

## BRIDGES ACROSS ACTIVISM AND THE ACADEMY:

### The Rising Profile of African Womanhood

E.M. UKA\*

#### 1 Introduction

God created us in His own image; but our men have recreated us to suit their own interests and pleasures, cried a female theologian in my parish when I was working in Tanzania in East Africa. Although God created African women equal to her male counterpart, she had for long been inhibited, fettered and restricted in many ways by man-made laws and customs. Such had been the feature of life of women in many patriarchal societies. The restrictions have brought untold hardship and frustration to many a woman who could not develop to the full all her God-given talents and potentials. Her self-esteem was reduced, and unfortunately society in the end lost what it could have gained from the contributions of many a gifted woman if she had been allowed to use all her potentials to the full service and development her community.

Africa had produced powerful female leaders of outstanding stature. Many scholars in recent years have made one common-mistake of assuming that all African women in traditional societies could be placed together in a single category. Not all women in the ancient world were oppressed. This does not, however, gloss over the inhibition of vast majority of women in traditional African societies. Evidently, some women stood above and over less privileged men and women. But they were few in that class. Those few charismatic and powerful women in the distant past were found among the housewives, market women, queens and princesses, daughters of outstanding noble men and ordinary rural dwellers. They came from different backgrounds and accomplished specific tasks in their communities in their own time. They became Activists and Voice of the Voiceless who mobilised other women to action in the struggle

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\* Dr. E.M. Uka teaches in the department of Religious Studies/Philosophy at the University of Calabar, Nigeria.

against the policies and traditions that did not favour women. Although they were not literate in our concept of the term, they made lasting impressions in the lives of the women and society of their day. Their types were still identifiable in many societies of our time. Such are the women we have described as **Activists** in this paper. Although they may not have received formal western education, they are forces to reckon with.

On the other hand, there had been many educated and highly sophisticated professional women in recent past and in our own contemporary period, who have become spokeswomen and fighters for the restoration of the dignity of womanhood. Some of them are found in industrial Labour Unions, academia, electronic - and print media, and other professions where they rub shoulders with their male counterparts. In the past, many of them did not make their influence reach the grassroots and rural levels where some other poor village women were struggling for the emancipation of womanhood too. In the last decade or so, many Women Organisations began to come together to compare notes and run joint programmes to generate awareness among all classes of women on the gross injustices against women in general. This new development which started a few years ago has done a lot of good within its short time of existence, and this is what we have described here as **Bridges across Activism and the Academy**.

A new Africa is emerging from the old. The co-operation between different organisations of women's movements in the recent past is a feature of this new consciousness in African development. The coming together of different kinds of women from different backgrounds including the rich upper middle class, the rural market women, professional and business women, politicians, intellectual theorists and sophisticated westernised African women, is a new chapter in the rising profile of African womanhood. The old traditions, which kept women at the background of social and political leadership of the society, are by no means dead, but the new African woman has come a long way in her efforts to establish her self-identity in her fight for human right and equal opportunity in public and private establishments.

This paper will address itself to an evaluation of the sojourn of African womanhood in her efforts to establish her self-identity in a male-dominated world. It is an excerpt from an ongoing research on the Rising Profile of Modern African Womanhood, which hopefully will be published as a book very soon. The data for this work were collected through random sampling from a three-year fieldwork in the West, East and South-African sub-regions. The predominantly Muslim North-Africa is not considered in this survey. Another research on the Place of Modern African Women in Islam is focused on that sub-region. A historico-analytical approach is adopted in this survey. Two principal factors have been identified as the pivot of this new consciousness in African woman which has helped her to carve a niche for herself in the present scheme of things. She is no longer taken for granted but is accorded a recognition that was not usual in the last three decades or so. One of the factors is the new team spirit of working together to build bridges across activism and the academy. The coming together of women of different social classes under one roof to discuss strategies in their fight against suppression of women is a major breakthrough in the sojourn for the eradication of discrimination against women. They have realised, though belatedly, that no group of women organisation can single-handedly dislodge the hard traditions of oppression in the hands of men in power. The small units of women organisations were too weak to challenge the status quo.

The other factor is hard work. This does not imply that women were docile in the past. But it is to emphasise that women have realised that if they would like their voice to be heard, they must also learn to work to earn substantial amount of money in order not to depend on the paltry charity from their husbands. Economic dependency is an inseparable part of political dependency.

The dependency on the income of the husband earned the African women the sobriquet - Oriaku- [consumer of wealth], which was a euphemistic way of flattering a woman as a lazy parasite who lives to consume and not to produce, except to live and breed children like a lazy drone and queen ant. Even though some people saw the title as a mark of love and care on the part of a responsible husband, it only portrayed women in bad light - a class of

consumers! In recent years, African women have come to reject that title and now prefer to be addressed as:

Oso di eme aku: a husband's strong associate and partner in progress.

