

Submission, Experience, Empowerment and Human Rights: The Position of Christian Women

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Abstract

Feminist research has moved the problems of representation and power in gender discourses from the margins to the centre of methodological/epistemic concerns in understanding humanity. This move is premised on the epistemic angle that stems from the idea that women's experiences should be the starting point for understanding society, by asking women to reveal their experiences in detail and also by critically deconstructing dominant texts, which continues to subjugate women. This article offers a critique, ethnographically grounded and textually expanded to show how patriarchal ideology is inscribed in particular texts and how the Christian churches have decoded such texts. It does so by attempting to show how women's empowerment is being constrained by a narrow and one-sided interpretation of the same tool, the Bible (an instrument of liberation and empowerment), and highlights the ways in which Christian women have been represented in the Bible through the concept of submission. It further problematises the concept of Christian women's empowerment versus submission and the challenges this pose to the women exercising their rights to practice Christianity.

Key words: Equality, human rights, submission, gender, Bible

1. Introduction

Feminist research has moved the problems of representation and power in gender discourses from the margins to the centre of methodological and

epistemic concerns in understanding humanity. This move is premised on the epistemic angle that stems from the idea that women's experiences should be the starting point for understanding society. As a researcher and practitioner in the field of religion, I believe that significant dimensions in the battle over women's rights and gender issues in general are still unattended to¹. As researchers and Christian women, we cannot continue to unwittingly embrace dominant ideologies and their one-sided interpretations that subjugate women and keep them at the margins of society and humanity. Such interpretations (as I will show) are enshrined with heavily encoded texts, which hinder the empowerment of women. According to Gramsci (1971:12), such hegemonic texts are the 'spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group' which directly or indirectly steer people to accept and interpret in line with the status quo endorsed by the dominant interests. People have come to accept what Brummett (1991: 72-73) calls 'inherited interpretive traditions' as a result of their membership in interpretive communities (in this case, the Christian church), which is a loosely connected social group, where the members share interpretive codes and strategies (Radway 1984). These interpretive codes provide hegemonic common sense by which people come to read and popularise dominant meanings in a culture (Mailloux 1985).

There is agreement on the fact that the Christian tradition generally is enshrined with practices and ideologies that continue to subjugate women and place them under the authority of men (Ruether & Keller 1986; Schüssler Fiorenza 1983; Doughs 1974; Pagels 1989). Christian women (the methodologically and epistemologically relevant for this research) encounter challenges on a daily basis as they strive to function within these interpretive communities. As a result, women's subordination continues and women carry on living unfulfilled lives. Those who struggle to overcome these challenges and exercise their God-given authority are labelled by some Christian authorities as rebels (as seen in the case of Deborah below). They refer to the book of Genesis 3:16, where God was speaking about the woman, after both Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden: 'your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you'. Unknown to most religious practitioners,

¹ As academic but also as Christian female pastor in ministry, I am confronted with these issues regularly and I am writing this article from an insider's perspective to bring the challenges we face in this regard to the fore.

scholars and Christian women, texts such as these were produced in patriarchal cultures. Most if not all religious literature came into being in patriarchal societies and scribal communities of men. With regard to the ideological level of the text, many also do not realise that this interpretation of the traditional patriarchal situation was groundbreakingly challenged and changed in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The woman's authority was restored alongside man's ability to approach the throne of God directly and both men and women were reconciled to God. This is clearly captured in this verse: 'For the son of man came to seek and save what was lost' (Luke 19:10). The offer of the gospel's salvation is available to all irrespective of gender. In addition to this gap in research, there has been a lack of attention to the conceptual dimensions of Christian women's rights (Condit 1989; Hunter 1987). We need to go beyond the essential need of every human being to connect with the supernatural to understand how certain biblical texts are hindrances to the advancement of women and their general fulfilment in life. The inability of many Christian women to progress and occupy leadership positions in the churches (and religious organisations and institutions) is a result of the reluctance to confront the most fundamental issues of gender inequality among men and women in their religion. For centuries, Christian women have been subordinated to the authority of hegemonic misogynistic churches, which have been facilitated by the patriarchal world-ordering belief systems, which were produced to uphold male power and authority and favour the subordination of women (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983).

