

**PROMOTING THE RIGHTS AND DIGNITY OF WOMEN IN CALABAR-
NIGERIA THROUGH EDUCATIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF MOTHER MARY
CHARLES MAGDALEN WALKER (RSC)**

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Abstract

Education has been part of human society from the very beginning. Human societies throughout the ages have vested interest in education. In Africa, women are regarded as the weaker sex and are looked upon as people who cannot stand on their own unless they are entrusted to men. What we see in Nigeria is the attitude of the nation. Nigerian society has been patriarchal in nature, which is the nature feature of traditional society. Patriarchy is founded on an erroneous understanding of human nature. With its misguided reading of human nature, it formulates ingrained social norm that privileged the men and disadvantaged women. Mother Charles Magdalen Walker's vision to uphold the right and dignity of women is one of the most elating of the events of her era. Women were under the stringent traditional, social, and cultural structures before her arrival to Calabar. The dominance patriarchy coupled with discrimination against women placed Calabar women under unfavourable conditions. Being regarded as second hand citizens, mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker in imitation of Jesus' esteem for women set out to raise their status. She knows that the essence of physical, intellectual, social and psychological well-being of women, she therefore adopted approach that would help promote their dignity and this she did through education. Education was one way to lift women and bring about positive attitude that could mobilize untapped ingenuity in them for societal change. Mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker's missionary activities in promoting the rights and dignity of women through education was clear demonstration of one who believed that every creature of God deserved a right to personal, communal, environmental and transcendental well-being. However, it is pertinent to state that

Mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker has willingly and effectively contributed in promoting the dignity of women in Calabar-Nigeria. Consequently, her contributions cannot be undermined. Her prophetic vocation was nowhere more evident than in her creative imagination made manifest in her ability to foresee and respond to the situation in southern Nigeria (Calabar) where girls were deprived of their rights to education. Hence, the focus of this work is to recognize the immeasurable successful educational contributions of Mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker in promoting the rights and dignity of women in Calabar South Eastern Nigeria.

Keywords: Mary Charles, Magdalen, Education, Nigeria, Calabar

Introduction

Mother Mary Charles Magdalen's vision of the dignity of women is one of the most exciting events of her era. In Ancient Greek mythologies and writings, women are often portrayed as necessary evil which man must endure. The Greek philosopher, Plato, for example, denies the existence of Hades. He argues that the true punishment of men is to endure women. The idea of this legendary philosopher influenced the development of patriarchy and its attendant cultural norms that regulate the institutionalized unequal social relationship and political process. As a result, women have lost their dignity.

However, it is pertinent to state that Mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker has willingly and effectively contributed in promoting the rights dignity of women in Calabar-Nigeria. Consequently, her contributions cannot be undermined. Her prophetic vocation was nowhere more evident than in her creative imagination made manifest in her ability to foresee and respond to the situation in southern Nigeria (Calabar) where girls were deprived of their rights to education. Hence, the focus of this article is to recognize the immeasurable educational contributions of Mother Mary Charles Magdalene Walker in promoting the rights and dignity of women in Calabar.

Before the arrival of Mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker in Calabar, there was only one girls school in the whole of the vicariate, the school being managed by St Joseph sisters of Clunny, but later left the country due to hash climate. As a result there was no missionary in the whole of the vicariate to run the school. Women were deprived of their rights to education, the men had greater educational opportunity, and mothers who had twins were deprived of their babies, as twins were considered as divine curse. At the request of Bishop Joseph Shanahan, Mother Mary Charles Walker voluntarily came to help out in women's education. She succeeded in enhancing the dignity and rights of women which were trampled upon, through education. This study intends to cast light on

the unsung aspect of Mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker's contribution in promoting the rights and dignity of women in Calabar that singled her out as a successful woman.