Ome ka di ya: a responsible woman who acts like and with her husband.

Odozi aku: a protector and preserver of wealth, a responsible manager.

All these do not imply that she cannot work alone but that she is a team player and a productive partner in progress. She is able to stand as an authentic personality<sup>1</sup>.

## 2 Women In Traditional Society: Ambiguity Of Status

The history of development and progress in human society has always been made an exclusive story of man and has invariably become his-story, not that of woman - her-story. Most accounts of great achievements of humans in traditional African societies wear the garb of man in such a great magnitude that one begins to ask if women ever achieved or contributed anything to the progress of human society. Every success story written by man neglected the roles and positive contributions of woman - a part of the gross injustice and suppression women had suffered in a male dominated world. Few intelligent men in the distant past constructed myths and pithy sayings, which gave validation to the suppression of women in traditional societies. This has persisted till this day. In many achievement-oriented societies, some ethnographic data have glaringly shown that women were not docile, but were unfortunate to be misrepresented by the men who chronicled the history of human society in the distant past. They showed women as second class persons who were to be tolerated or at best endured as a necessary

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<sup>1</sup> U.R. Onunwa [1992], "Femininity in African Cosmology: Paradox and Ambiguity", *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, No.44, p.45.

evil<sup>2</sup>. This is probably what the lady theologian in my parish observed when she stated that God created women in His own image; but men recreated them to suit their selfish interest and pleasure. More often than not, the image of women, their self-esteem, and status have been greatly presented as dependent on that of man or as perceived by man in his own cosmology. For instance, at birth, the arrival of a baby-girl is resented in some families. They prefer that of a baby-boy, whom they often greet with excitement and herald with a seven-gun salute in some communities. The birth of a baby-girl, especially if she was preceded by one or two girls earlier, is greeted with resentment and disgust. From that early beginning in life, a little girl suffers some forms of hatred and discrimination for a reason she does not know - her fault being that she was born a girl in a world that is dominated by men. Well-articulated and constructed taboos and sanctions are built into the traditional religion to give validation to the rules that keep women perpetually in bondage and subjection. As each generation came up and accepted the sanctions as norms of the society, the oppression and prejudice against women became perpetuated and deeply integrated into the cultural life of the people.

In spite of this long established tradition of suppression, there is no generation of Africans that has not produced powerful women who lived above the status quo. Many had mobilised their women folk to rise against man-made rules in defence of women's right, or even the entire community when threatened by of neighbouring communities. Many women at one time or the other had emerged as Executive Queens or Ceremonial Queens. One is the type that ruled as both the political leader and the military commander of the people's army. On the other hand, a ceremonial queen is the wife of a king who by virtue of her position is respected by the people. Africa has produced many prophetesses, priestesses, female healers, military leaders, mediums, and business entrepreneurs at one time or the other. Such people played prominent roles in their societies, but unfortunately, their efforts had not been properly documented in human history and in many places were not followed up immediately

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<sup>2</sup> S. Leith-Ross [1939], *African Women: A Study of Igbo of Nigeria*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul., p. 45.

by powerful personages to maintain an unbroken record of continuity of women leadership. Nevertheless, women had their own means of seeking redress when their rights were trampled upon or when they felt hurt. But it must be understood that their rights were, in the first instance, what men approved for them. It is this limited scope of right defined by men for women that many intelligent women all through the ages have been fighting to eliminate or to correct. The women who fight against such injustices against women feel that they should be allowed to pursue their own career uninhibited by any human regulations. This is what feminist theorists argue that the relational behaviour identified by many to be female is probably understood as a method of expression designed by men for women<sup>3</sup>. Over a decade or so ago, two psychologists who specialised in gender studies came out with suggestions that the choice of rights for women by men had become a practice and a mechanism of social control of women for the purpose of excluding one gender from attaining equal access to the social Power Resources of the other<sup>4</sup>. Men had for long devised means to maintain the status quo by keeping women subordinate in domestic and maternal roles. This pattern of thought and action has been facing a serious challenge in the last decade or so especially from educated women and men who feel that women should no longer be held down. Practical attitude to women and gender is a factor of man's mental perception of the female gender. This perception is often fraught with ambiguity and incongruity at certain points and in certain communities. This, in other words, is to say that one can hardly conclude from the scanty ethnographic data that women are not a power to reckon with in some societies in the distant past or that all women were equally classified under one category.