This article offers an ethnographically grounded and textually expanded critique of the ways in which Christian women have been represented in the Bible through the concept of submission. I will use certain biblical examples as well as ethnographic examples as a starting point to interrogate human rights, and the position of women vis-à-vis our own Christian religion. Several questions are crucial here: have women been privileged in texts? Why have Christian women's voices not been heard despite attempts by some women to speak out? How does the subordination of Christian women contradict the Biblical stance on equality? The article further problematizes the concept of women's empowerment versus submission and the challenges faced by women in exercising their right to be human. I shall also draw on some seminal biblical texts and draw on them with regard to the value-orientations that they espouse with regard to gender relations. Granted that the Bible (as is the case with virtually all religious

texts) came into being and were produced in patriarchal societies, favouring male dominance – it nevertheless inherently also contains liberating perspectives. The liberatory perspectives are usually based on the very human assumptions accompanying beliefs about human equality irrespective of race, gender or cultural position in life.

2. Privileging Women's Experience

Feminist research places the social construction of gender at the centre of its inquiry (Lather 1988). A feminist standpoint is not the same as a woman's experience, situation, or perspective but rather 'the achievement of an epistemologically informed perspective resulting from struggle by or on behalf of women and men who have been dominated, exploited, or oppressed' (*Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* 2005). This epistemology involves thinking from the perspective of women's experience, especially women who have been oppressed by specific monotheistic religious beliefs.

Gobo (2008:54) states that feminist ethnographies 'should give emancipatory intent to research, which should aim at the conscientization of women so that they become aware of their inequality, and empower them to free themselves from oppressive social constraints'. Such research should be focused on interrogating and dismantling the ideologies that continue to subjugate women. It should bring to the fore, who the authors of written texts are and the various contexts under which such texts are (or were) written. Research in the early 1970s highlighted concerns about how to represent women's rights as part of research. Privileging experience became paramount in the work of Lees (1996) amongst others, who argued that asking women to reveal their experiences in detail was undertaken on the understanding that the results would be used to try and change the present situation where women are disbelieved and humiliated by the judicial system. Christian feminists also advocate for a radical interpretation of texts and offer 'feminist alternatives' (Finger 1987) and read traditional sources 'in a different key' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983).

For feminist-based research, both ethics and epistemology are intricately linked. Research must begin with excluded voices and be conducted by women for the representation of women. In other words, the object of research and the subject of research must stay on the same epistemological terrain (Mohanty 1998: 55).

3. The Gendered Nature of Religion

Generally speaking, gender is an underlying principle of human organisation and existence; it determines the way we dress, act and think. Addressing women, on this matter, the male, Paul the apostle states, 'I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God' (1 Timothy 2:12). *This instruction given to women by Paul on how to dress further demonstrates the unequal nature of gender power relations and the impact of dominant hegemonic interpretive codes in the Christian community on women.* Gender is a crucial and fundamental issue in religion because it shapes the problems and all forms of religious orientation; it defines the concepts, and determines behaviours. My standpoint is that gender from a religious perspective has been biased and has placed the male gender in a privileged position, weakening and devaluing the position of women and their contribution. Gender ideology is instrumental and present in all forms of religion and failure to engage with it is tantamount to denying women their rights to equal religious participation and freedom. Elizabeth Johnson (1993: 67) has likened this gender bias to a buried continent whose subaqueous pull shaped all the visible landmass; androcentric bias has massively distorted every aspect of the terrain and rendered invisible, inconsequential, or non-existent the experience and significance of half the human race.

Religion is one area that needs a careful, critical and feminist analytic eye because it continues to effectively enshrine gender hierarchy and promote the suppression of women, the world over. Under the guise of patriarchy, women are conceptualised as weak and as the sex that needs protection. In exchange, they have given up their rights. Due to male dominance in religion, Christian women cannot engage intellectually in church. They are relegated to their own organisations if they are not kept silent and only allowed to interact with their husbands in religious matter. She is told to keep quiet and ask her husband afterwards at home. The woman is submissive, needs protection from physical and emotional attack, and from spiritual deception, she is to be obedient to male authority and maintain a quiet and tranquil spirit even in the face of a disruptive male presence (Bineham 1993: 520). The problem with the gendered nature of religion is that it is read off from the traditional texts and traditions as used in faith communities and faith

traditions – and these normally privilege the male gender while subordinating women to secondary roles in family life, societies as well as in religious organisations.

