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## The Suppression of Women by Religion: A Kenyan Example

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### Abstract

*Religion is one of the social phenomena that has powerful grip on human beings. The recent resurgence of religious revivalism and fundamentalism in many countries in the world seem to prove resistance to postmodern secularization and challenges against the relevance of religion in human society. Here in Kenya, preachers of various religious affiliations use lunch break sessions to communicate God's word to ready listeners. Unfortunately, horrific historical accounts of witch hunt and inquisition against heretics, torture and death in the West, and the constant conflict between Hindus and Muslims in Indian history, reveal the conflicting nature of religion. In Kenyan history, certain rituals which seemed obsolete are perpetuated by religion as part and parcel of culture. This is because, the interrelatedness of religion and human culture can hardly be denied. Today, we can look back, and question some of the atrocities done in the past in the name of religion and those which are still affecting society in our time. It is possible to navigate this trajectory of criticism because of the influence of modernity since the emergence of French Revolution which questioned orthodox Christianity in the West; even though it was not until early 19<sup>th</sup> Century when orthodoxy and its tradition became open to criticism. It is however, not only Christian Religion that has subjugated women, but all religious traditions have oppressed women without giving them proper recognition for self esteem; let alone excluding them from active contribution to the formation of cultural meaning and recognition of their society. Kenyan women, for example, rarely contributes in major issues. Religion on its own does not subjugate women, because, its oppression stems from the understanding that it is religion which establishes social norms and creates androcentric conceptual framework for patriarchy. This article employs the phenomenological stipulative understanding of religion to answer the emic and etic concerns of the meaning of religion both from theological and sociological dimensions to resonate with our topic of discussion. In analyzing and contextualizing this topic, the article includes the following common areas:*

- *Biased theological teaching and or traditions.*
- *Prejudiced moral interpretations.*
- *Androcentric cultural and social fallacies perpetuated by religion.*
- *Restricted opportunities for women religious leadership.*

*To facilitate this discussion, we administered a questionnaire to groups from religious affiliations apart from teachers of religion and preachers.*

**Keywords:** Religion, Women, Gender, Feminism, Subjugation/ Oppression; Androcentric/Patriarchy, Moral and Tradition.

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## Introduction

Religion has been one of the most prominent social phenomena in human history. In the past, it gave meaning to human life and ensured harmony among believers. But, it has also been known for wars of conquest as can be evidenced by the Christian wars of Crusades meant to recapture holy land in the Middle East from the hands of non Christians. In our own time, the frequent conflicts between India and Pakistan, in Northern Ireland between Protestants and Catholics and in the Middle East between Jews and Palestinians are all attributed to religious disagreements. This is probably why Hinnels (2010) hypothesized that, if there is another world war, it will be between Islam and the Christian world.

In the modern world which is potentially united by economic, environmental, political and epidemiological necessity-religious ideology is dangerously retrograde (Harris, 2006). This argument is based on the atrocities which have been done in the name of or supported by religion, such as: divine right of kings, feudalism, the caste system, slavery, political executions, forced castration, chastity belts, human and animal sacrifice, the stoning of heretics, taboos against contraception, just to mention but a few. Indeed, in the backdrop of such inimical and inhuman acts, alongside scientific and technological advancements, not to mention challenges of secularization. Many people thought that religion would be pushed into oblivion from the contemporary society. Unfortunately, it has staged something of recovery. It is once more a prominent factor on the world stage (Momen, 1999).

This is probably because; the interrelatedness of religion with human culture cannot be ignored. Even though, some people may distinguish their culture from religion, the differentiation is nevertheless not obvious to the majority of believers. In some traditions like here in Africa, a devotee of African indigenous religion may not know which came first, the religion or the ethical values and ideals. It is because, such moral values and ideals which promote social harmony are believed to have been formed by religion, if not supported and perpetuated by it as a traditional ethical prohibition (Hinnels, 2010). In fact, the distinction between good and bad, the significance of taboo among Africans, the need to respect and pour out libation to ancestors; all survive and are perpetuated by religion. In other words, for the Africans, what cannot be done in the name of religion is commonly done and accomplished in the name of culture.

The cogent insight of religion as a foundation of human values explains why it has been used as an instrument of oppression to some members of the society, especially women. Commonly, an instrument is a means to be used for achieving a goal. But, broadly at least three elements can be discerned from this, namely the means –to instrument, the monitoring instrument and the performing instrument. The way we intend to describe the use of religion in this article seems to serve *all the senses of the term, granted means- to instrument might be the most obvious to our discussants* (Blakely, et al., 1994). Interpreted in this sense, probably the title of our article should have been: **Religion as an instrument of oppressing women**. Unfortunately, such a heading would seem limiting and apparently misleading because, the oppression of women is not only practiced by those affiliated to a given religious faith. But, rather it is encouraged and perpetuated by already established patriarchal traditions made legitimate and affirmed by religious rituals. The oppression bespeaks the power struggle between the patriarchy and matriarchy, or simply feministic reactions to androcentric interpretations of religious paradigms and efforts to find a more inclusive and humane understanding that recognizes the dignity of both sexes. That is, a radical restructuring of thought and analysis which comes to terms with the reality, that humanity consists of women and men, that *the experiences, thoughts and insights of both sexes must be represented in every generalization that is made about human beings* (Loades, 1990).