There were valid evidences that women were accorded some measure of respect in many communities. Such roles and honour can hardly be understood when one considers the oppressive rules against

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<sup>3</sup> J.Hogg & M. Frank [eds. 1992] "Towards an Interpretation of Co-dependence and Contra-dependence", *Journal of Counselling Development*, Vol. 70, pp 271-375.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. R. Hare Mustin & J. Marecek.[1993], "The Meaning of Difference: Gender Theory, Postmodernism, and Psychology", *AM Psychl*, Vol. 43, no 6.

women in many other societies. For instance, agriculture was the main-stay of the economy in many traditional African societies. Land was the chief factor of production. As a society that was primarily religious, the agricultural life of the people was placed under the control and supervision of the Earth Goddess, a female deity ranked only second to the Supreme Deity in African pantheon. The Earth Goddess, [physically symbolised by the land surface] is the custodian of morality, family relationship; she is the fertility principle and the patron deity of agriculture. Her priests are among the strongest unifying factors among the Igbo of Nigeria, [one of the most powerful and dynamic ethnic groups in Africa, known for their shrewd spirit of enterprise and hard-work.]<sup>5</sup>. For a society [whose chief factor of production is the land], to place such an area of their life under the control of a female figure - the Earth Goddess, explains the unsung power and trust as well as respect which the Africans have for femininity. It shows indirect acceptance and recognition of the virtues and importance of womanhood. As a Fertility Principle, the Earth Goddess is responsible for the moral life of the family and acts as the custodian of societal morality. People flock to her shrine daily for her blessings and protection. Those who know the importance which Africans attach to their family relationships would often be questioning why and how such highly valued department of life should be placed under the control of a Female Deity if the society has a very low impression of femininity. This is one of the inexplicable paradoxes of African life. For a proud and domineering man to bow down before a female figure to plead for protection and other needs, is one of the subtle ways man acknowledges the inherent power in women. Often a man pleads before his wife or elder sister in times of need though he denies this fact. In his unguarded moments, man exhibits his true weakness and sexual inferiority before a woman - a fact he proudly tries to cover up in so many ways!

From the outstanding religious, economic and political position of the Earth Goddess, derives the political power of the Umuada [Umuokpu] in many societies. These are the married daughters of the

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<sup>5</sup> U.R.Onunwa [1992], *Femininity in African Cosmology*, Ibid., p.36.

community who from their matrimonial homes, exercise a lot of authority in their maiden homes. From their matrimonial homes, the Umuada, ostensibly acting through their leaders, exercise such moral and political powers in their fathers' homes which no one questions in the society<sup>6</sup>. They are often invited by their male siblings [or they can come on their own], to settle family or clan disputes which defy the order of the courts of the community elders or modern law courts. Their judgement is highly respected and obeyed even in cases that prove tough before modern law courts. They act as the last Court of Appeal in many cases of land disputes - a common feature in societies that are predominantly agrarian.

Francis A. Arinze has explained the revered position of African women as ritual and religious experts. The ritual-priestly role of women during family worship is an age-long tradition in many communities. Such female religious experts are called *Mater Familias*<sup>7</sup>. Women in both patrilineal and matrilineal societies, either as mothers or as elder sisters, held considerable authority and influence over their children and brothers. In certain circumstances, women have been noted as the breadwinners of their nuclear families. This is true in many polygamous relationships where each woman would work hard to train and feed her own children and collect some little financial and material support from her husband when it is available or when she is lucky to win the favour of the man whom she shares with her co-wives.

Although colonization and Christianity claim the exclusive credit of liberation African woman from the oppressive traditional rules and customs, it was in fact colonization that in a subtle way undermined the position of many titled African women who commanded respect and authority. It was Christianity that challenged the authority of female mediums - a position that gave women authority to challenge anyone irrespective of gender or status in society. Some of the mediums were sometimes called Queens in

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<sup>6</sup> E.C. Ilogu [1985], *Igbo Life and Thought*, Onitsha - Nigeria, Varsity Press, p.20.

<sup>7</sup> F.A. Arinze [1970], *Sacrifice in Igbo Religion*, Ibadan-Nigeria: Ibadan University Press p. 65.



many African societies. Royal women and many practitioners of traditional healing, divination and other forms of religious functions in society, had much to lose from the changes brought by the new social order<sup>8</sup>.

The present writer has elsewhere stated that although western education on the periphery, looks as if it were the chief agent that enhanced the positions of the African woman, it is a claim that should not be taken on its face value. Women and girls who were highly cherished in traditional societies as both sources of wealth and fertility-principle were hidden from the corruptive influence of western culture at the beginning of European contact with Africa. That was one of the reasons why girls were not allowed to go to school at the initial period of contact. The male children of the servants of the chiefs, sons of slaves, and children of hated wives, were the ones that were offered to the whiteman. It was when those who received western education began to occupy key positions in the new social order, and rose high in whiteman's social ranking that girls and children of chiefs who did not attend school at the beginning became greatly disadvantaged. The gap between them and those who received western education introduced by the missionaries and colonial administrators began to widen<sup>9</sup>. In other words, in spite of the obvious suppression of women in male dominated society, women had enhanced status in traditional societies. It must be stated that Women's Movements were not a brainchild of modern Feminist Movements in contemporary times. Such movements had been in Africa at different epochs of history in different forms with varied amount of influence and awareness on the part of modern scholarship. We could say with some measure of certainty that their scope has rather expanded in modern times. Such early leaders and agitators in Women's Movements are herein described as Activists while the modern academic and western oriented elitist feminists are the ones in Academy as already indicated in the early part of this

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<sup>8</sup> E. Isichie [1995], *A History of Christianity in Africa*, London: SPCK, p.241.