4. Are Men and Women Equal Before God?

The theoretical framework for discussion here is Christian Egalitarianism which holds that all people are equal before God and in Christ, have equal responsibility to use their gifts and obey their calling to the glory of God, and are called to roles and ministries without regard to class, gender, or race. Paul in one of his writings stated that ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 3: 28). Jesus himself treated women with dignity and paved the way for both sexes to be treated equally. He treated women as equals with men. In Luke 13:16, Jesus called the woman he healed from the spirit of infirmity which had left her crippled for 18 years, ‘a daughter of Abraham’, according her equal status with all those males and females who have faith in God such as Abraham had. He also corrected the privileging of men in the matters of divorce, which was contrary to the Law of Moses, which allowed a man to divorce his wife at the expense of the resulting hardship for women. In Mark 10:4 we read: ‘They said, Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away’. In Mark 10:9, he said none of them had the right to separate in divorce because in the beginning God made them male and female. In verses 11 and 12, Jesus made it very explicit: ‘Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery’. Jesus was very categorical, stating that neither of them had the right to divorce; because God’s plan from the beginning was for them to be together for life. With these statements he was radicalising the Jewish legal requirements for divorce and also did so with regard to humanitarian concerns of women.

In the ancient world, widows or divorced women mostly did not have any social structures that protected them – unless they would marry again and become part of a household, in some cases as a second wife. A woman’s struggle to survive after the death of her husband is exemplified through the life of Ruth in the Christian Bible. Ruth was one of the wives of Naomi’s son who died. After his death, Naomi requested that both Ruth and the other wife,

Orpha return to their native land where there was a possibility of a home and a husband. But Ruth pledged her loyalty to remain with Naomi until her death (Trible 1992: 844). Ruth and Naomi went to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley season where Naomi initiates a plan to secure Ruth a home and a husband through Boaz. Boaz 'redeems' Ruth after making sure a nearer relative does not want to 'purchase' her and eventually married her and had a child named Obed, 'the restorer of life' (Trible 1992: 845). In Judean society, men were not allowed to talk to women except their wives. Jewish women were not only excluded from leadership roles; they were also excluded from sitting with males in the religious gathering and were forbidden to hold and read sacred scrolls. Accordingly, they were not allowed to testify in court trials, could not go out in public, or talk to strangers. The gospel that Jesus proclaimed changed this law by allowing women to spread the gospel. After the resurrection, he appeared to women. He allowed women the right to meet with other people and commissioned them. In the Christian Scriptures we read:

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightening, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were still afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, 'do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he is risen, just as he said. Come see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'he has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him'. Now I have told you. So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. 'Greetings', he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'do not be afraid. Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me' (NIV Mathew 28.1-10).

After his resurrection, Jesus appointed the first set of female apostles with the instruction 'go tell my brethren'. An apostle is one who is sent by the Lord. He commissioned the women to spread the good news of the resurrection,

one of the seminal beliefs of Christians. He called his disciples ‘brethren’ and privileged the two women with information, thereby giving them authority.

Jesus also openly stood against the unjust ways in which women were persecuted for sin while their ‘sin partner’ (male) was not held responsible or punished.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?’ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘if any of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her’. Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, ‘woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ ‘No one, sir,’ she said. ‘Then neither do I condemn you’ Jesus declared. ‘Go now and leave your life of sin’ (John 8: 3-11).

Under the Jewish law of the time, women were not allowed to be taught. Rabbi Eliezer wrote in the 1st century: ‘Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman ... whoever teaches his daughter the Torah is like one who teaches her obscenity’². Through the ministry of Jesus, women were given the equal opportunity to study.

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman called Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!’

² Women in the Bible. Available at: www.bibleufo.com/anomwomen.htm. (Accessed on 18 September 2011.)

‘Martha, Martha’, the Lord answered, ‘you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her’ (Luke 10: 38-42).

