

THE CHALLENGE OF CHRISTIAN FEMINISM IN URHOBOLAND

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Abstract

The emergence of feminism and the women's empowerment movement has brought to the mainstream the understanding that women have been oppressed and denied some fundamental basic rights in almost all societies. Factors that have contributed to discrimination against women include literal and fundamentalist interpretations of religious texts, the existence of patriarchy, stereotyped gender roles, lack of adequate women-to-women solidarity, etc. The phenomenon of discrimination against women is present in Urhoboland as in other societies. While some may claim what is done against women does not amount to discrimination, the fact remains that women are denied some rights because of their sex and identity as women. This paper argues that the values of Christian feminism should be applied to culture and society in Urhoboland. It shows that in light of patriarchy and other factors, Christian feminism will face challenges in its application in Urhoboland. Through critical analytic and hermeneutics methods the paper argues that the principles of Christian feminism should be used to critique Urhobo culture. The paper finds that there is a lack of gender equality in Urhoboland. It concludes that if the values of Christian feminism are applied in Urhoboland, it will help to create a more egalitarian society in Urhoboland.

Keywords: Christian, feminism, *Urhobo*, women, patriarchy.

Introduction

The present writers are advocates of authentic forms of feminism. The current motivation to do this paper was spurred by the symposium organized by the Urhobo Historical Society (UHS), and Urhobo Studies Association, Delta State University, Abraka on “The Place of the Urhobo Women in the Emergence of Modern Urhobo Nation” held on Thursday, 12th October 2023 at UHS Headquarters, Okpara Inland in honour of late Dr (Mrs) Regina Otite. The paper is also inspired by Otite (2021) who argues for the emancipation of women in her book, *The Urhobo Woman*. At that symposium, one of the present authors made a contribution remarking that most people attending the event are Christians and that people should read the bible from the perspective of Jesus Christ who stood for the worth and wellbeing of women, and that people should not pick passages from the bible and use them to subjugate women. The high point of Christianity is Christ and the Christian story must be read from Christ's perspective, not simply from a Pauline, Petrine, or any other perspective. Those who read the bible should read it from the

perspective of Christ, the new lawgiver, and saviour of the human condition. The following statements from the Holy See (1994) that the gospels are the heart of the scriptures, that the Old Testament does contain matters that are imperfect and provisional, and that Christ is the center of God's plan should guide the reading and study of the bible. The Christian scriptures and traditions should never be used to support discrimination against women.

The above is the pivot for this paper. From the dawn of human history till date, women have gravely suffered from being marginalized, suppressed, oppressed, sidelined, abused, and relegated to the background in many cultures and societies. In many cultures, it has been perceived that they are not to be heard, excluded from the council of elders, and are often blamed for the death of their husbands. They are often accused of infidelity when there is difficulty in child-bearing. Rousseau (1979) opined that women are created to meet the needs of men and don't deserve to be educated for any other purposes. Hegel (1991) saw men as dominant and women are to be restricted to the domestic and family arena. Aristotle (2012) wrote that women are inferior to men and men should rule over them. The viewpoint that women are inferior, weak, to be subjugated, and even denied some basic rights predominate all through history. Space will not permit examining all the texts that deal with this. The focus here will be on the Judeo-Christian texts. While the Christian gospel and the Christ of the gospel preached and lived a liberating life that fosters the dignity and worth of women, there are many in the Judeo-Christian tradition who pick texts out of their so-cultural historical context to argue for the subjugation of women and deprivation of their fundamental human rights.

Unfortunately, the issue of women's pain and suffering arising from patriarchal beliefs and practices can also be found in Urhobo culture. What Kolawole (2013) writes of the expectation of women in traditional societies applies also to Urhobo culture,

A woman's primary duty as from puberty was to wait for a suitor in marriage and produce a male heir for her husband. She was also expected to address her biological peculiarities such as menstruation, painful child labour, nurturing infants, and bearing menopause. Some of the features above even trigger a higher degree of discrimination or repression against her... (p.13).