## The Concepts of Sex and Gender

The term “sex” has attracted a great deal of discussion in social sciences since the publication of Michael Foucault’s, *the history of sexuality* in 1978. Such interest in the historicity of sex and sexuality suggests that the conceptualization of sex and sexuality has not been uniformly conceived. Each period in history understood and interpreted sex and sexuality differently because, no tradition remains fixed. A tradition grows and is shaped in ways appropriate to its own experience (Harrelson, 1977). This awareness lends light and justifies why feminist academicians in our own time are questioning the traditional *biological givenness of sex as a category of analysis... because...Sex has intimate relations to the dissemination of power in discourses, and religions have often been powerful and authoritative disseminators of the truth of gender and sex* (Juschka, 2010). In this article however, we may not delve in the historicity of “sex”, but it is sufficient to point out that we do not intend to interpret it merely as a state of being male or female; rather, it is here understood as one of the social

institutions or tools feminists use to question why women must adopt certain roles based on their biology in the same way they question why men adopt and play roles based on gender. In other words, there should be a line drawn between biological behavior and cultural-determined behavior so as to free both men and women from cultural assumed gender roles.

The term gender is another contemporary vocabulary associated with feminists in discussing and interpreting religious traditions. It has been very vigorously debated since 1980's as academic category of analysis. Today, the term gender mainstreaming is a familiar phrase especially in reference to Millennium Development Goal number 3 and, the fourth world conference on women of 1995 documents. There, gender mainstreaming was directed towards dealing with "poverty, human rights, economy, violence against women and armed conflict" (Mehra et. al., 2008). In our discussion, we shall confine our meaning to that of feminists' conception which interprets gender as a term formulated to understand the oppression of women by men. Such conceptualization views gender as a social and cultural coding system meant to impact relations between men and women. Our description is akin to the meaning of gender as socially constructed roles and culturally created images of the feminine and masculine (Momen, 1999).

The term feminism is difficult to define. Since its inception in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, by a British lady Mary Wollstonecraft, it has taken several meanings and theoretical conceptions. For Wollstonecraft, it was to favour social, political and educational equality for women. Her argument *was based partly on the Christian teaching that all people were equal before God...* (Nielsen Jr et. al., 1983) that *...so God created man in his own image, in the image of God, he created him, male and female he created them* (Genesis, 1:27). In North America however, the pioneers of feminism included Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) the author of *Woman's Bible* (Loades, 1990). The contemporary feminist movement nevertheless gained momentum in the sixties when the utterances of its leaders became more strident (Stott, 2006). Today, there are several branches of feminism. Such divisions and diversities include: cultural, material, moderate, eco-feminism, radical, to mention but a few. In fact, feminism has become such a popular academic vocabulary, to the extent that one may support some of its ideas without necessarily advocating the ideals of the movement. Commonly, it is still understood as a belief that both men and women should be equal politically, economically and socially (<http://www.amazoncastle.com/feminism/ecocult-shtml>). Existentially, it is such an argument of the initiators of the movement underscoring common origin and equality of humanity which prompted our interest and reactions against socio-religious discrimination and oppression directed against women. We have accordingly, formulated a theoretical framework (Echols, 1989; Wills, 1984; Koedt et al., 1973) from the critique of radical feminism which emphasizes that cultural oppression of women has no racial, economic, religious or psychological boundaries. Our investigation thus takes from the theory that, in almost all societies, patriarchy is associated with power which oppresses and marginalizes women. As such, women are seen as the "other", due to their subjugation by men. It is essential to find out the cultural criteria traditionally used to oppress women and how such social phenomena can be eliminated through feminism reactions, interpretations and reconstructions of patriarchal traditions.

In an attempt to contextualize this theoretical framework and actualize areas of concern, the article is divided into the following four unequal parts:

- Biased theological teaching and /or traditions
- Prejudiced moral interpretations
- Androcentric cultural and social fallacies perpetuated by religion
- Restricted opportunities for women's religious leadership (Momen, 1999).

### **Biased Theological Teaching and or Traditions**

It may be essential to briefly describe African culture and make reference to scriptural texts with an assumption that theological motives lie behind and support the purpose for both cultural tenets and narratives in the Bible. As such, by extension the narratives and cultural beliefs function theologically. To contextualize therefore, our general introductory remarks, we now turn to Kenyan women and to prevent any generalization examples, are picked from the Gikuyu of central Kenya, Luyia of Western Kenya, the Lake region Luo, and Iteso women in Busia County. And, what is said about them may equally apply to other Kenyan women.

Kenya is made up of forty two ethnic communities speaking different languages. Nevertheless, like most African societies, it is a patriarchal nation where men are traditionally and culturally believed to wield social

authority. They are the arbitrators of both family and communal disputes. In semi and annual religious ceremonies, men take charge as liturgical experts and or leaders. That is, before the arrival of the interlocutors of the missionary religions, the four selected groups like other Kenyans believed in the existence of a creator and sustainer—God. The Gikuyu called him *Ngai*, Luyia referred to him as *Nyasaye*, the Iteso used the name *Akuj*, whereas the Luo people praised their God as *Nyakalaga*, *Were* or *Nyasaye*. The location of this God was taken to be the sky, granted for the Central Kenyans; it was believed to be the top of Mt. Kenya. Like all Africans, these communities invoked God any time as the prevailing circumstances dictated. There was no fixed abode or time for worshipping God, except on semi or calendrical liturgical functions when the communities came together for a collective ceremony. Such occasions were prompted by long drought or epidemic.

