

INTERNAL FACTORS THAT MILITATE AGAINST THE EMANCIPATION OF CHRISTIAN WIDOWS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study deals with the internal factors that militate against the emancipation of Christian widows in Nigeria. Christian widows often lament of androcentric web in Nigeria which is serving as a hindrance for their emancipation. Widows seem to be in deplorable conditions because of the so called androcentric view. The study therefore investigated some factors peculiar to widows themselves which hinder their liberation. This work employed the qualitative research design. It is concerned with systematic and inductive method of reasoning. Findings revealed that the presumed chauvinistic view lies within the domain of the widows. Most widows are ignorant of the matrimonial laws governing the marital acts. The matrimonial laws lean more on the interest of the women than men; yet most widows pay little or no regard to them. A lot of women go into marriage without taking time to study the matrimonial laws. Widows who ought to take the advantage of matrimonial laws cannot do that due to ignorance. More so, some Nigerian widows are illiterate, which impedes their emancipation. There is also the issue of misconceived ideology based on the notion of men's world. These widows have the freedom to fight off these hindrances, so as to be liberated. Based on the above, it was recommended, among others, that widows should access the existent marital laws to be legally equipped to fight the injustices meted out against them.

Keywords: Emancipation, Widowhood, Christianity, Gospel

Introduction

Feminists advocate the freedom of womanhood within the framework of feminism, a movement for the liberation of women. Hooks (2000) defines feminism “as a movement

to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (p.viii). Ezenweke (2014) buttresses that feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies that stands for the conviction of the full humanity of women aimed at reconstructing human society to reflect sex equality. This issue of feminism has received glaring attention in literature in the light of its important role for sustainable development in all cultures. In this light, gender discrimination is accepted as a hindrance for the desired national growth and development given that women are significant actors in this direction.

Gender discrimination affects all women folk, especially widows. Widows are women who have lost their husbands. Most of these widows are in deplorable conditions in Nigeria, because of androcentric view. Cultural practice of widowhood has enslaved some Nigerian widows. In some parts of the country, such as Igbo land, a widow lacks a significant right of inheritance, especially if she does not have a male child. Oreh (2014) affirms that Igbo land is mostly a masculine society in which a widow is seen as an item of her husband and his family. As an item, she is not capable to own or inherit a property; she nonetheless qualifies to be inherited herself. The only exception is when she has a living male child who can inherit part of his father’s property, and through him the mother may benefit.

Ironically, some deceased relatives hardly allow the right of inheritance for a widow. Widows deliberate more on their freedom from the male subjugation whereas some of the widows are directly or indirectly responsible for it. Widows’ ambivalent cry for emancipation seems more a foul play since some internal (personal) factors do not suggest so. The aim of the study is to explore the internal factors that militate against the emancipation of Christian widows in Nigeria. Liberation of widows has been a major issue in the society. Nevertheless, the issue seems to be more on the part of the widows than their male counterparts. The study is geared towards exposing those internal factors which impede the liberation of Christian widows in Nigeria. The study is accomplished through qualitative method. Agu (2018) sees a qualitative research as a research which is set to determine the quality of a particular attribute such as the quality of relationships, activities, or events. A qualitative research focuses on a specific element. This study centers on the issues within widows which have kept them in the bondage of male dominance in Nigeria.

Clarification of Terms

A few important terms are given operative definitions herein for clarity and better understanding of nuances. The term internal has a lot of meanings. The term “internal” is an adjective which means something that is inward, interior, within, or inside. Encarta

Dictionary (2009) defines the term “internal” as located inside. It views it as something which is located within or affecting the inside of something especially the inside of the body. The term is used here as something which has to do with the widows’ personal life affairs as against external influences. Internal means something that is domesticated within the widows themselves not something that is outside of them. It is self-contained or self-generating: existing, evident in or arising from the nature, structure, or qualities that somebody or something has. Mentally speaking, it is something that involves or exists within the mind or spirit. The term internal has to do with inward. This term is used here as something which lies inside somebody.

Again, the word “factors” is used in the plural form. The word factor is a noun which means an element, influence which combines to produce a result. Contextually, it means an instrument which makes widows unwilling to come out of their bondage. Encarta Dictionary (2009) views factor from the singular perspective as influence. It is something which contributes to or has an influence on the outcome of something. It is however used as personal attitudes of widows that lead to the outcome of certain actions.

