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Contents

1	“Heaven Helps Only Those Who Help Themselves”: Ladipo Solanke and the WASU Hostels in London—Ochiai, Takehiko,	1
2	Polygamy and the Rights of Women: Reflections on Religious Feminism —Fayemi, Ademola Kazeem	18
3	Beyond Racism: Language Use, Raciolinguistics and the Cognition of Africa —Adegbindin, Omotade, PhD.	31
4	Referencing and Academic Integrity and Excellence: An Evaluation —Onyemelukwe, Ifeoma Mabel	42
5	A Constructivist Critique of Gene Editing—Macaulay-Adeyelu, Olawunmi	53
6	Referring Expressions in Nigerian Stand-Up Contexts—Filani, Ibukun & Bamgbose, Ganiu Abisoye	63
7	José Luandino Vieira: Marcas de Africanidade, Inovação E Autenticidade No Texto Literário—Bamisile, Sunday Adetunji, PhD	83
8	Analysis of <i>Gangbe</i> Music of Badagry Ogu Community, Lagos, Nigeria —Loko, Olugbenga Olanrewaju, PhD	95
9	The Fanti Carnival in Lagos and its Message of Morality—Ōnádípè-Shalom, Títílàyò.	106
10	The Life and Times of Musa Ajagbemokeferi: 1933-2000—Bello, Mufutau Olusola, PhD & Balogun, Badrudeen Adesina.	113
11	Ìmò Ìjìnlẹ̀ Èrò Yorùbá Nínú Orin Fuji Saheed Òṣùpá—Taiwo, Adekemi Agnes	125
12	A Study of Lexical Priming in Newton Jibunoh's <i>Hunger for Power</i> —Hunjo, Henry J., PhD & Ajakah, John Chukwuma	137
13	Fífi àṣà Ìṣẹ̀lù tìpá Tíkúùkù yìirì Ìpolongo Ìbo ni Ipilẹ̀ Èkó—Olómì, Oyèwolé Òlamide	156
14	L'Implication de la Theorie du Skopos dans la Traduction des Anthroponymes —Oye, Adetola Olujare, PhD.	168
15	Traduire le hanló ou la chanson satirique fon en français: Dilemme identitaire, défis et fonctionnalité—Houenon, Casimir & Umah, Paulinus	177
16	Conversational implicature and Politics in Achebe's <i>A Man of the People</i> —Ndeche, Chinyere, PhD.	191
17	Nehemiah's Strategy of Fighting Corruption and Injustice in Neh. 5: 1-19: Implication for Incorruptible and Just Leadership in Nigeria's Democracy—Apuuivom, Daniel B., PhD, Inyaregh, Abel A., PhD & Aande, Simeon I., PhD	202
18	Salman, Hakeem, PhD— الثورة فنّية اجتماعية علي الشعر العربي الكلاسيكي	214

2

Polygamy and the Rights of Women: Reflections on Religious Feminism

Fayemi, Ademola Kazeem

Abstract

This paper philosophically examines feminism in relation to the practice of polygamy and the question of women's rights in religion. It discusses the popular arguments that several aspects of Christianity and Islam are incompatible with the tenets of universal women's rights and feminism. Contrary to the assumptions that both religions are homely with the subordination of women to men, and the suppression of women's rights, this paper contends that women are accorded rights and recognized just as men in Islam and Christianity. The paper unpacks polygamy to show the protection of women's rights in both religions. It argues against liberal feminists' wont to condemning the religions as repressive (of women's liberation and slavish of women's rights and positions) in a social structure. It establishes that in spite of the antinomies arising from the religious conception of women and their gender roles, their rights are still recognized and protected, and that polygamy can still be rationally defended as deserving and worth courting within the light of contemporary realities and challenges.