<sup>9</sup> See Onunwa [1988], "The Paradox of Power and Submission of Women in African Traditional Religion and Society" *Journal of Dharma*, Vol. 13, no. 1 p. 31-38.

work. This does not in any way suggest that modern feminist agitators are non-active in the practical demonstration and struggle for women's rights.

### 3 Early History Of Women Empowerment And Struggle For Equal Rights

History of the struggle for recognition of rights of women as persons is not a recent one as already stated. The identity of the woman according to the feminist manifesto should be based on her personality not on gender. This has long been in the minds of many early illiterate female activists who could not write down the philosophy and principles of their mission as fighters for the rights of women. Yet they knew what they were fighting for. What was implicit in those women's minds is explicit in works of modern feminists who now use their pen as part of their weapons of war against the unjust treatment of women in many societies. The modern feminists are making their views now known to the world through their writings and this is one of the privileges which western education has added to the existing opportunities of women to fight for their rights. African women, in their several generations, had not been docile. Their methods of response and reaction against oppressive regimes and institutions had been changing with time. In traditional societies when there was no knowledge of reading and writing, women had their own method of protesting against any draconian laws against them. They could either invoke the wrath of powerful goddesses and female ancestors, or organise a peaceful march round the shrines and town squares for several days or flee en masse to another neighbouring village for refuge, thus abandoning their children and domestic chores for their husbands who are ill-trained for such a delicate routine.

The present writer's grandmother was one of the most powerful African women who challenged the colonial government of her day. She was born in a royal family where political activism was a part of daily routine. She got married into another ruling family where leadership roles and political activism was seen as a vocation. She was one the leaders on the Women's War of 1929 against British Colonial Administration in Nigeria. The First World War brought a

serious economic depression to the colonies. European control of market prices as well as the rumour of taxation of village women, agitated the minds of women and escalated a wide range of destructive uprisings which had a long time effect on the policies of the colonial government. The 1929 Women's War was started by a group of Igbo women who spontaneously mobilised others from many other ethnic groups and within a space of few days spread throughout the whole region. It was a turn in reaction to events in the procedure of administration which throughout Africa sought spokesmen and headmen but never spokeswomen and headwomen<sup>10</sup>. This was a full-fledged war that shook the colonial administration with the effect that reforms in the system of Native Administration became not only expedient but also imperative.

Much earlier than 1929, we also have a record of the slow conversion over many decades of a Lozi Queen, Kanjogera, to Christianity. She became the Rwandan Queen Mother in 1889. She was, prior to her conversion to Christianity, impeccably hostile to the Europeans but by late 1920s, she was able to make royal Rwandan women leading converts in their communities. She used her overbearing personality to bring other women to believe in the Christian teaching. This was one of the many serious encounters led by women against either foreign or local invaders of an African community. Such protests and revolutionary movements led by influential women were common in different parts of Africa. The organisers of those early Women's Protests against the local oppressive leadership of European colonial administrators and missionaries were stark illiterates judging by the standard of western education. But they could mobilize others into action. That they could neither read nor write did not imply that they did not know their rights. What happened was that only very few charismatic women leaders could take the risk by challenging the oppressive systems of the society of their time. Even in contemporary time,

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<sup>10</sup> J.C. Onwuteaka [1965], "The Aba Riot of 1929 and Its Relation to Indirect Rule", *Nigerian Journal of Economic Studies*, pp 278-289. Cf. also Onunwa [1995], "Gender and Religious Protests", *International Journal of Religion and Philosophy*, Vol 1, no 2, pp 40-50.

when a considerable number of women are well-educated, the awareness and zeal to challenge the status quo is still limited to a few who have the strength. It is encouraging that the modern feminist has picked up the gauntlet thrown to her by her grandmothers and elder sisters who in their own time led strong protests against what they considered oppressive to them. It must be stated that modern African womanhood is not pursuing the rights of women in an extreme radical anti-men and anti-family fashion of some of the groups in some parts of Europe and the United States.

Lisa Isherwood has recently tried to explain what the feminist movements are struggling to achieve in contemporary time. According to her, the feminist movement strives to give women back to themselves; that is to awaken women to their oppression and liberate them to make choices free from the stereotypes and societal restriction<sup>11</sup>. It is the realisation of the rich legacy of Activist illiterate women in history that modern highly academic African women, both secular feminist and feminist theologian, as well as other female bodies who belonged to no groups, have decided to pull their resources together in their struggle for the rights of women. The illiterate market women who have the awareness and the tenacity to stand up and counted have been invited by the elitist women in the corridors of power [who dine and wine with their male counterpart] to join them in the fight for the rights of women. They would mount a frontal attack from several sectors and pull down all opposition and inhibition against the progress of womanhood. This coming together has obviously bridged the gap between various classes of African womanhood.