Although generally, men played leading roles in these religious ceremonies, there were nevertheless some rituals which were associated with women, That is, domestic and/ or material rituals. In a patriarchal society like Kenya, it must be remembered, the division of labour is significant because it encourages supervision which in turn opens paths for justification to oppression. And, there is no better place than domestic sphere, believed to be women's domain of operation. Marriage therefore, which describes family and domestic responsibility was paramount in the training of young girls among the four selected communities. Every young woman looked forward to being married to a man from a different community to which she would be integrated ritually after having given birth and transfer or arrangement of bride wealth. She thus became a member of her husband's community and apparent foreigner to her biological family, by adopting her new clan's taboo and ritual obligations while giving up some of those which identified her with her biological parents' community.

Even though marriage traditionally gave Kenyan women social status and facilitated their incorporation in a husband's community, nevertheless, the socio-religious and cultural practices which went along with it were oppressive. More often, women's spouses were chosen for them against their will (Akaranga and Ongong'a, 2013). Those who could not give birth to children were socially and culturally looked down upon, and their husbands practiced polygamy without their consent. Single mothers had no respectful social recognition, they were despised. Widows were often forced to be inherited by the late husband's brothers. Divorce was made pretty difficult. And, traditionally, women had limited opportunities for leadership, whereas as young people, they depended on the supervision of their father or brothers. At marriage, such supervision and control was taken over by their husbands. Yet, in all these apparent inimical socio-cultural injustices, Kenyan women patiently tolerated their situations without open and common defiance. There was nothing else to look forward to; the dice was cast in support of androcentric patriarchal authority. Such was the social situation of Kenyan women on the eve of the arrival of the Christian missionaries.

When they arrived, missionaries preached among other virtues, love and equality of Gods' people. In reference to marriage, however, they vehemently denounced polygamous form of marriage which had generally accommodated more women and gave them a recognizable social status alongside their children. The interlocutors of the new religion insisted that those Kenyan adult men who wanted to accept salvation through Jesus Christ must restructure their marital status and remain monogamous. This meant that those with more than one wife had to send away the rest and remain only with one in order to facilitate a church marriage. Unfortunately, they (the missionaries) did not realize that be it in central Kenya, Western Kenya, Nyanza, or in Busia county, traditional marriage was culturally legal, acceptable and binding.

An apparent difficult question which the advocates of the Christian religion could not readily answer was: *where do we take those women who were already married under polygamous marital arrangements? And, what would be the status of their children? Could they be regarded as bastards? And their mothers as concubines!* Ekeya (1994) gives a crystal description of such apparent misogyny of the missionaries in these painful words in reference to Iteso women:

*...the once happily married women found themselves abandoned and homeless, for they could not return to their fathers' homesteads. Some were no longer women in their prime who could remarry. But wasn't that treatment of women living in polygamous marriage contrary to direction of the love, reconciliation and justice commonly known as key themes of the Bible!*

Such was the first shock Kenyan women learnt from the new religion of love and equality among God's people. The apparent inimical and discriminating reality dawned upon women when they opened the Bible, the

foundation of Christianity, and saw such texts as: Genesis, 2:22; 3:6-7 and 3:16; Matthew, 19:4-6) in reference to Genesis, 2:18-24 and Ephesians, 5: 21-24 to mention but a few. These scriptural texts, even if today, they may be interpreted differently, seem to explain why feminist theologians denounce biblical faith as hopelessly misogynous that have been used to reinforce and justify inferiority and discriminative position of women. What was said in the Old Testament is directly or indirectly repeated in the New Testament especially in the Pauline letters (vide Ephesians, 5:21-24). The impact of such scriptural discriminative texts and their biased theological implications are summarized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in her book, *The Woman's Bible*. She says: The chief obstacle in the way of women's elevation today is the degrading position assigned to her in the religion of all countries- an afterthought in creation, the origin of sin, cursed by God, marriage for her, a condition of servitude, maternity degradation, unfit to minister at the altar and in some churches, even to sing in the choir. Such is her position in the bible and religion (Page, 1990).

Definitely, not every part of Stanton's Biblical observation and reaction can today be accepted by all, nevertheless, parts of the excerpts are still used and interpreted as a basis for blaming and /or oppressing women as being responsible for human social evils. The majority of our correspondents had the same mentality and frequently made reference to both creation stories in the book of Genesis and parts of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Eve, according to Genesis, 2:22 was created last from the man's ribs. In Genesis, 3:16, all women now go through birth pain as a result of Eve's disobedience. The same text is quoted and used to justify the husband's rule over his wife. Marriage is described as a condition of servitude and maternity degradation and the same conditions and interpretations are repeated centuries later in St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, 5:21-24, once more, women are reminded to submit to their husbands with reverence. Finally, we read in Genesis 19:8 how Lot offered his two daughters to the people who wanted to sodomize his visitors. That is, among the Hebrews women belonged to men (vide Exodus, 21:7). These are but few examples from the holy book which confirm the feminist critique against clear and explicit cases of the marginalization of women in several passages of both Old and New Testaments.