While there are many good and liberating aspects that support the well-being of women in Urhobo culture, there are equally aspects that impede their rapid socio-cultural and politico-economic advancement. The concern of this paper is how to mitigate the aspects of the culture that impede women's progress. The paper will use critical hermeneutics, and analytic and sociological methods to examine the concerns of the paper. The procedure here will be to analyze the basic concepts and look at the socio-cultural situation of women in Urhobo culture and the demands of Christian feminism. The paper will also interrogate Christian feminism and bring it into dialogue with Urhobo tenets and practices on women. After this has been done, it will propose the way forward in upholding women's rights and progress. The paper will not examine forms of feminism nor give a history of feminism. It will suffice to focus on Christian feminism.

Analysis of Concepts

In order to understand Christian feminism, it is important to understand feminism. Ikeke (2021a) cites Johari: "... feminists are against the treatment of women as means of exchange, and they also argue against gender inequality and injustice. When it comes to the exercise of power and decision-making in society, women are often in a disadvantaged position" (p.2). Eastern Kentucky University (n.d) writes that:

Feminism is an interdisciplinary approach to issues of equality and equity based on gender, gender expression, gender identity, sex, and sexuality as understood through social theories and political activism. Historically, feminism has evolved from the critical examination of inequality between the sexes to a more nuanced focus on the social and performative constructions of gender and sexuality (p.1).

Feminism is about women overcoming all social, cultural, economic, political, religious, and ideological hindrances and obstacles that deny them their worth and dignity as human beings. Feminism in its pure essence is not a struggle or fight against men but against beliefs, ideologies, practices, and structures that deny them of their humanity and personhood. It is painful to note that there was a time in history when women were not allowed to vote, could not be elected into political positions, were deprived of formal education, and were denied playing football and other sports. There are still countries today where women are not allowed to drive a car or own land and are denied other basic rights.

What then is Christian feminism? The term Christian relates to the beliefs and practices that came from the followers of Christ. It is in the Acts of the Apostles in the early church in Acts 11:26 that the followers of Christ were first called Christians. Today the term is inclusive of the religion that merged from his life and ministry (Christianity), the institutions and heritage that arise from that Christianity, etc. Macy (2007) says that "Christianity can be understood as a family of faith traditions united in their monotheism and in their belief in the central role of Jesus of Nazareth in redemption" (p. 232). Heeren (2021) writes that Christian feminism which is a softer form of feminism advocates for the equality of women and men in the moral, social, spiritual, and leadership spheres calling for the recognition of the moral and spiritual abilities of women in society and in the church; and Christian feminists are also concerned about reproductive rights, women ordination and the need for use of gender-neutral pronouns in the bible. Christian feminism is feminism rooted in Christian beliefs and practices. It draws on the bible, the message of Christ, and other Christian sources to argue for the radical equality of women and men, affirm their worth and value and shun all forms of discrimination against women. What some women may perceive as discrimination can be subjected to debate, for instance, so-called reproductive rights. The rights of the unborn child to life should not be ignored.

This paper is essentially concerned with the situation and plight of the Urhobo women in Urhoboland and beyond in the light of Christian feminism. It is imperative then to also define who is the Urhobo woman, and Urhoboland. Otite (2021) defines the Urhobo

woman as a woman whose father or mother is Urhobo and also possibly enculturated and socialized as such. A woman is an adult human being of the female sex. The notion of who is an Urhobo woman should also include women from other ethnicities who are married to Urhobo men. The paper is concerned with the situation of Urhobo women whether in the ancestral homeland or in the diaspora. Often Urhobo women in the diaspora are also affected by the beliefs and practices coming from Urhoboland. For the avoidance of doubt, the Urhobo people are the largest ethnic group in Delta State in Niger. They live mainly in the western part of the Niger Delta.

The Socio-Cultural Situation of Women in Urhoboland

What is the situation of the Urhobo woman and by extension other women who live in Urhoboland and beyond? The reality is that culture is dynamic. What is obtainable about the status of the Urhobo woman many years back may not necessarily be what is seen today. But by and large, there are many socio-cultural beliefs and practices regarding women that are still predominant in some places in Urhoboland today. Erhiurhoro (2020) writes that: "Gender inequality is a global social disorder, that is affecting many countries around the world today. This is most pronounced in African societies, including Nigeria and Urhobo land" (par. 1). In terms of beliefs, it is still generally held that women are subservient and should be subordinated to men almost in all spheres of life. In recent research conducted by this present writer regarding the role of elders in conflict resolution among Urhobo people of the Olomu kingdom, it was discovered that women's experiences and voices were generally not considered in decision-making in the governance of the communities as they are not among the council of elders. Their opinion was only sought, if need be, not statutorily. Women meet in their women's group where they settle disputes and make decisions that affect them, they don't meet jointly with men. It is a privilege for women to be invited to the men's council of elders. It is not a right.

