is no scriptural evidence that women are created in a lesser image of God than the men. The theological or rather biblical assumption for the exclusion of women in the order of priesthood does not look so self-evident. Jesus had called twelve male apostles, but this does not automatically mean that those twelve apostles were conferred with the title of priests during the time of Christ. In addition, there is no clear evidence that gender was a factor in Jesus' election of the twelve. Going back to the New Testament texts, the Gospel tenuously outlines the importance and role of women in the narratives about Jesus. Beginning with the story in Matthew and Luke, the childhood of Jesus is replete with narratives about the importance of Mary in the birth of Christ; in the annunciation (Mt 1:18-25), in the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary (Lk 1:26-38), in Mary's visit to Elisabeth (1:39-56), in the birth of Jesus (Lk 2:1-7), in the visit of the Magi (Mt 2:11; Lk 2:15-20), in the flight to Egypt (Lk 2:14-22), in the presentation of Jesus in the Temple (Lk 2:27-35) and in the finding of Jesus in the Temple (2:46-51). Women also constitute the majority of those who followed Jesus in his ministry and they performed significant roles. Women bore *faithful witnesses* to the death and resurrection of Jesus. They *followed* Jesus and ministered to him in the capacity of *diakoneō*, which has often been translated as to organise and prepare the daily food, to function as an intermediary, to perform obligations, to be of service, to serve, to wait at table, to help someone, to care and provide for someone, and lastly to minister.⁷ At the foot of the cross, Matthew refers to the presence of some women who have followed Jesus during his Galilean ministry (Mt 27:55-56). Paul also lists the names of women who participated with him as co-founders, co-workers and helpers.

Another issue is that the assumed Jewish background of

7. Hermann W. Beyer, art. diakone/w, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 2 (1964), 81-87; F.W. Gingrich and F.W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 229-230; Alfons Weiser, art. diakone/w, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* 1 (1987), 302-304.

Christianity that shaped most of the pejorative views about women is mostly inferred. For reason of space, the details of this argument will not be addressed here. I will have to limit the discussion to one example. In Judaism, the portrait of Jewish women in Jewish writings is more due to the worldview of rabbinic Judaism than to Scripture itself, even though in the latter this negative worldview about women is not completely absent.⁸ The fact that most of what is written in the Scripture is about the religious experience of the Jews in relation to fulfilling the Law, attention to women was strongly sidetracked. Without understanding the context of some of these Jewish writings, we have assumed the attitude as the *status quo*. On the contrary, this exclusive attitude does not necessarily presuppose that women are or were oppressed in this Judeo culture.

Recognising this fact about some of what she has received in the Christian theological tradition, the Church has taken serious steps in reconstructing and reformulating some of the negative teachings and attitude toward women. On a positive note, the Church has taken important steps, in her various social teachings, Papal declarations, Encyclicals and Letters to affirm the dignity of all human persons, to revoke her previous teachings and stand on the position of women, to establish the roles and duties of women in the family, Church and society, to affirm the equality of men with women in Christ and to overcome certain cultures and

8. An example of this assertion is the use of the presupposed "three blessings of gratitude found in Jewish writings" where a male Jew at the beginning of the morning prayer of blessings thanks God for not making him a gentile (non Jew), for not making him a boar, for not making him a woman." These expressions are found in *Berachot* 6:23 of the *Tosefta*, *Berachot* 9.1, 63b of the Palestinian Talmud and *Menahot* 43b of the Babylonian Talmud. Without a proper understanding of Judaism, most scholars have claimed that the prayer of blessing in question is an embodiment of Jewish attitude toward women. Of recent, this position has been criticized as inaccurate since we lack a clear view of the social historical context in which the three blessings came into being, the social cultural world they envisage, the social, cultural, religious and political world of rabbinic Judaism and especially the Judaism that predates rabbinic Judaism. For further reading, see Gesila Nneka Uzukwu, "Gal 3:28 and its Alleged Relationship to Rabbinic Writings," *Biblica: Commentarii Periodici Pontificii Instituti Biblici* (2010): 370-392.