Keywords: women's rights, polygamy, Islam, feminism, womanism

Introduction

THE SUBJECTS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND THE STATUS ACCORDED THEM IN religion have been recurrent issues in recent past. The discourse centers on the vulnerability of the feminine gender to the burden of historical, religious, and cultural stereotypes across different societies in the world. Women have generally been victims of oppressions, victimizations, social inequality and injustices. This becomes more pathetic when situated within the religious domain wherein there are serious tensions between the desire to jealously keep to the religious doctrines, and the desire to keep abreast with contemporary trend of redefinition of sex roles (Hassan, 1986:16). Being in this state of dilemma, one

wonders what effects the universal notion of human rights has on the promotion of women's rights in the world of the religions, especially in Africa.

The 1948 document on Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) ratified and adopted by the United Nations States in universal terms the human rights of all peoples and all nations. These rights which are grouped under the sub-headings of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights are derived from the fact of universal humanity. They are innate to human's existence and they are rights which every human enjoys and shares with fellow humans. As an ideal, the universal human rights should therefore be granted and guaranteed to everyone irrespective of culture, race, sex, religion or creed. However, rather than referring to the lofty document of Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is common for Christians and Muslims to resort to the authority of their holy scriptures, in knowing the rights of women, their roles and status in social structure and relations. Some aspects of these universal human rights as it relates to women have even been challenged in some parts of the world, especially by the Muslims, and in Muslim countries. The claim in this regard is that women's rights must be understood and practicalized only in the context of Islamic religious injunctions.

The basic questions here are: are the rights of women as enshrined in the UDHR compatible with the religiously approved rights of women or are there fundamental differences in the positions of religion and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on the imperative of promoting equality and freedom of the female folk? Are the two religions (Christianity and Islam)¹ homely with the oppression, and suppression of women to men in its divine decrees and injunctions, or is it altogether a question of misinterpretation of the spirit and letters of the scriptures?

Generally, there is a long history of unequal relation between men and women in human society whether in the East, South, North or West pole of the globe. Feminism arose as a consequence of these general discriminatory gender relations of rights and the quest to liberate women from all types of historical stereotype. While today there are different brands of feminism, feminism essentially evolved as a thought and agenda for action aimed at eliminating gender hierarchies in all societies of the world irrespective of the religious or ideological proclivities. Given the evolutionary and reactionary trends of feminist movements across the world as well as the conservative nature of the two religions in this paper, the question is, do the agitations and claims of feminism contradict the ontological and gender perceptions of women in Christianity and Islam? Are there feminist movements in the Muslim world and to what extent have they improved the status of Muslim women in the face of tremendous gender oppressions and inequality perpetuated under the garb of Islamic tradition? Are there Christian feminists and do their agitations correlate with scriptural injunctions about women? Does the need for domestication of feminism arise at all within these issues?

1 While there are many religious traditions, this paper intends to focus on Christianity and Islam.

In discussing feminism in relation to women's rights under religion, the paper shall examine two major issues: polygamy and rights given to women giving illustrative scriptural examples of the numerously cited instances of gender imbalance and women's oppression in Christianity and Islam. While recognizing the need to situate the issues within the African experience, the word 'feminism' becomes too western to solve the inherent problem and therefore, a womanist philosophy of rights is advocated. This paper hereby examines the above issues closely under five sections. The first section is this conceptual prologue. The second section discusses feminism and the practice of polygamy in the religions. The third section presents Christianity, Islam and women rights. In section four, certain disparities in the Universal Declaration of Human rights of women and the religions are highlighted, while the last section is the conclusion, where the impact of African feminist movement on the religions is also discussed.

Feminism and the Practice of Polygamy in Religions

Polygamy or polygyny is a term used to refer to the custom of being married to more than one wife at the same time. Though the cross-cultural practice of polygamy "has long been perceived to be in conflict with the ideals of gender equality, inherently subordinates women, violates the dignity of women" (Mwambene 2017: 2), it is unlike polyandry (common among certain hill tribes in India) which allows the woman to marry multiple husbands and is restricted to selected societies. The first point in this discussion is that while the task of spouse choice is primarily reserved for men, the consent of women is not completely ignored.