It is however, worth noting that marginalization and subjugation of women is not restricted to monotheistic religions. It is found in other religions as well. In Hinduism, the description of ideal relation between husband and wife is recorded in the Laws of Manu 5. And from the law, it is apparent that a wife has to show the loyalty and subordination to her husband. This subordination starts right from childhood as recommended by Manu 5:148 which states in part:

*... in childhood, a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her lord is dead, to her sons, a woman must never be independent* quoted by Nielsen Jr., (1983).

This oriental practice to a large extent justifies feminist concern and attempt to radically question what different cultures and religions have traditionally held a woman's place and role to be. Among Africans in general, a girl child at least traditionally was less desirable in the eyes of her parents than the male child. And, although a girl stayed close to her mother in order to be trained in domestic chores, her father controlled her life, only to relinquish her to another man at marriage. When therefore does a female feel free to manage her own life?

Here in Kenya, some communities are still prone to make marital arrangements of their daughters with elderly spouses without the former's knowledge or consent (Akaranga and Ongong'a, 2013). This practice though has been vehemently condemned by Kenyan government still exists. And, it is in fact, akin to the Hebrews' and Indians' tradition of selling a daughter to settle a debt dispute (vide Exodus, 21:7). And yet, there is no comparable provision for selling a son! Is this not slavery in disguise? Doesn't this kind of treatment of women work in a contrary direction to the love, reconciliation and justice which are key themes of the Bible" (Page, 1990). This question leads us to the next part of our discussion of moral interpretations associated with women.

### **Prejudiced moral interpretations**

Almost the majority of world known religions seem to have something negative about women. Even here in Kenya, different communities have various myths to associate women with acts of evil. They are condemned and accused as the world's greatest temptation and cause of all sinful acts in human society. Such descriptions however, have been shown by feminists to be far from being objective; if anything they are androcentric texts interpretations and/or knowledge meant to produce historical silence and invisibility of women (Fiorenza, 1990).



In Christianity as we have pointed out above, the blame starts with the book of Genesis 3:6-7, reporting the eating of the forbidden fruit by Adam's wife. That is, after Eve ate the forbidden fruit at the advice or persuasion by the serpent, God cursed and promised Eve and her descendants of inevitable punishment. The same theme of blame is repeated centuries later by Paul in his letter (1 Timothy 2:14) where he seems to be exonerating Adam (man) from any offense and thereby placing the total blame on Eve (woman) saying ... *Adam was not the one deceived, it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner*, says Paul.

This apparent patriarchal interpretation is further depicted in John 8:21, the woman caught in adultery. The advocates of the Gospel have been at pains to explain why the woman alone was accused and brought before Jesus. Did she commit adultery alone? Or was the Mosaic Law only constituted and promulgated to women alone? It is perhaps this apparent double dealing in the execution of divine law by patriarchal tradition which prompted Momen (1999) to remark that *women are considered inherently more sinful than men and liable to lead into temptation and sin. This has led to unequal moral standards being expected of men and women.*

Indeed, there are several examples of negative pronouncements and / or statements made against women by interlocutors of religious traditions linking them with emanation of sin in human societies. Here in Kenya, there is a popular saying that, *if you want to keep a secret do not tell it to a woman!* Some of our respondents seem to have alluded to this apparent stereotype statement when they said that more men tend to die because of emotional diseases like heart failure and high blood pressure than women folk. And, that is because; men are prone to keeping problems to themselves than women do. Whether these are mere misogynistic statements we leave it to our discussants to decide!

In Mahayana Buddhism, Diana Paul quoting Buddha's speech to king Vdayana says: *you should know that when men have close relations with women, they have close relationship with evil way...* (Momen, 1999; Paul, 1985). The laws of Manu in Hinduism on the other hand point out that, *it is the nature of women to seduce men in this world, for that reason, the wise are never unguarded in the company of females. For women are able to lead astray in this world not only a fool, but even a learned man to make him a slave of desire and anger* (Laws of Manu 2:213). Such references of religious traditions given and interpreted in light of misogyny can no longer go without feminist hermeneutical critique and challenge. Feminist biblical scholars have attempted vigorously to point out how male bias has inadvertently distorted sacred writings and religious traditions, thereby lending a sexist tone which was probably not intended by originators. For example, in Islam Quran 4:4-5 states that, *if one cannot treat one's wives equally, one should not marry more than one.* This was one of our questions addressed to respondents where about 60% admitted that the Quranic text is not strictly followed. There are people with more than one wife and they hardly support and treat them as per the Quranic teaching. Again, while most religions acknowledge the sanctity of life, Hinduism until the intervention of British colonials, the practice of *suttee* was a common phenomenon.

As pointed out in the opening pages of this article, the witch hunts in Europe and treatment of non Christians in the Middle East during Crusades do not ameliorate some practices carried out in the name of religion in the past. Ethically therefore, the law has been interpreted selectively by male folk where women are concerned. Finally, virginity was culturally reinforced requiring that nubile girls preserve their virginity for their future husbands. Among the southern Luo for example, a nubile girl found to be a virgin on the occasion of her marriage prompted celebration, respect and praise both for her and her parents. Yet no comparative social or religious requirement demanded the same for men. This Kenyan practice and expectation is akin to what we already said above in reference to John 8:21, where an adulterous woman is accused alone without her consort. With this brief acknowledgement of selective interpretations of morality in relation to women, it may be essential to find out how such androcentric fallacies are perpetuated by religion.

