

The Condition of African Women: A Religio-Anthropological Critique

Fr Stan Chu Ilo, University of St Michael's College, Toronto School of Theology, Toronto Canada

This is an edited excerpts from the book, *The Face of Africa: Looking Beyond the Shadows* by Stan Chu Ilo published by Author House Indiana, USA, 2006.

*There is no sin not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it. With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussion on the entire ... human family"*¹

African women are one of the greatest gifts of the continent. African women are beautiful and dutiful; they are hardworking and responsible; they have been the most vital element in the sustenance of a culture of love and community even in the midst of unnerving difficulties. African women may hold the key to the future of Africa if the process of women empowerment is realized in the continent.

The award of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize to Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan woman, is a sign of the height which African women can reach, when given equal opportunities with men and when they are supported through affirmative actions. African women are coming of age. Besides their creative genius, which is being manifested in the arts and sciences and in the teaching, legal and medical professions; they are also gradually gaining ground in the political arena. At the end of 2005, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf made history in Liberia, when she became the first African woman to win a presidential election and subsequently the first African woman President. Early in 2004, Gertrude Mongella was elected the first female president of the pan-African parliament. Mangella, popularly called 'Mama Beijing,' is widely respected in Africa and beyond, because of the pivotal role that she played in energizing African women to present an African women's agenda for the 1995 UN International Conference on Women. In many parts of Africa, a new generation of African women is rising up in grassroots social movements to challenge the assumptions of established patriarchal, cultural practices in Africa. Women are the prime victims of such a mentality which sees them as expendable and irrelevant in society. This new generation of women is articulate, determined, purpose-driven and well organized in the fight for the liberation of African women.

They are fighting entrenched social sins in African societies that are evident in various political, social, economic, and religious institutions. There is still a lot of work to be done in Africa in reforming the unjust and deleterious mentality, which sees women as instruments for the selfish interests of men or as objects for pleasure.² Africans must critically appraise the ways and means in which entrenched cultural practices have made it impossible for women to participate fully in the life of the community at all levels. Certain customs and traditions should no longer be considered sacrosanct if they do not correspond to the demands of human rights and dignity, and

¹ *Reconciliation and Penance*, No. 16.

² Cf. John Paul II, *Celebrate 2000*, (Ann Arbor: Servant Publication, 1996), 182.

the needs of the modern world.³ Cultural traditions are not ends in themselves, but means for realizing certain ends. When they no longer serve the goal of human progress, they should be abandoned.

There are four levels at which social sins affect women in Africa: marriage/family, education, health care, and participation in social, economic and political groups. I will discuss these briefly trying to point out how the social structures contribute to the abuse of the rights of women.

The African marriage tradition as constituted today represents a real challenge for women liberation. *Women liberation, in my conception, consists in the full realization of the dignity of women so that each woman is able to realize her ordered end, without any cultural, economic or political restrictions. Women liberation does not mean collapsing the gender differences; rather it entails the destruction of the sociological bar that makes women inferior to men. This means the rejection of all andocentric, sexist and patriarchal cultural practices, which have made it impossible for most African women to pursue their ordered ends. The liberation of women in Africa demands that the rights of women should not be seen as privileges or mere concessions to women, according to the whims and caprices of male-dominated societies.* About 50% of women in Africa are married by the age of 18 and one in every three women in Africa lives in a polygamous marriage; the fertility rate for women in Africa is about 5.7 children per woman.⁴ A greater majority of African young girls marry before they are 18 years of age. Indeed, teenage pregnancy accounts for half the number of maternal deaths in Africa. According to the findings of the Western Nigerian based Muslim Students Society of Nigeria, more than 40,000 Nigerian teenage girls lost their lives within the last decade due to pregnancy. It is poverty, ignorance, and cultural factors that lure young girls to early marriages, which puts an abrupt end to any kind of professional life for the young girls.