customs that debase womanhood or femininity.⁹ On the whole, these developments have brought some changes in the status of women. Today, women have and continue to play a variety of roles in the Church. The active presence of religious women in the Church – in their charitable missions, social campaigns and assistance in Church's missions – is gradually changing the societal and religious attitudes towards women. Women are now involved in heading religious, social and political groups, undertaking charity missions, giving religious and moral instructions and acting as stewards, ushers and readers during worship. It is interesting also to note that today women are allowed to teach in seminaries. It is amazing to see the contribution and support these women are making in the theological education of prospective priests.

Despite these efforts, there are still some drawbacks. In fact, it is paradoxical that as the Church has embraced new perspectives and theological teachings to correct the mistakes of the past, certain issues appear irreformable. One of them is the response of the Church for the non-admission of women into the order of priesthood. The position of the Church as expressed in the current *Code of Canon Law* (can. 1024), the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (§ 1577) and by *The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* (1976) is that the sacrament of ordination is reserved for only a baptised man. The issue here is not about whether there should be women ordination, but that the effort to empower women to serve Christ in the Church more actively is still backed up by questionable traditions. While we accept that there is ontological equality between men and women, the idea of barring women from leading the people in sacramental services or participating in sacramental leadership on the basis of gender

To list just a few: we have conciliar documents such as Pastoral Constitution in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) and Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*); Apostolic letters such as John Paul II's *Mulieris Dignitatem* (The Dignity and Vocation of Women, 1988), Letter to Women (1995), Letter to Mrs Gertrude Mongella in preparation for the *United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women* (1995), The 'Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World' published in *The Tablet* (2004).

differentiation ends up in reinforcing the devaluation of women and condoning injustices against women.

The second observation is that the present condition of some of the liturgical prayers offered by the Church is for a male-oriented audience or community. Gender insensitivity in some of the prayers is still an issue that has to be dealt with because it affects women in their religiosity, in their relationship with God, in their spiritual formation and involvement in the liturgy. This brings us to the image projected of God in Christian tradition. The image of God in Christian tradition is more of a father than a mother. The female face of God is minimally projected, if projected at all. In Judaism, God has no physical representation, no body and no genitalia. Thus, the very idea of God as male or female is patently absurd. It is only for convenience's sake that the Jews referred to God in masculine terms since Hebrew has no neutral gender. Of course, the Jews recognised this. That is the reason why they could speak of God in both masculine and feminine terms (Isa 66:13, 'as a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you'; Isa 66:9, 'shall I open the womb and not deliver? says the LORD'). It is because we have maintained a very negative view of female sexuality that we continue to neglect or stress the feminine side of God. Furthermore, in sermons and spiritual writings, women are presented as though there are particular sins that their gender makes them prone to – gossip, jealousy, envy, small mindedness, seduction of men, temptation, etc.

The African Christian Man's Attitude to the African Christian Woman

Majority of Africa's male population, especially in Nigeria, strongly upholds the ideology of male supremacy, which has systematically and unwittingly suppressed the women and has resulted in most women having a diminished value of their worth and leading to a limited participation in the Church and society. Indeed while the ideology of male supremacy is deeply

entrenched in the African society, and particularly in the Nigerian culture, the advent of Christianity and Islam with their respective patriarchal traditions succeeded in exacerbating an already existing situation.¹⁰ It is for this reason that most of the so-called cultures and traditions that suppress women have passed unchallenged. For this same purpose some African men have resisted challenge and change amidst their religiosity.