### **Androcentric Social and Cultural Fallacies Perpetuated in the Name of Religion**

Among the Kenyan communities sampled for this study, women until recently rarely mixed with men in public meetings. They sat on one side and men on the opposite side. In these meetings, they did more listening than actively participating in the discussions. Only elderly women who played ritualistic roles and were seen as custodians of the community's cultural tenets could attempt to contribute especially if the issue was maternally or domestically oriented. More often, especially among the Luyia and Luo, women were married to spouses against their wish; under the threat of supernatural repercussions should their father curse them if they (women) refused their father's preference; let alone being inherited by a husband's brother at the death of the former.

This practice was reinforced and perpetuated by religious belief that, failure to do so would prompt the spirit of the dead person to haunt the living relatives for ignoring his family and not begetting children on his behalf. Among the Luyia, on the occasion of the death of the husband, the first wife was expected to announce the death by wailing over the body of the late husband (Bulimo, 2013). If however, she had been unfaithful and had an affair outside marriage she would not have contact with the body without having to take some medicine for reconciliation and pacification. This is a patriarchal trick because, a man is not expected to go through the same ordeal when his wife dies, even if he is known to have been equally unfaithful! The practice was intended to subjugate married women and reinforce faithfulness in marriage. Some of our respondents confirmed that the practice is still in force though in a limited manner because suspicious women visit traditional medicine experts when they suspect the pending death of a husband.

For the Luo tradition, on the first day of a husband's death, between five and six in the morning, the first wife stripped naked and ran from the hut to the entrance of the homestead as she mourned the husband to demonstrate that the one who clothed her is dead. This practice was justified by the traditional practice that a nubile girl was clothed by a husband who paid for a traditional woven skirt that was tied around the waist. Alternatively, however, this practice could be interpreted to mean that the person who had the sole right over her body is dead. It was an announcement that in the future she will be remarried by another man. This cultural belief is no longer in operation as none of our respondents could confirm its continuity except that it existed in the past.

Once more, like in the Luyia case, the Luo men were not expected to strip naked on the occasion of a wife's death (Ongong'a, 1983). This is, in feminist language and hermeneutic more than sexual harassment. It is a mere intimidation of women folk because, most women traditionally had very limited recognition for human freedom compared to their male counterparts on the eve of the arrival of missionary religions. When however, the interlocutors of these religions preached about equality and freedom among people of God, Kenyan women embraced the new religions with open hands judging from the high number of Christian women than men among the Gikuyu of central Kenya, Luyia, Luo and Iteso. Unfortunately, as we have pointed out above, here too, the new religions, like the African indigenous religion disappointed Kenyan women. They soon became aware that be it in Christian Canon law, Islamic Shariah, or the laws of Manu in Hinduism, to mention but a few religious traditions, women have very restricted opportunities for confronting and rejecting patriarchal manipulation, authority and discrimination against the female folk. This observation was observed by Lan (1990) when he commented that *many missionaries both male and female accused indigenous traditions of being oppressive to women without the slightest recognition of the sexist ideology of Christianity*. Until recently in a Christian church, upon entry, women sat on the left hand side while men sat on the opposite side, during a liturgical function. To prove that this was a mere continuation of patriarchal discriminative practice since Vatican II Ecumenical Council, the separation is no longer an issue. In a mosque however, women are still separated from the male worshippers.

A patriarchal discrimination against women included dietary prohibitions. Among the Agikuyu, until today, women do not eat meat from every part of a goat. The men tend to choose and select by tradition, the parts women are expected to eat. For example, when the meat of a goat is being roasted, men eat the ribs and cut particular parts to be given to women who until then would be sitting inside the hut as the men sit outside where meat is being roasted. For the Luyia and Luo, women were not allowed to eat meat of a chicken or eggs until very recently, especially with the advent of the revival movement advocated by the Church of England (CMS) now referred to as the Anglican Church of Kenya (Akaranga, 1996). Otherwise, it was taboo for these women to violate this prohibition. The discrimination was based on suspicion or mistrust that since men tended to be away from homesteads, either looking after the animals or on hunting expeditions, women who were left behind would probably cook and eat the eggs whenever such opportunities availed themselves and consequently there would be no chicken in the homestead. But, it is perhaps also, because, both eggs and meat of chicken are a delicacy among the two communities-Luyia and the Luo. The prohibition undermined women as not being responsible adults who could satisfactorily appreciate and take care of the family possessions. All these socio-cultural practices selfishly enforced by men were, and to a large extent are still perpetuated in the name of taboo- a religious language; whose meaning is tied to supernatural repercussions (Akaranga, 1996). The apparent religious suspicions, prohibitions and discrimination may perhaps explain why the majority of Kenyan women until recently were not given adequate opportunity in positions of religious leadership.

