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Religious Prejudices, Conflict and Sub-Saharan African Women's Conditions: Critical Thinking and Change Imperative

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Abstract

Sub-Saharan Africa is characterised by religious pluralism, which serves as a fertile ground for religious prejudices and conflict among the faithful of the ever-contesting plural religions in the region. This study seeks to make and justify three arguments about religious conflict and women conditions in sub-Saharan Africa. First, it argues that religious intolerance arises from religious prejudices that lead to religious conflict. Next, it blames the pathetic conditions, arising from religious conflict, suffered by women of the region, on the Church and other religions that uphold, preach, spread and exhibit religious prejudices. Thirdly, it maintains that critical thinking is imperative to affect the needed change, as the panacea for religious prejudices, conflict and sub-Saharan African women's conditions. The study relies on observation and relevant secondary data to drive home its arguments. To that end, qualitative

approach, argumentative and analytic methods, and text-content analytical tools are employed. The study concludes that critical thinking is a pragmatic tool for changing the attitude and the practice of religious prejudices that lead to religious conflicts/wars and put women in pathetic conditions in the region. It recommends critical thinking to different religions, as a means of rethinking and changing religious views, doctrines and dogmas, towards doing away with religious prejudices, intolerance and conflicts. Also, expressing religious prejudices against others should be outlawed by all religious bodies and political authorities.

Keywords: Religious Prejudices, Intolerance, Conflict, Sub-Saharan African Women, Conditions, Critical Thinking

Introduction

Studies affirm the place of religion and culture in female marginalisation and the conditions women wallow in across various cultures, especially those in developing nations (Akinwale et al., 2024; Danjuma, 2023; Ludovic & Lado, 2021; Stichter & Parpart, 2019; World Bank, 2019; Akinola, 2018; Chaves, 2018; Anyogu & Okpalobi, 2016; Robert, 2016). West African nations are largely characterised by violent conflicts (Afisi 2009). For example, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Senegal, Ghana and Nigeria have been hard-hit by violent conflicts for several decades now, with a large number of death tolls and vandalism (Afolabi, 2009; BBC News Africa, 2011). Conflict can be described as contradictions in socio-political relations between and among individuals and groups as a result of their pursuit of scarce resources, which cause tensions and violence. For Mayer (2000), conflict involves perception, feeling and action that clash as a result of incompatibility between groups and individuals, which are expressed and/or acted violently, bitterly, angrily, sadly and destructively. Since the 1980's, when inter-state conflicts in West Africa changed to intra-state conflicts, it has been very difficult to do away with the conflicts.

The pervasiveness of the conflicts and

violent extremism undermines the formation objectives of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its and efforts at ensuring regional security (Etim, 2019; Jaye et al., 2011). Various measures put forward and employed by ECOWAS, Civil Society groups and the International Community have remained seemingly inefficacious (Annan, 2014). Nigeria takes the lead position in all forms of violence in the region (Women and Conflict in West Africa, 2021; Bakare, 2011). Studies regret the spate of crimes against women and women's pitiable conditions in conflict situations in Africa (Adams et al., 2023; Jousse, 2021). The present study avers that although conflicts obtain at a high rate the African continent, they obtain at the very high extent in Nigeria.

Government's failure to protect women in the region is complemented by individuals and groups. Most often than not, leap services are paid to women welfare. Even para/military personnel, who are supposed to defend women, are even the worst perpetrators of crimes against women (Women and Conflict in West Africa, 2021). They rape, abuse, assault, maltreat, maim and kill them anyhow, as if women are not human beings. This statement does not imply that women do not kill or commit crimes against men. They do, but rarely. In view of the foregoing, this study rises to analyse the conditions of sub-Saharan African women in conflicts, with respect to the underground role played by religious prejudices against women. That is, the study seeks to demonstrate that religious prejudices take centre stage in the conflicts that engulf the region and in the gendered perception and treatment of women in the region, for which they suffer pitiable conditions in conflict situations. Studies attest to the assertion that religious prejudices play an underground role in the conditions suffered by African women. Such studies include Truna and Zakaria (2022), Idress et al. (2021), and Basedau and Schaefer-Kehnert (2019). The present study focuses on sub-Saharan African women in such conditions.

