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ISSN: 0305-7925 (Print) 1469-3623 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccom20>

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To cite this article: Funmi J. Para-Mallam (2010) Promoting gender equality in the context of Nigerian cultural and religious expression: beyond increasing female access to education, *Compare*, 40:4, 459-477, DOI: [10.1080/03057925.2010.490370](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2010.490370)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2010.490370>



Published online: 22 Jun 2010.



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Promoting gender equality in the context of Nigerian cultural and religious expression: beyond increasing female access to education

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National education policies in Nigeria aim at addressing female disprivilege by improving girl-child enrolment in schools in line with Millennium Development Goal targets. In addition, the National Gender Policy and its Strategic Implementation Framework stress the importance of mainstreaming gender perspectives within the education sector by ensuring adult women and girls gain access to education. This article draws on empirical qualitative data from interviews with educated Nigerian women, religious leaders and principal actors in women's rights groups to demonstrate that merely increasing female access to education is an incomplete development strategy for reducing gender inequality. This is owing to the strong influence of pervasive cultural and religious gender bias. The article employs a redemptive-movement hermeneutic within a Christian faith ethic to argue for a critical interrogation of sexist interpretations of biblical texts. It concludes with culturally sensitive and practical action steps within the education sector to promote a gender-friendly learning environment and more equitable outcomes.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion; culture; gender equality; redemptive-movement; patriarchal; egalitarian; complementarian; participation

Introduction

Nigerian traditional, Christian and Islamic religious values exert a powerful influence over Nigerian social life in general and over the nature of gender roles and relations in particular (Gifford 1998; Nweze and Takaya 2001). Indeed, there is now recognition in development literature that culture and religion are powerful determinants of development outcomes (Verhelst and Tyndale 2002). As in most parts of the continent African Traditional Religion (ATR),¹ Christian and Islamic beliefs and symbolisms permeate individual, communal and organizational behaviour. They constitute a palpable undercurrent pervading spiritual, social, political and economic life (Kanyoro and Oduyoye 1992). Although in numerous respects ATR conflicts with and, in fact, is mitigated by the exigencies of modernizing society, the synchronized effect of traditional, colonial and religious patriarchy produce deeply entrenched gender stratification (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Youth Development 2000). Increasing female access to education is often put forward as 'a fundamental tenet of development strategy' constituting 'a basis for the *full* promotion and improvement in the status of women (Dauda 2007, 1, emphasis mine). This is a cornerstone of the Millennium Development Goals (no. 3), as well as the Nigerian National Gender Policy (NGP,

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objective no. 7) for eliminating poverty and inequality and promoting sustainable economic development through female educational empowerment (Leo-Rhynie 1999; Ogunyemi 2005). Yet, the rights of women and girls to equal educational opportunities and outcomes, as enshrined in the 1999 Constitution, successive national education policies and the NGP, are persistently undercut by cultural and religious prescriptions of what constitute appropriate roles and status for women.

This paper discusses the ways converging gender-stereotyped beliefs and practices derived from African traditional and Christian religion continue to affect the everyday lives, social aspirations and development prospects of educated Nigerian women. The paper draws on two pieces of empirical research: the first, a doctoral study on the challenges of mainstreaming the National Policy on Women² in Nigeria, provided qualitative data from 29 semi-structured interviews, three focus group discussions and four participatory rural appraisal (PRA) sessions with urban, semi-urban and rural women³ and quantitative data from a survey of 45 women/gender groups (Para-Mallam 2006).⁴ The second, an ongoing study on engagements between religion and Nigerian women's movements towards the domestication of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), consisted of open-ended interviews with 22 principal actors of secular and faith-based women's rights coalitions and government agencies, and 11 (male) religious leaders.⁵ Most of the women from both studies, except the market and rural women who participated in focus groups and PRA, had attained post-secondary educational level. Neither study set out to investigate directly the interactive effects of religion, tradition and education on female material conditions or life chances. Nevertheless, the tangible ways and extent to which educated women's 'achieved status' is undermined by their traditionally and religiously 'ascribed status' was a recurring theme in both studies. The focus on educated women as opposed to women in general or economically empowered women is for three reasons. First, the paper presents the views and experiences of educated women as they contend with the paradox of cultural/religious disempowerment and educational empowerment. Second, it is premised on empirical evidence that information, knowledge and awareness available through education produce a higher level of personal autonomy for women than purely economic empowerment, yet both categories of women are constrained by cultural and religious ideologies and practices. Third, it seeks to illustrate the limitations of a policy orientation that promotes female access to education without a strategic framework for counteracting institutionalized gender bias informed by culture and religion.

The paper demonstrates how despite important advances in female educational attainment the quest for gender equality remains a mirage in the face of sexist ideologies that imbue widely practised traditions and beliefs. Their adverse effects on gender identity formation and the nature of women and men's social engagement lead to systematic and institutionalized gender discrimination. Because pervasive gender prejudice is instigated and perpetuated by conservative interpretations of biblical texts, the paper argues from a standpoint of complementarian egalitarian assumptions for a critical interrogation of gender-biased cultural and religious ideology. It employs the redemptive-movement hermeneutic proposed by William J. Webb (2001) to establish a basis for a transformation in the structure of gender roles and relations in Nigerian society to enable women, and society at large, rein in the full benefits of education. The article concludes by highlighting intervention strategies that may help to guarantee the transformation of deep-seated socio-cultural attitudes through gender mainstreaming in education as stipulated in the NGP.

