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EARLY CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES AND WOMEN EDUCATION IN CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA: A MODEL FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

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Abstract: The paper titled: Early Christian Missionaries and Women Education in Cross River State, Nigeria: A Model for the Church Today, is motivated by the quest to explore the impact of the early Christian missionaries' activities in Cross River State. Most scholars think that Christianity was used as a tool of British imperialism. Before the advent of Christianity in Cross River State, women were backward and associated with various taboos, they were regarded as people who lacked the potential useful for development other than child-bearing and rearing. The early Christian missionaries introduced Western Education in Calabar as early as 1846. Initially, the missionaries encountered difficulties in convincing parents to send their daughters to school, but they succeeded in convincing parents to support the girl-child education with much persuasion. The research is anchored on two theories, the relational feminist theory propounded by Carol Gilligan and the liberal feminist theory propounded by Mary Walstone Craft. It adopts the historical and descriptive method of data collection and the qualitative method of analysis. Women benefited from western education and began to make significant strides in different careers of their choices. Through the instrument of conscientization, the church should educate women to stand the challenges of global health and insecurity in Nigeria.

Keywords: Christianity, women, education, development, conscientization, missionaries, model.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a known fact that in the Nigeria traditional societies women were relevant to an extent due to the patriarchal structure of the society. Men were in control of the economic, political, cultural, religious and social life in a given society. While women's position to a large extent were subservient, they were powerless. Economically and educationally, women were denied the privileges. It was erroneously believed that women education ends in the kitchen", their education was considered as a waste of resources. Consequently, women's experiences range from exploitation, marginalization, discrimination, oppression, and violations of their human rights.

However, the introduction of Christianity in Cross River State and the missionaries's insistence on western education for the girl-child, brought about is a remarkable improvement on the social status of women. The Christian missionaries established girl's schools like: Holy Child Girls Secondary in Ikom, Ogoja and Calabar respectively and Edgerley Memorial Girls Secondary and Primary School in Calabar etc. to find out how Christianity has prepared women to take responsibilities in the society, the research considered the missionary activities of the two foremost churches: the Presbyterian Church and the Roman Catholic Church that pioneered Christian mission in Cross River State.

Initially, fathers resisted sending their daughters to school, but with much persuasion from the missionaries there was a breakthrough and the girls who were sent to school performed wonderfully and thus cleared the erroneous views of the men who thought that women are inferior intellectually, that they had shallow minds incapable of intense and continued application or of a

close and comprehensive reasoning (Bridget Hill, 1993).

Mikkola Anne and Mile Carrie (2003) note that the "education of girls is an important factor in understanding the connections between the status of women, welfare of the family, the human capital available in a society and future government. Evidence shows that mother's education has a greater impact on children's performance later in life than the fathers. The introduction of western education for women brought the awareness and they began making significant educational strides, majority of these women contributed to political development, human development and most importantly contributed towards the struggle for national independence in Nigeria. This is because education raised the women's consciousness and equipped them to the level where a retrogressive culture had kept the men, thereby creating an atmosphere for them to compete favourably.

The research will discuss the advent of Christianity in Cross River State, it will analyse women's experiences before and after the advent of Christianity. It will discuss the efforts of the early Christian missionaries to encourage the girl-child education and how the church today should be challenged towards the promotion of the education of the girl-child.

Theoretical Framework

The research is anchored on two feminist theories: the Liberal Feminist theory and the Relational Feminist theory.

The Mary walstroncraft propounded the liberal feminist theory in the 18th Century, and John Stuart Mill in 19th century. This theory states that women's subordination is due largely to the legal and political constraints that prevent them from having access to the public spheres of economic, religious and

political life freely. According to this theory, liberal people should adopt the human rights principle, which holds that since all human beings are moral equals, men and women should be treated equally. This means that no one should be discriminated against when participating in economic, political, education and religious life. This theory compliments the Christian missionaries' effort who did not discriminate against women but rather prepared a platform for the girl-child education in Cross River State (Uduigwomen, 2005).

The relational feminist theory was propounded by Carol Gilligan, a Harvard Education Psychologist. The theory states that men and women are not functionally the same as both undergo a different moral development from birth to adulthood. It is self-evident that all men and women are created equal, that their creator endows them with certain inalienable rights, the struggle for women's right led feminist to seek for women education. According to Gilligan (1982), the early feminist position is that education is critical for women if they are to live under their own control. The Christian missionaries who emphasised the girl-child education could probably have had the mindset of the early feminists (Gilligan, 1982).