Polygamy flourished in the Old Testament era of the Bible, but later began to lose savor in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, men were permitted to have as many wives as they desired. In fact, it was a norm for women to give out their maids to their husbands whenever their place in that marriage is threatened. One marked feature of polygamy in the Bible is unhealthy rivalry among women due to the partial treatment they got from their husbands. Polygamy also engenders a high level of domestic crises ranging from division, rape, incest and struggle for inheritance among others. In similar case with most African societies, the Judaist culture cherishes polygamy seeing that it provides the needed manpower to sustain their occupation (mostly farming and animal husbandry). Levirate (a widow marrying her late husband's brother) and sororate (a widower marrying his late wife's sister) marriage are also encouraged and even backed by the mosaic laws, while polyandry is totally prohibited:

For the woman which hath a husband is bound by the law to her husband, so long as he liveth: but if the husband is dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress, but if her husband be dead, she is free from the law; so that she is no adulteress though she be married to another man (Romans 7:2-3)

Another evident condemnation of polyandry is found in 2 Corinthians 11:2 stating that: “For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband...”

Nonetheless, the New Testament was almost silent on polygamy issues; we use the term ‘almost silent’ because Apostle Paul affirms that only people who intend or wish to be titled holders in the church should be men of one wife; “A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife....” (1 Timothy 3:2). “Let the deacons be the husband of one wife, ruling their children and their own house well” (1 Timothy 3:12). “if any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children, not accused of riot or unruly” (Titus 1:6). The implication is that order than this, polygamy is permissible.

In present day Christianity as practiced in Africa, most Christian sects still tolerate polygamy, except for the Pentecostals who openly frown at the act. Hiding under the bondage of civil marriage, which forbids polygamy, most men keep concubines outside wedlock. This practically takes their attention off the woman and deprives her of most, if not all of the purported essence of marriage. This is a contributory factor to the feminist (basically western feminist) agitation for right to divorce, which is not without its tolling effects on the children, and ultimately, the society.

The practice of polygamy among Muslims, which is deep rooted in the *Shariah* and other Islamic sources of divine authority, has received serious condemnations in some circles, particularly, feminists of the liberal leaning, are wont to condemning it. This is because polygamy to them, essentially marks a strong instance of male's domination of women in an unbalanced world of rights, inequality and power hierarchy. The Qur'an says:

If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two or three or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with (them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess, that will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice (chapter 4, verse 3).

The above verse can be interpreted in diverse ways. Irrespective of the interpretations, the social and domestic problems that this practice usually creates is what makes it most questionable. In spite of the above, it is still arguable that polygamy has been enjoined in Islam only to honor and favor women. When we are to take cue from the claim that the number of women in the world exceeds that of men, especially after the Second World War, and that currently it is accentuating towards the ratio of four to one, then is polygamy not likely to be the best solution to this predicament? Since the number of women is out bursting that of men, what shall we do to upset the balance? Shall we deprive women of the blessing of marriage and motherhood; and thus let her walk the way of whoredom and vice, as it happened in Europe owing to the increase in number among women after the last world war? Or shall we solve this problem by noble

ways that preserve the women's honor, the family's purity and the wholeness of society? Which is more honorable and more ethical, that a woman should be bound with a holy bond in which she joins other women under the shelter (or even outside it) of a man in a legal, noble manner, or that we let her become a mistress or a 'sugar mummy' of that man, the relationship between them then being sinful and evil? (Al al-Sabuni, 427).

Feminists describe the argument on women population as lame excuse and ask, if a man is justifiably allowed to marry more than one wife in Islam, why should a woman not be allowed to marry also more than one husband? Because polyandry is forbidden in the religions (Christianity and Islam), the conclusion is easily made by feminists that men and women are not equal in the eyes of the God(s) of both religions, and that such act like polygamy, is a veritable instance that women are discriminated against and are subjected to repressive life in the religions.