Dignity of women

John Paul II (1991) states that Women dignity refers to the inherent and inalienable value of every woman which cannot be destroyed, taken away or measured. It is not dependent or conditional, it simply results from being a woman. According to John Paul II (1999) "Human person are willed by God; they are imprinted with God's image. Their dignity does not come from the work they do, but from the person they are"(p.34).Munroe (2001) states that dignity of women is an inherent value a woman possesses as a woman and not the worth of skills, profession, qualifications achieved. To this as observed by John Paul II (1988) " In creating human race, male and female, God gives men and women personal dignity, endowing them with the inalienable rights and respects proper to the human person" (P.22). Chiegboka (2001) Citing Arnold opined. "The woman is a person and an individual who contains within herself the value and the purpose of her existence, who is provided with same rights and the same freedom as the man" (p.53).

Promotion of Dignity of Women

Meyer (1965) defined promotion of the dignity of women as the ability to create a society where the female voice is sought and heard, where the principles of equity (fairness) and equality (opportunity) co-exist (p.152). To this Chiegboka (2001) observes "the women voice is necessary because of their dignity as human persons as ontological half of humanity with numerical advantage, and significantly because they have a unique way of viewing reality (p.19). It is in promotion of dignity of women that made the church and society to proclaim Gospel of equality of man and woman, of spouses and in all human endeavours. This equality is not uniformity but unity in diversity of gender and personal inclinations.

John Paul II (1988) states that promotion of dignity of women is the encouraging and upholding of women's role in the church's life, including her intellectual life and by opening to them ever greater opportunities to be present and active in the church's mission of love and service (p.34) The ability to appreciate their services in the church's life promote and respect their dignity as women. To this, John Paul II (1995) observes" I am convinced that the secret of making speeding progress in achieving full respect for women and their identity must first and foremost be won through an effective and intelligent campaign for the promotion of women" (p.15). 1995 Beijing Conference on women defined promotion of dignity of woman as the removing of all the obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and

equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision making. This means that the principle of shared power and responsibility should be established between woman and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities. The increasing participation of women in public life is seen as signs of the time. According to Chiegboka (2001) “This crusade has been witnessed both in the civil society, church and among individuals” (p.8). Its principal agenda is that women should be treated as persons with rights, dignity and voice within the community.

Munroe (2001) states that promotion of dignity of women is a matter of human right and a condition for social justice and is also a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for equality, development and peace. According 1995 Beijing Conference on women; the dignity of women is prerequisite to any recognition on the part of the state. Without a clear understanding of the meaning of human dignity, discrimination will never be avoided. According John Paul (1988) “A woman’s dignity is closely connected with the love which she receives by the very reason of her femininity; it is likewise connected with the love she gives in return” (p.30). According to John Paul II (1996) “The church desires for her part to contribute to upholding the dignity, role and rights of women” (p.10) the church has a broader vision to promote the cause of women in the church and in today’s world.

Invitation by Shanahan to Come to Nigeria

In the 1920s, Bishop Shanahan (CSSP) of the Vicariate of Southern Nigeria sent fervent appeal to Europe for volunteers for the Nigerian Mission. “Come to Nigeria and help us”, was his clarion call. The need was enormous. According to Waturuocha (2005), “mission schools then were scattered and scanty” (p.4). Calabar had just one school for girls. The Sisters of St. Joseph of Clunny originally managed it. They were recalled to France for health reasons. Bishop Shanahan made a general appeal to female religious congregation in English speaking countries of Europe for help. His dire appeal was not heeded. Subsequently, he directed particular appeal to the Irish Sisters of Charity, urging them to accept the Nigerian mission. These felt unready for the Nigerian mission. However, Mother Mary Charles Walker and few others stood up and volunteered. They made their request known to the superiors. There was great resistance to the mission from considerable members of the Congregation. Hazards of health and the extremely weather and trying living conditions in the tropics were foremost of the reasons that the mission would not be embraced. Almost all the Sisters, who had initially volunteered for the mission, rescinded their decision. Mother Mary Charles Walker did not. She was resolute in her resolve to go on this mission. The call: “Come to Nigeria and help us” became the cause of her avocation in her vocation as Sister of Charity. Going to Nigeria became the

one life she cannot but give herself to in order for her to fulfill her religious life as a Sister of Charity. On this, Waturaocha (2005) notes:

For Mother Mary Charles, the call was immediate and with all due process, obtained permission from Rome, from Holy Father. Pope Pius XI, in a rescript dated 23rd May, 1923, gave her his permission to answer the Nigerian missionary call as well as allowing her to live out of her convent while still remaining a Sister of Charity (p.5).