The Fourth World Conference on women in Beijing China, in 1995 was one of the most formidable gatherings of women of all walks of life and a true reunion of both the illiterate activist women and the elitist sophisticated and westernised women. It really challenged the women in ivory towers of academia, professions, commerce and industry to realise the need for combined efforts with

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<sup>11</sup> Lisa Isherwood [1997], "Thinking about Imago Dei", *Feminist Theology*, no. 15, p.73.

the rural women at the grassroots of community life. Earlier than that, several programmes and projects like Better Life for Rural Women, Family Support, etc., under the auspices of several Women Organisations had been going on in different parts of Africa but had not been carried out with genuine spirit of comradeship among women. Rallies were organised by women's organisations in different countries on special days like the International Women's Day, the Annunciation of Blessed Virgin Mary, the Marian Year, the Madonna Club Day, Club Feminique Week, etc. At such gatherings, some powerful and gifted women orators are called upon to address the crowd. Those who could not speak in any official language of the country especially English or French would be asked to speak in vernacular with many interpreters around.

The modern academic women had used their vantage position in academia to enhance the opportunities of other local women. Violence against womanhood especially wife-battering is being challenged by many women organisation through legal means. It was the great grand mothers of yesteryear who started what those in academia are pursuing now in their own way with all the resources at their disposal. Considering her limited resources which included lack of effective and fast means of communication and transport, inability to read and write, unwillingness of most women to rise, the traditional old female Activist was able to shake the traditional power structure that threatened to muzzle her. The coming together of both the rural and the urban elitist female fighters has built strong bridges across activism and academy in our own time and the result is overwhelming and encouraging.

#### **4 The New African Womanhood**

Although illiteracy, poverty and economic hardship still plague a large percentage of women in Africa, a reasonable breakthrough into the modern scheme of things has been made. At least violence against women in the form of wife battering has stopped, or if any one is caught doing it, severe punishment is given to the culprit. Women can now be sure that they can argue out their points with their husbands without any reprisal. Men do not find it easy these days to lift up their hand against women for fear of the legal

implications. Many women today live in the cream of society and are found at the corridors of power in many countries. We do not have the statistics, but when we compare the level of the number of women who are ready to stand up to be counted in today's world, we may say without fear of contradiction that African womanhood has come a long way in her search for recognition and equal rights.

Interviews with some retired headmistresses of schools, nurses, midwives, lady politicians, clerks, senior chefs, and some leaders in their rural communities who worked in the early 1960s and 1970s has confirmed positive improvement in the status of women both in the home and in public offices. There is a positive response to the clarion call to Freedom and Human Rights.

Women Organisations in different parts of Africa, through public lectures, rallies, workshops and seminars have fought against child-marriage and violence against women, excessive bride price and bride-wealth and some other local forms of exploitation of women like the practice of clitoridectomy. Since the new index of the assessment of progress in society is the level of attainment of western education, many African women have carried out large scale crusades to enlighten parents, and young girls as well, of the importance of this unique opportunity. There is a continuous campaign going on to make sure that no girl is denied the opportunity to receive the level of education she is capable of. Special scholarship programmes are set up by different organisations to see that this programme does not collapse. Adult education and vocational training centres are established at different parts of the country, especially in Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, for women and single mothers who missed the opportunity of formal education. Consequently, the number of local women who can now read and write is increasing. Many of them can sign their names and signatures at the banks and can even write letters in their vernacular.

In the last few years, there is a steady drop in the number of boys in school enrolment and a steady increase in the number of girls. The boys prefer working and making money early in life while the girls continue to study even up to the university level. Some of the tertiary institutions in Africa have more female students than

male. This is particularly true of the situation in Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria and the Ivory Coast<sup>12</sup>. It is no longer a favour to offer an appointment to a girl in a highly competitive office of a company because many of them are qualified for such top posts and often beat the boys during the interview for employment. Job-reservations, which confined many women to such professions like teaching, nursing, and domestic science, are no longer tenable. Those professions which used to be the exclusive reserve of men have now been thrown open to women. There are many women in different sections of the armed forces, engineering, architecture, law, medicine, accountancy, etc. The ordained ministry of some Protestant Churches have got highly placed women in the hierarchy of Orders.

The insatiable desire to have male children in many Africans has started to dwindle since they have seen that girls who were well trained and disciplined can do even better than boys in terms of taking family responsibility. There is now a common slogan—whatever a man can do, a woman can also do, even better! This shows a gradual but steady rise in female profile in contemporary Africa.