Speaking in particular about the Nigerian context, Uchendu argues that in the pre-colonial era, women in the various tribal kingdoms had political and economic status of their own, though they were not treated equally with men.¹¹ They had independent lives of their own. Although the women were placed under the *potestas* (authority) of the father or the husband, they were not marginalised economically and politically. Concerning religion, women were considered important alongside men; at least African Traditional Religion granted women the rights of priestesses. Women were associated with certain gods, such as gods of fertility and peace, but also with the practice of witchcraft, which according to Carolynne Dennis demonstrates “the potential social danger of women exercising power uncontrolled by men.”¹²

With the coming of Christianity, the imported patriarchal worldview gave men stronger motives to support the patriarchal elements they shared in common and mythologised their negative view of femininity and womanhood. The result is the exclusion of women from significant aspects of religious worship and activities, from participation in the order of governance and an

10. Rose N. Uchem, *Overcoming Women's Subordination: An Igbo African and Christian Perspective: Envisioning an Inclusive Theology with Reference to Women* (Enugu: Snaap Press, 2001), 46-48. See also Amuluche Greg Nnamani, “Gender Equality in the Church and in the Society: Our Obligation towards Change,” in *Gender Equality from A Christian Perspective*, ed. Rose Uchem (Enugu: Snaap Press, 2005), 22-42, at 28-29.

11. Patrick K. Uchendu, *Education and the Changing Economic Role of Nigerian Women* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing, 1995), 9-11. See also, Joseph Therese Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 38-39.

12. Carolynne Dennis, “Women and the State in Nigeria: The Case of the Federal Military Government, 1984-1985,” in *Women, State and Ideology: Studies from Africa and Asia*, ed. Haleh Afshar (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 13-27, at 15.

intensified cultural subordination. Under the guise of Christianity, a lot of African men continue to oppress their women and force them to comply with cultural norms that have no connection with the norms of Christianity. For instance, in Nigeria a widow can be sent out of her matrimonial home at the death of her husband, or forced into levirate marriage. Women are objectified as instruments of sexual pleasure. For men adultery is assumed and for women it is punishable by their religious communities, priests and pastors. A priest can bar a woman from receiving communion and attending group organisations and thereafter punished because her daughter got pregnant out of wedlock. Meanwhile, the man who is responsible for the pregnancy is not judged. Women with disabilities are not fit for marriage, while men with disabilities are given to women in marriage. People value priests and religious men more than they value religious women.

While the Church attempts to preach and teach the equality of men and women in Christ, one notices that a lot of Nigerian men resent the transformation in attitude which Christianity propagates. While they acclaim themselves Christians, they are not predisposed for religious changes that touch on socio-cultural attitude relating to women. One of the reasons proposed is that there is a growing concern that the social, religious, spiritual and ecclesiological changes, among other things, are bringing new waves of cultural syncretism that is neither Christian nor traditional. As Nehemiah M. Nyaundi expresses, although social and religious changes have brought many positive transformative experiences at both individual and societal levels, it has debilitated some of the traditional African values, especially family values.¹³ While the presupposed loss of culture persists, most African men, especially the Igbo, tend to resist the change by insisting on guarding certain traditions.

13. Nehemiah M. Nyaundi, “The Contemporary African Family in the Light of Rapid Social Change Theory,” in *Challenges and Prospects of the Church in Africa: Theological Reflections of the 21st Century*, ed. Nahashon W. Ndung'u & Philomena N. Mwaura, ESEAT, 1 (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), 71-87.

In my view, the problem is not only about the new wave of culture change, but the presupposed effect it is having on patriarchy with its male privileges. Many men will uphold patriarchal influences, do anything to hang on to that belief, including ignoring anything that will give women a more positive image due to the fear of various losses: loss of control over female sexuality, loss of control over headship of the family, loss of religious and political power that may lead to religious and political marginalisation of the men. It is quite unfortunate that when we talk about change in the attitude towards women in religious circles, we leave out the emotional, psychological, social and political aspects of patriarchy. Meanwhile, these aspects have serious implications for the question of women's religiosity and active participation in Christian communities.