Understanding Women Liberation

The proposal, which I make for the recognition and acceptance of gender equality in Africa, is based on a *theological and anthropological model* which views humanity as made up of 'man' and 'woman' in equal and complementary relationships. We are human only through being woman or man. Humanity, therefore, cannot be complete unless both ways of being human are equally acknowledged and respected in both its substantial and relational aspects. The differences are not accidental but substantial, though they are mutually complementary. It is a difference of kind and not of degree. As the female theologian Edith Stein argues, "I am convinced that the species of humanity embraces the double species man and woman; that the essence of the complete human being is characterized by this duality; and that the entire structure of the essence demonstrates the specific character. ...Man and woman are destined 'to rule over the earth,' that means, to know the things of this world, to delight in it, and to develop it in creative action."⁵ This differentiation is part of creation. Humanity can only subsist if

³ Cf Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, 69.

⁴ Takyiwaa Manuh, "Women in Africa's Development" in *Africa Recovery*, No. 11, April 1998, 4.

⁵ Edith Stein, *Essays on Women, the Collected Works of Edith Stein Vol 11*, (Washington: ICS Publications, 1987), 177. See also Prudence Allen, 'Integral Sex Complementarity' in *Communio International Catholic Quarterly*, 17, Winter, 1990.

these two forms of being human are fully realized in relationships and responsibilities of all kinds.

At the level of co-generating life, we see a clear distinction of the two genders. There are obviously some schools of thought about the distinction between sex and gender. According to Pope John Paul II, "The creation of woman is thus marked from the onset by the principle of help: a help which is not one-sided but *mutual*. Woman complements man, just as man complements woman: men and women are complementary. Womanhood expresses the 'human' as much as manhood does, but in a different and complementary way...Womanhood and manhood are complementary not only from the physical and psychological points of view, but also from the ontological. It is only through the duality of the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' that the 'human' finds full realization."⁶

Maleness and femaleness are substantial forms of being human; gender distinction is based on maleness and femaleness, but it is at this level that cultural and religious factors tend to blur the lines of distinction. Sexual differentiation is not a functional distinction, but an ontological distinction, hence, what a man can do and what a woman can do should not be interpreted in terms of functional differences founded on sexual differentiation, but in terms of the ontology of the two sexes which are mutually implicated in the fullness of what it means to be human. Thus, what a man does and what a woman does is not distinct for humanity; both make up what our humanity is capable of doing and realizing for the good of the human race. *If a substantial part of our human race (women) is denied the opportunity of fullness due to a wrong interpretation of gender differences, our humanity is impoverished. This is why Mercy Oduyoye argues for a revisiting of the anthropological self-understanding of the human person in Africa so that a new basis will be found for the transformation of the human relations in which it is assumed that the man takes precedence over the woman.*⁷

In terms of functions and responsibility both sexes play equal roles. Other aspects of social, economic and political life do not necessarily need these distinctions, because in terms of performance and productivity one does not see any essential functional disparity. In child rearing, both man and woman play complementary and equal roles. However, because the mother carried the baby for nine months there is a more natural tendency in women to have more affinity with the child as both a child-bearer and a child-trainer than the father. This is why it is said that one can be a father in the sense of one who procreates and a father in terms of one who brings up. Both motherhood and fatherhood are related in an intimate way, "every element of human generation which is proper to man and every element which is proper to woman, namely human 'fatherhood' and 'motherhood' bears within itself a likeness to, or analogy with, the divine 'generating' and with that 'fatherhood' which in God is 'totally different,' that is completely spiritual and divine in essence, whereas in the human order, generation is proper to the 'unity of the two': both are parents, the man and the woman alike."⁸ Any form of cultural practice which promotes this kind of model, to my mind, is healthy for the human species.

⁶ John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1995), 7.

⁷ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 67.

⁸ John Paul II, *Dignity and Vocation of Women*, (Kampala: St Paul Publications-Africa, 1989), 8.

African family life is often not based on this kind of model, because a man and a woman in a marriage are not considered equal partners in African societies. This is the basis for the abuse of the rights of women in marriages in Africa. The argument given for this kind of unequal treatment of women is that it is the man who marries the woman and not the other way round; it is the man who pays the bride price and not the woman. It is through marriage that a woman gains a dignity, hence, she is *someone* because she is married and she is *nobody* outside marriage. In addition, in Africa it is the woman who leaves her family to be with the man – this is seen as a new form of identity, which is conferred on the woman. *A woman acquires an identity through marriage to a man.* There is one major and fundamental transition in a woman's identity-journey, that is, from 'whose daughter?' to 'whose wife?' Women and children are part of what a man owns in African traditional society.