Gender mainstreaming policy in the Nigerian education system

The 2006 NGP does not elaborate on modalities for female educational empowerment as did the National Policy on Women. But under its five-year Strategic Implementation Framework and Plan education and training are earmarked as one of the 16 thematic focal areas. The NGP regards female education as a cornerstone of gender mainstreaming policy. The overall policy goal is:

To build a just society devoid of discrimination, harness the full potentials of all social groups regardless of sex or circumstance, promote the enjoyment of fundamental human rights and protect the health, social, economic and political well being of all citizens in order to achieve equitable rapid economic growth. (NGP 2006)

The policy document realises that the achievement of its goals and objectives depends on ‘a cooperative interaction of all kinds of stakeholders including government, private sector, civil society organisations, *traditional and religious leaders*, community based organisations and development partners at all levels’ as well as on ‘cultural re-orientation, elimination of stereotyping and discrimination as well as support for legislative and judicial reforms’ (NGP 2006). The first policy target under Objective 7 is to ‘Guarantee equal access of women, men, girls and boys to both formal and informal education and skills development opportunities’ and its third is to ‘Mainstream Gender studies in the taught and evaluated curriculum of all formal and non formal educational institutions/courses at all levels – primary to tertiary by 2010’ (NGP 2006). In this regard, its key implementation strategy is through information, communication and value re-orientation (Item 3.1.2) with a positive gender culture as a definitive expected outcome. According to Leo-Rhynie gender mainstreaming implies:

The consistent use of a gender perspective at all stages of the development and implementation of policies, plans, programmes and projects ... Gender mainstreaming may thus entail a fundamental transformation of the underlying paradigms that inform education. (1999, 8)

Nigeria has had a National Policy on Education since 1981. Since then the federal government has come up with a number of initiatives on female education including the 1986 Blueprint on Women’s Education, the 1994 Family Support Basic Education programme, the 1999 Universal Basic Education programme, the 2000 National Policy on Women and the 2003 National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS). These policies have sought to increase girls’ access to education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, their retention in schools and to provide opportunity for adult literacy through the establishment of specialized women’s units in the Federal Ministry of Education and the funding of various women educational empowerment programmes (Ityavyar and Obiajunwa 1992). The Blueprint actually pinpointed socio-cultural, religious and economic factors militating against female education. Nevertheless, Dauda’s (2007, 461–79) assessment of policy performance in female education shows that while there were clear gains in the degree of accessibility in general government policy rhetoric amount to ‘Lots of talk and no action’. This is because state policy on female education, especially prior to the 2000 Millennium Declaration, was explicit in its patriarchal conceptualization of the purpose of female education as evidenced by the following statement by one-time Minister of Education, Prof. Jibril Aminu:

Women need peculiar skills of *womanhood*, in addition to those that will enable them to compete in the world of work and the world of men. Nothing can be more *tragic* than an accomplished Lady Doctor who does not know how to cook. So women need Special Education. Women look after the men and the children in addition to themselves. (Cited in Ityavyar and Obiajunwa 1992, 54, original emphasis)

Yet, cracks are beginning to appear in the glass ceiling of routinized gender bias. Increasing urbanization and globalization are giving Nigerian women occasion to break into and climb the ladder within typically male domains such as medicine, law, engineering, banking, business management, academics and politics. The outstanding and not-so-outstanding performances of a token crop of highly prominent and visible professional women during the 1999–2007 democratic dispensation made some public commentators affirm the importance of increased female access to education and assert that Nigeria had largely closed the gender gap in education. Nevertheless, the policy orientation of the Nigerian state towards female education remains undergirded by a patriarchal ideological construct that sees women primarily as wives, mothers, domestic workers/managers and secondary adjuncts to men (Pittin 1991; Okome 2000). Item 1.2 of the NGP document describes the status of gender equality as follows:

Nigeria is a highly patriarchal society, where men dominate all spheres of women's lives. Women are in a subordinate position (particularly at the community and household levels), and male children are preferred over the female. (NGP 2006)

Moreover, female research participants in the doctoral field study explained why from personal experience they felt that although female education is key to enhancing women's socioeconomic status it does not of itself guarantee gender justice and equality. This will be elaborated upon after setting out the conceptual framework for analysing the effect of culture and religion on gender equality.

Conceptualizing culture, religion and gender equality

In sociological terminology culture concerns the entire way of life of a society and therefore encompasses religion. Culture consists of all the material and non-material products of human society including artefacts, technology and physical objects in the first instance and all abstract creations such as language, beliefs, customs, skills, family patterns and political systems in the other (Robertson 1981, 53). This paper is concerned with the non-material elements of culture. Alolo (2007) traces the conceptual link between culture and religion, explaining that culture is the vehicle that absorbs and translates religious beliefs and values into socio-political and economic spheres where they shape behaviour and condition human interaction. Thus, culture is both the means and outcome of the transmission of values and understandings regarding the meaning of life and social phenomena.

In relation to gender, culture is the agent of socialization or conditioning through which males and females internalize societal values, develop a self-concept and identify with members of their respective gender groups. Chirkov et al. (2005) employ self-determination theory to explain the process of internalized cultural motivation whereby individuals inculcate societal beliefs and norms, define themselves and act in accordance with cultural expectations. As such culture is a powerful tool for the reproduction of meaning, social relations, classification and power configurations (Woodard 1997, 31, citing Emile Durkheim's theory of culture).