While the practice of polygamy usually raises dust in the home because of the innate tendencies of jealousy of the wives and preferential treatment by the husband, the polygamy phenomenon raises some challenges for humanity, which we must consciously and continually contend with. These are the challenges of tolerance, equity and justice. Though polygamy has unfortunately been abused by men, but given its intent, its spirit is primarily to honor women, and protect their rights and interests. It is on this basis that we see it as deontologically justified and justiciable. We may then proceed to analyse women rights in the two religions.

Christianity, Islam, and Women Rights

Both the old and new testaments present case studies of high regard for women; they also record instances of interventions whenever women rights are threatened. Such cases include Hagar, whose son was rescued from death after being accused of rivalry and sent out by her husband (Genesis 21: 15-20); perhaps, this is an indication of the right to life. Mention can also be made to the right of women to inheritance (though not explicit) as presented in the case of Zelophedad's daughters (Numbers 27: 1-7). The right of women to share properties could be found in Psalm 68:12. Deborah's case exemplifying the right to hold public office and doing the jobs naturally regarded as men's occupation (Judges 4: 4). Also of note are the scriptural descriptions of rape and incest as wickedness, (Leviticus 18:17) and the protection of women from all forms of harassment as described in Revelation (12: 1-6). These and many more reflect the protection of women's rights in Christianity. We must also note that contemporary Christianity accords even more rights to women than in the past. However, we cannot ignore evident suppressions and repressions of women in Christianity.

The origin of women subordination in Christianity can be traced to the creation story (Genesis 2:7, 15) "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.... And the Lord God took the man and put him into the Garden of

Eden to dress it and to keep it.” It is generally interpreted here that man was first made before the woman, implying elderliness, experience and dominance. This position is supported in the New Testament where man is described as “the image and the glory of God while the woman is the glory of the man”. This is so because: “The man is man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman, but the woman for the man” (1 Corinthians 11: 8-9). The suppression and repression of women's rights comes to bare in Christianity with a denial of freedom of expression as proffered in I Timothy 2: 11-12 “a woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man; she must be silent”. This instruction or injunction is weighty because it cuts across all aspects of the woman's life be it social, economic, political and even spiritual.

Although explicitly stated in the above quoted verses that women are below men and are to be so by design, the implicitly stated freedom of women from these scriptures are usually ignored. Genesis 1: 27b-28 states that:

Male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that creepeth upon the earth

The above verse clearly states the need for interdependence and also does not specify who is to have dominion, this imply that the rights were given unreservedly to both man and woman at the beginning. For Alabi (2010:142) the theological import of the blessings in the scripture above transcends biological fruition:

She is blessed to be fruitful and multiply in all other areas she ventures into. She is not to be caged and subjugated politically, she is also to take dominion and fulfil her ambitions. Women are not subsidiaries to issues of politics, religion, social or economy.

In the same vein, 1 Corinthians 11: 11-12 maintains that “neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man in the Lord. For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God”. How else do we interpret the above quoted scriptures if not that they connote the rights of women? Some thinkers even argue that it may be doubtless that woman and man once maintained equal status, but that the woman lost her place to the background after she was deceived by the serpent: “and thy desire shall be unto thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” (Genesis 3:16b). Ratcliffe's (2012) argues that Judaic monotheist authors put this statement into their God's mouth in order to give the new patriarchal supremacy and the rule of men over women an imagined divine authorization. This is a rather radical position which is, in all modesty needless; for what more can be said about 1 Peter 3:7 which states that “likewise, husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honor unto the wife as unto the weaker vessels, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers be not hindered” (emphasis ours). While this paper does

not ignore the possibility of an injection of patriarchal and cultural values into the scriptures, it is noteworthy that the practice of religion by people has often turned out to be a denigration of the right of women.