Causes of Conflicts in West Africa

Conflicts in West Africa are noted to have historical, economic, socio-cultural and political factors (Obi, 2012). These include colonialism, misrule and abuse of power, failed indigenous leadership, authoritarianism, exclusive politics against women and youths, religion, worldview, underdevelopment, power and chieftaincy

tussles, discrimination, military interference with civil government, social imbalance and inequality, resource ownership, control and mismanagement, and clashed interests (Peter et al., 2023; Robert, 2020). Violations of human rights are widespread in the region with those in Nigeria taking the lead (Angrawa, 2022; HRW, 2003). There are cases of gender violence against women in particular, sexual molestation and rape, wanton killings of various categories, pervasive social injustice, police brutality against civilians, brutal leadership, and unequal distribution of state resources (HRW, 2003; Ejibunu, 2007).

The conflicts are largely over chieftaincy (Olonisakin, 2011), natural resources ownership, control and sharing formula, boundary demarcation, getting back at bad government through terrorism, insurgency, militancy and banditry, and so on (Peter et al., 2023). The conflicts keep claiming millions of lives and property, leaving many citizens displaced, and ridden with abject poverty, diseases and pathetic conditions. Other effects include "the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, human and drug trafficking, illegal exploitation of natural resources and banditry" (Afolabi, 2009, p. 25). Conflicts in this region remain protracted, because of ethnic fragmentation, undemocratic leadership and belligerent groups' sustained desire to attain supreme military power or uncontrollable use of violence (Fearon, 2002; Chew, 2012). Corruption, greed, bad governance and poverty are also affirmed to be responsible for conflicts in Nigeria, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and other West African countries (Vinck et al., 2011; Voz di Paz & Interpeace, 2010; Fithen, 1999).

The failure of the government to alleviate poverty remains one causative factor behind the conflicts in West Africa (ECOWAS, 2006). Sub-Saharan Africans are ridden with abject poverty amidst abundant resources in many parts of this region (UNDP, 2012). Ethnic diversity is identified as a source of conflict in this African region, as ethnic minorities feel marginalised, and continuously fight against the marginalisation (Annan & Danso, 2013; Vinck et al., 2011; Fearon & Laitin, 2003). It is observed that ending the recurrent conflicts in West Africa remains serious challenges, because of poor understanding of the causes of the conflicts plaguing the region, international politics, political propaganda, corruption, misdeeds of the indigenous leaders, ethno-religious sentiments and misleading orientations and

incitement, Islamic fundamentalism, cultural factors and militarised approach to quelling the rising conflicts and insecurity (Annan, 2014; Taylor, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Frustration-Aggression Theory of Violence (FAToV hereafter), which maintains that aggression is always the consequence of frustration. This study lashes FATov for generalising that aggression is always the consequence of frustration. It argues otherwise that certain aggression may not as a result of frustration. One could make a person to be aggressive to him or her. In that case, the aggression is not transferred. Aggression is an act of stimuli responses. As Dougherty and Pfatzgrate (2012) observe, hostilities arising from terrorism are unleashed on the wrong persons, innocent persons, who are not responsible for the original frustration. This reality expressed by theorists of FAToV justifies why it is considered the most suitable theory for this study.

The harm of violent conflicts received or suffered by women is usually the manifestation of the wrongfully transferred aggression from insurgents, militants, kidnappers, bandits, war warriors, secessionist group members, and what have, who unleash terrors and hostilities on women, children and the society at large. Even though women are members or parts of the government of a nation, those attacked by all categories of miscreants and evil mongers are innocent. They too suffer the wrongs from the state and its agents, which culminate to the frustration that drives them into action against the state. Then, instead of facing the state agents involved in meting out cruelty and all kinds of unfair treatments on the masses, terrorists and the like others turn to innocent members of the society, as a way of getting back at the government. Unfortunately, the government most often than not turn deaf ears to their acts, because elitist members of the government rarely get reached or attacked by such deviant citizens.