The term, militate, is a verb which means to contend, hence hinder. The term militate could also mean to prevent. Encarta Dictionary (2009) defines militating as present participle. It means to have an influence, especially a negative one, on something. The term militate simply means to hinder, to impede, and to limit. Similarly, emancipation is a noun which means the act of setting free from the power of another, from slavery, subjection, dependence, or controlling influence. It also connotes the idea of liberation. Encarta Dictionary (2009) sees emancipation as an act of freeing. It is the act or process of setting somebody free or of freeing somebody from restrictions.

Oreh (2014) defines a widow as a woman whose husband is dead and does not remarry. She added that it can equally be referred to as a woman who has become single because her husband died and she remains unmarried. These terms are however used as the inner elements which limit the liberation of widows from oppressive act.

Statement of the Problem

The prevalent view of male dominance has led to different forms of feminists’ movements. Women often go with the ideology that men keep them in subservient position in the society hence there is quest for emancipation of women including that of widows. Ezenweke (2014) maintains that “the issue of subordination and injustices against womanhood and the girl child has been widely stressed: women in diverse cultures and work places believe that the nature and power of women were initially, grossly marginalized and misinterpreted” (p.56). She adds that feminist issue has attracted

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a wide range of responses from all genders, men and women alike and from within and outside Africa.

Nigerian men have been misbranded of tyrannical conduct against their female counterparts. Aina (1998) maintains that the Nigerian society has been patriarchal in nature which is a major feature of a traditional society. Nigerian society is viewed as a male world. Stacey (1993) submits that the structure gives men edge of dominance over their female counterparts. Nigerian society seems to have a structure which serves as a buffer for male dominance. Kamarae (1992) sees a patriarchy as a recreated term which analyzes the origins and conditions of men oppression of women. Most Nigerian women relate with men with a chauvinistic view. Oreh (2014) posits that feminists' theorists argue that in any of the historical forms that patriarchal society takes, whether it is feudal, capitalist or socialist, a sex gender system and a system of economic discrimination operate simultaneously. These views notwithstanding, it is quite unfortunate that majority of these widows are architect of their own misfortune as they have either remained dormant by accepting hook, line and sinker the stereotype notion that "it is a man's world" or by refusing to maximize the extant marital laws that empower them in this direction. This has continued to deepen the culture of male dominance and culture of widow injustices, thus worsening their plights. Therefore, the study was embarked upon to find out the internal (personal) factors that hinder widows from the male despotic conduct.

Internal factors which hinder the liberation of widows in Nigeria

This is the thrust of the paper. There are several factors that are working against the emancipation of Christian widows in Nigeria. The list is endless. Below are some of the factors:

Ignorance

There are lots of women in marriage who know little or nothing about the matrimonial laws. Majority of women who celebrate white wedding in the church hardly know something on the marriage act. On the demise of their spouse, they eventually end up as widows who know nothing about their welfare. Wildaf (2002) states that the struggle for women's rights has gained momentum during the past two decades. Women have developed and discovered new skills and tools that they are now using to leverage for change on behalf of women's rights at global, country and community levels. Unfortunately, a large proportion of women themselves are ignorant of many of their rights and the laws which protect them. It is not enough to talk about emancipation without knowing what to do. Most of the widows who talk of male dominance in the

society hardly study the matrimonial laws. Wildaf (2002) posits that the knowledge of the matrimonial laws is the most powerful tools. The women need to study this tool before crying wolf. It is so unfortunate that majority of widows are carried away with the euphoria of marriage that they ignore matrimonial laws only to realized it at the difficult moment. Ignorance of matrimonial laws is one of the widows own inner issue that hinder the emancipation of Christian widows.

Illiteracy

Illiteracy is another widows' inner affair that work against their liberation. Ikoni (2009) affirms that "education is the vehicle that breaks the shackles of poverty thereby leading to transformation, development and progress." It is however sad to note that most of the widows are uneducated because they were carried away with marriage. Some of the widows had opportunity to acquire formal education. But they refused to do that just because of marriage.

NDHS (2003) maintains that lack of education has been a strong visible barrier to female participation in the formal sector. It adds that the social pressures on females such as early marriages, and other extraneous factors as well as consideration of female education as secondary to that of boys and certain inhibitive religious practices in some parts of Nigeria are the major causes of the high illiteracy rate amongst women. In spite of the education opportunities in Nigeria, some widows still remain adamant to change.