The African Christian Woman as both Victim and Perpetrator of Women Oppression

Paradoxically, women in Africa are both victims and agents of their oppression. At the level of victims, women are not just victims because of the way society and Church regard and treat them. They are also victims by the way they treat one another. First, they allow patriarchal prejudices and experiences permeate their lives at their detriment. As stated earlier, though some parts of our Christian tradition contributed to a distorted image about femininity in the Church, women have internalised these distortions. Let's look at two examples: first, the internalisation of the myth that women are temptresses, and second, the ethos that their contact with blood (due to menstruation and childbirth) renders them incapable of handling religious objects or performing religious duties.

These distortions have led to various instances of the following: (a) women's profound de-appreciation of fellow women especially those who try to speak against the existing religious system or protest for a more active participation in the Church, (b) women seeing themselves as incapable of performing religious

duties or roles, (c) women easily siding with the male point of view about how to define women privilege and deprivation, (d) women accepting arguments that they are inferior to men, (e) women accepting that their sexual body and being are owned and are to be controlled by the 'owner', (f) women losing their worth in the present religious system, (g) women holding that it is their job to obey and to serve men, and (h) self-hate and hate for one another.

Furthermore, women have become encaged victims that appear incapable of rising above their oppressing structures and attitude. For obvious reasons, women's socio-cultural life experiences are shaped and oriented according to their faith convictions. As such, where religion is oppressive, other institutions follow suit. Where all structures are oppressive, women remain apparently trapped. They continue to live in a state of learned helplessness. Accordingly, they continue to accept oppression in resignation. Another reason lurking behind women's regressive silence is the fear of losing acceptance, respect, dignity and self-worth in their social and religious communities. There is the fear of being tagged a revolutionary or dissident. Another is the lack of confidence in the self and in one's ability which is a consequence of discrimination and the invisibility of women in the Church and society. The aspect of denying women access to participate in some religious practices, access to offices and positions of leadership and access to voice out their opinions on the ground that women are to be silent in the Churches (1 Cor 14: 34) still mitigates against the self-confidence of many African women.

On another note, women are agents of their own oppression, thus exacerbating the problem of patriarchy. Several instances abound across Africa. The following are merely illustrative, and not exhaustive. A woman advises the daughter to stay in an abusive marriage because the mother believes that the daughter has no respect outside marriage and that both the mother and the daughter will be ridiculed by the society. In religious, social and family settings, women are prone to castigate

and speak ill of fellow women. A childless woman is branded a witch, even the childlessness is not her fault. A mother is chastised and outlawed from her religious group by other women because her daughter got pregnant out of wedlock. Mothers train and treat their male and female children differently, forming in them the sense that the male child is more valued than the female. In addition, many women who are victims of domestic violence perpetrate crimes against other women.

Bridging the Chasm of Living Paradox

Summarily, though Christian women are in the majority in Africa, this religion hampers their religious experience and religiosity. This is the living paradox of women religiosity in Africa. In the light of the three issues hampering their religiosity, women appear unable to rise above their oppressing structures and cannot even cry against them. This section offers some reflections and recommendations on how women's religiosity in Africa can be enlivened and deepened.

The Church in Africa Promoting Formation of Women

While the Church lends her voice for a greater inclusion of women in Church structures and decision-making process, there are grassroots issues in Africa that first have to be dealt with.¹⁴ In my opinion, the Church should take the first step towards realising "the recognition and liberation of women, following the example of Christ's own esteem for them..."¹⁵ Where religion is the starting point of the problem, it should also be the starting point of the solution. A sincere participation and commitment on the part of the Church will change the course of the history of the discrimination against women. As we said above, the Church has to speak out in women's favour and challenge the violent and oppressing religious, cultural and traditional practices that are based on patriarchal norms.

14. See Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, no. 57.

15. *Ibid.*

One of the fundamental tasks before the Church is to look for ways to deconstruct the negative image it has constructed about women, especially of women as temptresses. The Church should emphasise the need to look beyond the literal reading of the story of the Fall in Genesis 3 and focus on the symbolic reason for which the story is alluded. Second, there is the need to review our liturgical and sacramental books. It is true that most of our prayers are scriptural prayers, translated from the language in which they were originally written, and of which most of these texts were originally meant for male audience. Yet, it is part of enculturation to be language sensitive in a prayer offered by both male and female believers. Next, there should be serious effort on the part of the Church to unmask the stereotyped image we have of God. It is not only Mary that is our mother. God is also our Mother. God has been idealised as a male, even when the function he is performing is feminine. If the feminine dimension is institutionally accentuated, women will deepen their relationship with God and be able to express their sexuality in prayer. Men, on the other hand, will reinforce their perception and understanding of femininity and motherhood, leading to a positive evaluation of women.