As regards women's rights in Islam, there is this popular impression that women in Islam have no rights and that they are naturally meant to be subordinated to men. There are two sources of this popular impression: "patriarchal interpretation of the text" and the "reality". Many people are wont to citing some verses from the Holy Qur'an, which is the most authoritative book in Islam, as expressive of the position that women have no rights and that where they do, such rights are conservatively discriminative and fosters gender imbalance in social roles and structures. In this light, there are patriarchal interpretations of the texts on women's rights by some Muslim scholars. Some of the Qur'anic verses often quoted (and which shall be examined subsequently, are chapter 4, vs. 11, chapter 4, vs. 22 to 24, chapter 4, vs. 34, etc). This is the textual aspect of the source of the dark perception of women's right in Islam.

The second source is the practical observations of how Muslim women (and women in the Muslim world) are being treated and related with by the male gender in different parts of the world. In such observations, there is the manifestation of slavish treatment of women, repression of their rights and their subordination to their male counterparts. For instance, the Maulvis, which placed a great emphasis on the seclusion of women while ignoring their God-given rights and freedoms. So also, is the Taliban regime that oppresses and beat women as a norm.

There are some conceptual errors and fallacies involved in the above popular sources of women's rights denial and suppression in Islam which need immediate clarification. One, on the first source, there is the problem of misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the Qur'anic texts, which are often quoted. The Qur'an, if properly interpreted is a very humane document that accords cognizance to the rights and privileges of women, even above their male counterparts.

Second, with regards to the other source of the public perception of women's right in Islam, a logically false inference is made when a male Muslim is seen maltreating the wife or wives, the condemnation is passed on to the religion, Islam. For instance, when people observe the Taliban who oppress and beat women based on their crude tribal customs they pass it off as Islam. Such conclusions as these involve a false conflation of the religion with the individual practitioner's personal attitude and cultural norms, which in any case are different. Conclusions about Islamic perceptions of women's rights, roles, obligations, and freedoms should strictly be based on the correct understanding of the spirit and letter of the Qur'an, and Haddith, and not on Muslims' attitudes and behaviors.

Having noted the above, the fundamental question to raise this point is: Is it the intent of God to create men and women unequally or equally? The greatest source of the inferiority assumption of the women as earlier stated has to do with the religious belief on the myth of creation. This myth, which most Muslims and even adherents of the Jewish and Christian traditions believe is that God has given

men superiority over women. But in truth, the Qur'an says nothing about the secondary creation of woman 'Eve' from man, Adam. Scholars have established various grounds for the equality of male and female. For Bala (2010) who follows thinkers like Abdal'Atis (1977), Nadvi (1990) and Umari, (1990), "human biological existence is another clear evidence of men-women equality: both came to life in the womb and are given birth to by women in exactly the same fashion; hence, ruling out the question of superiority or inferiority between them". Furthermore, Bala (2010:303) affirms that both men and women are equally obliged to practice the principles of Islam and their deeds are equally regarded. In the same vein, Qur'an also supports equality in education, obligation and reward.

A cross section look of Qur'an chapter 2:30-40, chapter 2:35-39, chapter 7:19-25 as well as chapter 4:1 where the creation story was given reveals that Islam only talks about human creation in absolutely egalitarian terms. This is revealed in Qur'an chapter 4, verse 1: "O man kind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created, of like nature, his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women...."

In fact, the egalitarian human relation which ought to exist between men and women is given in the chapter 4, verse 19 of the Holy Quran where Allah enjoins:

O ye who believe! Ye are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should ye treat them with harshness, that ye may take away apart of the dower ye have given them, except where they have been guilty of open lewdness; on the contrary live with them on a footing of kindness and equity (emphasis ours).

One very popular and important verse in the Holy Qur'an which is often quoted as depicting Allah's commandment on the gender superiority of man over and above women is verse 34 of chapter 4 of the Qur'an, which reads:

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given them one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoted obedient, and guard in (the husband's absence what God would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds, (and last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance): for God is most High, great (above you all).