In terms of leadership, it is men who most often occupy leadership positions. There is the subtle belief that women are not as capable as men. Erhiurhoro (2020) writes that the Urhobo people are patrilineal and so descent is traced along the male line; maternal children (*emo-emeté*) are discriminated against, and none of the 24 Urhobo kingdoms is headed by a woman. From 1948 that the Urhobo Progress Union was founded only men have been presidents-general, all the presidents and chairmen of communities are men, a woman have not been made an *Okpako-Orere*, no woman can be considered *Owara* (family heir apparent, and women groups are secondary and must pay total allegiance to the men group. From research conducted in 2023 in Olomu kingdom, this researcher realized that no woman can be the spokesman of the town or community. A woman is not allowed to break kola nuts. Still on leadership, Erhiurhoro (2020) notes that since the creation of Delta State in 1991, no woman has been the governor, in the Local Government Areas in Urhoboland only one local government has had a woman as "chairman" and most of the positions at local, state and national levels are occupied by men. It is as if women are not capable enough to govern and lead.

Another area in which Urhobo women have suffered from discrimination is in education. The girl-child is seen as another man's child. Some parents refuse to send their girl-child

to school claiming that after training her she will now be married and belong to another man; she will now answer another man's name. It is true that this situation has greatly changed. There are now many girl-children who are in schools both primary and secondary, and even university. But there are still parents who believe that there is no need to educate the girl-child. Onoriode (n.d) states that in times of financial difficulty in the family, it is the girl-child who is withdrawn from school for her male counterpart to continue and in places like Jesse, Mosogar, Oviri-Okpe, and Ovwori she is given into marriage. Otite (2021) rightly notes: "The preferences given to boys are gradually changing as both boys and girls are now getting equally educated to render services and meet new needs of the parents, family, family, and community" (p. 8).

Language and speech are other discriminatory ways that women have been subdued. Women in Urhoboland are described with various adjectives and terms that demean them. There is the notion of calling married women housewives (*Ajeuweyin*). This researcher has often queried that a house does not have a wife. Originally the term *Ajeuweyin* seemed to have been a sign of respect and a way of distinguishing a married woman from a single woman. But unfortunately, some now use it to mean that married women should be restricted to house chores and duties. It is as if her only function is to take care of the house and breed children. When a woman is striving to enter into arenas like politics, social life, education, etc she is often reminded that she is a housewife, her chores are at home and her duty is to take care of the home. Nothing wrong with taking care of the home, but this should not be used to restrict women who are dexterous to enter politics and public life. One of the two present writers has also seen some Urhobo women calling their husbands, "Imasa." This is a corruption of the word, "Master." This concept of "Imasa" here has colonial undertones when people call the colonialists, colonial masters. From the biblical perspective, Jesus rightly affirmed that there is only one master and he is in heaven. Because of the limitation of human language even when words are used to designate positions to respect those positions, the paradigm of servant-leadership that Jesus established should never be forgotten. The husband is a servant-leader, not a Master or Lord.

Women are allowed to be easily insulted and talked down by men but a woman dare not respond to her husband. The violence against women in Urhobo culture is horrific. The woman can be beaten and the man is not reprimanded rather the woman is blamed for infuriating the man. In Urhoboland a childless woman or a woman without male children is seen as a problem. This researcher has seen cases of people who even at the advanced age of 55 and above keep trying to get a male child no matter the risk to their lives. There are Urhobo men who beat their wives mercilessly and even when some men err, they never accept their faults. Some always see the women as at fault. All these create the idea that women are inferior and of lesser status.