It is not as though women are not involved in the life of the Church. Catholic Women Organization (C.W.O.) and other sodalities in the Catholic Church give women opportunities to utilise and contribute their talents towards the welfare of the Church. The problem is that their position and status are not utilised to the full. Often, the women's participation in decision making in the Church are limited to these female organisations. Hence, it is high time women are allowed to be equally represented in the decision making process in the Church. This takes inspiration from Pope Francis' post-synodal exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*:

But we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. Because 'the feminine genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society, the presence of women

must also be guaranteed in the workplace' and in the various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures.¹⁶

The Pope builds his argument on a theological claim that some might find very provocative: "a woman, Mary is more important than the bishops."¹⁷ This fact greatly challenges both pastors and theologians to come to terms with what power and authority mean in the Church "with regard to the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church's life."¹⁸

The Church should continue to encourage and offer women the opportunities to be spiritual directresses, theologians and writers of spiritual books. The Church is improving in its effort to reach its goal of the integration of women in the Church, and has to continue in its effort. If this will take root in Africa, then the Church in Africa should improve on several avenues for men and women (both religious and laity), especially women, to receive theological training. They can be trained and commissioned as catechists, pastoral counsellors, and preachers of the word at the level of small Christian communities. They can be commissioned to take communion to the sick and conduct the liturgy of the word in the absence of an ordained minister. Some dioceses in Nigeria have existing institutes for such theological training (e.g. Abuja, Kaduna and Onitsha Archdioceses, Abeokuta, Ilorin, and Newi dioceses). The problem, however, is that after their training at these institutes, women are not adequately represented in the various non-ordained ministries in the Church.

In the West, women are making their unique contributions in the Church's mission. It is time the Church in Africa gave women proper formation on the Church's mission and the opportunity to do the work. Often, the impression is created that the Church in

16. Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, November 24 2013), no. 103.

17. *Ibid.*, no. 104.

18. *Ibid.*

Africa has enough male figures to do the work. Thus there is no need for women to worry themselves about decision making and leading liturgical activities in the Church. No, according to Francis, women need to be integrated in every sphere of the Church's life. The absence of a true deeper transformation is the reason why the African Church, especially regions where patriarchy is deeply entrenched, makes a charade of the discussion about women religious experience and expression of their religiosity.

Beyond the Fear and Resistance of Men

The level of Nigerian men's acceptance of women's real involvement in Church structures and decision making process reflects how far our society has developed in terms of education and exposure. Indeed, poor exposure has far-reaching effects on people and their understanding of freedoms of men and women. It is true that enlightenment has had its damaging effect on our culture, not to mention the secularisation of religion, culture and the loss of some of our cultural mores and customs. Nonetheless, enlightenment brings change to people's attitude and makes them considerably more open to other people, including women, religion and culture. While we oppose modern practices that undermine our cultural values, we cannot uphold traditions that degrade female sexuality and womanhood, even to the point of violating women's fundamental human rights.

To create more space for empowering religiosity and better opportunity for women's collaboration with men in the Church, family and society, the Church should be more involved in the struggle because of its wide network that permeates the various levels of the society. Of course, the Church is doing a lot already to empower the faithful and foster authentic religiosity. At various level of the ecclesial, the Church organises seminars and workshops that focus on deepening one's faith, health education, leadership training and family relationships, to mention but a few. For instance, the Church in Nigeria has various engaging forums,

e.g. various associations for catholic men, women, young and old, that bring men and women together, providing opportunities for equal co-operation, and encouraging conversations among them on how to deal with the challenges that come from family, religious and social institutions. In particular these Church's forums afford women more opportunities to make their voices heard and express their talents.