### **Restricted Opportunities for Women's Religious Leadership**

The religious hierarchy in most religions as observed by Momen (1999) is dominated by males. Whether Hindu Brahmin priests, Buddhist monks, Zoroastrian mobeds, Jewish rabbis, Christian/priests or Muslim Ulamas all considered, are exclusively or predominantly male preserves. This goes on to include African traditional religion in which religious expertise was in the sole domain of the male folk. Women were not expected to offer sacrifices or lead a public liturgical function. Although parts of Momen's observation may have been over taken by events, it can still be said, that generally in almost all religious traditions, women have tended to suffer exclusion from leadership in the work of their religious organizations. In Islam and Hinduism, there is no common evidence of women's participation in upper levels of religious hierarchy. In Christianity, only until recently did the Episcopalian Church in North America allow women to join Seminaries and Theological Institutions to be educated in theology and subsequently be ordained to the ministry of priesthood, a position which until then was believed to be the sole domain of men. However, the Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox Churches have no women priests and they set themselves against this development. The openings up by the Lutheran Churches have not completely influenced their reluctance. Anglican Church has discussed the options of women's ordination in various conferences and while they find no scriptural ground for denying women from ordination, the church has not conclusively come to terms with the practice (Stott, 2006).

This change and development by the Lutheran Churches have since then been adopted by other Protestant churches in other Third World countries; so much so that even here in Kenya we now have women Pastors and Bishops dully recognized by their Congregations. Unfortunately, until now as we have hinted above, the Catholic Church has not fully appreciated and navigated the same trajectory being followed by Protestant Churches. Granted, it is perhaps one of the most significant institutions with numerous resources and educated personnel remotely challenged by other church institutions. Its record in development and attempts to empower both men and women cannot be underrated (Gifford, 2009). Unfortunately, such attempts of social transformation have not translated in aggressive process of hierarchical leadership of women in the church.

The most common leadership role so far occupied by women in the Catholic Church is the position of the mother superior in convents or monasteries. And, since the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, religious Sisters now assist priests in distributing Holy Communion during liturgical functions and, young ladies are equally permitted to assist at the altar as mass servers not to mention participation in the scriptural readings preceding the Gospels on Sunday liturgies. Is this enough? Considering the fact that here in Kenya, women are the majority in the Catholic Church. What has happened to St. Paul's warning that before God we are equal? There is neither Jew nor Greek. Slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). Paul is here affirming that, all who by faith are in Christ are equally accepted, equally God's children, without any distinction, discrimination or favouritism according to race, sex or class (Stott, 2006). As it stands, there may be no convincing explanations why predominately male led churches tend to exclude or restrict women from full hierarchical leadership and participation in the church.

The example of the Catholic Church, African indigenous religion and culture does not however mean that all religious traditions operate at the same level of discrimination against women. Rather, the argument augments observation made at the beginning of this paper about the paradoxical and ambivalent nature of religion as a social phenomenon. In that, religion can be used both as an instrument of oppressive force and liberating one in peoples' lives. As we argued above, on the one hand, it is still being used to oppress women and on the other hand, it has been used to help to bring about both economic and social transformation of women's lives and thought. The access to theological training by women has enabled and encouraged them to discern and re-examine means of their oppression in relation to their lives and whether such means carry any authority as divine revelation or whether they are mere subjective interpretation of the oppressors! And, in the long run nevertheless, such reactions in turn have led to fundamental changes within the same former oppressive institutions (King, 1994).



The ambivalent nature of religion explains why particular parts of the Old Testament acknowledge the importance and contribution of some women, whereas other parts advance the opposite. In other words, the Bible is not wholly made up of patriarchs; there are matriarchs such as Sarah, Rebecca and Leah. These women were equally resourceful individuals whose influences were not confined to the shadows of their husbands. And, among Hebrew Judges and prophetess, Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth played great roles among the Israelites; she settled their disputes and led them into battle against Canaanites (Judges, 4:4-24). The same role of delivery from political and or military destruction against the Jews is reported about Esther the wife of King Xerxes (Vide Esther 3:8-7: 1-10). Esther then, the queen, saved her people, the Jews from the hands of Haman, a selfish and envious general who had wanted to destroy them. The conditions under which Esther carried out her plan required courage, wisdom, proper planning and management, not to mention patriotism and commitment.

In the New Testament, Jesus is reported to have recognized women by violating rules of tradition and conventions, he recognized and acknowledged women in his teachings. Both the synoptic and John's Gospels confirm this inclusive teachings of Jesus evidenced in the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast (Lk 13:18-21). Here, he compares the kingdom of God to a seed planted by humanity and the yeast used by a woman in baking bread. If he did not recognize and have women in his audience then the two forms of comparison would have no relevance.

And, John 20:10-12 reports about women disciples who went to the tomb on Easter morning to mourn Jesus only to find it empty and then went back to report the same to other male disciples of Jesus. Once more, to prove his recognition of women Jesus honoured Mary as the very first witness of Resurrection (John 20: 10-18). Going by this incident, who between Peter and Mary Magdalene showed appropriate concern?

Misogyny is not only exemplified in the biblical account, even some church fathers especially Thomas Aquinas and Tertullian are culpable of the same discrimination. Aquinas in his hierarchical view of the universe assumed that the male is superior to the female in the divinely created hierarchy and that women are simply "misbegotten" men (Nielsen Jr. et. al., 1983). On the other hand Tertullian accused women of not only being responsible for evil in the world, but that the same responsibility prompted the death of Jesus Christ, the son of God (Tertullian 1982). It is no wonder; therefore, that today, feminist hermeneutics is challenging interpretations of the Bible and patriarchal religious traditions. Feminism interlocutors seem to be justified when they say that there is need to reconstruct and reinterpret these traditions in the light of women's experience, with a critical attitude towards the socially and historically constructed notion of Gender (King, 1994).