There are many other cultural practices that demean women such as female genital mutilation, abuse of childless women, etc. On the abuse of childless women, Ikeke (2021b) writes that:

One of the major challenges confronting marriages and families in Africa

from the past to the present is the issue of barrenness or childlessness. Childlessness was often blamed on the woman, even though at times it may arise from the medical conditions of a man. African traditional culture had great value for children and childless marriage was seen as cursed and the woman in particular was even labelled a “man” or a witch. The woman is often verbally abused, and physical violence was meted on her. The marriage is often made unbearable and uncomfortable for the woman by the man

Despite the discrimination that women suffered in Urhobo culture, they were great contributors to the survival of the Urhobo nation and society. They were equally regarded to some degree in some spheres of life. Egbedi (2022) while noting that: “In Urhobo culture, men are naturally privileged through inheritance, the headship of their families and communities” (p. 29), nonetheless argues that women played prominent roles and these women include Chief Idiarhevwe (Oniemo of Ughelli), Princess Irivwidide of Ughelli Kingdom, Madam Udu, Orogun, Ovieya of Ughelli, Queen Ezezi of Okpe kingdom and Chief Janet Omotogor Ibru. While not disputing the role that these women and others would have played, the reality is that there are few exceptions to the general treatment of women in Urhoboland. Egbedi (2022) concludes her paper by asserting that: “Urhobo women should be given more opportunities to actualize their purpose in creation as complements and not subordinate to me” (p. 300). A statement like that is a testimony to the fact that women are missing many opportunities to live out their authentic selves because of how they are generally treated.

In order not to detract from the focus of this paper, the achievements of *Urbobo* women can be the concern of future research. Now what is said about the situation in *Urhoboland* is not static. Some communities and persons have transformed their beliefs and improved their practices more than others. There are persons who from their enlightened beliefs do not necessarily follow the customs of their localities that inhibit women. This fact is corroborated by Otite (2021) who opines that social changes are taking place in *Urhoboland* and that *Urhobo* needs to respond to modern needs. It is precisely to encourage more transformation for better treatment of women and for them to have more opportunities like their male counterparts that this paper is written. It is not written to condemn the *Urhobo* culture or men. It is written to critique structures and practices that limit women.

Foundations for the Demands of Christian Feminism

The Christian story is rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition coming from the biblical and ecclesial accounts. No Christian theology can be done without reading the bible and also looking at Christian history. With regard to the bible, it is important that though the bible is inspired by God, it also contains human actuality and reflects the cultures in which it was written. Human beings are sociological and cultural beings. They are influenced by their environment. Buchi (2020) argues that:

The Bible did not invent patriarchy, but it only expresses the prevalent state of male dominance in those times. I mean, even though the Bible was

written by men on inspiration from God, male dominance was largely sold through that age's culture, which was highly patriarchal. If the Bible were to be rewritten in our time, there'd be a distinctive difference in traditional gender nuances, as we humans have evolved and women's inclusion in virtually every part of society is fast gaining a foothold (par. 2).

The point is that it is going to the extreme and fundamentally fanatical to literally take all biblical passages without considering their situational historic origin and context and use them to promote beliefs and practices such as slavery, women subordination, racism, apartheid, sexism, etc. It may be true that there are black-and-white texts in the bible that indicate subordinating women and denying them their fundamental rights. These texts include 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 (women should keep silent in churches), 1 Timothy 2:11-15 (women should have no authority over men, the woman was deceived and became a transgressor), and 1 Peter 3:7 (women as a weaker vessel). The fact is that the Judeo-Christian scriptures should be read in the light of their entirety and especially in the light of the Christian gospel. The four gospels and the Christ event are the apex of Christian revelation. Whatever runs in conflict with the liberation and freedom teaching of Jesus Christ, the liberator of the human condition and life-giver should be re-imagined and appraised? Jesus, the new lawgiver and the one that is higher than Moses and all the prophets assuredly enunciated that what he teaches supersede some aspects of the Old Testament. He says: “You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also;” (Matthew 5:38-39). Elsewhere he says: “You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5: 43-44). Through his teaching and lifestyle, he revoked the law of revenge, retaliation, hatred for enemies, unforgiveness, etc. He pronounced to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount that they were to show love, work for reconciliation, and be peacemakers. He associated with women publicly as you see in his welcoming of the Samaritan woman (John 4), affirming unconditional positive regard for the woman caught in the act of adultery (John 8), allowing a sinful woman to anoint him in public (Luke 7:36-50), being a friend to Mary Magdalen and even making her an “apostle to the apostles”, having close women disciples (Luke 8:1-3), having Mary and Martha as close women friends (Luke 10:38-42), and often staying over in their house at Bethany. Jesus saw women and men as ontological equals in personhood and dignity. He saw all as children of God and none should be discriminated against. In Jesus's fellowship in the gospels, all were welcomed including women. Jesus was not ashamed of dining with women at the table. Jesus in Luke 4:18-19 proclaims his Jubilee manifesto of freedom to captives and freedom for all people, and all men and women.