Another interesting point is that Catholics listen and heed more to the prophetic voice of the Church than of the society. Within these forums, the Church can educate the men on the care and respect for women, intensify its preaching that both men and women being made in God's image, inform the believing community that those negative images portrayed of women in the past are not right, and beckon on the men to reject cultures that do not protect its own from degrading practices and violation of their rights.

In this way, Christian men will be able to overcome some of their fears and resistance towards women, thus giving women more opportunities to experience their unique contribution in the life of the Church.

Women rebuilding Trust in One Another

How can women empower themselves to speak out? How can they encourage themselves to be bolder? How can they empower themselves to have authentic religious experience and live it out through active and real involvement in the life of the Church?

In my opinion, if the Church at the institutional level is living up to its task as outlined earlier in this section, women will be empowered to begin to ask without fear what they can do to reinforce their identity and make great effort against the social and religious norms that devalue them. The opportunities created by the Church as offered above will empower women to understand better and utilise their potentials. It is also going to create what we call a reversal of worth. That is, it is going to have a turnaround effect on the psyche, behaviour and attitude of

women towards themselves and towards other women.

Women should also take part in this struggle, especially in helping to rebuild trust among themselves and learning to appreciate one another. In view of this, they need to build constructive networking and support organisations that can have positive and not negative effects on the lives of women. There are diverse female religious congregations, associations and groups in the Catholic Church in Africa. Majority of them have been very helpful in challenging women to make meaningful contributions to the Church. Paradoxically, as already argued, almost all of these organisations operate on the Church's view of Christian tradition which is dominantly patriarchal. Thus, the changes they advocate and the challenges they have to deal with circle around patriarchy and its consequences. The result is the inability to challenge the system and indirectly reinforce patriarchy.

Accordingly, women need to create support systems for themselves that can open up avenues for women to develop themselves, discuss their daily life experiences, deal with abuses arising from their religious and social contexts, encourage women to step up to be more positive of themselves, build self-confidence, teach one another, guard and educate others outside of the boundaries of patriarchy. They have to teach one another to understand critically, believe convincingly and truly live out their religious convictions.

Conclusion

The problem of religion and religiosity of women in the Scripture and in Africa cuts across their religious, social and cultural contexts. There can be little doubt that the Christianity is pursuing the cause of the fuller integration of women in its various structures and decision making processes in Africa. However, Christianity has not gone far enough. The patriarchalism retrieved from Christian history still poses an enormous challenge for the recognition of the equal participation of women with men in African Christianity. This article, located

within the ongoing conversations in Roman Catholicism in Africa, suggests that women religiosity in Africa suffer from triple jeopardy.

First, there is the Church's resilient patriarchy still playing out the exclusion of women from certain leadership roles in the Church, its gender insensitivity in some liturgical prayers of the Church, and its sexist presentation of God's image. Second, there is the attitude of the African Christian man towards the African Christian woman. Under the guise of Christianity, most men resist the equality of men and women in creation and in the mission of the Church because due to lack of good exposure and insecurity. Third, there is the paradoxical resistance of women to their fuller integration and involvement in the Church's life and mission. They are both victims and authors of their oppression and jeopardy.

It cannot be overemphasised that the Church needs the voice, experience, wisdom and contribution of women to improve the good, growth and mission of the Church. Hence, beyond the critique of the triple jeopardy, this article's significant contribution is the proposal on how African Christianity can move beyond its living paradox about women religiosity. First, Christianity has to reconsider some of the cultural elements that conflict with the message of the Gospel. Second, there has to be forums for encounter between men and women, which can offer opportunities that can educate the men on the care and respect for women, while intensifying the biblical insight that both men and women are made in God's image. Third, women need to build constructive networking and support organisations among themselves to rebuild self-confidence and trust in one another, as necessary steps towards making their voices heard in their Christian faith.