Obviously, the foregoing explanation gives an insight to what has been the case in West Africa over the years. Women of this African region continuously suffer pitiable conditions of violence that they barely know anything about. They are unfortunate recipients of hostilities, violence, abuses, massacre, insecurity and all forms of inhuman cruelty arising from all kinds of violent conflicts. It follows that women, who are also frustrated by the bad government of their states, still suffer

various forms of ills from some other members of their societies. It is a case of transferring the aggression of their frustration by the same bad government to women, girls and children. Such evil mongers merely take advantage of prevailing situations and exploit women, girls and children for their self gains.

Thus, women are made sacrificial lambs for the wrongs or misdeeds of those in the realm of power, whose failure accounts for the various woes suffered by the citizens that lead to widespread social vices, terrorism, conflicts, insecurity, insurgency, militancy and what have you in the region under study, as in elsewhere in other parts of the globe. Therefore, given the foregoing, FAToV aptly explains the conditions of women in conflicts, as in West Africa. For example, women captured during wars and non-state actors' raids are subjected to different pitiable conditions. Some of the women suffer rape and its lasting attendant effects, abuses, torture, and so on. It is a case of women being victimised, following the prejudices held against and shared about them.

Religious Prejudices and Women's Conditions

Despite being known for reasonable contributions to economic growth and overall development of society (Robert, 2016 & 2017; Ochelle, 2014; Morrisson & Jütting, 2004 & 2005), women of this region are still largely relegated, discriminated and stereotype against. Although these ills obtain in other continents, those in Africa remain largely unchanged. Patriarchy, sexist cultural and religious embargoes, discriminatory policies, and resistance to change are the root causes (Robert, 2016 & 2017; Ochelle, 2014; Marchand & Parpart, 1995; Parpart, 1993; Elson, 1991). Akinwale et al. (2024) argue that colonialism and Christianity have robbed African women of their erstwhile societal prominence and role in decision-making processes, as in the case of the Ayabas (Alaafin's wives) in the old Oyo Empire of Yorubaland, Nigeria. Their view confirms that religion has been a source of problem to African women, since the introduction of foreign religions to Africa.

Gender along with all its associates is given different constructions and interpretations in various religions, as evident in Hindu, Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion, among others. These variances in constructions and interpretations constitute sexist religious prejudices about and against women. These prejudices take centre stage in the gender stereotype and woes suffered by

women in society (Neusa, 2021). In the long run, these prejudices, gender stereotype and woes play a significant background role in the conflict conditions women experience or suffer, as in West Africa. As Truna and Zakaria (2022) affirm, prejudiced and misogynistic religious teachings about females form religious prejudices against them and consequently the pitiable conditions they are subjected to with reference to such religious teachings.

Religious conventions are largely gender stereotypical and discriminatory. This study argues that religious prejudices, arising from gender stereotypical religious teachings, join force with cultural conventions and practices to account for the unfavourable conditions women find themselves in or are subjected to. These include gender stereotypical laws, rights, norms, values, social roles, corporate social responsibilities, code of conduct, traditions, etc. that characterise institutional setting, social institutions and cultural practices (Jütting & Morrisson, 2005). To deny women certain rights, merely on the basis of gender considerations, amounts to abuse of their fundamental human rights. Not allowing women the rights to ownership of land and inheritance, for example, has grave implications.