The radical and revolutionary life of Jesus should be the model and paradigm for Christian belief and practice. The reality is that Jesus existed before Christianity and before the church. If there is any Christian or Church practice that conflicts with the message of Christ, Christ must take precedence. Passages before Christ came on earth, and passages that came after his life on earth such as in the letters of Paul and in the other

epistles of the New Testament that indicate or inspire anti-women values should be re-read and appropriately critiqued. Odoyoye (2007) writes that:

It is true that there is much violence in the Bible. See the often re-hearse 'texts of terror' against women. But read against the example of Jesus, none of these can be said to be divine dictates for us to follow today. Christians have held on to the 'square-rib' myth of the making of a woman and used its disempowering interpretations to do untold violence to the humanity of women. They have savoured and swallowed the forbidden apple myth of the origin of sin and disobedience in human nature (p. 8).

Preachers who teach male domination over women often quote Sarah calling Abraham, lord. From this, they argue that husbands are to lord it over their wives who must submit. These preachers often misunderstand the principle of biblical submission that should be mutual. They also often forget that Jesus' model of lordship is servant-leadership (Luke 22:24-27). Writing of the revolutionary ministry of Jesus and how he was counter-cultural, Alabi (2012) writes that:

In His ministry Jesus lifted the status of women from master-slave trend of the society to 'each other' or 'one another' relationship. There are instances that the first set of people who received His healing benefits was women. For example, Peter's mother-in law was healed of her severe fever and Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter. Some women received their dead back like Jairus' daughter; exorcism was carried out on women and healing like Mary Magdalene (Lk. 8:1-3). A disgraceful hemorrhage of a woman was cured after she had spent all her blessings on it to earthly men (Mk. 5:25ff). Women could touch Jesus for healing; He was not too sacred to be touched by women and ate with them unlike the Rabbis of His day who accused Him of eating with a sinner. A woman could anoint Him and massage His body with her hair. He set a woman caught in adultery free while others thought of stoning her to death (Jn. 8:11ff). He received monetary gifts from women (Lk. 8:3) and could enter their houses and teach them the word of God like the case of Martha and Mary. When others doubted women, Jesus trusted them and He revealed Himself to them first after His resurrection. Provision was made to cater for His mother even while on the cross dying just as women cared for Him from Galilee to Jerusalem while He was facing trial and during crucifixion (Mt. 27:55-56). The absence of women among the twelve apostles was not discrimination but a matter of providence after all, women were among the 120 disciples who received the baptism of Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:12-14; 2:1-4) (pp.366-367).

Paul (1988) writes thus:

In all of Jesus' teaching, as well as in his behaviour, one can find nothing which reflects the discrimination against women prevalent in his day. On the contrary, his words and works always express the respect and honour due to women. The woman with a stoop is called a 'daughter of Abraham'

(Lk 13:16), while in the whole Bible the title 'son of Abraham' is used only of men. Walking the Via Dolorosa to Golgotha, Jesus will say to the women: 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me' (Lk 23:28). This way of speaking to and about women, as well as his manner of treating them, clearly constitutes an 'innovation' with respect to the prevailing custom at that time (sec. 13).

The Pauline household code in Ephesians 5:21-23 is frequently misappropriated to subdue women. Okure (2007) writes that the Ephesian household code is based on unredeemed culture and instead of interpreting it in the light of Christ's message of freedom, it has been canonized to mean absolute obedience of women to men and when there is a failure in marriage the woman is blamed for not subjecting herself in all things ignoring the fact that absolute subjection dehumanizes the humanity of the woman. Absolute subjection for a Christian woman should be to Christ, not her husband. It should be understood that subjection is not domination. Okure (2007) notes that subjection has been used to demand women to submit to inhuman treatment from men and other discriminating practices. In terms of leadership, there were many officeholders in Judaism and the Christian era who played prominent roles such as Jael who killed Sisera, army commander of Canaan (Judges 4:21), Miriam prophetess, singer, and composer (Exodus 15:20-21), Huldah the prophetess (2 Chronicles 34:22-28), Anna the prophetess (Luke 2:36-38), Deborah (Judges 4 and 5). There were women as financiers of the ministry of Jesus and the apostle Paul. These women financiers and philanthropists are Lydia, Dorcas, Mary, Nympha (Acts 9:36-42, Col 4:15, Acts 12:12, Acts 16:13-15). The New Testament passage of Galatians 3:28 affirms the equality of women and men. In Romans 16:3-5, St Paul mentions many women who were partners with him in ministry. Alabi (2012) notes that:

The New Testament apostolic writings make the greatest provision for women by commanding men to love their wives. In Torah, love is the greatest commandment and this is directed to women as recipients. The regulation of submission on the part of women is to reciprocate the love of their husbands and not of a slave to a master relationship. The Peter's admonition hinges the answers of the husbands from God to their stand to their wives (1Peter 3:1ff) (p. 367).

The Holy Spirit, as Jaja (2007) notes, is poured equally on both men and women on Pentecost day. Borg and Crossan (2009) have written that the radical visionary message of the first Paul, the original Paul in the New Testament must be recovered. This Paul according to them saw all men and women and all people as one in Christ, no division, no slaves. This Paul they also say is different from the conservative Paul who teaches the subjugation of women to men and sees women as the weaker sex.

Outside the life of Christ, there are many passages in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments that endorse the empowerment of women and reveal that men and women are equal. The Bible is absolutely clear that both women and men are created in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-28). It is both of them that are saddled with the responsibility of being stewards of God's creation. The point that needs to be affirmed clearly is that it is

to Christ in his teaching and example that people should look to and not take bible texts out of context.

Christian Feminism and *Urhobo* Culture

Every human being carries experience, a lived experience for that matter. They are also carriers of knowledge and beliefs. Every human being has a voice. Every experience and voice matters. However, it should be subjected to critical evaluation in the light of human rights and the quest for justice. The experience and voices of women should count. To deprive women of a place in the public square and leadership meetings is to miss out on important voices and experiences that can enrich the conversation. This is why for instance it is fundamentally wrong that almost all over Africa, councils of elders lack a woman's voice and experience. It is often explained away that the women have their own meetings and when they are needed, they are invited to the meeting of elders. This should not be so. It should be a statutory right of women to be in the elders' council. It is through the elder's council that important decisions about the governance of the community or town take place. The apostle Paul's admonition that women should keep silent should be read within its proper context and subjected to the ministry of Jesus.

Even in the Christian story women's voices have been marginalized for most of the time. The point made by Ursic (2021) is helpful here:

For over 2,000 years, Christian theologians have been primarily men writing from men's perspectives and experiences. In the 1960s, women began to study to become theologians when the women's rights movement opened doors to higher education for women. Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, female theologians developed Christian feminist theology with a focus on women's perspectives and experiences. Christian feminist theology seeks to empower women through their Christian faith and supports the equality of women and men based on Christian scripture. 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). The arts have an important role in Christian feminist theology because a significant way Christians learn about their faith is through the arts, and Christians engage the arts in the practice of their faith (p.1).

There has been great advancement in the inclusion of women's voices in society. But more still needs to be done. The emergence of feminism and Christian feminism should be an inspiration to women in Urhoboland particularly Urhobo women to press into being educationally advanced. They should make their voices heard. There is a need for more women theologians, religious studies scholars, and philosophers and feminist scholars in Urhoboland. To say that women's experiences and voice in Urhoboland have been silent does not mean their experiences and voices is totally silent. The challenge is that in the major areas of life where their voices and experiences should be taken into cognizance, they seem to be missing in action. It may not be any fault of theirs but the way society has been structured. Otite (2021) writes about Urhobo women thus:

With their failure of lack of strong will to resist their subordinate status and

role, women help to elect more men than women to the Senate, the House of Representatives, State Houses of Assembly, and even the Local Government Councils in Nigeria. They learn to depend on men for the relatively few appointive positions they hold in society. Their low population in the National and State Assemblies, etc., and in political parties, as well as their tacit endorsement of the notion that a woman's place is in the home, the domestic domain, are part of the demonstration of their apparently involuntary acceptance of traditional gender-biased male-controlled culture (p. xix)