On September 12, 1923, she set sail from Liverpool to Nigeria. She arrived in Calabar-Nigeria on October 2 and became the sole woman religious in the Vicariate of Southern Nigeria, which was founded in 1885. It was made up of East, North, and South of the Niger and the British Cameroon. In Calabar, she was known as “Charles Walker”.

On January 14, 1924, she took over the management of St. Joseph’s Convent School after Miss Mary Martin’s had departed on January 13, 1923. Immediately, she recognized the school. Okure (1980) reports that “she laboured in the Nigeria mission in Vicariate of southern Nigeria, under Bishop Shanahan from 1923 – 1931, and under Bishop Charles Heerey. She undertook every aspect of the apostolate, education, medical, social and pastoral” (p.5).

She opened boarding and day schools, convents, hospitals, and dispensary. She organized catechism classes for women, children and adults men. She built vocational schools. She prepared people for the sacraments and baptized those who were critically ill and could die, especially children. The foundation of native Sisters in 1931, crowned her work. With due permission from His Lordship, Bishop Shanahan, Mother Mary Charles Walker founded the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus with four young African girls.

Educational Contributions of Mother Mary Charles Magdalene Walker in Promoting the Rights and Dignity of Women in Calabar-Nigeria

In Africa, women are regarded as the weaker sex and are looked upon as people who cannot stand on their own unless they are entrusted to men. Nmah (2003) states that:

The resultant weakness has deprived women of the strength to rise up and insist on a change in their environment for the sake of their families and children. Women fear the difficulty of having to live without a male companion in a man’s world. (p.59)

Before the advent of Mother Mary Charles Walker, Mary Slessor had already put to an end some of the maltreatments melted on Efik women. For example Mary Slessor saved the lives of twins and mothers who until her coming were seen as product of *juju* and

killed by being stuffed head-first, into calabashes and abandoned while mothers were driven into the bush to die. “May you have twins!” was a curse too terrible for a woman to hear in Calabar-Nigeria. Mary Slessor hurriedly travelled through many villages where the birth of twins was rumoured to have occurred. Over her life time she, largely by her own efforts to an extense, saw an end to this practice. She saw that the mothers were cared for and the twins saved are put in good homes in a village called *Ikuneto*. In the cause of this enterprise of suppressing the killings of twins and banishment of their mothers, she faced enormous challenges until she eventually won them over and gained a place in their hearts as Ma *Akamba*-Great mother.

By the time Mother Mary Charles Walker arrived the vicariate, women were being deprived of many things. The girls were prevented from attending school by men and even after that if there was a choice to be made it was the sons who received the education. Moreover the type of education the girls received was of the role determining variety; it consisted of training in housewifery and childcare. Thus, men had a greater educational opportunity, even though early missionaries had attested that the key to the conversion of African people was the Christian education of women". There was indeed obvious gap between boys and girls in school system. The magisterial Phelps-Stokes Report on education in Efik of 1920 shows evidence of the surprise at the lack of women in the educational system: it is rather surprising that mission and school have not made serious effort to bring the girls into the school and to provide suitable training for them. According to Mbonu (2010), “it is reasonable to say that more boys than girls completed formal education in Efik land.”(p.4).

Women have received from God the sublime mission of fostering in society the spirit of sacrifice and devotedness. With this gift woman assumes almost a foundational role with regard to society. The various sectors of society, nations, and states and the progress of all humanity are as a result of contribution of women. Yet in all these, the world’s confusion over the place, right, worth and dignity of women manifest itself in a variety of ways. Mother Mary Charles Walker’s unique missionary call to help in the training of women, and girls led her to observe the dilemma of identity which most women and girls of her time were facing. Thus, she took an active service that promotes the dignity, rights and holistic development of women. She made herself available in every service that could promote their dignity. She believed that for a missionary to succeed, she should be prepared to turn her hand to many works besides the actual one which is her special strong point. This explains while she was single handedly an educationist, architect, a social worker, a nurse, a catechist and a foundress. She committed her efforts towards liberation of women from heavy load of certain cultural and socially negative conditioning which kept women from being conscious of their own dignity. Mother Mary Charles Walker