In conflict situations, women cannot have such resources to hold on to for a solace or a source of livelihood. Those who lost their husbands, fathers and so on are denied the right to inheritance, only because they are women. This is too bad. The denial has a lot of implications for them. It affects them economically, socially, psychologically and otherwise (Agarwal, 1994; World Bank, 2019). With such prejudicing religious and cultural embargoes on what women do and discrimination against them, a lot of things are adversely affected in women's lives and wellbeing, as in the case study African region. Religious and cultural detects, embargoes, prejudices and discriminations against females continuously manifest untold effects on women and the society at large (Jousse, 2021; Basedau & Schaefer-Kehnert, 2019). These manifest in family system, marriage and widowhood practices, right to inheritance and ownership of property, male child preference, spousal conflict over child sex, early marriages, outrageous bride price, etc.

Also, with such prejudices, little or no priority is given to educating, developing, asserting, empowering and enlightening females. They are not given equal opportunities (UNDP, 2004). In African countries like Sudan (especially in rural

areas), female children are still denied education and rather given out for marriage as early as ages 12-15 in this contemporary era (Jütting & Morrisson, 2005). Morrisson and Jütting (2004) show that such practices like polygamy, excision, arranged marriages and parental authority exert reasonable level of negative impact on females, particularly literacy, enrolment and life expectancy of females. The implication of these is that there still remain a gap in education between males and females and access to health care, credit, modern information resources, market labour, technical-know-how and what have you.

The study done by Udoh et al. (2020) establishes the role of religion and culture in realising women's rights to property in Nigeria. It states that protecting Nigerian women's right to property is a step towards realising the Sustainable Development Goal of gender equality. Next, it holds that laws, traditions, customs, institutional policies and religious precepts have to be reformed and made gender-inclusive and -equal. Changed patterns of social systems and change behaviour are also identified as what ought to be done to realise the goal. The major finding of the study shows that culture and religion value men more than women and thereby relegate women to the whims and caprices of men. The study argues that the property right of women is not disregarded by Islam and Christianity and so the prevailing discrimination against women in that regard has no place in these religions. It demands that the faithful of these religions should not be misguided and exploited religiously to the point of having misconceptions about women as a result of misguided religious orientation and prejudices. The study does not specify the property, which the right to is being examined and advocated. However, it lends credence to this current study.

Conflict and Sub-Saharan African Women's Conditions

Violent conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa are becoming increasingly alarming these days, with the occurrences in 2020 being the highest ever since the 1990's (Women and Conflict in West Africa, 2021). In 2020 alone, there were 5,600 cases or events of violent conflict and 16,000 fatalities in this region (Women and Conflict in West Africa, 2021). Women and girls are affirmed to be the most affected persons, followed by children. They suffer both immediate and long lasting effects of the conflicts engulfing the region. They are objects of sex in the hands of militants,

insurgents, terrorists, secessionist group members, kidnappers, *ritualists*, politicians, husbands, male lovers and such others. They bear the burdens of feeding their homes and the warlords on the battle field respectively. They combine the care economy role with domestic chores. Women and girls are more affected by the effects of those lose to violent conflicts. This is because they mourn and bear the aftermath effects much more than males do.

Here, this study avers that most of the evils perpetrated against women are neither reported nor recorded; some are underreported; some other cases are misrepresented; others are disregarded and covered up; and then a few cases are covered, revealed, recorded, reported and dealt with accordingly. Take for instance, only but a few cases of rape are known, reported, recorded and dealt with accordingly. During conflict situations, including rampage raiding, wives and daughters get raped right before their husbands, fathers and male lovers respectively. On campuses in Nigeria and other parts of West Africa, young ladies get raped and maimed mercilessly by Fulani herders, cultists, armed-robbers and hoodlums. Even some lecturers rape students, though most of the cases ever remain unrevealed to the public. Women's fundamental human rights are grossly abused without any reasonable redress (Angrawa, 2022; Neusa, 2021).