In Nigeria, culture is widely understood to mean the African traditional way of doing things. It is closely associated with oral myths, rituals and age-long customs that predate colonial rule, providing a framework for engagement with the natural and supernatural world. Therefore, ATR conceptualizes religion as a life-encompassing reality – ‘Everything is religious!’ (Stamer 1995, in Alolo 2007, 10). However, although, as already noted, religion is subsumed under culture in sociological analysis, Nigerians treat them as analytically discrete concepts; the tendency is to equate culture with African traditional beliefs and religion with Christianity or Islam. In both studies that informed this paper research participants used the term ‘culture’ when speaking about various forms of ATR and traditional norms and practices. Consequently, in this article culture is used in this narrow sense to imply African traditional beliefs and customs. In the gender fabric of Nigerian society Nweze and Takaya (2000, 1) explain how culture and religion converge through the graduated synthesis of Western (Judeo-Christian), Eastern (Arab Islamic) and African customs and traditions to produce ‘anti-female gender discrimination culminating in the abridgment and subjugation of women’s rights’ across all Nigerian cultures and sub-cultures. Female subordination and oppression are seen as rooted in the essential nature of male and female identity confirmed by ‘cultural’ regulations and divine ordinances. Thus, Nigerian women and men tend to advance natural, cultural and religious justifications for pervasive discriminatory treatment of women and girls, especially with regard to marital relations, inheritance, property and widowhood rights, female autonomy and participation in intra-household and public decision-making processes.

Both tradition and religion, by their characterization as ancestral or divine revelation, have earned a reputation for being averse to change such that gender roles and relations become fixated while interchange and flexibility are resisted or frowned at. Cultural and religious systems tend to embody the vested interests of powerful groups whose dominant ideology shapes the consciousness of the less powerful (Doyal and Harris 1986). Because religion is associated with the sacred as well as divine origins, dominant groups often use it to forestall resistance and legitimate their authority. In relation to ethnic, gender and racial identities Volf (1996) explains how Christian clergy, in taking on the biases of the dominant culture, facilitate the collusion between culture and religion, the sacralisation of cultural identity, and the legitimization of exclusion and oppression. As Alolo (2007, 8) rightly contends, the sacredness of religion restricts the degree to which it can be challenged.

Over the years, particularly since the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, with the ratification of CEDAW, the inception of the Better Life Project and the Beijing Platform for Action, women’s activism towards addressing the gendered stratification of Nigerian society has targeted practical gender needs mainly through economic and educational empowerment initiatives.⁶ For the most part, such agendas continue to shy away from confronting structural gender inequality directly for fear of a backlash from cultural and religious sentiments within and without their ranks. Women’s human rights groups, notably those at the forefront of the campaign for the domestication of CEDAW, are more explicit in their pursuit of gender equality through the promotion and protection of women’s rights.

The CEDAW campaign experience, discussed below, indicates the extent to which gender equality in the Nigerian context is a contested concept. In deference to cultural and religious sensibilities over gender roles a number of human rights activists adopt the term gender equity to avoid accusations of promoting gender similarity or outright role reversal (see, for instance, Imam 2008; Sada, Adamu, and Yusuf 2008; Odinkalu

2008). But as Phillips (1995) argues, gender equality need not imply the elimination but the celebration of difference in such a way that men and women can be both different and equal. Bryson (1999) further contends that policies aimed at promoting gender equality must focus on *equality of opportunity* and *equality of outcomes* to prevent the erosion of policy benefits by institutionalized gender bias. Bustelo (2001, 10), in discussing the need for social equality policy to expand citizenship and democratic participation, claims that in fact 'Equality then implies equity i.e. proportionality in the degree of access to the benefits and costs of development, and also redistributive justice, grounded in collective solidarity'.

In Western evangelical and liberal Christian literature four⁷ distinct strands of Christian thinking on gender equality can be identified: traditional patriarchy, evangelical patriarchy and evangelical or complementarian egalitarianism and Christian feminism.⁸ From the traditional and evangelical viewpoint gender hierarchy is the natural and God-ordained outworking of biological sex differences. Biology is destiny as certain roles like childcare and domestic work are the natural preserve of women; men are naturally suited to leadership and rigorous public engagement. Traditional patriarchy is uncompromising on male superior ranking in the home and in Church ministry. Talk of gender equality is considered a deviant Western feminist-driven agenda. This contrasts with the position articulated by evangelical patriarchalists, such as Piper and Grudem (1991), who do not subscribe to any notion of essential male superiority but accept the functional subordination of women in Church and family life. In other words women are not inferior but God has called them to certain roles suitable to their nature and barred them from others. According to Groothuis evangelical patriarchalists believe that though women are equal in their human essence and proven intellectual and moral competence, 'a woman's subordination still follows – necessarily and permanently – from what she necessarily and permanently is by nature (namely, female). Her personal being decides and determines her subordinate status' (Groothuis 2007, 328).

Egalitarians espouse an alternative view of gender roles and relationships based on the assumption that inherent equality in human essence is incompatible with gender hierarchy and functional female subordination in social life. They distinguish biological-sex roles (e.g. pregnancy and lactation) which only women can do, from socially constructed gender roles (e.g. housework and child rearing) which can be done by men and women. This understanding informs the commitment of evangelical egalitarians to gender justice in Church and society in a way that guarantees women equal opportunity to develop, deploy and enjoy the benefits of the *full range* of personal competencies and societal resources in all spheres of human endeavour. Christian feminism is similar to evangelical egalitarianism (also called biblical feminism) in the core belief about egalitarian gender roles and relations but does not invariably subscribe to the inerrancy of all Scripture as evangelicals do (Schüssler Fiorenza 1995). Egalitarians insist that being equal is not the same as male and female being identical. They would agree with the position of secular feminist Ann Phillips (1995) that gender differences do not justify gender inequality.