The Advent of Christianity in Cross River State

Christianity was introduced to Cross River State through the effort of two missionary bodies, the Presbyterian Mission and the Roman Catholic Mission. The Presbyterian Missionaries were invited to Calabar by the famous King Eyo Honesty II due to his quest for political influence. Thus, within two years of the missionaries' arrival in 1846, Creek Town had become the centre for missionary activities. Through Honesty's influence or zeal so many reforms took place at the arrival of the missionaries. Some Efik religious beliefs were abolished. The missionaries put an end

to the practice of immolation by which a slave was buried alive with his dead master. The Ekpe law was passed in the territory, making many reforms possible (Kalu, 1988). Consequently, Aye (1987) notes that within six months from the arrival of the missionaries under the leadership of Reverend Hope Waddell, everything was set for the work, schools and churches were established, and population pupils increased daily. Education was used as a tool for evangelism by the missionaries. Rev. Hope Waddell persuaded the Chiefs to enrol their daughters in the schools. Falk (1997) observed that the missionaries believed that:

The desire for western education promised to bring quick results in evangelising and educating the young people of Africa... Missionaries felt that a western education would form a literate laity and would thus contribute to Church growth and equip the people to participate in the activities of the society.

Onunwa (1985) states that, "the most effective weapon for evangelization used by the missionaries was education. Western education strongly urged by Crowther as a means of elevating the Africans". The Roman Catholic Mission came to Cross River State on February 2, 1903. According to Okon (1985) the prefect Apostolic Monsignor Leon Lejeune accompanied by Father Patrick McDermot left Onitsha for Calabar and in February 8, 1903, the Calabar mission was officially founded. The missionaries started work in full by opening the Roman Catholic stations and schools at strategic areas. The main thrust of the Calabar mission in the first decade was directed towards education. Okon further notes that "in 1906, well over 400 delegates went to Calabar from various stations to ask the missionaries to open missions and schools in their villages and towns, the quest and

emphasis on female education motivated the establishment of Holy Child Girls Secondary Schools in Calabar, Ikom and Ogoja respectively. The Presbyterian Mission and the Roman Catholic Missions did not limit their expensive strategy to the Calabar mission in Cross River State, but extended to the entire Cross River, the North, the Central and the Southern part of Cross River State.

Women's Position in the Pre-Christianity Era

Before the advent of Christianity, women's contributions in the home and society were slowed down as a result of the retrogressive attitude of a patriarchal male dominated society. Women were placed in subservient positions while the men ruled and dominated the economic, political religious, social and family. Women thus, lived in self-defeating, self-enslaving and poverty perpetuating life style. The women accepted some traditional practices that were detrimental and inimical to them and limited their chances of making a meaningful contribution to society's growth and development.

For instance, the birth of twin babies was regarded as a taboo rather than a blessing. The people argued that humans were made to reproduce one at a time, it is only animals who are created to reproduce multiple babies. Ogbajie (1995) notes: "It is only animals and birds whom nature made to do that, and not human beings". Thus, women who delivered twins suffered stigmatization from the society. Hackett (2002) agrees with Ogbajie's views and opines that, "In some societies such as the Efiks and Ibibio, women were ostracized if they gave birth to twins, a sign of their association with evil spirits". Hardage (2008) believes that one of the most troubling practices in Cross River State was the killing of twins and the banishment of their mothers. When the British Consul finally signed a treaty to abolish the killing of twins, she adds that

the women rejoiced and shouted "Sosono, Sosono" (thank you, thank you).

Secondly, widowhood rites were one of the common practices in different cultures of society that helped dehumanize the lives of women in Cross River State. While the widows were subjected to deadly rituals to mourn their dead husbands, the widowers (men) were free from such practices. According to the Efik custom, Aye (1987) highlights the nature of widowhood rituals: widows were confined in the mourning house (ufokikpo) for weeks or months until all the traditional ceremonies associated with mourning were over. The widows were made to wail (eyet anwa) out of the doors in the company of other women and the deceased eldest daughter. The widows marched in solemn procession through the town, dressed in long flowing gowns, repeating commemorative poems (ASE) as they walked along until the climax of the wailing which ends in front of an old deceased chief. Sometimes the widows were made to remain unkempt for the period of mourning, and at the end of seclusion, they were expected to undergo the humiliating ordeal of oath to prove their innocence. A heavy fine was imposed on them or faced death sentences before and Ekpe court if guilty. This situation was not peculiar to the Efiks, other societies in Cross River State practiced widowhood rites in their uniqueness.