In other words, Jesus was teaching about the emancipatory power of education. He called it ‘the better,’ and said that it was something precious that could not be taken away from Mary. Education has been conceptualised as having an empowering and emancipatory effect on women and has the ability to overcome gender inequality. Women’s empowerment is the process by which women collectively come to recognise and address gender inequalities which stand in the way of their advancement in terms of equal access to resources and full participation in power structures and decision-making (Longwe 1998). In agreement with Longwe, Ojong and Muthuki (2010) noted that education is a corner stone to women’s empowerment because it enables them to respond to opportunities, challenge their traditional roles and change their lives.

A detailed examination of some Old Testament as well as some New Testament scriptures and church practices tell a different story of the role and place of women in religion and the church. Rather than continuing to endorse the lifestyles of historical Christian women, our current roles are a regression of over two thousand years.

A case in point is found in the book of Romans 16.7: ‘an account of the work of a female Apostle (Junias); greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was’. This scripture stands out as proof that women in the New Testament occupied key positions in the church even before Apostle Paul was called.

An Old Testament account of how women stood up and fought for their rights is found in the book of Numbers 27:1-11:

The daughters of Zelophehad son of Hephher, the son of Gilhead, the son of Makir, the son of Manasseh, belonged to the clans of Manasseh son of Joseph. The names of the daughters were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglath, Milcah and Tirzah. They approached the entrance to the tent of meeting and stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders and the whole assembly, and said, ‘Our father died in the

desert. He was not among Korah's followers, who banded together against the Lord, but he died for his own sin and left no sons. Why should our fathers name disappear from his clan because he had no sons? Give us property among our father's relatives'. So Moses brought their case before the Lord and the Lord said to him, 'what Zelophehad's daughters are saying is right. You must certainly give them property as an inheritance among their father's relative and turn their father's inheritance over to them. Say to the Israelites, 'if a man dies and leaves no son, turn his inheritance over to his daughter. If he has no daughter, give his inheritance to his brothers. If he has no brothers, give his inheritance to his father's brothers. If his father has no brothers give his inheritance to his nearest relative in his clan, that he may possess it. This is to be a legal requirement for the Israelites, as the lord commanded Moses'.

The above text portrays how religion in society has disadvantaged women vis-a-vis their male counterparts and how these women were able to rise above the position that society had placed them in by going to those in authority and demanding that laws that favoured men over women be revisited. Although it was not customary for women to speak out in the assembly of believers at the time, Zelophehad's daughters spoke out; it caused Moses to ask God what to do, since the laws of inheritance made no provision for women. God told Moses that they were right to have asked for their inheritance and although women could not still inherit directly, it was the first step towards gender equality and the emancipation of women. One would expect contemporary women to be proactive in fighting for their rights as these women did. Women need to stand up against the disadvantaged position that has been assigned to them based on the Bible and the Christian religion, and advocate for equality not just in theory, but like the daughters of Zelophehad – amongst many other examples in the religious texts – they should stand together and take emancipatory action.

5. Questioning the Submission of Christian Women

Christian biblical traditions of women's submission and the authority of men have been in existence from the time of the Old Testament. In this section, I intend to highlight the fact that Christian women have not always heeded this

ideal of complete submission³, both from the standpoint of expectations and their experiences.

In 1Corinthians 14:34 -35, Paul writes: ‘Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church’. The Weymouth New Testament captures it profoundly: ‘Let married women be silent in the churches for they are not permitted to speak. They must be content with a subordinate place, as the law also says’. In Colossians 3:18, Paul wrote, ‘Wives, submit to your husbands as it is fitting in the Lord’. If we engage these texts critically, the submission of women is supposed to be ‘as to the Lord’. Women according to this scripture cannot be passive recipients and endure abuse from men under the guise of submission. As it is fitting in the Lord could also mean that she has the right to stand up for what she believes is right in the eyes of God and if God approves of it, she should resist a husband’s ways which are hindrances to her rights of being human. One of such rights being; the right to decent treatment and dignity and not abuse. This in principle embedded in the fact that the patriarchal text bases the husband’s authority in the relationship of Jesus with the church – which obviously is one of ultimate service and not abuse. The scripture makes it clear that women do have some recourse and not submit to exploitative and abusive relationships and ways that destroy their lives. Passive submission according to this text is a distortion of the biblical concept of submission. This would mean that a wife is not obligated to obeying the husband if it is contrary to what God expects of her. Acts 5: 29 (we must obey God rather than men) aids our understanding of how women ought to obey their husbands ‘as it is fitting’ in the Lord and show us what to do when a choice has to be made between obeying God and a human being, including men. In matters of teaching and learning, Paul said, ‘A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent’ (1 Timothy 2:2). This statement is highly problematic from an epistemological and conceptual perspective. This is because it stands in sharp contrast to the prophecies recorded in the book of Joel 2:2 and Acts 2: 16-17 which all state that men and women will prophesy