The often-quoted query with the above verse can be located in two folds. One is that God has given men more strength than the women and as such, men are lord or master over women. The Arabic word, *quawamun*, in that verse is usually translated as ruler or master and with such interpretation; a hierarchical relationship is established between the man as the ruler and the woman as the ruled. This interpretation is misleading. The word *qawwamun* means 'pillar' or 'breadwinner' and it is an economic term. It only shows that Allah has created men and women as equals, however, with different responsibilities. The obligation

of the man, which is to provide for the economic needs of the woman, becomes a right for the women. The obligation of the women is to be obedient, loyal and seek the happiness of the man.

The point in the above is that a correct interpretation of the first aspect of the verse reveals that while God created men and women equally, they are given identical obligations as well as physiologically and psychological compositions. In fact, chapter 4, verse 19 of the Holy Qur'an stresses the equality of men and women:

O ye who believe! Ye are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should ye treat them with harshness, that ye may take away part of the dowry and have hem, except where they have been guilty of open lewdness; on the contrary, live with them on a footing of kindness and equity.

The above notwithstanding, a careful look at the later part of the verse 34, chapter four, of the Qur'an as quoted previously, will show that God enjoins men to beat lightly their women as the last resort when they are unrepentant in engaging in ill-conduct. This is the second hard-nut usually quoted as the islamically cruel treatment of women and which confer on them inferior status and rights. This injunction is repressive of women's dignity and cruel; it again poses the question of an inducement of personal or cultural views into the scripture because there is no way a meaningful defense can be put up in support of the battering (whether lightly or heavily) of women under any circumstance. To this, Akachi (2004:173) points out that it seems that religion and culture have been held responsible for worsening the predicament of women. This is not without the theological pitfalls in the interpretation of some texts used to suppress women. Women are highly honored in Islam; those who tend to oppress women do it only out of their own selfish greed and not because they are being ordered to do so by Allah.

In the words of Bala (2010:298), "the degeneration of Muslim women around the world over the past centuries is a necessary corollary to their cultural disorientation wrought in the main by the colonial holocaust." Allah enjoins men not to be harsh on women (Qur'an 4:19), and not to take undue advantage of them (Qur'an 2:231). Islam not only gives women rights in their day-to-day affairs, it places women (especially mothers) in an enviable position, a status that demands respect, and veneration (Qur'an 46:15). Also, in Qur'an Chapter 33 verse 35, the equality of male and female is emphasised:

Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who do so, and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so - for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward.

The inference we can make from the above is that while Christianity and Islam are not totally at pole with women's rights, which are fundamental human rights, they are both expressive of the oppression, repression, and suppression of women in certain areas. In spite of these shortcomings, it is evident upon our textual analysis that the moral impulse of the scriptures in the relationship between men and women is toward equality for all. The only exception to this can be linked to specific temporal and spatial circumstances.

Universal Declaration of Women Rights and the Religions

The Universal Declaration of Women's Rights is an offshoot of various oppression and repression meted out to women across societies of the world. It defines the term the term "discrimination against women" as:

any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.

The Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by general assembly resolution in 1979 notes that the resolutions, declarations and recommendations adopted by the United Nations and the specialized agencies promotes equality of rights of men and women, it is however concerned that despite these various instruments, extensive discrimination against women continues to exist. It recalls that:

discrimination against women violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity, is an obstacle to the participation of women, on equal terms with men, in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries, hampers the growth of the prosperity of society and the family and makes more difficult the full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their countries and of humanity. (Article 1)

Having presented a list of the challenges facing women, the convention resolved in article 5 that: States Parties shall take all appropriate measures:

- a. To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes on stereotyped roles for men and women;
- b. To ensure that family education includes a proper understanding of maternity as a social function and the recognition of the common responsibility of men and women in the upbringing and development of their children, it being understood that the interest of the children is the primordial consideration in all cases.

Other parts of the resolution pay attention to issues in women trafficking, women participation in the formulation and implementation of government policies, improved work conditions for women, provision of adequate living condition, equality before the law among others.

