

Renewed Relationship

Background

Missionaries Christianity taught African women to be dutiful wifely mothers. The skills chosen for them were needlework nursing and teaching for the few who were privileged to get some western education. They were taught to keep their homes clean and observe “Christian teachings”, which included such teachings as obedience to husbands who are heads of homes and to whom they should be submissive. After all, women were created from Adam’s, never to rise to the same position as the “head”. The missionaries did not understand the realities of the African women and this kind of education continued to perpetuate the subservient position of women. This type of education was disempowering.

Later in the 1970s, we saw the emergence of the women’s movements all over the African continent, aimed at helping women to improve their lot through income generating activities. Again these activities turned out to be a burden to the already overworked women who had now to cope with additional work load of income generating activities, as they were called. Also the goods and services produced by these activities soon became irrelevant when the supply outstripped the demand, and therefore the women did not benefit much and their actual position did not change significantly for the better. One can even say that it also made the situation even more stressful for them.

The situation today

The social constraints are greater than economic ones. Attitudes do not change fast and patriarchy is seen as ordained by God. Some of the questions that women ask are:

- (a) Why work harder and reap less?
- (b) What are the men doing?
- (c) What does the law say?
- (d) Why do we have to take care of everyone else?

With the HIV&AIDS, women’s burden of care has quadrupled. They have become victims as care givers. The situation will take long to change especially for the African women.

- (a) How are they coping?
- (b) What are the strategies that they have developed?

There are various coping mechanisms:

- (a) Women live by faith -faith gives them hope for the future and the strength to continue striving in spite of the difficulties.
- (b) Willingness to learn and receptiveness to new ideas and information - women are keen to learn and bring the learning to bear upon their lives.
- (c) Changing situation - society is dynamic and women are taking advantage of the social changes happening in their societies and as a result, many are venturing in different activities, including those that have been hitherto male dominated. This courage - to dare to venture - is opening new horizons for women in many parts of Africa.

The role of the church

The church has not helped the situation - it has perpetuated patriarchy and even encouraged silence in the face of blatant abuse of women’s rights

Christian women in Africa find themselves in a difficult position - there is no separation between church life and individual life in the expectations of society on women. They are expected to live in a defined “Christian way” even when such stipulations are in stark contradictions with the social, economic realities of the women. There seems to be two moral codes with which the women have to grapple in their daily struggles to survive. However, one can say that women are now being integrated into the church leadership, but this is belated and it is not a favour for women who constitute the majority of the church congregations all over the south. The church has rather reluctantly, if I can say, revised its position on the leadership role for women and now that they are gradually being allowed into the decision making level, this has not fully empowered the women because

they are operating in a male-controlled social environment with such limitations that their efforts are sometimes rendered ineffective at the macro society level. This is a structural issue especially in the mainline churches where the missionary ideals emanating from 19th century European background of a strong patriarchy, still hold sway as the “tradition” of the church.

Lessons

Charitable work will not change the situation of the majority of women in Africa. The church is reluctant to identify the issues, for example the church is reluctance to deal with gender issues that have continued to hamper the progress of women towards empowering leadership. Most women have had to choose between quitting and belonging to the church in these conditions. The church must address the inequality that it has either ignored all this time or has continued to perpetuate in various ways and rendered women powerless and weak.

The church must do a theology of empowerment of all sectors of society. If women are also made in the image of God, they deserve equitable treatment.

Women must act together in order to make their lives tolerable. They must identify the means to their empowerment through the institution of the church. They must find a way of fulfilling their roles without being disempowered and hopeless.

Women are waking up the reality of their lives and they are angry. But they need support to articulate their anger and direct and channel it in such a way that they can remedy their situation. Women in the North can participate in this process by assisting the women to articulate the anger about their realities. Information, for instance, is an important element in the process of articulating the women’s agenda and as it is well known, this precious commodity is not freely available to the majority of the women in the Africa due to various constraints. Women must be empowered to be able to challenge the traditions in which debilitating attitudes are enshrined.

What do they expect?

Women in Africa expect understanding of their situation and respect as human beings. They expect solidarity from women in the North who have moved beyond the social and cultural impediments to personal development and progress. This support can be in form of training and information sharing. There is a feeling of comfort when someone shows understanding even if they do not give material support. Solidarity could be communicated in many ways, especially because the church is held in high esteem in many places in the Africa.

The church should be encouraged to work in solidarity with Women. I cannot say I have seen much change in the lives of women as a result of the WCC decade for church in solidarity with women. It was a discourse at a different level than the level of the real women congregations with all their different realities both inside and outside the church. The church in the North supports the churches in the South, but is there any sense of accountability? For example the churches are now up in arms about the issue of same sex relations, but they have never been heard to say anything about the patriarchy in the church in Africa for instance, that is perpetuated in the name of traditions. The church in the North has not been heard to say anything about the gender inequalities - one sees the church fathers here in Europe coming to raise funds for their churches, but it seems there is no attempt to hold them accountable for what happens to the larger proportion of their congregations - the women. There must be a change of attitude towards gender relations for women in Africa to live an abundant life which Jesus Christ came to give to those who believe.

- Anne Kubai