This kind of conception has three main consequences for a woman. Already a number of African women theologians/social scientists (Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Teresa Okure, Kanyoro Musimbi, Uchenna Ugwueze, Wangari Maathai, Elizabeth Amoah, Letitia Adu-Ampma, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, Rosemary Edet, and Felicia Ekejuba, and Ayesha Imam among others) are increasingly challenging the Christian and Islamic presuppositions used in Africa to sustain attitudes and structures that militate against the liberation of African women.⁹

In the first place, the woman has no rights within marriage. She cannot easily divorce her husband, because that would rob her of her identity. When an extended family member of mine divorced her husband because of repeated domestic violence and celebrated infidelities, many people did not support her decision because it was considered some kind of cultural suicide. Many women, like her, who refuse to live in abusive relationships are seen as women of easy virtue by the ordinary African. A woman who divorces her husband in most African countries loses everything because there are no legal claims and benefit for a wife who divorces her husband. What are the legal rights of a woman within marriage? There are absolutely none, hence the need for women lawyers to be in the fore front in evolving new legal protection of women who work out of marriages that could not offer them happiness and human fulfillment. Actually, it is the man who divorces the woman and not the other way round. In my native Igbo tribe, *igba alukwaghim* (to divorce), *ichuna nwanyi be nna ya* (to send back a woman to her father) is properly an act or decision to be taken by a man. For the woman, she can never divorce her husband, she can only 'run away' (*igbapu be di*) from her husband's house. Naturally, she is expected to go back to her husband, because once married to a man she can only 'run away' not 'break away' from the marriage. There is no law in most African countries to protect the woman's right to divorce, because it is something that should never happen. It is usually the case that most women have to literally beg their husbands to be faithful to them and have no reprisal against an

⁹ See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*. This is a work of considerable scholarship in which the author traces the journey of the African women theology of liberation. She broaches the context of African women's theology and challenges the anthropological bases of the subordination of women in Africa. Based on an impressive Christological hermeneutics and ideology criticism, she proposes a new Christian interpretation of anthropology based on appropriate Christology and which is germane for inaugurating new structures for the full blossom of the personality, individuality, and dignity of African women.

unfaithful husband.

Exploitation of Women in Various Contexts

In the second place, marriage is seen as an absolute for African women and, hence, they are beings-oriented-to-marriage, no matter at what age and at what cost. There is, however, one positive aspect of this attitude. Because both the man and the woman in an African marriage understand their union as spiritual and eternal, there is always a commitment to marriage and family life that is so deep and sacrificial. Not only the two partners in marriage, but also the families of the two and the entire community help to make the marriage work in such cases of serious family problems. Through the same agencies, different kinds of remedies and sanctions could be applied to stop any form of abuse or injustice to women in marriages. I have been touched many times at funerals when a wife or husband symbolically hands over his or her wedding ring to the late spouse (placing it by the heart of the deceased for custody in the spirit world) before the final burial. In a certain sense, this practice in some African Christian communities is a sign of the fundamental understanding of marriage in Africa as a union beyond death. If people do love each other beyond death and believe in a continuity of their conjugal life beyond death, one can understand the low rate of divorce in Africa. It is, however, important that such a cherished tradition is not sustained at the expense of the women. Measures should be taken to remove any form of abuse that women suffer in marriages.

Many African wives are more like domestic servants than equal partners to their husbands—they do the laundry for the man, prepare his food, go to the stream to fetch water for the man in places where there is no public supply of water and, at the same time, take care of the children. According to a survey of nine African countries by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 1996, about 80% of the economically active female labor force is employed in agriculture. Food production is the major activity of rural women and their responsibilities and labor inputs often exceed those of men in most areas in Africa. Women also provide much of the labor for men's cultivation of export crops from which they derive little benefits. Women are responsible for 70% of food production, 50% of domestic food storage, 100% of food processing, 50% of animal husbandry, and 60% of agricultural marketing.¹⁰ The same woman who goes to the farm with her husband in the morning is the one who in the evening goes to the market to buy the family groceries with money made by selling sundry products.