With reference to the African context, Gifford (1998) and Oduyoye and Kanyoro (1992) argue that historically a rich blend of traditional beliefs and practices of indigenous cultures with orthodox, evangelical, charismatic or Pentecostal ideologies has produced unique brands of African Christianity. Sofola (1992) contends that pre-colonial African cosmologies were in their own right essentially egalitarian and empowering for women as evidenced by the prevalence and

prominence of female priests within ATR. She further argues that even the vestiges of African tradition are severely scarred by a colonial patriarchal legacy that eroded female essence and identity. Nevertheless, in contemporary Africa, the growing phenomenon of evangelical and Pentecostal revivalism has occasioned a widespread practice of female ordination at high levels of ecclesiastical leadership (senior pastors, bishops and archbishops) as well as general acceptance of women's freedom in religious worship, including liberty to demonstrate spiritual gifting. Nevertheless, as Owanikin (1992) rightly points out, a patriarchal worldview permeates virtually all Nigerian cultural and religious systems to a lesser or greater degree. Hence, varying shades of Christian traditional or evangelical patriarchy hold sway across the different denominations.⁹ Responses of faith-based activists and religious leaders in the CEDAW study underscore this point. Mostly, their understanding of 'gender equality' fell somewhere along a traditional–evangelical patriarchal continuum that regards the male as the first among equals, and a few rejected the term outright. They were averse to the notion of gender equality because they saw it as implying identical nature and roles as well as a loss of status, power and privileges for men. A female secular activist explained it thus:

There is fear in this part [of the world] about the word 'equality' ... My own experience in having policy dialogue with men in Nigeria is that they are scared of what equality connotes. They are seeing it from the perspective of power relations like, 'Are you saying my wife should stop cooking and I should start cooking for her?'

It is worthy of note that in both the doctoral and CEDAW study research participants cited culture and religion as the major factors responsible for the lack of as well as pervasive societal opposition to gender equality. William J. Webb's redemptive-movement ethic provides a framework and hermeneutical grounding for intrinsic, functional and complete gender equality premised on evangelical and complementarian egalitarianism and, to some extent, on Christian feminism. It queries the static hermeneutic that freezes gender roles and relations in time and rests on a cardinal principle: the underlying message or spirit of the biblical text is redemptive aimed at the developmental progression of human society towards an ultimate ethic of the Kingdom Shalom (the the reign of peace on earth) where justice, equality, equity and righteousness prevail. As such when Christians remain gridlocked within a restrictive culture-bound interpretation of specific texts at the expense of an ultimate ethic of human development they are unfaithful to the central message of the Gospel.

In essence a redemptive-movement ethic argues that certain biblical texts are culturally bound and therefore only applicable within a specific time-frame and cultural context where at the time they represented an improvement on the prevailing culture. Others are trans-cultural and their truths apply for all time. Culturally bound texts envision a progressive move towards a higher ethic as society assimilates and adapts to the message. Webb's framework seeks to redeem religion from imprisonment within a patriarchal construct and is reminiscent of Christian feminist Susan Frank Parson's (1996, xii, preface by Robin Gill) 'search for redemptive communities which are not blemished by patriarchy, and the hope for a new vision of humanity'. Verhelst and Tyndale's (2002) assessment of the role of culture and spirituality in development processes attests to the need in all religions for redemptive movement. Their words are worth stating here:

Religions themselves have fundamental messages to deliver about an integrated vision of the world, a different approach to knowledge and the basic values that hold human societies together. But it is painfully obvious that religious institutions sharing, as they do, the flaws of all humanity, have often failed to act in accordance with their vision ... *They embody challenges which call for repentance and renewal, for a return to the original fire of each.* (Verhelst and Tyndale 2002, 8–9, my emphasis)

Finally, Webb bases his challenge of conservative interpretations of Christian Scripture on how Jesus Christ, the quintessence of Christianity, interacted with women. Jesus did not overtly address gender oppression in the course of his ministry but neither did he address other topical issues of his day such as political liberation of the Jews, slavery and poverty. In his interactions with women Jesus showed respect for their human worth, dignity and intelligence; he saw women first and foremost as persons whose needs and interests he validated. As sociologist Ian Robertson (1981, 321) noted, ‘Jesus himself seems to have been remarkably free from the patriarchal attitudes of his time’.

Bustelo’s earlier assertion regarding redistributive justice and collective solidarity strikes at the heart of what culture and religion deem just for women in the interest of the collective whole. As the personal testimonies of research participants in the doctoral field study show, more often than not, the interests of the community, as determined by the power brokers within it, are promoted at the expense of women. Frequently, both male and female research participants expressed fears about the consequences of gender equality for the cohesiveness of Nigerian family life and society. These opinions will be highlighted in the next section.

Educated women at the intersection of tradition, faith and modernity

In the immediate post-colonial era to be ‘educated’ in Nigerian parlance meant to have been exposed to formal western schooling. The National Policy on Education (as amended in 1999) envisions a minimum secondary school level of education for all Nigerians unlike its 1981 predecessor which stipulated universal primary education as the basic requirement. However, owing to widely acknowledged deterioration in the educational system a university degree is now considered as the baseline entry point in the competitive labour market. Thus, at the barest minimum, a shared understanding of what an ‘educated’ person is would be one who has some form of tertiary-level certification. Such people are often referred to in social science literature as part of an educated elite who are privileged as opposed to the majority grassroots and urban-poor populace. Formal western education opens up a wide range of socio-political opportunities and spaces to the Nigerian woman, and expands their scope of personal autonomy.

House-Nidamba and Ekechi (1995) argue that although Nigerian women have been economically independent since pre-colonial times, they have not been able to convert economic acumen alone to political power. This is borne out by the fact that the few women who have made it into political office have come mainly from among the educated elite. In addition, an empirical study of the impact of micro-credit schemes by Lont (2001) demonstrates that economic empowerment alone does not guarantee financial autonomy for women. However, whatever measure of autonomy or empowerment women are able to achieve in Nigerian society it is often mitigated by the dictates of culture and religion. Furthermore, although educated and economically empowered women may have identical levels of material well-being, findings

from the doctoral field study demonstrate that educated women usually have a higher level of awareness about their rights, and are more likely to break free from previously internalized and/or widespread traditional or religious beliefs about gender.