The Christian scriptures should be interpreted in a liberating manner in Urhoboland for the emancipation of Urhobo women. Christian feminism is not about fighting against men. Some persons wrongly misunderstand Christian feminism to be fighting against men and so once they hear of Christian feminism their mind denies it. Christian feminism should be about the deconstruction of patriarchal socio-cultural beliefs, policies, and practices that make women unfree, limit their aspirations, and strangulate their personhood. Christian feminism is about asserting the ontological equality of women and men and indeed all people and the implication and import for ethical practices and social living. Men and women in Urhoboland should be able to play any gender roles that are not biologically innate in the sexes for the well-being of society. A great many gender roles are based on socio-cultural perceptions. When a woman is pregnant for instance, a man should be able to do the domestic chores. Many men in Urhoboland consider this a taboo. They will force their 8-month pregnant woman that she must do all the domestic chores. In the gospel, Jesus is presented as cooking breakfast and sharing with his disciples. Painfully religion, including the Christian religion, has been used by some as an instrument to foster discrimination against women in the name of fidelity to the text.

The fact is that most of the things and functions that women are deprived of performing are not divine and have no supernatural origin. They come from gender stereotypes of seeing women as the weaker sex and even “inferior” persons. That it has been practiced like that from time immemorial or it comes from the ancestors does not mean it should not be transformed to meet the dynamics of a changing society. To use the argument, it is the way it has been done and it should not change is fallacious. Beliefs and practices like slavery, human sacrifice, etc may have been practiced by the ancestors but today in the light of greater knowledge and ethical development they are now seen as evil and have been eradicated in most places.

Christian feminism should be an inspiration for Urhobo women to be motivated to strive for greater leadership roles in their communities and politics. As noted, there are many leadership roles that women are deprived of in Urhoboland simply because they are women. The structural beliefs that hold women down should be deconstructed. Women can be spokeswomen for the entire community and not just their women's group communities. We need women as president-generals of various communities. In Urhoboland they need to strive for more elective offices.

In Urhoboland, Christian feminism should not be seen as an enemy of the land. Christian feminism is not a divider of families as some see it. It is not struggling for the dominance of women over men. It is not a fight against men. There are different roles to be played in both family and community in Urhoboland. Christian feminism does not teach that all men and women in Urhoboland should play the same roles. Men and women complement one another. They should live in mutual respect for one another. Marriage is about a partnership of life. Men and women are to collaboratively make decisions and live life together. It is not a question of one sex dominating the other. Many women and men are Christians in Urhoboland. They hear what their priests, pastors, and other ministers say to them in churches. An anti-feminist interpretation of scripture can make people hostile to women's rights and empowerment. There are preachers who teach subservience, slavery, and domestication in the name of family harmony. They wrongly interpret the bible to make women seem inferior. This ought not to be so.

The Way Forward

There are many ways to foster the demands of Christian feminism and authentic feminism in Urhoboland. One such way is a critical re-examination of the biblical texts and all religious texts in general. This re-examination can be done at seminars, conferences, symposia, debates, etc. The goal is to appropriate rightly the texts that further women's empowerment. Religious texts should not be swallowed hook, line, and sinker. They must be read within their particular historicity and cultural milieu. Oduyoye (2007) rightly opines that: "...the...transformation of negative attitudes towards women would come only as the whole community of women and men became open to re-examining faith-based discrimination against women and cultural provisions for downgrading the humanity of women" (p.1).

There seems to be a fear of change. Those who exercise power fear losing their power. They love things to be done the way they are. Oduyoye (2007) writing regarding this fear implies that there should be courage in facing ourselves and critiquing ourselves. The human mind is very powerful. Mentalities need to be transformed. This is where education has a great role to play. There are hundreds of declarations regarding the worth and dignity of women but many women and men are not aware of them. Even many in politics are not aware of them. How many persons in Urhoboland know of the Maputo Protocol of the African Union (2003), Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women of the United Nations (1967), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women of the United Nations (1979), Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993). Ikeke (2021c) writes:

Despite the many international human rights declarations affirming the equality of men and women, and the techno-scientific accomplishments of humanity, in many non-Western societies and indigenous cultures there is still much discrimination against women. The discrimination and violence against women on the basis of their sex and their being perceived as subservient to men by some cultures, societies and persons are morally unacceptable. Discrimination and violence against women are wrong for they offend against the ontological status of women as human beings;

violate their human dignity/ rights as persons (p. 125).