Thirdly, women willingly gave in to the cultural practices of female genital mutilation narrowly speaking, female genital mutilation is the excision of a part or more of the female sex organ. Broadly speaking, it is the tampering with the sex organ of a woman by excising, or stitching a part or more of it, so much that injury or harm is inflicted on the victim (Archibong, 2013).

The consequences of female genital mutilation are as follows: it leads to a breath-taking pains, bleeding and

heavy loss of blood, damages on the nerve and other organs around the genitals of the victims, infections such as tetanus, urinary tract infection, pelvic inflammatory disease and Hepatitis B. Most of these consequences lead to complications during child birth and in some cases death. It is understood that women were ignorant of these consequences since they were not educated, as such the practice was seen as an aspect of the people's culture.

Fourthly, women lacked economic power due to the absence of educational empowerment, the education of women can create greater opportunities for economic empowerment which removes or reduce drastically their dependency on men to earn a living. Unfortunately, in most Nigerian household, girls education was often sacrificed for the boys, especially where there is limited resource. Also, the erroneous belief that the girl-child's education ends in the kitchen. Parents (especially fathers) felt their daughters should be raised as prospective house wives and mothers. The denial of basic education for women made it difficult for them to achieve set goals in careers of their choices. Thus, women resorted to doing petty tradings through acquiring soft loans to support the family income. While others in the rural areas spent most of their time in the farm (tilling and cultivating). Orugbani (1988) rightly notes, that the vast majority of women in Nigeria society earn their living as small scale farmers and petty traders.

Fifthly, women were subjected to varying degrees of exploitation in their societies. They were used for agricultural purposes yet were denied land ownership access. According to Orugbani's observation, inheritance in most African societies had been patrilineal, women were not given lands in their own rights, and they had to kneel down to address their husbands. Another area women experienced exploitation is

the area of child bearing and rearing. Women saw themselves and were used as "House wives" and baby making machines, their sexuality determined by their husbands. The men determined the number of children needed in the home and the children's names.

However, with the introduction of Christianity and the missionaries insistence on women education, there is a remarkable improvement for women (Naseri & Ekpene 2011). The two missionary bodies, the Presbyterian mission and the Roman Catholic Mission both established girls schools in Calabar, Ikom, Ugep, Ogoja and Obudu respectively. Although these schools were established, the prejudice against formal education for the girl-child set a limitation. According to Aye Chief Eyo and his people argued that "girls no sabi book" Rev. Hope Waddell tried to explain the importance of female education, that men would never get well alone in the world if their wives cannot support them "because ignorant girls would necessarily make ignorant mothers". King Eyo was convinced and thus, sent his daughter Ako to school. Subsequently, a good number of girls registered in school, they proved clever and intelligent pupils. The introduction of western education helped to enlighten and cultivate intellectual value on women. Secondly, it contributed to the elimination of harmful practices that were inimical to the development of women, such as the killing of twin babies and banishment of their mothers, punitive widowhood rites, female genital mutilation and the exploitation of women.

Today, women in Cross River State have excelled in different field as medical doctors, accountants, politicians, lecturers, engineers, teachers, lawyers etc. Ndem notes within a period of two decades from 1925 to 1946, Nigerian women had become more educated, more enlightened and better organized

to mobilize social forces to stem the tide of disposition. The educated women were among the frontiers who fought for the independence of Nigeria, such women like Margaret Ekpo, Madam Nkoyo Ironbar, Madam Elizabeth Henshaw and others not mentioned in this research, thanks to the efforts of the early Christian missionaries.

Okonkwo (2018) notes that education removes unnecessary fears from people. That is the more reason educational attainments are attached as one of the prerequisites for occupation of any political position in Nigeria.

A MODEL FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

The research had been able to explore the contributions of the early Christian missionaries to the educational empowerment of women in Cross River State history, enables us to look at the future. It is intended to act as a typical example or pattern for the Christian churches to follow today. The early Christian missionaries paved the way for girl-child education by establishing schools basically for girls and with persuasive words convinced parents to send their daughters to school, the challenge for female education at that time was ignorant and lack of educational facilities to motivate the girl-child which the missionaries were able to handle. This action should lend credence to the fact that women education in Cross River State would not have been a reality without the effort of the early Christian missionaries.