loved her life of total self-giving to Christ and cater for the needs of God's children in response to John Paul II appealed women religious: "Be spiritual mother and sisters, ... be it for everyone without exception especially for the sick, the suffering, the abandoned, the children, women, families in difficult situation... go out towards them! Do not wait for them to come to you! Look for them yourself". Mother Mary Charles Walker devotedly engaged herself in promoting the dignity of women in Calabar-Nigeria through education, spiritual attainment, social services, social mobility, women's right, medical services and foundation of native sisters. Mother Mary Charles hoped that through these, women will be conscious of their rights and dignity, and that the society will in turn appreciate them for the simple fact of being a woman, who through their insight which is so much a part of their womanhood enrich the worlds' understanding and help to make human relations more honest and authentic and that the society will consider men and women equal co-partners and not enemies in the immense task of bettering humanity.

Educational Development

Human societies throughout the ages have vested interest in education. Arinze (1965) sees education as "the development of the whole man, soul, body, intellect, wills, emotion and physical well-being" (p.20). Thomas Aquinas stated that the purpose of education is to aid man attain the purpose of existence. The importance of education to societal development cannot be over emphasized. It would not be an exaggeration to say that without education most societies would stagnate and die. In Calabar Women and girls were denied of their rights to education. Mother Mary Charles Walker believed that education of girls and women is the single most effective way to promote their dignity and improve the lives of individuals, families as well as to bring economic development to poor communities nationwide.

Bishop Shanahan invited mother Mary Charles Walker to undertake this monumental task to educate girls and women who will become a catalyst for social change and promote their dignity as women. Under Bishop Shanahan, women education and literacy programs in schools remained a top priority to promote their dignity. None other could collaborate in this enterprise better than mother Mary Charles Walker, who descended from a family "noted for the inconsistency of its academic performance". Mother Mary Charles' vocation was nowhere more evident than in her creative imagination, made manifest in her ability to force aid respond to the situation in Calabar where girls were deprived of their right to education. She saw that education is important for everyone, but it is specifically significant for girls and women. This is true not because education is an entry point to other opportunities, but because educational formation of women has ripple effect within the family and across generation. Besides, investing in girls' education is one of

the most effective ways to reduce poverty and promote her dignity. To strengthen the assertion that education of girls and women has effect in the development of societies, Hooks (1984) stated that “female education is the pre-condition of the development of a nation. Both men and women are the members of society. So it is true that both men and women should receive proper education in order to build up a proper society” (p. 80). Through education, mother Mary Charles Walker empowered women with the knowledge, skill and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process in their societies and acknowledge their dignity as women.

Mother Mary Charles Walker took over the management of St. Joseph’s girls school, Calabar and plunged herself into education, evangelization and transformation apostolate. She organized St. Joseph’s girls’ convent school Calabar so well with Montessori system that it was classed A+ by government inspectors. She enlarged the curriculum of her schools from the three Rs to include domestic, science, home management, needle work and art. Her aim was to provide comprehensive education with firm character formation. Thus, she made literacy available to girls in Calabar.

She planned vocational education for girls who had passed school age and those preparing for marriage. She established one such school in Calabar. Horticulture, domestic science and crafts including needle work and raffia constituted the main part of the curriculum. Okure (2016) attest “The reputation of St. Joseph’s convent primary school attracted many high ranking visitors from around Africa and beyond (P. 72).

Hinsely (1930) made an appraisal of the schools founded by mother Mary Charles Walker, thus:

At Calabar, Nigeria in the Efik country, Sister Mary Charles Walker has worked wonders among the women and girls. Her schools at Calabar and Anua are considered the best girls schools in the country and her name is known to all who are interested in African education (p.5)

Cooke (1980) noted that “her strong point was her ability to deal with children be it in the classroom or in the solidarities or extra school activities” (p.92).

By providing educational opportunities for girls and women in Calabar, she helped women develop skills that allow them make decisions and influence community change. In turn, these educational opportunities for girls and women helped to raise their dignity as women.

According to Vatican II Council;

The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation and dignity of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved.