There is a need more than ever before to spread the knowledge of these declarations. Knowledge can make a difference. The place of re-education and raising of consciousness on the women's issue should never be neglected. Speaking of how women have suffered in society Penha (2011) writes that: "It is therefore necessary that the process of conscientizing society with regard to various issues of discrimination and violence to women be accelerated. This is best done by various methods of adult education. One important way is personal reflection and grappling with our doubts and questions. Group interaction and discussion facilitate adult study" (p.8). In relation to the issue of re-education, there is need for more girl-child education in Urhoboland. Omogbemi, Adedoyin and Oladepo (2010) are on target to note that girl child education is a tool for national development and through its women's skills and talents can be tapped for the good of society.

The Christian church in Urhoboland can do more to ensure that women's rights are fully recognized as human rights and that more spaces in the church are created for women to exercise their gifts and talents. And finally, on the way forward sister solidarity should not be neglected by women. It is often said that women are their own worst enemies. The church has an enormous role to play in education. But it should be a radical and new education that is attentive to the issues of feminism. It will not be right to deny the fact that women have suffered from various forms of marginalization in Urhoboland and other societies. In relation to education also, people should be educated in their use of language. Language should be used to empower women and not demean them. Ehiakhamen (2001) notes that language should be liberated from negative and derogatory manner it has been used to put down women.

There is a need for law and social policy to be reconstructed. Still, all over Africa and Urhoboland, there are still many men who will never accept that women are equal to men and that the role of men is not to dominate women. Unless there are radical affirmative laws and the attendant social policy that regulates societies and creatively provides spaces for women there will continue to be gender imbalance. It is not enough to say that women should struggle and strive to be on par with men. Ekwierhoma (2014) writes that the law should be used as an instrument of change to transform women's situation by enacting that women are well-consulted in making social policies, and laws should be made that can mainstream women to come to the mainstream. There are political parties in Nigeria that have apportioned a certain percentage of positions to women. More needs to be done in this regard. Using the instrument of law here is not an advocacy for unhealthy forms of unjust affirmative actions. The instrument of law should be used in a democratic manner for the well-being of all, and should never foster incompetency of anyone whether man or woman.

One fundamental question that was raised above is the question of leadership. Because of the open or overt biases against women, you find very few of them in leadership positions in society, politics, and the church. When there are women who strive to be leaders, they

are often reminded that they need to take care of their homes and leave the domain of leadership especially in politics and in the church to men. It should be clear that women have responsibilities in the home does not mean they cannot be leaders in the public space. After all, in the biblical tradition, Deborah served as both wife, judge, and military commander in Israel in the days of the judges. Ojo (2007) has noted that the presence of prominent women in the bible amidst a patriarchal culture shows that women have leadership gifts and these gifts should be recognized in churches in Nigeria.

On the way forward, there is an equal need for sister-to-sister or woman-to-woman alliances. Very often women tend to simply rely on men to give them power or leadership positions. This is not enough. Women need to do more meetings and confer among themselves. Especially in this part of the world, like Urhoboland that this paper is concerned women rarely meet to discuss women of their empowerment to overcome the problems caused by patriarchy. They take it for granted as if things will change themselves. Abdulkadir (2003) writes that: "...women must unite and form alliances with other feminist movements in the world in order to conquer the buccaneering dragon of their continual oppression" (p. 24).

Conclusion

This paper has examined the socio-cultural situation of Urhobo women in Urhoboland in light of the challenges posed by Christian feminism. It showed that like in other societies and cultures, women have also experienced patriarchal domination. The paper showed that the bible has often been misread to subjugate women. It argued for a re-imagination of better appreciation of the biblical texts and to recover those texts that inspired recognition of women as equal members of society and their being accorded their rights. It then proposed ways that the values of feminism can be used to foster women's empowerment in Urhoboland and beyond such as positive re-appropriation of biblical text, re-education and conscientization for authentic feminist values, enacted of laws and policies that affirm women's lives and dignity, overcoming fear of sharing power with women, etc. If these things are done, they will help to create a more peaceful and harmonious Urhobo society.

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