In the field of sports, talented female athletes have won many laurels. The number of African women climbing the corporate ladder is rising tremendously. Consequently, the financial income gap with men which was the order in the colonial era in the 1940s, and post colonial periods of the 1960s and 1970s, has dramatically closed up. The number of women executives in banks, corporate and multinational companies in different parts of Africa has risen since the past few years. A report published by the African Development Bank and the Economic Division of Economic Community of West African States confirms this fact.

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<sup>12</sup> In a survey carried out in the West African sub region between 1992 and 1995, it was discovered that school enrolment has more girls than boys in Ghana, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Guinea and Sierra Leone. Consequently, the age of marriage for girls is risen from between 18 and 20 to between 25 and 30.

Many African women leaders and feminists still love to be others and cherish it as a sacred duty. Their rising profile, however, in many areas of life has threatened some fearful men who had been basking in the false belief of man's superiority over woman whose place is the kitchen and primary duty procreation. One encouraging factor of the dignity of African womanhood is the importance she attaches to marriage and stability of the home. Divorce is still rare and respect for husband is observed among many families where the woman earns bigger salary than her husband. Though single mothers still have their rights and respect, it is not recommended as the ideal of African family life. A good number of people still frown at it, especially among those Churches with strong ethical emphasis on the sanctity of marriage. Many distinguished men in society have been supporting the type of responsible and positive feminism espoused by many enlightened African feminist organisations which in spite of the elevated status of their members, still uphold the sanctity of family life and mutual love between a man and his wife. Some modern secular and theological feminists tend to over emphasize the issue of gender equality and independence to the extent that they resort to defend some abnormal and deviant sexual practices like lesbianism, homosexuality, etc. which psychologists, not to talk of Christian morals, see as deviation from the normal way of life ordained by God for humans. Feminist struggle for the rights of women should not be used as an escape route for a woman, who either by her own choice or by accident missed the bliss of strong family life, to campaign for societal approval of abnormal practices.

It is now obvious that in marriage a girl's view is not only sought but also respected and supported by parents and brothers when they know that she is right and sure of her stand. The early missionaries, for instance, on entering some parts of Africa, condemned bride-wealth. A respected dignitary from Ganda people of Uganda once pointed out that a girl is not forced to go against her wish, but she would like to see how much the man cared for her. There was also a reasonable prospect of her being taken good care of



when she had been obtained with some cost to the man<sup>13</sup>. This view is not particularly true in all African societies and even in all Ganda families. The Nyakusa, however, made similar points when one lady tried to explain the type of tension which the differences in the opinions and methods of traditional and Christian courtship practices generated. One insisted that

The girl had power to refuse no one ever compelled her to agree, even though the man has made cattle. But the custom of wooing in secret first, before a man has been to the father began among the Christians... Pagan fathers still object saying 'we will not eat the cattle properly'<sup>14</sup>.

Monica Wilson rightly observed that Christian presence in many African societies changed the traditional methods of wooing girls in such a tremendous way that it almost shook the foundation of traditional family structure. The idea that today's African girl has a say in her marriage plans is a veritable mark of improvement and achievement on the part of African womanhood. It must be acknowledged that those African women who can make such bold claims and protested against the imposition of polygamous relationship on a young girl were empowered by the support of the Church. Young people often found marriage partners in Church fellowships and circles, by bypassing the elders and their control. In some ways, Christianity has empowered women. There are strong women organisations in many Mission Churches and African Initiated Churches [A.I.C.]. Some Churches have become more

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<sup>13</sup> M.L.Pirouet [1982], "Women Missionaries of the C.M.S. in Uganda 1896-1920" in T. Christensen and W.R. Hutchinson [eds.], *Missionary Ideologies in the Imperialist Era, 1880-1920*, Aros, Aarhus, p.237.

<sup>14</sup> M. Wilson [1971], *Rituals of Kinship*, Cambridge: CUP. p. 251.

aware of gender issues primarily because it is perceived as a dimension of modernity. But it is not true in its entirety. In some ways, the Christian form of monogamous marriage has given African women fewer rights and freedom than they had in the distant past. While I was working in Tanzania in the early 1990s, I was challenged by a well-educated Reverend Sister who had spent over thirty years in a Catholic convent. She accused me of being ignorant of the feelings of some top African Christian ladies living in monogamous marriages. She quoted to me what a prominent Roman Catholic lay woman once expressed:

In Africa, the woman as a human being is often puzzled and even confused by Christianity as presented to her. What is puzzling is not the Bible as a whole... the problem is the set up of the Churches as brought to Africa. The woman often find herself a second or if not a third class citizen in the Church<sup>15</sup>.

The mature and experienced Religious who had met with many women with family problems confirmed that women in the Church have suffered a lot of discrimination and suppression. She cited the example of ordination of women, which the Catholic Church has consistently resisted, but is now enjoyed by many frontline Protestant Churches like the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania. In spite of the number of years of service in her Order, the Sister felt abandoned in her old age and felt she had wasted the chance of being a mother or a priest because of the oppressive laws made by men in the Church.