From this brief account of the paradoxical nature of religion and how it has been used as an instrument of oppression of a section of society, we may now discuss and make general conclusions from the field.

### Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

The main question of our investigation was how men have used socio-religious interpretations to justify the subjugation of women and how the feminists are today reacting to and seeking a reconstruction of such patriarchal interpretations and authority. To augment what already exists in the literature, we administered two hundred and thirty (230) questionnaires to Christians, Hindus and Muslims as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Number of Respondents**

| Religious Affiliation | No. of Laity | No. of Clergy    |                 |      | % |
|-----------------------|--------------|------------------|-----------------|------|---|
|                       |              | Pastors/ Priests | Brahmins/ Imams | Nuns |   |
|                       |              |                  |                 |      |   |

|             |     |    |    |    |      |
|-------------|-----|----|----|----|------|
| Christians  | 110 | 7  | -- | 20 | 59.6 |
| Hindus      | 7   | -- | 3  | -- | 4.4  |
| Muslims     | 80  | -- | 3  | -- | 36   |
| Total       | 197 | 7  | 6  | 20 | 100  |
| Respondents | 230 |    |    |    | 100  |

Our original intention to reach out to those who only believe in and follow African indigenous religious heritage failed. What we found in the field was apparent syncretism whereby some people simply turn to African indigenous religious practices in moments of crises, or when they want to justify a particular traditional ritual, but none of our respondents declared themselves publicly as sole devotees of African Indigenous Religion, granted the influence of that religion is not wanting. This is typical of Eastern Africans; we are not like West Africans especially in Nigeria where people have continued to recognize the significance of African Religious heritage. In fact, here in Kenya, people may vigorously deny and refute indigenous religion, describing it as relics of bygone beliefs with no mystical power, but only to turn to its rituals and influence in secrecy during moments of crises.

To further contextualize as mentioned already, we used a theory based on radical feminism because, to our reading, is the basis of feminism. It does not necessarily condone differences between men and women, or attempt to exclude men to advance women's concerns, but rather acknowledges the existence of patriarchy and socio-cultural oppression which have no boundary. This gave us an opportunity to identify common and related popular questions in investigation. A summary of the findings from the field is analyzed in tables two (2). This was prompted by the fact that information from the field seemed to overlap and to categorize them differently according to the four objectives would lead to indirect duplications. Even though, our respondents included the clergy to confirm the official teaching of the selected religious affiliations, the information and interpretations of data remained similar. Such tendency further explains the grouping of respondents into two categories, of Yes and No, those who agreed and the ones who refuted the questionnaire as administered to them. The analysis of data revealed that the discriminations of women in the name of religion are mainly anchored on biased moral interpretations and androcentric fallacies perpetuated by religious influence. This was corroborated in the interviews where 52.2% under the influence of the book of Genesis argued that since man was created first, it is no wonder that he should subjugate a woman.

This misplaced exegetical interpretation of creation story is no longer taken as an argument for the domination of women by men moreover, as (Stott, 1999) has argued, men have misused God's judgement after the fall as an excuse to maltreat and subjugate women. The gradual change of mind against this tradition was evidenced by 84.8 % of our respondents who refuted a part of the same textual misconception that women are in fact inferior and are the cause of evil in society. It is no wonder therefore, that 74% of those interviewed insisted that in religion, men and women are equal, even though they have different roles to play in society.

This acknowledgement was corroborated by one hundred and eighty three (183) people out of two hundred and thirty (230) people interviewed. Accordingly, the traditional discrimination against women exhibited in the name of religion and gender stereotypes can hardly be justified. Women said 80.4% of our respondents should be judged or treated as per what they can do after being given equal opportunity without prejudice. A group of forty five (45) respondents nevertheless, did not agree that the status and role of a woman could be pegged to her role in society because there are things which women cannot do simply because they are women. But, we feel that such is another argument based on androcentric fallacy perpetuated by tradition and supported by religion, because, in life there are things that cannot be done by men simply because they are men!

In the fourth objective, it was pointed out that generally religious organizations, be they monotheistic or polytheistic rarely consider gender balance in hierarchical leadership positions. To further test and verify this hypothesis, a question was administered to the respondents-whether there are some roles and/or duties which are better performed by women than men. A good number of respondents, 78.3% supported the premise. Out of those interviewed, fifty people, 21.7% however, argued differently challenging us to clearly specify particular roles or duties we had in mind; and that unless such roles are domestically inclined, we have no argument. That line of thought is a typical conservative tendency that is more common in African churches than in European or American churches. It confirms a common argument that beliefs and customs when supported by religion die

hard. This is why it was pointed out that even though Episcopalian and other main Lutheran churches have acknowledged the importance of gender mainstreaming by women’s ordination, here in Kenya, it is a slow process which does not include all churches. The reluctance was corroborated by the interviewees out of which, 82.6% concurred that women in Kenya have not been seriously considered for high positions of leadership by mainline churches.