No reasonable measures are put in place to address the pitiable conditions of sub-Saharan African women in conflict situations and beyond. As Robert (2016) emphasises, women in this region are largely allowed to wallow in their plights. These include being vulnerable to abject poverty, epidemics, HIV/AIDS and STDs, and various other health challenges, illiteracy, ignorance, gender and domestic violence and insecurity. They are made to suffer injustice and gross abuse of their human rights almost perpetually. The effects of violent conflicts in the region under study are noted to include displacement of persons, high death rates, malnutrition, vandalism, rape and gender-based violence against women (Vinck et al., 2011), paralysed economic activities, increased poverty, illiteracy and lack of basic needs, social vices, threat to peace, security and social order, and the rise of terrorism.

These effects are suffered by Nigerian masses, who have been victims of the Boko Haram insurgents in North-East (Walker, 2012), Niger Delta militants in South-South Nigeria (Ejibunu, 2007; Brock, 2012), bandits in North-Central up to North-Wes, and kidnapping, ritual killings, hired assassination and various heinous

crimes across all geo-political zones of Nigeria. As in Guinea-Bissau and the like nations, bad governance is repelled by citizens with violence that often claims lives and property (Voz di Paz & Interpeace, 2010). In what lends credence to the above, Ogunsanya (2007) has decried the impact of conflict on women in Africa, with particular reference to the cases of Burundi and Sierra Leone. Women are noted to be vulnerable to conflict and difficult situations. Women are made victims of conflict and all sorts of inhuman conditions. They are victims of rape, sexual slavery, human trafficking, domestic violence, gender-based violence, slave labour, ritual killings, abduction, assault, genital mutilation, forced pregnancy, and disembowelment of pregnant women.

Underage females are forced into marriage, prostitution and exposed to sexual related diseases and HIV/AIDS (Ogunsanya, 2007; Ben-Aro & Harsch, n.d.). It is observed that children born from rape in Darfur are often not accepted in the community (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2005). A source has it that gang-raped girls in Sudan suffer the lasting effects of the rape, as they keep living with the trauma and the stigma from the society (Abirafeh, n.d.). The fact expressed by this source applies to women of other parts of the world, wherever gangsters gang-rape women. Nigeria is among the nations where such ill happens against girls and ladies. The situation is so bad that even female children of two months above are reported to be raped in different parts of the country. Insurgents in Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria, among other African nations, are known for raping women and girls and abducting some away into their wide-outs. The Chibok girls and other subsequent ones abducted by the Boko Haram sect members, bandits and other unknown gunmen are known to have been raped, made breast milk-maids, forced wives, forced sex objects, and so on.

Some of the Chibok girls were alleged to have been shared among insurgents and militants in Cameroon, Mali, Niger and Chad. These include Al-Qa'ida in the Lands of Islamic Maghreb (AQLIM), Ansar Al-Dine of Mali, the Movement for Oneness Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and Azawald National Liberation Movement (MNLA), among others (Big Allied and Dangerous Data, 2013). Boko Haram gradually got split into AlQa'ida, Taliban and Ansaru. The sect members also use women for their evil activities, such as forcing them to go for suicide bombing (Women and Conflict in West Africa, 2021). The killings by Boko Haram

insurgents are noted to account for 20% of the overall killings in West Africa. Members of this Islamic sect have been killing significantly since 2009, with the highest recorded ratio being in 2011 (Kanu, 2016; Muktar, 2015; Abimbola, 2011). It had started in 1995, began causing mayhem in 2002 and became violent and prominent in 2009 (Muktar, 2015).

Critical Thinking and Change Imperative

Critical thinking, also regarded as 'reflective thinking', is said to mean an act of careful, logical, in-depth, reason-based and result-oriented thinking directed at achieving a given goal (Besong, 2021). Both critical thinking and reflective thinking are used interchangeably (Besong, 2021). In the academic circle, the use of critical thinking is attributed to John Dewey, who had used it interchangeably with 'reflective thinking' in 1910 (Besong, 2021). For Dewey (1910), critical thinking refers to active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends. Critical thinking also involves constructive thinking that rests on one's own observations and experiments, and other factors (Ennis, 1962; Fisher & Scriven, 1997; Johnson, 1992), with the central goal of appraising the products of such thinking (Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2018).