Despite their mutual allegiance to conservative and patriarchal notions about women's place in society, culture and religion are not static. They are subject to influences from urbanization and globalization which modify societal perspectives about women including women's views of themselves, the world they live in and their expectations of life. It is pertinent to note the paradoxical relationship between women, tradition and faith. Nigerian women are deeply committed to both either as custodians or captives of a social order in which they are simultaneously empowered and disempowered (Para-Mallam 2006, 68, 70). This is not to say they do not contest their subordinate position. Responses from women across all socioeconomic categories in the doctoral field study (grassroots, market, business and professional women) showed they do.

The campaign for the domestication of CEDAW is a key manifestation of contestation against female subordination. It is noteworthy that the domestication bid failed owing to fierce opposition from religious and traditional interests, notably the Catholic Church (spearheaded by the Catholic Women's Organization) and Muslim groups. CEDAW is widely perceived to be an abortion bill that grants unlimited rights to women, equal rights in marital relationships and overturns the natural leadership position of men. Thus, while female adherents and traditionalists opposed CEDAW because it threatened the institution of motherhood, their male counterparts saw it as a threat to male power and privilege. In a sense this brought about a convergence of women's interests with patriarchal values.

Both faith and tradition are sources of community belonging and prestige in relation to women's prized roles as wives and mothers. Nevertheless, in the practical outworking of gender roles and relations, patriarchy is not a unified, coherent or static concept, more so in the context of a modernizing African state in which men's patriarchal power is constantly being eroded by the practical demands of global capital rendering male-female roles and relations inexorably fluid (Silberschmidt 1999).

Notwithstanding, educated Nigerian women find themselves pulled in opposite directions by the forces of tradition, faith and modernity. On the one hand, traditional and religious indoctrination compels them to prioritize the socially acceptable female sphere of domesticity and supportive secondary endeavours. On the other, new global realities and opportunities urge them to aspire to greater economic and political involvement, and thereby achieve more personal fulfilment, status and power. So in the course of daily social interaction women must navigate diverse contexts in which they are required to alternate between powerful male roles or powerless/less powerful female scripts. This is not to say Nigerian women are powerless or less powerful than men in all social milieus. But the aspiration of educated women to participate on equal terms produces confusion over the legitimacy of female agency and the nature of their engagement with a world aligned primarily to masculine priorities and modes of being and doing. In the words of one research participant, Bolere (in Para-Mallam 2006, 212), 'The whole world stands on the male ego leg' – a world that is not inclined to accommodate female peculiarity. This was highlighted most clearly by research participants in three main domains: female leadership and participation in intra-household and political decision-making processes, career development and inheritance and property rights.

Female leadership and participation

In spite of constituting approximately 49% of the Nigerian population (2006 National Census), Nigerian women make up only 6.85% of parliamentarians nationwide and less than 10% of ministerial appointments (*Human Development Report 2007–8*). *Social Watch* (2006) reports that Nigeria's Gender Equity Index, a measure of educational, economic and political empowerment, is 45 out of 100 compared to Gambia (50), Ghana (58), Uganda (64), South Africa (70) and Rwanda (84). Okwuosa (1992, 5) explains that ideological, cultural, material and legal constraints have resulted in the relative 'de-politicisation of the female personality'. Educated women struggle over regulatory and attitudinal barriers that hinder their unfettered contribution to change processes that affect their lives. Yinka Olatunji (in Para-Mallam 2006, 195), an assistant director in a federal ministry and Christian, exemplifies the fix between her faith and feminist convictions about religiously prescribed limitations on female leadership in the Church which bar women from certain ecclesiastical roles even if they feel gifted in those areas:

Well, I don't know. Maybe I'm talking as a Christian maybe I will say I would talk differently. If I'm talking right now as a women activist or ... That's probably is where I now have my own watershed – that in religion I declare that I am a born again Christian therefore I am guided by the tenets of the Bible as it says it clearly. So I cannot talk to you as an ordinary human being now. I can only talk to you within the limits of what I believe within the scope of that religion.

In intra-household decision-making Nosa¹⁰ and Florence, both Masters graduates, opined that as a result of cultural influence and popular interpretation of biblical teaching on male headship and female submission, even educated men do not welcome women's equal participation. According to Florence:

When it comes down to it you find out that education hasn't really got an influence on the way the man thinks. It's the culture and the society. That's my own impression o¹¹ ... it depends on the man, you know the individual person. If he's the type that consults he will consult with the wife. But if he's not the type I don't think education has ... because when it comes down to it you find out that his ... culture has a lot of influence. (Para-Mallam 2006, 196)

Nosa went as far as to say that the difference between an educated and uneducated man is not significant in the light of the superseding impact of culture:

On the long run the results are almost the same whether the person is educated ... or not. You still find out that the man feels that because he has the right, he's the head of the home; he can take decisions whether in the beginning he consulted with the wife or ... he didn't consult. It's not as if to say education doesn't have its place but on the long run you find out that the educated man and the non-educated man are thinking and behaving the same. So culture seems to have a stronger effect on the mindset of the man than education. (Para-Mallam 2006, 196)

According to Bernice, a secondary school leaver and politician, men use culture and the lack of female intellectual ability to keep women out of family and community decision-making:

This cultural something. You know the men are intimidating us. They won't let us have any say. They won't let us have our own say. They want to take the whole decision by

themselves. And these are human beings! You don't have to decide for somebody, eh? ... You want to go and do this he [husband] will say, 'No o, don't do that o,' this and that. We are not given all that freedom like the men. We are not given all that freedom. But we want to be left alone to decide by ourselves. And although they said we have little mentality, maybe our decision may not be the best, but let us decide by ourselves. (Para-Mallam 2006, 191)