Some African wives have to live silently with domestic violence, domestic enslavement, marital infidelity, and the drudgery of household work as part of what it means to be a wife, a mother and a woman. This is the way the cultural condition has defined their roles. Such cultural situations have no basis in any sound anthropology and are the fruit of successive acts of men to dominate and defeat the genuine aspiration of African women to become the kind of persons that God made them to be.

Polygamy and Widowhood Practices

One of the worst social realities with regard to family life that still negatively affects most African women is their being yoked into polygamous marriages. Polygamy is still

¹⁰ Takayiwaa Manuh, 5.

widely practiced in Africa. Polygamy is, however, not peculiar to Africans. It is a common practice among Muslims and was widely practiced among the Ancient Near East peoples. Polygamy existed in many Western societies until recently. The philosopher, Plato, recommended that wives should be common among the Greeks. Nicolaus, one of the deacons in early Christianity, also recommended that Christian men should have wives in common.¹¹ There are some Africans who argue that polygamy (polygyny) is a good thing and is not meant to oppress women, but to support them. This is because women outnumber the men in African societies. African women are hardier and survive infancy and other health risks more than men. Polygamy provides the women with husbands, this way they become part of a family, have employment and social security, for which there is no alternative in rural societies of Africa.¹² The question is: Why are the women not working for themselves, if they are strong enough to work for their husbands? Is marriage a means for sustenance or rather an institution, where a man and a woman enter into equal covenant of love for the good of society and the procreation and education of children? We must look beyond the veil of this argument to expose the underlying conception of womanhood, which makes polygamy still prevalent in Africa today.

Polygamy is still rampant, because having a large family of multiple wives and children is still considered a sign of wealth and honor for a traditional African man. Many African men accept the cultural myth that African men are polygamous and marital infidelity among some African men is usually excused as part of this cultural practice. Polygamy also exists when a first marriage is childless or when it produces only female children. Most African families prefer having a baby boy to a baby girl. A boy child guarantees the continuity of the family line, while a girl child will be married away to become the 'property' of another man and thus her identity is not tied to her parents' family. This is also the reason why women do not have a right of inheritance in most African countries. This denial of the right to inheritance is most prominent in many Muslim countries where women are invisible and silent without rights of any kind. It is unfortunate that many women are meant to bear the shame of childlessness and lack of a male child even when they are not usually responsible for this situation.

Most widows do not have any claim to their husbands' estate. The property and estate of their late husbands usually reverts to the family members (brothers and uncles) and not the widow. The widowhood practices in most African societies, which denies the woman the right of movement for over six months, and places many social restrictions on her, is still rampant and destructive of the humanity of women. Most African widows remain single for the rest of their lives, even if they were widowed at a very tender age. This is because in Africa, marriage between a woman and her husband does not end with death. It is the duty of the late husband's family to take care of the widow and children of the dead relative. 'Taking care' of these widows exposes them sometimes to sexual exploitation by men, even from within their late husband's family. It is curious that most widowers remarry after the death of their wives—there are always two different standards and practices in marriage for men and women respectively.

¹¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith* Book 3, Part 2, (trans) Vernon J. Bourke, (New York: Image Books, 1996), 252.

¹² Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1985), 97.

The Challenge of Polygamy

However, it is polygamy that insults the dignity of women and in the face of HIV/AIDS exposes women to all kinds of health risks. The woman who lives in a polygamous relationship is a wounded woman; her love for her husband is not full, because she is one of many such loves. She is a woman who has to share her love with other wives and she nurses in the depths of herself a certain sense of inadequacy. She is a humiliated woman who may see herself as a sexual object or a domestic slave of her husband with whom she shares little in common. The wives of a polygamous man take turns to sleep with him and to prepare his food and sometimes fight each other to please their husband. Most polygamous families are never homes of peace; there is always a feeling of partiality and injustice among the wives and between the siblings themselves.