Mother Mary Charles' ability as teacher was remarkable. Women's visibility and participation in society and church life underpinned her education philosophy. She was against the system that would produce semi-educated women, who were at home neither in their traditional culture nor in the wider international community. According to Mbonu (2010) "she insisted on integral formation of women who would take their proper role in society and church life". To this end, Bishop Shanahan would rather have his new missionaries, the missionary sisters of the Holy Rosary, receive training from Sister Charles Walker in Nigeria than have them trained in Ireland. Mbonu (2010) citing Shanahan States:

The more I think of the idea of sending the sisters for a few months in a Training college before they sail for Nigeria, the less I like it... I am convinced that sister Charles Walker in Nigeria knows more about school work than any sister in the English training college. Her experience in Africa is invaluable (p.44)

Her vision of a community informed her art in teaching the mystery of reading and writing. The vision of how women and girls would excel permeated her education ethos. According to Okure (1981) "She made literacy available to women not only in Calabar,, but also in other towns and villages of the vicariate" (p.24) bishop Shanahan, writing in a document dated 30th April 1926 to be handed to his successor, paid tribute to sister Mary Charles Walker "God has blessed her work beyond expectation. Although, she is still alone, she has been able to bring the convent schools up to a high standard of efficiency" (p.12). Citing Bishop Shanahan in his letter to mother Charles Walker, Okure (1981) states:

I congratulate you and your girls of St. Joseph's convent school on the success you have achieved in being classified A+... it is the first time in the history of the mission that a Girls' school has honourably carried off the much coveted honour of being classified excellent.(p.27).

Mother Charles Walker was very successful in raising the literacy rate of women in Calabar .She brought energy in working and raising the standard and dignity of women. Citing Amadeus Nwokpo (2002) states:

The more we see, the more we are amazed at what sister Charles Walker has accomplished single handed. This school (Calabar) is in a flourishing condition. It is the only Montessori school in the whole region. Sister was almost in despair about being able to teach the native anything, no system that she tried seemed to produce any results, so at last she decided to send for the books and see what she could make of Montessori method. She had never seen it in operation, and has just taught herself, but the results are wonderful.(p.57).

Montessori method was one of the best ways she applied to make her educational work effective. The training was so effective that the girls could work conscientiously and progressively on their own without supervision.

This unique and singular work of mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker in education of girls and women raise the dignity of women to heights that could never be reached naturally. For mother Charles, man and woman were created originally for one another in the unity of the two. They are equal in dignity and are also equally persons; therefore, depriving women of their rights to education is considered disrespect against the dignity of women. Mother Mary Charles Walker Magdalen is therefore, the “Architect of women’s education in southern Nigeria”. According to Okure (1981) “She introduced the Montessori method of education with such starting success that those who came either to study or to inspect her methods were forced to speak with high praise of her schools”(p.19).

Many teachers from all parts of the west coast have visited her homes to learn her spirit and her adaptation of the Montessori system of education in Africa. Thus, she succeeded in drawing the attention of Nigeria and the world at large to girls’ education in Africa. To crown it all, she wrote a paper: “Education of girls’ in southern Nigeria”.

Conclusion

The mandate to go and preach the good news to the ends of the earth (Mtt 28:19-20) by its very nature and content has a universal appeal because of its inclusiveness and universality non nation is excluded. Mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker’s arrival in Calabar ushered in a new era and a new vision for women and girls; the girls child education. Having reached the poor girls of Calabar her joy was without bounds, her vision began to flourish as she watched the poor become rich in spirit, the illiterate become literate and growing in faith, responsibility and maturity, women understand their worth, rights and dignity of womanhood. Despite the understandable challenges in African mission, which she met, she was fully aware that just as “faith is strengthen when it is given to others” so the mission strengthens consecrated life, gives it new enthusiasm and new motivational n elicits faithfulness. Evidently mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker excelled beyond reasonable doubt in promoting the dignity of women through social services, catechetical works, pastoral works, medical services and women literacy. As an outstanding educationist she recognized that the Montessori system of education was the only method that would allow her to single handedly open the many needed schools for girls. By making literacy available to women, and children, especially the girl child she was able to raise their status in the society.

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