Valentina, wife of then Executive Governor of Plateau State, spoke of how religious and customary teaching among the predominantly Christian indigenes led to the devaluation, dependency and incapacitation of women in terms of independent decision-making and risk taking (Para-Mallam 2006, 190). On the other hand, Lucy, a journalist, claimed that it is not down to the mind-set of individual men or women alone but more to societal pressure to conform. She shared her experience working in a profession that is generally believed to be for 'loose women'. Although her husband is quite liberal in his ideas about female roles he had to be careful of being seen to be weak or not in control. Lucy explains further that it would be difficult to bring about equality in marital life even among educated couples, where wives tend to be more independent and outspoken, because culture still prevents married women from asserting their rights. In her words:

Like in eliminating gender inequality like I always say our culture, culture, culture, culture, we will always have a problem with that. If we want to create gender equality first and foremost, like I said, if you have women that are outspoken they will say in Hausa, '*ta fi karfi miji ta.*' She's controlling her husband. It starts from there and before you know it they are *zugaring* (instigating) the husband somewhere. (Para-Mallam 2006, 79)

On the political front, culture and religion act to sanction women's entry into formal politics as well as confine them to women's wings of political parties and in many instances to 'soft' portfolios.¹² Bernice, who, after two failed attempts, managed to mobilize enough women's votes to win elections as a Ward Councillor, recounted her personal experience with harassment, intimidation and abuse. At political meetings she and other women were called harlots who came into politics for the sole purpose of looking for men. Sarah, one-time presidential aspirant and party chairperson, alleged that even well-educated articulate women in politics were conveniently sidelined from mainstream politics through the structure of women's wings. Moreover, in political appointments she and Julie, former President of Plateau State National Council of Women's Societies, contended that a few prominent female political appointments represent a tokenistic strategy to appease female activists and is hugely disproportionate to the growing population of qualified women.¹³ According to them, cultural and religious gender bias continue to be the main, though not exclusive, hindrances to female political participation and representation. For instance, Julie explained that many more educated women may have ventured into politics if not for time constraints from domestic chores and child rearing that culture and Church doctrine insisted were their exclusive preserve. Indeed, all categories of women in the doctoral study showed clearly that they carried a triple burden from reproductive, productive and community development roles. In the CEDAW study some activists identified the tripartite legal system of statutory, customary and religious laws as an additional burden because they limit women's access to social justice and human rights. In the case of educated women these have far-reaching implications for career development.

Female career development

The incidence of poverty is higher among the women than men, except in relation to female-headed households (National Bureau of Statistics 2005). The *World Bank Gender Stats* (2002–5 data) (World Bank 2005) showed male labour force participation (MLFP) to be 65%, and 35% for females (FLPP). As noted earlier, increasing urbanization and globalization are expanding the range of career fields open to women considerably, yet time poverty remains a common denominator shared by Nigerian women that greatly hinders their ability to compete in the labour market. The doctoral study found that generally women have fewer leisure hours, less sleep and do more work (reproductive and productive combined) than men. Hilda, then Permanent Secretary in the Adamawa State Ministry of Women Affairs, claimed that the academic performance of girls in the state was adversely affected by a double burden of school and domestic work. As a result, most girls wake up earlier and go to bed later than boys; they have less time for homework and recreation, and are more likely to be pulled out of school in the event of financial hardship and/or for marriage.

During a focus group discussion with business and professional women they shared how traditionalism had thwarted their academic and professional aspirations. Nosa (a Masters graduate in physics) gave personal testimony that is particularly instructive in showing how women's goals are often sublimated to the interests and needs of significant other males in their lives:

I've always had a flare for computer science ... even when I finished secondary school I actually wanted to read computer science but my father didn't buy into it at that time. So, for me it was like here's an opportunity to do this ... But you see things were not very smooth at that time because I didn't sit with my husband to discuss it with him ... I found I have to make some sacrifices for the good of the family, not necessarily looking at it from my perspective ... So, I had to just withdraw ... I find it a bit difficult to explain to people, I paid so much, I paid all my fees, I was very interested in the course and you know, from the way I was coming I know I would have been one of the good ones in the class. But I had to cut all that short. (Para-Mallam 2006, 200)

Similarly, Irene, then President of the National Association of Women Academics, underscored the real challenges academic women faced in trying to compete with male academics to fulfil the mandate to 'publish or perish'. She alluded to three factors that severely curtail women's career prospects: low expectations of women by the establishment, sexist attitudes from colleagues and a psychology of female underachievement. Consequently, female academics end up being far outpaced by their male counterparts.

Inheritance and property rights

A survey by the Centre for Housing Rights and Evictions in 2004 found that Nigerian women's inheritance and property rights are denied by the concomitant existence of customary and religious (Islamic) laws that limit female access to land and property. Nigerian statutory law ensures the equal right of men and women to acquire and dispose of both as an essential element of citizenship rights. Yet, the myriad of customary and religious laws exert greater influence over the lives of women, particularly grassroots and urban poor women who cannot afford to purchase land or housing. Although under statutory law land ownership is vested in the secular government in practice, the structure of kinship relationships and land tenure systems ensures that

access to land and property is primarily through a patrilineal system of inheritance that largely excludes females.