According to Besong (2021), critical thinking involves thinking critically, logically, creatively and diversely about issues and thoroughly processing and organising facts, data and other information to identify and describe a problem, and evolving, implementing and sustaining efficient solutions to the problems at stake. Critical thinking skills are noted to include identification, research, identifying biases, inference, determining relevance, curiosity (the quest to know), observation, introspection, retrospection, inductive and deductive reasoning, critical reflection, creativity, decision-making, problem-solving, analysis, communication, keeping an eye for details, pre-empting situations, and multitasking, among others (Besong, 2021; Erstad, 2018).

Critical thinking is not only affirmed to be the foundation of self-reliance, but also to make one to be conscious of and exhibit self-content, self-worth, self-reliance, responsibility, and self-development (Besong, 2021; Moore, 2021; Kloppers, 2019; Kim & Isma'il, 2013; Nwokoye, 2009; Fonchingong & Fonjong, 2003). Given the

above, it is quite clear that with critical thinking, the imperative of change would be realised, pursued and sustained by all and sundry. Gender complementarity is a reality affirmed logically and empirically with critical thinking and critical reflection on human nature, which proves that male and females are complementary opposites that cannot do without each other, regardless of their sexual differences (Besong, 2021; Robert, 2016). They complement each other and have to work together always and in all regards, rather than on separation basis.

Critical thinking makes it obvious that gender inclusiveness is more profitable that gender exclusiveness. With critical thinking, government, groups and individuals would realise the imperative of finding lasting solution to the recurrent conflicts engulfing West Africa, which adversely affect women in the region. Each of the three sets of solution givers to the plights of women in this region ought to rise to the challenge of combating the scourge. Also, meaningful collaboration is imperative. Critical thinking is a mechanism for realising the imperative of good governance. It is also a viable mechanism for self-assessment and self-realisation. More so, critical thinking is a viable tool for realising the efficacy of combining approaches and measures to address the recurrent conflicts and the inhuman conditions of these women.

With critical thinking, the indigenous governments of these nations with their agents would realise that they need not rely wholly on or keep looking up to powerful nations of the world or the international community for a lasting solution to their problems. They could think creatively and critically out of the box and come up with reasonable solutions to the problems inherent to their nations and better the well-being of the nations and their citizens. Also, with critical thinking, cultural reformation and reorientation would be realised and embraced as ways of doing away with religious and cultural prejudices that affect women in various ways.

Furthermore, critical thinking offers better measures and approaches to conflict mediation, resolution and management. Above all, critical thinking flushes out mind concealment, which blurs and mars realities on the basis of subjective bias and mind-conceived and hatched out falsehoods or wrongs (Udoh, 2016; Asouzu, 2011; Asouzu, 2004; Asouzu, 2003). Therefore, upon flushing out mind concealment, everything positive rather than negative becomes the target. Also,

upon that, realities are no longer polarised, peace, tranquillity, unity, tolerance, security and gender inclusiveness are bound to obtain without anyone being forced to do what would bring them to place.

Conclusion

The plights of West African women are aggravated by recurring conflicts, which have been confronting the region for several decades now. This study demonstrates that religious prejudices are underground factors behind the recurrent conflicts and gender-based woes suffered by women of this region, which government fails to address. While looking at other causes of the conflicts, the study focuses its attention on the role of religious prejudices against women in pathetic conditions suffered by women of this region in conflict situations. The study concludes that critical thinking is a viable pragmatic tool for changing the attitude and the practice of religious prejudices that lead to religious conflicts and wars, which put women in pitiable conditions in the region. It recommends critical thinking to different religions, as a means of rethinking and changing religious views, doctrines and dogmas, towards doing away with religious prejudices, intolerance and conflicts. The study also recommends that expressing religious prejudices against others should be outlawed by all religious bodies.

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