**Table 2 Androcentric Fallacy Perpetuated by Religion**

| Item                                                  | YES |      | NO  |      |
|-------------------------------------------------------|-----|------|-----|------|
|                                                       | No. | %    | No. | %    |
| In Africa, a boy child is preferred to a girl child   | 193 | 83.9 | 37  | 16.1 |
| Education is important for both boys and girls        | 199 | 86.5 | 31  | 13.5 |
| Clitoridectomy is an important initiation rite        | 32  | 13.9 | 198 | 86.1 |
| Parents should arrange the marriage of their children | 44  | 19.1 | 286 | 80.9 |
| Widow remarriage should continue in society           | 45  | 19.5 | 185 | 80.5 |

It is already been observed that the influence of African indigenous religion is still part and parcel of the African’s world view. The interrelatedness of their culture and religious belief can hardly be ignored. Religion is perhaps one of the most influential social phenomenon in the life of Africans. The explanations and responses given to one of our questions- *whether a boy child is preferred to a girl child*, was based on indigenous religious tenet. Accordingly, 83.9% of the people we spoke to admitted that in the eyes of the majority of Africans, a male child is more preferable than a female one. This is because, the girl child will eventually be married away to a different family, whereas, a boy will remain in the home, marry and give the names of his parents to the newly born, and in so doing, perpetuate the father’s name among the living. One old man in his response said, *If I do not have a son, when I am dead and buried then, that will be the end of me. No one will call my name among the living let alone pouring out libation on my behalf to recognize me as an ancestor!* To most Africans, this is a serious belief; whether one is a Christian, a Muslim or otherwise. It has to be acknowledged nevertheless that, like all other religions, African Religion has apparently been strongly influenced by the benefits of formal education and secularization introduced both by the missionaries and colonialists. Because, in finding out whether education is equally good for both boys and girls, a total 86.5% readily agreed that it is significant that all the children be given opportunity for equal education irrespective of their gender. Globally however, Kenya as a nation does not compare well in ensuring the success of women Education. In his article entitled, *Why Kenya needs to reduce gender gap*, Nic Cheeseman has argued that according to Unicef, girls make up a majority fifty two (52%) percent of primary school children, boys are more likely to complete primary education and go on to secondary school (Sunday Nation, Nov. 2014). This variation is probably explained by what we have said above about boy child preference against girl child among Kenyans.

The trend of change of mind alongside the influence of education and missionary religions was equally evident in the responses given to the last three statements in table 2. A total of 86.1% of those who were interviewed did not support the continuity of women circumcision. Whereas 80.9% strongly refuted the practice of parents planning and arranging the marriage of their daughters without the latter’s knowledge. In the same breath, 80.5% said that widow remarriage is outdated especially now, in the age of HIV/AIDS. We strongly feel that the reactions against these traditional practices commonly perpetuated and supported by religion were based on the fact that the majority of our study population was selected from urban centres and institutions of higher learning. Again, as most of our readers may remember, the concern against women circumcision is no longer limited to feminists and gender mainstreaming interlocutors. The Secretary General of United Nations recently took and spoke about it as a global concern. From a Kenyan context however, it would perhaps be too early to generalize that the denial of the last three statements in table 2 is a final pointer to the end of three traditional practices perpetuated by custom and religious affiliation.

### Conclusion

From both the literature and information obtained from the field work, it is evident that religion has been used to justify the patriarchal oppression of women here in Kenya. This is probably so because, be it in African indigenous religion or the missionary religions, the position of leadership is overwhelmingly male dominated and often unsympathetic to women causes and interest (Jenkins, 2002). It is these same men who have been at the forefront in the preparation of religious literature and interpretations. In Kenya, like in other parts of Africa,

oppression of women in the name of religion begins with the initial different forms of socialization for both boy and girl child in the social set up. This is perpetuated and confirmed by the diversity of rites of social transformation which are key forms of cultural and religious indoctrination. It is where the exclusive characteristic of initiation rites are empirically actualized and internalized. Men are told never to behave and perform some duties which are exclusively designed for women. For example, *do not act or behave like a woman. Women are meant to serve and obey men!* Such euphemisms go on to confirm that sexual distinctions are not intrinsic, but established by social pressure and supported by religious threat. It is no wonder that they are vigorously criticized by feminists as discrimination influenced by patriarchal traditions. The significance of hermeneutics and the problem of gender mainstreaming need to be seriously discussed without undue emotion or historical bitterness based on original school of radical feminism.

Finally, religion *per se* as a social phenomenon does not oppress any one, but due to common belief, that it is the basis of moral sense, patriarchal influenced interpretations of such moral link has been used to dominate and socially suffocate the freedom of Kenyan women. Irrespective of one's religious affiliation, there is need to learn how to listen to interlocutors of feminism and gender mainstreaming alongside Kenyan constitution which now recognizes and accommodates social importance and position of women. The advocates of different religious traditions need to be more sympathetic to women's causes and interests as it is now common concern in the North. And, the significance of debrain washing of the younger generation from traditional hermeneutics should be recognized by all Kenyans. We may now end this article by remarking that, whatever may needed to be said, tells about sexual roles, there can be no question of one sex being superior or inferior to the other. Before God, and in Christ, *there is neither male nor female. We are equal* (Stott, 2006).

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