One of the worst aspects of polygamy is the treatment given to women when they grow old. These wives are relegated to the background and the new wife, who would definitely be younger, sometimes as young as the children of the oldest wife, takes center-stage in the heart of the polygamous man. Many people will argue that no one forces any woman to become a second wife and that women accept polygamy, especially if a second wife could 'produce' the male child preferred by the man, and if the husband respects and takes good care of them. No matter the social status given to the eldest wife, I do think that the whole cultural situation creates a certain mindset and superstructure that reduces women to something of an object for men. Many African women still accept this kind of stereotype and continue to live with the obvious humiliation which the cultural forces put on them. However, no one can seriously maintain that most women find fulfillment in polygamous marriages or that a woman would willingly share her man with other women in any normal situation.

Health Risks to Women

Women in Africa today are faced with all kinds of health risks. In 1998, I lost my beloved sister from pregnancy-induced hypertension. She held a first class graduate degree in English and was teaching in a high school in Abuja at the time of her death. In 2003, my late sister's good friend also died soon after childbirth. She had a degree in Administration. I remember with pain my high school biology teacher, a wonderful woman in her mid-30s, who was doing her master's degree in biology at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka who died in childbirth in 1987. According to the news we received, she was told by her doctor that since she has had three successive Caesarean sections, it was unsafe for her to bear any more children. However, she wanted to have a baby boy for her husband (the other three pregnancies led to three baby girls). In the process she lost her life. These were well-educated women, open to the best form of medical attention and well-informed on health issues about women. The cause of their deaths is mainly a poor healthcare system. One can then imagine the pregnancy fatality rate among uneducated women in Africa!

According to a survey conducted by the Grassroots Action for Sustainable Health and Rural Development in Nigeria (GASHRUD), 1 out of every 5 pregnancies in Nigeria ends in the death of the mother. In the whole of Africa, maternal mortality is very high—for every 100,000 children born in Benin Republic, 1,500 of their mothers die. In

Guinea, it is as high as 1,600 and in Sierra Leone 1,800 mothers die for every 100,000 births.¹³ Maternal mortality is very high in Africa, because of poor healthcare, illiteracy on the part of women, and the cultural factor which forces African women to raise large families.

Large families are in themselves a blessing if the parents have the means to raise their children to realize their full potential. However, most African parents who raise large families do not have the means to train their children. This results in child labor and the exploitation of women who have to go the extra mile to provide for them. Many African women spend most of their time on farms when they are not pregnant or nursing their babies. There are situations where women are still bearing children in Africa when they are over 40 years of age or where they do not have adequate antenatal health services. In religious institutions in Africa, women who are pregnant often turn to rituals and prayer sessions for safe delivery. These prayers and rituals cannot save the women unless adequate medical attention is provided. My sister's death was not necessary and this is true of most women who lose their lives in Africa during childbirth. Such a noble vocation like childbearing should not be a short cut to the grave for African women.

Another health risk that women face is female circumcision or female genital mutilation (FGM). This practice is still rampant in most African societies – this practice is a cultural way of preventing promiscuity among women. This in itself is one-sided: How do you keep men from being promiscuous? Among women in Mali, there is a myth that without FGM, the child would die during childbirth. This practice is very evil and inhuman. It has claimed the lives of millions of women. In February 2003, a number of female activists in Africa gathered in Addis Ababa to proclaim a 'zero tolerance' on FGM, a practice which they noted has led to an intolerable number of women being mutilated, abused, abducted, battered, maimed, and bruised all in the name of tradition. The UN General Assembly, in January 2002, adopted a resolution on traditional or customary practices affecting the health of women and girls and characterized female genital cutting as a serious threat. However, despite all these national and international efforts, female genital mutilation practices persist in many sub-Saharan African countries like Mali, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Benin, and Kenya.