³ The verb translated ‘submit’ (Colosians 3:18; Greek, ‘hupotasso) carries the implication of voluntary yieldedness to a recognized authority.

equally. The word prophesy means ‘to teach, instruct, or speak by divine inspiration’. I interpret this to mean that a woman who is prophesying is playing a leading role in the church and is teaching both men and women. The women who understand this have taken up this opportunity as demonstrated in the section below.

6. Were Women always Silent?

Women have rarely completely or unconditionally accepted the patriarchal ideology of femininity that commands total submission of the wife to the husband. 1 Samuel 25 speaks about Abigail who usurped her husband Nabal’s authority and saved her life and that of her children. The Bible describes her as an intelligent and beautiful woman and Nabal her husband as mean and surly. In verses 10 and 11, we are told that Nabal refused to give food and drinks to David’s servants and instead hurled insults at them. Verses 14-19 states:

One of the servants told Nabal’s wife Abigail: ‘David sent messengers from the desert to give our master his greetings, but he hurled insults at them. They did not mistreat us, and the whole time we were out in the fields near them nothing was missing. Night and day they were a wall around us all the time we were herding our sheep near them. Now think it over and see what you can do, because disaster is hanging over our master and his whole household. He is such a wicked man that no one can talk to him’. Abigail lost no time. She took two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five dressed sheep, five seahs of roasted grain, a hundred cakes of pressed figs, and loaded them on donkeys. Then she told her servants, ‘go on ahead; I will follow you’. But she did not tell her husband Nabal.

She was praised for her actions in verses 32-34:

David said to Abigail, ‘praise be to the lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgement and from keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands. Otherwise, as surely as the lord, the God of Israel, lives, who has kept me from harming you, if

you had not come quickly to meet me, not one male belonging to Nabal would have been left alive by daybreak’.

The Bible also gives us a good example of a married woman’s leadership in the book of Judges. Deborah was a judge and a prophetess (Judges 4:4): ‘Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at the time. Men under her dispensation depended heavily on her guidance and leadership’. In verse 8, Barak says to her, ‘if you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go’. Israel depended on her leadership and guidance even though she was a married woman. During the leadership of Moses, there was also a woman leader in the ranks. ‘Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing’ (Exodus 15: 20). The prophet Joel had predicted that sons and daughters would prophesy, Joel 2:28: ‘And afterward, I will pour out my spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy’.

In the New Testament, we have accounts of women who played leading roles in the church. ‘Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the seven. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied’ (Acts 21:8-9). In Acts 2:14- 17, Peter stated that prophesy was being fulfilled on the day of Pentecost:

Then Peter stood up with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: ‘fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. Its only nine in the morning. No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘in the last days, God says, I will pour out my spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy’.

In I Timothy 2.12, Paul forbids women from teaching and exercising authority over men. However, within her submission to her respectable and acceptable leader (her husband), women are seen and can teach and question men’s knowledge. This is evident in Acts 18.24-26:

Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the

scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Pricilla and Aquila (note Pricilla's name was mentioned first; probably suggesting that she was the one with the teaching grace) heard of him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

In all these Biblical texts there are indications of the assertion of women's equality. There is also a wide variety of critical feminist studies on them. See for example Mohanty (1988); Harding (1987); Finger (1987); and Schüssler Fiorenza (1983).