Article 16 of the convention is of interest to this paper. It emphasizes same rights to enter marriage and freely choose spouse, same rights and responsibilities during marriage and at its dissolution, the same personal rights as husband and wife, including the right to choose a family name, a profession and an occupation and so on. The religions, backed by traditions make these rights almost impractical although there are divergences. The statement ‘the two shall be one’ in Christianity aligns with the idea of same personal rights between spouses. In Islam, the woman is expected to rely solely on her husband for the supply of all her needs regardless of whether she works or not. Both religions are convergent by frowning at divorce (except in cases of infidelity). In addition, there is no room for such rights as choice of family name by women. Despite these gaps, we cannot ignore the fact that the women’s rights are to a great extent covered by this declaration.

Though it can be argued that the very idea that polygamy is encouraged for men and discouraged for women in many contemporary societies already shows a double standard in Christianity and Islam, and that the status of women in the two religions is more of a matter of recognition of the two sexes than of equality. However, a counter argument to this position is that the recognition of human diversities, capacities, and potentialities is a positive step in the promotion of the virtue of respect in human relationships. While equality is not an end in itself, where there is recognition, individuals regardless of the sex, can operate freely with responsibility. Where there is responsibility of each towards the other, the clamour for equality and the likely tensions it creates, can be better managed in human relationships and marital relationships. In the context of polygamy, it is important that there is regulation of the practice in African societies in order to protect women’s and children’s rights (Santoso and Nasrudin, 2021).

Also, while some issues (like rights to choose of family name) raised in the declaration of women rights are seen as a holistic approach (devoid of religious coloration) to women’s rights, it becomes obvious that rights valued by women in certain parts of the world, particularly the West, are not in congruence with most other parts of the world. African women do not regard these issues as pertinent to their problems since they hold the view that marriage is some form of social contract where certain values must be mortgaged for the achievement of other values. The disparities between Western and African feminist values raise a fundamental need for a renewed outlook of religion, one that is devoid of the notion of helplessness and the resignation of women to fate, thereby creating proper awareness of what rights are available and could be explored in the religions.

Religious Feminism to the Rescue?

“What is meant by feminisms in varied religious contexts remains ambiguous, and how each particular case of “religious feminism” informs our understandings of both religion and feminism is undertheorized” (Zion-Waldoks 2021). However, in this section, I attempt to unpack what this notion suggests, and its importance to the promotion of culture of respect, recognition, and dignity of women in human and marital relationships. Religious feminism appraises women's status in the religions and provide alternative concept of women's rights based on a return to the original sources and their objective interpretation of the scriptures. Religious feminism being an emerging movement has the task of presenting the position content of the scriptures which has been lost because of centuries of male-chauvinist interpretations. For religious feminists to be successful in this laudable task, the critical and analytical tools of philosophy are required. The Religious books - Bible and Qur'an (including sacred texts of other religions which are outside the scope of this paper) - need to be critically interpreted, devoid of sentiment and bias in order to bring to light the latent rights of women therein. The critical role of philosophy in this regard is to continuously raise the consciousness of women across the world on their rights, values and obligations, and emancipate them from their shackles of historical stereotype. Philosophy will raise questions about underlying traditions in each religion; subject them to constant review of their values vis-à-vis contemporary challenges without necessarily being dogmatic. The employment of the tools of philosophy by religious feminists will help in intellectual agitation for gender justice. Also, philosophy is a serviceable tool in deconstructing stereotypes by massively educating women through reasoning and persuasive arguments on the need for religious conservatives to recognize that women are full equal human beings who also deserve human rights and freedoms as men.

Conclusion

In all, this paper presents religious feminism as an interface between feminism, women's rights and polygamy in Islamic and Christian religions and philosophically defends such integration. Given this stance, contemporary societies must make women's rights a top priority if the society as a whole is ever going to be transformed. This in essence, is a call for religious feminists in Africa who will embrace the task of objectively researching into the true interpretation of the scriptures, one that is devoid of any cultural or patriarchal tendencies.

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