There is no justification for the pain inflicted on young women who undergo this mutilating procedure without anesthetic. Many Africans justify this practice as a way of making women capable of childbearing, but these justifications are myths without any scientific connection. Cultural practices are in themselves expressions of a people's worldview. Female circumcision expresses the way women are perceived in most traditional African societies. Women are made for the men; they exist as domesticated beings that have no role in the public; they are prepared for marriage in the most 'moral' way. Marriage and childbearing is the destiny of women and anything that threatens this is prevented from the root. This is why they have to be subjected to the horrors of circumcision, symbolically, to prepare them for womanhood.

Since women in Africa are regarded as inferior to men, building up the capacity of women is often not considered a priority. This is why female education in most African countries is low compared to men. In many professional bodies, except in the teaching

¹³ UN Statistical Division, World Bank, World Development Report for 1997, *UNICEF's State of World Children Report for 1998*.

and healthcare sectors, African women are still far behind the males. The level of political participation of women is still very low and their involvement in decision-making, even in matters that concern their future, is marginal. Indeed, as Rose Uchem argues, the situation of women in Africa is not just a matter of marginalization but of subordination: "Women's subordination refers to cultural claims and customs, which maintain that men are primary and pre-eminent, and that women are secondary, subordinate and under men. It is a belief, which excludes women from public leadership of family, Church and society, most especially, from decision-making and from officiating at cultic/ritual and political leadership positions. Subordination is distinguished from marginalization, in that the latter is an offshoot of the former. Thus, women's marginalization amounts to their being relegated to the periphery and margins of society economically, socially and politically, as a result of subordination to men."¹⁴

Women Exploitation in Religious Institutions

The question of the involvement of women in religious leadership evokes a lot of passion and debate, which sometimes ignore the pains suffered by women and blurs a deeper understanding and appreciation of the different positions of churches and other religious bodies on the question of inclusiveness. In the Catholic Church, the teaching authority of the Church has settled the matter of women ordination officially by stating clearly, that the Church has no right to change a law on the ordination of women which she did not make. Female ordination, according to the Catholic teaching authority (Magisterium) is inconsistent with the teachings and practices of Jesus Christ, the early church and Christian tradition.¹⁵ There are some opposition to this teaching from within the church, especially in Europe and North America. However, in Africa, the question of female ordination to the priesthood does not relate to the immediate concerns of women in Africa for gender equality. However, in those churches that allow women to be ordained or to preach in the church, the participation of African women is still very marginal. In the Catholic Church, African nuns have not been given the chance to play leadership roles in the Church as befits their training and professional competence. Many still wonder whether the nuns are stewards to the clergy or whether they have distinctive roles to play or whether they play their roles at the mercy of the clergy.

Lamenting on the marginalization of women in the Church, George Ehusani writes, "We must recognize that there has been widespread victimization or subjugation of women. Though they form the overwhelming majority in most of our churches, they

¹⁴ Rose Uchem, *Overcoming Women's Subordination*, (Enugu: Snaap Press, 2001), 23.

¹⁵ According to Pope John Paul II, "Although the teaching that priestly ordination is to be reserved to men alone has been preserved by the constant and universal Tradition of the Church and firmly taught by the Magisterium in its more recent documents, at the present time in some places it is nonetheless considered still open to debate, or the Church's judgment that women are not be admitted to ordination is considered to have a merely disciplinary force. Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church's divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk 22:32) I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by the Church's faithful." *On Preserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone, Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1994), 4.

are not often considered for appointment into decision-making bodies.”¹⁶ It must be stated in a very obvious way, that women are equal members of the church with men; they are called by Christ to follow him and to bear fruits in the world. They are a majority in most churches and often raise all the money needed for all kinds of work in the church. They need to be respected, affirmed and given due recognition in terms of offices and duties that befits every child of God with due respect to the requirements and rules of different religious institutions. Chukwudum Okolo points out that the Church in Africa is “challenged to liberate African women in the society and in the Church. To spearhead this struggle for liberation of African women, the African Church should start the battle from within, since liberation like charity must start at home. Certain questions for self-reflection seem crucial to the African Church at this point in time such as: How far is the Church herself an obstacle to women enjoying their *freedom* in the Church? How often does she conscientize women on their rights in the society and Church or make them aware of their full responsibilities and rights? More importantly, is the Church fully aware of the characteristic modes she uses to exploit and oppress women or deny them their legitimate rights?...The Church’s graver responsibility towards African women, is to liberate them from customs and traditions which oppress them or bar them from active membership in the Church.”¹⁷