## 5 Discussions And Analysis

Although African women are coming up the ladder social hierarchy, their inhibition in the world that is purely patriarchal dated far back into the history of human existence on earth and is difficult to be completely eradicated. Often many western scholars,

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted by Sr. Monica from a statement made by Bernadette Jumambi, a one-time Member of Parliament in Tanzania, and Head of Tanzania Union of Catholic Women made in Reflections on the Position of African Women in K. Banda, *Pro Mundi: Vita, Africa Disaster*, Vol.33, no.2, 1988 pp.15-16.

particularly Christian missionaries who worked in Africa, wrote home exaggerating what they described as the awful plight of the social conditions of women in Africa. Most of the time they concluded that African womanhood has suffered the worst form of suppression in the world. Discrimination against women is a global phenomenon and although African women's condition is not the best of all, it cannot be said to be the worst. We know places where, hitherto, women are subjected to series of humiliating treatment in spite of the United Nations declaration of the Rights of Women. The condition of women in western societies is in some cases not much better.

Stereotyped thinking among men of their emotional, intellectual and spiritual superiority over women dated far back into history to the origin of human species. It is often validated with religious myths and etiological tales. Recognition accorded to the informal distinction between men and women enhanced the sex bound division of labour prevalent in industrialised nations as well as developing countries. It was Aristotle who in his *Politics* asserted in the 5th century BCE that biologically the world is a hierarchy composed of ruling and ruled elements, and that women fit adequately by nature into the second category<sup>16</sup>.

Lisa Isherwood, one of the most balanced modern feminist theologians, has vehemently criticised this retrogressive and archaic view of Aristotle which like most other aspects of Greek philosophy influenced the early Christian thinking and doctrine. Fathers of the Church who imbibed both Greek and Jewish ideas had no high opinion of womanhood. According to Lisa, the Fathers of the Church grasped the opportunity that Genesis gave them and interpreted women's bodies as the gateway to the devil. Augustine, for instance, believed that all women were whores and had to be controlled<sup>17</sup>. Thomas Aquinas said that God made women solely to reproduce

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<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, [1949], *Politics*. Book I, London: O.U.P. [Reprint], p.182ff.

<sup>17</sup> K. Power [1995], *Veiled Desire: Augustine's Writings on Women*, London: Darton, Longmans & Todd, quoted by Lisa Isherwood in *Feminist Theology*, no.15 (1997), p.74.

since men needed company of other humans in order to rise to spiritual heights<sup>18</sup>. Jerome felt that women led men into sin. So he [Jerome] laid down guidelines for women's dress and ways of action<sup>19</sup>. Jerome's principal aim was to neutralise the destructive power of women's bodies. According to Lisa Isherwood, the early Church Fathers' opposition to women and their anti-female theological stance compelled them to sanitise the Mother of Jesus by declaring her a perpetual virgin<sup>20</sup>. Whether we believe it or not is immaterial, because God has done what he intended in history, and its validity does not depend on our belief or unbelief. But we run into a crisis of misinterpreting every use of sex ordained by God as if it is evil. We do not do God any honour by such thought. The view of those early Fathers of the Church is still held in many circles among Catholic and main line Protestant scholars and theologians. The Bible does not say that sex given to humans by God is evil, or to destroy its use makes one equal to God immediately. Such a view is an indirect way to endorse the myth that human sexuality is basically evil. Many women who were later declared Saints by the Church had been advised by their male spiritual directors to impose all kinds of mutilations upon themselves. Those women who hurt themselves so badly were often hailed as having achieved the necessary state of sanctity<sup>21</sup>. Unfortunately, this obnoxious legacy of the Fathers lives on in both Catholic and Protestant theology in some diverse ways. The Church still believes [though not openly] that the only or primary justification for the existence of women was procreation. Augustine believed that sex was rational before the fall, but afterwards, people lost their reason and could become beasts<sup>22</sup>. In the case of the Catholic Church, it is the celibate clergy and [probably unmarried nuns?] who truly perpetuate the ideas of

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18 K. Armstrong [1987], *The Gospel According to Women*, London: Pan, p. 84.

19 Armstrong [1987], *Ibid.*, p. 57-61.

20 Lisa Isherwood, *Ibid.*, p.75.

21 Lisa Isherwood, *op.cit.*, p.75.

22 K.Power, *Ibid.*, p.162.

Augustine and seek to apply them to the Universal Church<sup>23</sup>. Association with women [including those in the Holy Orders] is absolutely a pollution or at best a second level of spirituality which stands the chance of being saved or condemned in the end depending on what God decides to do. This view is implicit in the teaching of the Church but for fear of losing members, has carefully shielded it. That is why Ordination of women is still something people cannot image when in traditional society, which they consider primitive and where women were discriminated against, such high ritual office was given to women who had the vocation, and there were and still are priestesses of some popular deities. Could it be only in Christianity that women lack vocation for Priesthood?