Ideology

Women always view the world as men's world instead of women's world. A lot of widows are still going around with this chauvinistic perception. Eagleton (1991) maintains that "it is common for sociological discussions of ideology to begin by acknowledging, if not bemoaning, the plurality of different ways of using the term "ideology"." The term ideology has various usages. Meaning of ideology varies from one context to another. John (2015) defines ideology as beliefs, attitudes and opinions of those with whom we disagree. The term is used strictly in this context as widows' perception about Nigerian society. Most widows view the Nigeria society as men's world hence they hardly do anything to break the jinx. Even at home, if a male child cries, a woman would console him by telling him to be a man. But if a female child does the same thing, she receives consolation because they view a female child as being weak and unable to endure what a male child could endure. This ideology has hindered widows from liberation. Widows would have been emancipated if not for their misconceived idea.

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In the same vein, widows also view maleness as male superiority. They often look down on their fellow woman when she gives birth to a female child by calling the child nothing but a harlot whereas they rejoice more on the birth of a male child. Widows' perception of male superiority causes some derogatory statements on their fellow women. There is a common notion among widows that no one can fight a male child.

Children

A typical Nigerian Christian widow sees marriage as a permanent union. African widows do not believe in polyandry or a contract marriage. A Nigerian Christian widow views children as the greatest asset. The Urhobo people of Delta State, Nigeria have this same notion and that is why they name their children "Emonefe," (children are more than wealth). The Igbos also have a similar view hence they name their children too "Nwakaego," (children are more than money). A Nigerian Christian widow would rather stake her life for her children on the demise of her husband. It lies within the prerogative of a widow either to live or to stay after the demise of her husband following the provision of matrimonial law which terminates every union on the demise of the spouse. It is however, noted that most widows would rather stay, hence the Urhobo people say "Emomine." (it is my children that I am looking after). This is an internal issue which comes from maternal affiliation with children and not androcentric as often propounded. A widow may either chose to remain in the gynecological web or be emancipated from androcentric web. The seemly patriarchal web is sometime self-made because of personal perception.

Lack of personal empowerment

There are lots of widows who are not empowered in the society. UNICEF (2017) says that empowerment refers to increase in the personal, political, social, or economic strength of individuals and communities. Women and girls empowerment concerns gaining power and control over their own lives. It is unfortunate that some widows are just but typical house wives. Some able-bodied women stay at home doing nothing to earn a living. Upon the death of the husband, they become powerless due to financial constraint. This is an internal affair of a widow which renders her incapacitated from servitude. UNICEF (2017) states that empowerment involves awareness- raising, building self-confidence, expansion of choices, increased access to and control over resources and actions to transform the structures and institutions which reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and inequality. Lack of empowerment weakens widow's potency against emancipation because a widow cannot seek redress in the court if she does not have the financial capacity to shoulder it.

Conclusion

Gender equality seems to be an enigma. The feminist movements have achieved a lot in gender equality. It is however not yet completed because gender equality is yet to be fully tenable. A lot of widows are still in the ambivalent web. Byrnes (2002) maintains that the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) guarantees equality and freedom from all forms of discrimination by the state and non-state actors in all areas of public and private life. The rights of women are fully promulgated everywhere yet women still find it difficult to obtain gender equality because of the internal factors at their disposal.

Protocol to the African Charter on Human and people's rights also say a similar thing in this regard. Gbenga (2011) affirms that there are various articles in this protocol that are clearly against harmful traditional practices and it is relevance to widow's rites. The rights of widows are emphasized in Article 20 (a), which explicitly says that the states parties should ensure that "widows are not subjected to inhuman, humiliating or degrading treatment". Article 20 (c) states that a widow "shall have the right to remarry and in that event, to marry the person of her choice". Article 21 (1) emphasizes the rights of widows on the basis of "inheritance of the property of her deceased husband". A widow may not be able to enjoy all these benefits if she is not acquainted with all these provisions.

If widows must be emancipated from the androcentric web, there is the need for them to conquer the internal factors that kept them in that chain. Although Nigeria is a patriarchal nation, the grip of patriarchy has been weakened by gender study. It is therefore necessary for widows to liberate themselves through acquisition of knowledge because knowledge is power. Again, widows should reduce their dependence on their spouse by engaging in a reasonable venture.

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