It is, however, left to women and men of goodwill to constantly put this concern in perspective. What is worrying, however, is that in many African churches, women are still being treated as if they are the repositories of evil forces. I have gone to many spiritual healing sessions in Nigeria and have always been curious as to why most of the people who are being exorcised are women. Is the devil still attacking and seducing women as was the case with Eve or are these clear religio-cultural biases and burdens that women are ‘made’ to bear as manifested in the creation narrative? Elizabeth Amoah has shown in her well-documented article that cultural and religious institutions in Africa tend to disrespect women’s body, taking liberties to touch particular parts of a woman for amusement and for excitement or exorcism. In addition, according to Amoah, women are also seen as carrying in their bodies maleficent forces. She goes on to say that: “Over a long period of time the belief has been held that witchcraft, which is essentially perceived as evil and destructive, is associated with women. Thus forms of inhuman acts of violence are meted out to women who are accused by the system of being witches. Even in most recent times in Ghana, there are some villages described as witchcraft villages, especially in the northern part of Ghana, where any woman accused of witchcraft is sent away and confined. Such women are kept in very small rooms where they are denied some of the basic necessities, including visitors and hygienic conditions. It is not unusual for deaths, or mental and physical disabilities, to occur among such women.”¹⁸

This practice has also become prominent in many Christian churches in Africa. Many women undergo different ‘deliverance’ sessions to free them from evil spirits that

¹⁶ George Ehusani, *A Prophetic Church* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Society of St Paul’s), 140.

¹⁷ Chukwudum Okoro, *The Liberating Role of the Church in Africa Today* (Eldoret, Kenya: AMACEA Gaba Publications, 1991), 55.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Amoah, ‘Violence and Women’s Bodies in African Perspectives’ in *Women Resisting Violence*, Mary John Mananzan et al. (eds), (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 84-85.

made it impossible for them to bear children or to be obedient wives. It is not unusual to see women being exorcized for bringing misfortune to a family after marriage, for being a princess of a water goddess and for being the cause of suffering and pain. I do think that this is one issue that demands a deeper reflection with regard to the theology and anthropology that sustain such archaic and unchristian thinking. It is an insult to African women for them to suffer these painful rites in the name of demonic possessions. It is also a rejection or denial of the power of God working in them, which in Christian tradition, regards all baptized Christians as temples of the Holy Spirit.

Sexual Exploitation of Women

Most women in Africa cannot advance in their chosen professional careers without being subjected to all forms of sexual abuse, sexual harassment or restrictive cultural influences. For instance, most working class ladies in Nigeria are reluctant to buy a car, because it is a liability for them in terms of getting a husband. I have often heard some nubile young men say that they will never marry women who already had a car or who belong to some profession like medicine, law or academia. Some women fall into this mindset wherein they lack self-confidence and depend on men for everything. The very traditional African woman is one who is dependent on men even for the things she can do for herself. Unfortunately, in many African countries there are no provisions for legal recourse for women who are exposed to sexual exploitation or harassment in offices. Indeed, there is a feeling in most male circles in places like Nigeria and Ghana that any successful woman in the public or economic square must have some *bottom power*, a conception that betrays the andocentric bias of African societies. Nor can we fail to mention the sexual exploitation of young girls by men even those of them that are in high places.