For the majority of women, whether educated or not, although they may have the advantage of independent income to purchase land, prevailing economic conditions make it difficult to mobilize the required resources. Moreover, they are not culturally conditioned to do so because it is seen as a male responsibility. A comment by Bernice when asked whether access to inherited land and property was a problem in her locality drove this point home:

Big problem here. Like for instance, when my father died they never gave me any land. My brothers shared the land among themselves. Even when they are selling it, when they sell they wouldn't even give me a naira. That is our culture here, which is so bad. Even if you have a land, now that I'm married ... maybe I have land or any property, eh? I won't own that property. They say it's your husband's property. Yes! You cannot claim it. But you bought those things with your money. They will say you are not entitled because you are in your husband's house. (Para-Mallam 2006, 83)

Hilda, a widow and mother of five children, recounted how when her husband died neither she nor her children were allowed to inherit any of his property due to prevailing customs. At that time she felt lucky to be educated and have a steady income. Yet, her education did not safeguard her against cultural gender bias.

Strategies for enhancing development outcomes in female education

In order to address the challenges posed by tradition and religion to gender equality agendas, gender-aware planning needs to be introduced into the entire educational system, in terms of content, context and delivery (Leo-Rhynie 1999; Verloo et al. 2007; Working Group on Higher Education (WGHE) 2006). The essence of such a gender mainstreaming approach is to ensure that the needs and interests of girls and women are factored into every dimension of the education sector to produce optimal development outcomes to all. This entails targeting subtle and overt ideological influences on educational content and context as well as the tools and mediums for the delivery of curricula. The rest of the section draws attention to certain issue-areas where mainstreaming gender perspectives are particularly required, but which are not given specific mention or sufficient elaboration in the NGP or the Strategic Framework document.

Language use

Sardar (2008, 8) asserts that language is the 'cultural tool par excellence' for determining social behaviour. He points to research in bioinformatics and genomics at Harvard and Reading Universities, respectively, that confirm 'a quantitative relationship between words and change' (2008, 10) and discusses how language in itself constitutes both social perception and action with implications for social equality. Consequently, in order to direct human attitudes and behaviour towards equality there has to be conscious effort to change language use. This implies the engendering of language. Feminist commentators have long pointed out preponderance of andocentric language use in Nigerian official documents, in public/private discourse and in educational material.

Words like 'he', 'man or men', 'manpower', 'policeman' are incorrectly assumed to be gender-neutral. But they convey an impression that the standard citizen is male,

the standard reference point is masculine, and thereby devalue females and femininity. Most significantly, they render the physical entity, views, experiences, needs and interest of females unimportant and invisible. Consequently, a key element in curriculum review, besides changing the content, is promoting the use of gender-neutral and gender-sensitive language (e.g. he: they; man or men: person or people; manpower: labour power; policeman: police officer). Sardar (2008, 11) cites evidence from the research to support the principle that promoting equality requires the need 'to err on the side of politeness' in order to foster consideration, courtesy, civility and fairness in society.

At the level of indigenous cultures proverbs and folklore help to create and reinforce gender stereotypes. A 1999 Survey of Harmful Traditional Practices against Women and Girls in Nigeria (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development 1999) found that proverbs and local sayings act as psychological constraints against transforming societal attitudes and behaviour. Within the church setting most commonly used biblical translations such as the King James Version, the New King James Version and the New International Version are replete with 'he' man language that puts men and maleness at the centre of reality. The central characters in most biblical narratives are male or male-oriented. Leadership roles in church and society are dominated by men. This implies that language is key in promoting role models for young impressionable minds. The predominance of he-man language in Nigerian educational curricula coincides with a dearth of historical and contemporary female role models for young girls and boys to conceive a more participatory society. However, as in both the New and Old Testaments, exceptional women loom large in Nigerian history that excelled in male-dominated fields. Webb's redemptive-movement ethic points to a progressively gender-inclusive social order in the ministry of Jesus Christ that extended the Jewish male priesthood to the community of brothers and sisters in Christ as well as the priesthood of all believers. Similarly, Ruth Dul, a faith-based activist in the CEDAW study, drew attention to the need for institutional and constitutional reform in most church denominations, particularly conservative ones, as a means of introducing progressive ideas about gender identity, roles and relations and thereby promoting a woman-friendly environment within church settings with a rippling effect on the wider cultural context. This calls for a collaborative working relationship between educational and religious institutions as a deliberate intervention strategy in national education policy.

Teacher training and monitoring

The importance of promoting gender-sensitivity among teachers who are powerful vehicles for the transmission of ideas and attitudes to impressionable minds is underscored by the (WGHE) of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (2006) as well as policy studies on gender mainstreaming published by the Commonwealth Secretariat (Leo-Rhynie 1999) and the European Development Fund (EDF) (Verloo et al. 2007). In the doctoral study, a clear example of teacher gender cultural bias is demonstrated by the following story told by Josephine, a Masters graduate and women's activist, about an experience her daughter had at school:

The teacher was actually the one that called my attention, that they were teaching them social studies – of course it's the stereotype social studies: daddy goes to work, who

cooks the food? Mummy. Who sweeps? Who tidies? Mummy and the girl. So they asked her, who cooks and who does the chores at home? She said, 'Aunty' (I have a cook – a lady that comes in) 'It's aunty that does it and mummy if she's at home sometimes, daddy sometimes', and the teacher said, 'No this is not...' – you know [she] wanted her to say what they taught her and she said, 'No!' and they said, 'Okay daddy is the one that brings money' and she said, 'My mummy brings in money too; my mummy buys things for me too'. ... So I had to go to the teacher and I said, 'this is a dilemma you people are putting these ... it's a stereotype thing you are teaching them: 'Oh daddy is the one that brings money, mummy is...' – man-the-hunter, woman-the-gatherer. (Para-Mallam 2006, 223–4)

Nigerian teachers and education officers/supervisors need to be made aware of the gender bias inherent in the various curricula, the socio-cultural and physical environment and in their own views and expectations as well as their consequences and how to overcome them. This is particularly important because in many rural areas religious leaders double as teachers, principals and education officers. One of the key recommendations that emerged from the CEDAW study in relation to transforming social perspectives and behaviours towards gender issues was the need to conduct gender sensitization and awareness training among religious leaders who wield enormous influence over individual beliefs and public opinion. In this way, gender conscientization could serve as a practical strategy towards a constructive engagement between sacred and secular texts. Stella Amadi, a secular activist who participated in the CEDAW study, described how this had been successfully accomplished in Gambia where a family law had been passed to promote women's rights and gender equality. In addition to providing gender education for opinion moulders, it is also necessary to institute a monitoring system at school and inspectorate levels for system-wide change.