7. Examples of contemporary Christian women leadership

There are other conflicting ideologies related to women occupying leadership positions, which are in congruence with the experience of Deborah (not her real name) who is a Pentecostal pastor and Christian leader in South Africa. She believes she has been called and anointed by God to be a minister of religion. According to her, she approached the pastors of the church she had been attending for seven years and asked to be released or prayed for so that she could start ministering to others outside her church. She was categorically told that this was not possible⁴. The pastors acknowledged that God had anointed and called her – in terms of how these expressions are understood in religious circles – but she could only be ordained and be allowed to minister under the authority of her husband. The pastors invited Deborah's husband to join the church on several occasions without success. She has since left the church and started a ministry which is currently attended by both men and women. Her former pastors continue to question her authority over men; claiming that it is unbiblical. These pastors' interpretations are all indications of literal interpretations of scripture and of leaders who do not engage with their ministry critically. At the time of writing this article, other male pastors had approached her and told her to continue with the calling of God because they say 'God is not a respecter of persons'.

⁴ Cf. Phiri's *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy. Religious Experience of Chewa Women in Central Malawi* (2000:80 - 102).

In our contemporary situation, many women participate in ministry and gain access to public speaking through their husbands. Telecasts hosted by male preachers are sometimes hosted by their wives; for instance Omega Ministries by Apostle Johnson Suleman, Dunamis International Gospel by Dr Paul Enenche, and Kingsway International Christian Centre by Mathew Ashimolowo. However, these women only have access to the airwaves or to publishing in the first place through their husbands and by virtue of the fact that the role of wife and mother in conservative Christian circles is valorised (Rudy 1999). According to Rudy (1999), a woman who is allowed to speak and preach in public, can do so, but only within a complicated web of domestic and cultural dynamics. She is almost completely dependent on her husband for initial public recognition; she can only be seen as a valid public authority in the secondary and submissive role of wife and mother.

This is a clear display of the complexity of gender discourses and the position of women from a religious perspective.

Conclusion

The struggle to achieve the right to equality in religious issues among Christians is one that needs an emancipatory push. Many Christian women are not aware that at the level of the ideology of the text, equality has been granted to them through Jesus Christ and that they need to rise up, fight and claim these rights. Christian women need to claim these rights and to recognise that submission should be mutual; as Paul states in Ephesian 5.21: 'submit to one another out of reverence for Christ'.

One of the conceptual problems that women face is the perpetuation of the continuous patriarchal nature of the concept of women's submission. The continuous struggle for the emancipation of women is not a challenge to men per se but a challenge to Christian ideologies that remain steeped in the traditionalist and foundationalist cultures in which religions became patriarchally conceptualised and intellectualised. These were always be unfriendly to the advancement and upliftment of women and need to be challenged.

As a Christian woman and a scholar, I believe that it is time ordinary Christian women's voices be given scholarly intent in public because religion continues to play significant roles in the lives of women. For decades, women have been given inferior positions in churches under the guise of submission

which hinders them from achieving self-transcendence and spiritual growth and maturity. From a feminist perspective, there needs to be a critical reflection on Christian women's voices in order to achieve a holistic perspective of the role of religion in the lives of human beings. Engaging in this scholarly phenomenon it is important not simply to highlight and document women's experiences and show that they are important as a corrective measure in both scholarship and religion, but also to start engaging in gender issues and to set norms for future engagements. Gender issues need to be dealt with critically and constructively in ways that build society.

In the Christian fold, the success and failure of a Pastor (who in most cases is male) is judged on how supportive his wife is. An anointed Pastor is judged on the prayers of his wife and if he fails it is blamed on his wife. If a pastor commits adultery, it is blamed on the wife's inability to satisfy him sexually. In this context, a woman can only realise her identity through her husband. We need to put a stop to the beliefs and practices of both male and female that hold that women can only achieve self-realisation and fulfilment if done and channelled via and with the support of her husband. Christian women need to rise up in defence of their own rights. This will require an agenda separate from the agenda of men. Power is not held in a vacuum or isolation. If women rise to positions of authority, fewer men will be occupying these positions. The examples used in this article paint two different pictures: one that is liberating and the other that is constraining. What is encouraging and empowering is the manner in which some women occupied empowering positions. The ethnographic example shows that Deborah was able to exercise agency and is fully involved in ministry and playing a key role as a leader. This is done on the margins and not as a central part of the established church. As such, this remains a critical point against the established patriarchal structures of the church. Such representations of women as leaders show emancipatory intent, however and it is in the work of women such as Deborah that we have the paving of the way for future research. Continued research along these lines must give women voice and liberate them from their silence.

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