HINDRANCES TO GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION

Inspite of the efforts made by the early Christian missionaries towards the promotion of girl-child education, certain factors continue to hinder or limit their education. These include: patriarchal mindset, financial limitation, teenage pregnancy and wrong views about women.

Patriarchy is deeply rooted in many cultures especially Africa and Nigeria in particular (Mansbach and Rhodes, 2006). It perpetuate and encourages gender inequality. It is a concept that reveals that the society is a man's world, women are second class citizens. The Nigerian society expects a woman to play a wifely and subordinate role in all spheres of life. Therefore, women are denied formal education in most cases, the belief is that a woman does not need formal education to become a good wife and mother.

Secondly, there are wrong impression or views of the fact that women are only important in the area of child bearing, nurturing and domestic chores. It is always said that "women education ends in the kitchen". This means no matter the level a woman gets to academically, she would end in the kitchen where it is her duty to prepare the meals for the family. Most fathers see it as a waste of resources sending their daughters to school beyond the secondary school level. Also, it is the opinion of most men (fathers) that their daughters are potential wives and are on transition to their husbands' families to bear their names. Spending so much to educate them means building up another man's family.

Thirdly, female education experience the challenge of teenage pregnancy. This in most cases, occurs during the secondary school period of the girl-child; and most parents get so angry to a point where the victim is abandoned to face the harsh realities of single parenting. Such girls find it very difficult to return back to school at the long run.

Fourthly, Njoku (2018) in her observations states that the series of economic variables that favour men against women in Nigerian societies also replicates itself in governance since the economy is the substructure of the society. It is worth noting that the

economy of any given African society and Nigeria negatively affects or hinders girl-child education. In most cases, female children who belong to low economic background families are given out in marriages and the resources used to sponsor their brothers in school. Thus, the girl-child is denied access to formal education. When a girl is denied formal education, she cannot be economically empowered or informed.

Therefore, the Christian churches today should place emphasis on the girl-child education by establishing and managing mission schools where the girl-child education will be given proper attention than the schools established by the government where moral upbringing, has been abandoned. It will be appropriate for the church to establish more schools for girls. In our society today, most fathers are still ignorant of the importance of girls education. Iloanya Chukwuemeka (2018) notes that for some men, it is a taboo or a waste of time and family financial resources to educate female children because they later discard the family name for their husbands', others believe that the education of the girls – child will delay her marriage. In other places, it is believed that formal education affects the morality of the girl child, because of the belief that in the formal school system, the girls become exposed to or are trained in sex and sexuality matters. They feel that such exposure or training will lead the girls to promiscuity, robbing them of their chastity. The need to conscientize the men to change their perception and world view about women and their position in the society is inevitable. The church needs to adopt the tool of conscientization for the society to be better. Conscientization is a gradual and effective approach to structural change in which the church can best function. It is a social educational programme aimed at creating socio-political awareness among the people for an eventual peaceful transformation of

the structure of oppression (Uchegbue 1989).

Consequently, the church should engage in disabusing the minds of men (fathers) who have the wrong views that “women education end in the kitchen” majority of the men do not realize the full implications and effects of the neglect the female education. The theory propounded by Mary Walstoncraft clearly states that liberal people should adopt the principle of human rights which holds that, men and women, boys and girls are equal and should be given equal opportunities in all spheres of life. Again the theory propounded by Carol Gilligan affirm that education is critical for women if they are to live under their own control or independence. This paper agrees with the position of these theories, the church can motivate or promote female education by organizing scholarship scheme for young girls who are victims of neglect.

In doing that, it can also embark on teachings that can create an atmosphere for equality of male and female children which will reduce to a greater extent the preference for male children over female children which according to Eteng (2018), is an aspect of discrimination against women. Such teachings will encourage women and young girls to self-consciousness and awareness of their worth which will bring about the eventual total liberation of women from the oppressive mechanism in the society. The church should provide encouragement and incentives for the education of girls/women in science, technology and mathematics. The church has the capacity to intensify and encourage female students and women who distinguish themselves in academic excellence. The church should also teach sex education to enable the girl-child to be properly informed on issues of sexuality to avoid the negative consequences. In conclusion, Christianity

has positive impact in African society generally and Cross River State in particular. The Christian missionaries came to Cross River State with a dual purpose; to propagate the gospel and education.

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