Gender-friendly learning environment

How safe is the school environment for girls? The NGP admits that gender-based violence is a serious problem in Nigeria but does not pinpoint its damaging effects in the learning environment. At all levels girls experience sexual harassment and assault primarily from male teachers or authority figures and male colleagues, including religious instructors. The incidence of teen pregnancy among school goers is widespread. Garba (2006) asserted that this fact is one reason parents in Kano State were reluctant to send girl-children to school, particularly co-educational schools.

To promote effective learning for girls they need to feel that the school environment is not predatory or sexualized. The University of Jos is an example of an educational establishment that has taken the threat of gender-based violence seriously. In 2006 it approved a gender policy that, among other strategies, set up a Sexual Harassment Committee and a Gender and Diversity Complaints Committee for reporting sexual offences and violence. It establishes good practice worth emulating by other educational establishments at all levels. Because of the close proximity between church and society in daily social interaction Nigerian federal, state and local government educational authorities could adopt a pragmatic strategy of providing sex and gender-based violence training to religious leaders of both sexes, who often have the confidence and respect of their parishioners. Such training should stress the need for privacy and confidentiality for victims/survivors in view of the culture of shame surrounding sexuality in Nigerian society.

Indigenous and other information and communication tools

The NGP recognizes the importance of information and communication in the task of value re-orientation with regard to views about gender issues. Indigenous communication styles and media such as storytelling, role play, town hall meetings, public squares, etc., would be useful in this regard owing to their broad acceptability among Nigerians at the grassroots. Salami-Agunloye (2007) highlights the important role of female writers, theatre artists and film producers in re-writing or re-enacting their own stories and identities as a viable means of societal transformation. For instance, gender and development practitioners are now using theatre for development approaches as a culturally-sensitive tool for teaching literacy to street children. In addition to formal media channels like television, radio, home video and written texts, local communications styles, networks and spaces could also be employed to challenge taboos and introduce new ideas and basic gender concepts to children and adults. This tool would be particularly useful in creating re-enactments of biblical narratives in a way that brings to life the progressive message of female emancipation consistent with a redemptive-movement ethic through the medium of various indigenous folklore and languages. This is somewhat different from the local language voice-over on the *Jesus Film* which could have been even more successful if it had re-created the gospel story using culturally relevant narratives and symbols.

Conclusion

This article demonstrated that access to education, crucial as it may be for enhancing the social status and improving the material conditions of Nigerian women, is not sufficient to produce gender equality unless fundamental steps are taken to address prevalent cultural and religious gender bias. This requires a critical interrogation of the commonly held beliefs that inform sexist ideology as well as intervention strategies aimed at transforming the patriarchal paradigms that underlie educational systems and policy. The paper proposed a redemptive-movement hermeneutic as a framework for the progressive interpretation of sacred texts and a foundation for en-gendering the content, context and delivery of education.

Notes

1. In this paper I use ATR in view of the general agreement among scholars that there are common threads that link the multiplicity of African belief systems into a unitary whole (Alolo 2007).
2. This has been revised to become the National Gender Policy.
3. The original field study included male research participants and covered the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria, although the bulk of the research was done in Plateau State. For complete details of the research sample see Para-Mallam (2006).
4. The thesis has also been published by VDM Verlag dr Müller, Germany under the title, *Nigerian Women Speak. A Gender Analysis of Government Policy on Women* (2007).
5. This is part of a Department for International Development-sponsored Religion and Development research programme being conducted in four countries (India, Nigeria, Pakistan and Tanzania). The study covered both Christian and Muslim research participants. The first draft report is under review.
6. For a detailed discussion on practical and strategic gender interests, see Molyneux (1985), Moser (1993) and Young (1997).
7. There is also a fifth, but less distinct, 'pluralist' strand that straddles a middle ground between evangelical patriarchalism and egalitarianism. It could fall under Webb's

- classification of ‘ultra-soft patriarchy’ because while endorsing the opening ecclesiastical ministry and public participation to women it insists on benign or benevolent male leadership (Liefeld 1989; Webb 2001).
8. Webb (2001) points out a slight difference between evangelical and complementarian egalitarianism in that some evangelical egalitarians deny biological sex roles as a basis for any difference in gender roles. Complementarians admit difference and but not as a basis for discrimination and devaluation. Many evangelical egalitarians would agree.
 9. Tobin (1985, 291 in Aluko 1999, 66) explains how patriarchy is a socially constructed ideology of male dominance that ‘assumes the alienation of women. It places the male on the centre of reality and makes the masculine normative. In such a world order, women cannot be anything but inferior since if the male/masculine is normative they are different (abnormal). Where patriarchy as a worldview is in operation, symbols, rituals and laws will perpetuate fundamental inequality’.
 10. Name changed on request.
 11. A Nigerian manner of speech.
 12. During the democratic administration of Olusegun Obasanjo the culture of soft portfolios for women was fractured when he appointed women to typically male positions as Ministers of Finance, Defence, Science and Technology, and Aviation.
 13. In 2005 10% of political appointees were female (*Human Development Report 2007–8*).

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