Two deductions can be made from the views of the Church Fathers on women: one is that although many still believe that Christianity has elevated the status of women, one must be careful and slow in making such an unqualified assertion. We need to take that view with a pinch of salt. Secondly, it is wrong to assume that it was only in the Third World that women suffered and still suffer humiliation and discrimination, sexual apartheid and violence.

In the United States, for instance, women have never had it all that easy; but the Church does not condemn the government for trampling on the rights of women. The place of women vis-à-vis their male counterparts in employment and reward for work done is nothing but sheer suppression. Ann D. Wood and C. Barker-Benfield, two outstanding psychologists, have revealed that the neglect of women's health has a long history in medical sciences. Women's health-care has always mirrored a male-dominated world<sup>24</sup>. Stereotypic views regarding female gender roles persist and continue to exert a powerful influence on the formation of the female personality in today's America. When will a woman become the President of the United States?

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<sup>23</sup> Lisa Isherwood, *Op.cit.*, p.76.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Ann D. Wood [1973], "The Fashionable Disease: Women's Complaints and Their Treatment in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 4, pp. 25-42.

Working women continue to be seen in the United States as less family-oriented, more selfish and less sensitive than women who work solely within the home. Discrimination is a major problem faced by women in jobs often manifested in the tendency to underrate and under-reward them compared with men with identical credentials<sup>25</sup>.

Despite the noise made daily by civilised western countries on Human Rights and equal opportunity, sexual abuse of women, discrimination in job placement and different salary scale for women still exist. For instance, in the United States, as late as 1992, the average man still earned more than his female counterpart at every level of education. The greatest disparity existed for women with professional degrees.

Although African women suffered many forms of discrimination in the past as far as employment and holding top positions in public service was concerned, there is no evidence yet known to the present writer, of disparity in salary structure. Gender issue in Africa is no longer a factor in deciding workers' benefits at places of work. Promotions and appointments to top positions are no longer determined by gender but by qualification, hard work and experience.

## 6 Summary And Conclusion

Africa had produced outstanding female leaders of immense stature. African societies, patriarchal as they are, have never failed to provide women with opportunities to defend themselves and their rights when they felt hurt. The advent of colonialism with all its attendant problems in Africa, resulted in the emergence of a sordid state of affairs for all people in the colonies. Women, however, took the brunt of the distortions brought by the new order. For instance, the introduction of western education [on face value] seemed to have lifted the status of the women at the beginning. Then unfortunately, it was one of the factors used by the oppressors of women to trample

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<sup>25</sup> Florence Denmark, et. al. [eds] [1996], "Women, Work and Family: Mental Issues", *Women and Mental Health*, Vol. 789, p 105.

them down. As already indicated, women were not exposed to the opportunity of western education early enough and this widened the existing gap when it became the index of rising high in the new order introduced by the colonial administration.

Traditionally, men are brought up to think of women as their social inferior in every aspect of life. Women, on the other hand, were taught not only to be submissive but also to accept their second rate position given to them in society. The Churches seemed to have at times sanctioned indirectly this standard for women because they were encouraged to be submissive and obedient to their husbands as befitting to all godly matrons. Therefore, given that image of passive and submissive womanhood, it has become somewhat radical, obnoxious and contrary to the Church's noble picture.

The struggle for a positive self-identity [which the illiterate rural women began in the distant past and followed up in recent times by their educated counterparts] has become a controversial issue in many communities that would otherwise want to maintain the status quo. The co-operation between the illiterate but active women and the educated and professional women in this struggle has become phenomenal and auspicious to the untiring efforts of women to establish their self-esteem and raise their profile. That purpose of trying to raise their profile is being achieved in a systematic and steady manner.

Although no African woman has become the President or Prime Minister of her country, just like what has happened in India and Pakistan, the profile of women in politics is rising just as fast and high as it is in other areas of life previously dominated by men. The new experience is a result of multi-factorial causation. The Church has often [and erroneously too] taken the credit alone. Although we shall not forget some of her positive roles, many indigenous African scholars and nationalists, especially the women among them, would give the Church a hard knock on the head of for some of her policies of indoctrination of submission, which tended to weaken the zeal and enthusiasm of some women in their radical crusades for the rights of women.

Two principal factors have, however, made some outstanding contributions to the success of women in their struggle to improve their lot. One is the co-operation between the various classes of women. A solid bridge has been built across activism and the academy. Secondly, the awareness of the awful plight of women and the desire for upward movement should be viewed from the perspective of the general trend of the modern global phenomenon of social change. The Church and other agencies interested in the welfare of women in particular and humanity in general, played their own part. The empowerment of women for the good of society is an on-going and continuous phenomenon and all hands must be on deck to see it succeed. It is a programme that will be helpful to the entire human society and should not be seen as a gender issue per se but as a human affair. Continua aluta!