Prostitution

Finally, a great evil, which is taking root in some African societies, is prostitution, especially resulting in the trafficking of young African teenagers to Europe. According to *Zenit News Agency* (March 28, 2001), Caritas-Italy sources revealed that the sale of Nigerian women as prostitutes in Europe is controlled by a Nigerian bank. Volunteers of the Italian Church's aid organization in Salerno have gathered the testimonies of several young women, whom they have rescued from this "slavery," with the help of the John XXIII Association of Rimini, headed by Father Oreste Benzi. The director of the "Caritas Group Against Trafficking," who has rescued nine women in one year from the hands of organized crime, explained that about 10 or 12 volunteers constantly risk their lives in trying to help these women. The work undertaken is so dangerous that the volunteers prefer anonymity. Twice a week, these Caritas volunteers comb the east of Salerno by car, to establish a rapport with young Nigerian and Eastern European prostitutes who are scattered along the streets of Italian cities. The oldest prostitutes are 23; some are as young as 14. The volunteers have reconstructed the mafias' plan of action, from information supplied by the young women. The network is highly organized. There are countries where the girls are found, and cities and centers where the "merchandize" is stored, auctioned, and distributed to European cities and abandoned to the dangers and indignities of this shameful and unchristian life.

In the case of Nigerian women, a Nigerian bank offers them or their families a loan of \$14,000 to \$18,000 so that they can travel to Italy to secure "honest" jobs, guaranteed by the bank. Once they arrive in Europe, the young women are put in touch with a tribal witch-doctor, who performs a voodoo ceremony and then hands them over to a "madam" who runs a brothel. The women must earn a certain amount every day, to pay for their "job" and repay the loan. The Caritas volunteers became suspicious when they saw branches of a Nigerian bank opened along Salerno's coast. The young women who are forced into prostitution must deposit their earnings in these banks. "We have a spiritual closeness especially with the African girls," said one volunteer, who asked for anonymity. "We meet to pray. About 50 have taken part in a prayer meeting. We offered one 17-year-old one-day's earnings so that she could attend Christmas Mass, but she did nothing but cry. Two days later, she asked us to help her change her life. So we put her in a car, and had her disappear from the street."

One police study estimates there are about 70,000 prostitutes in Italy, a third of them minors. The study says there are 500,000 prostitutes in Europe. This evil should be condemned in unmistakable terms. The gangs of conscienceless men and women involved in this shameful trade should be exposed and punished. But there is also local prostitution which has taken hold in some African cities and which debases the dignity of the African women involved. "In many traditional African societies prostitution was looked upon as a monumental disgrace for the person engaging in it and her family. In some cases it was even an abomination. The person engaging in it was ostracized, and was required to perform certain religious rites before she could be readmitted into the society."¹⁹ The structure of society that drags women down to the level of selling their body in morally conservative societies of Africa must be seen as radically evil.

Conclusion

The situation of women in Africa is particularly troubling, because most women are not educated and those who are educated are often pressured to be less pro-active in the cause for the integral liberation of women. In addition, there is also a strong resistance to change in the established structures of the African society, because the people who benefit from such structures do not wish to lose their privileges. Cultural evolution is part of the historical process and is inevitable no matter the barriers that people lay along the path of history. What is essential is that all societies constantly evaluate their cultural practices to see how it promotes the integral life of people, especially in their most fundamental aspirations, which is the desire for freedom to be who they are meant to be and to respond to God in love. This is the measure to apply to any cultural practice. Unless African society and societies the world over constantly asks this fundamental question about how the quality of the life of their citizens is promoted or destroyed by settled cultural practices, there will be no authentic development of the human person.

Prudence Allen has shown in her two-volume work that the concept of woman has evolved across the centuries. It is the hope of many people today in Africa that the concept of woman in Africa should continue to evolve in the direction of more gender

¹⁹ *Restoring the Dignity of the Nigerian Woman*, (Lagos: Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, 2001), 8.

sensitivity, gender equality, greater fulfillment and human realization for women and children. According to Allen, "A deep impulse within Christianity towards integral gender complementarity reappears at different moments in history, especially when distortions have entered into these respective identities. When significant differentiation shifts to the radical devaluation of one gender, an impulse moves towards affirming the equal dignity of man and woman. When equality is interpreted in a unisex model of human identity, the impulse moves towards engendered appropriation of significant differences between women and men."²⁰ The same impulse for a better understanding and respect for African women is one challenge that must be at the center of the life of religious and political institutions in Africa. It should, above all, be part of the agenda for human development in Africa.

²⁰ Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman Vol. 11*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 1089.