

Women and Culture in Christian Worship: Examining Restrictions against Feminists' Liturgical Engagement in the Sacred Space

Matthew Voke E. Amuro^{1*}

^{1*} Baptist Theological Seminary, Eku, Delta State, Nigeria.

***Correspondence:** Matthew Voke E. Amuro

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines some constraints facing women in the sacred space regarding their liturgical engagements in Christian worship. It analyses how these perceptions continue to reshape understandings of the sacred space. Historically, patriarchal systems that determine religious authority or spiritual leadership, as well as cultural interpretations of Scripture, have limited women's involvement in worship in many Christian traditions. However, recent surges of prayer ministries operated by women have introduced new ways of seeing their role in engaging prayer, praise, and liturgical expression as acts of spiritual resistance and renewal. In-depth studies of women's prayer and praise practices, including historical, theological, and cultural aspects, show that they are more than devotional acts. Theological statements also support equality, inclusion, and the divine presence beyond gendered limits. This study examines how feminist viewpoints reinterpret religious sensitivities to recover women's role in worship. It concludes that feminist liturgical engagement in the sacred space invites the church to rethink worship as a transformative encounter where spirituality and gender converge for holistic renewal of Christian faith and community.

Keywords: *Women, Culture, Christian Worship, Feminism, Prayer, Praise, Sacred Space, Theology, Gender.*

INTRODUCTION

The sets of people who adequately bring the needed exuberance into worship are the women. The place of women in biblical records regarding prayer and praise indicates the depth of understanding and rich spiritual devotion they could foster in worship, which underlines their significance for the modern liturgical community. It is striking how authors overly tilt literature to exclude women's roles in liturgical festivities. Teresa Berger described it as a "poverty of documentation" of feminists' role in Christian worship (Berger, 2006, p. 755). In addition, in an attempt to deconstruct the narratives of women's ways of worship, she notes that their worship practices are either muted or situated within their maternal or reproductive societal roles. Furthermore, she accuses the narrator of the deliberate preclusion of women's rites and their worship practice (Ibid., 759).

Also, constrained within their domestic context, Berger notes, are women's liturgical initiatives and leadership (Ibid., 759-760). Furthermore, the restrictions on women's public appearance owing to the realities of *cultus publicus* indicate gender polarisations that exemplify women's liturgical actions and contentions.

It was women who constantly had their presence put under liturgical constraints by being admonished what to wear, how to do their hair, and how to comport themselves. If these admonitions were effective, there were clear constraints on the kind of presence and the kind of bodies women could bring to worship. However, rather than simply accepting these prescriptions as descriptions and as 'facts,' a more convincing interpretive strategy will read these admonitions as pointers to contested practices. That is, in these admonitions, we catch glimpses of how women's bodies might have been present at worship as sites of liturgical contestation. These glimpses appear in a number of different sources that prove suggestive when seen side by side, even if it is impossible to create a composite picture. These sources help us

to imagine, however, what might have shaped the liturgical lives of the many Christian women of the fourth century. And even if these stipulations reveal more about their authors than about real women's liturgical lives, they reveal a distinct pattern: the negative association between women's bodies and women's liturgical presence and agency (Ibid., 760).

Given the risks and victimisation or discrimination women encounter at worship, it is apt to state that this policing of women at worship served a slight gender-related problem peculiar to the male authors, who associate "women's liturgical presence and agency with trouble" (Ibid., p. 761).

Cultural and Religious Contentions against Women in Worship

Women proudly see themselves as conduits and possessors of spiritual powers and prowess (Olademo, 2012, p.66). According to Ukuanovwe, the idea of women's fervency as better agents of devotional expression is because they give more exuberant worship and are much more committed to the church than men. She cites the overwhelming number of women compared to men in devotional settings. To her, the discrimination women suffer when it comes to liturgical function pertains to their natural bodies and can no longer stand in today's world (Ukuanovwe, 2022).

However, Yusuf Bolanle thinks that the marginalisation of women in worship should be blamed on society, which shapes their roles and devotional engagements in the church; they always expect women to prove themselves twice to be trusted. However, in traditional circles, women's active leadership roles (priestesses) are respected, highly revered, and even considered more powerful than men. It is the belief that women possess unique gifts and powers from God (Bolanle, 2022). The question that naturally comes to mind is why the people who submit to women's leadership because of the spiritual insights they gain from them in traditional worship circles now think that certain restrictions are necessary to keep women in check, in the church. The writer will briefly explore some grounds for this seemingly gender based discrimination.

Researchers generally admit that the marginalisation of women in Christian leadership is a product of patriarchal culture transposing biblical theology (Oduyoye, 2001; Fiorenza, 1983; Dube, 2001). Before the advent of Christianity in African societies, women served as priestesses, female prophets, seers and healers, because authority was charismatic and experiential. However, as Christian bureaucracy changed from spiritual experience to that of institutional religion, it became a gender-sensitive authority. Ordination and clerical hierarchy replaced charisma as the basis for legitimacy, effectively excluding women from power structures (Fiorenza, 1993).

Furthermore, some theologians tend to use selective biblical interpretations to justify the exclusion of women, and to support male dominance, they often use passages such as 1 Timothy 2: 11-12; 1 Corinthians 14: 34-35 outside their historical and cultural context. However, other passages of the holy Scripture also highlights women's ability to lead in devotional and spiritual spheres; women such as Deborah, Judges 4 and 5, Phoebe and Junia in Romans 16: 1, 7 (Wright, 2004). Oduyoye (2001) and Okure (1992) believe that it was European missionaries and colonial infiltrators of the African culture who brought Western gender differentiations that portray female spiritual engagement and authority as pagan or morally suspect. As a result, the church became a male-dominated space, even with a handful of spiritually influential women, albeit informally or domestically. In conclusion, the blend of patriarchal culture with Christian establishment is to blame for women's restrictions in the worship setting. The challenge for a new theological emphasis is to recover all-inclusive biblical affirmations for women as bearers of divine authority.

In the first place, African worldview of women reflects several issues about society's spiritual and social well-being. Kasomo Daniel (2010, p. 128-129), in his review of African cultures and the welfare of women in the church, noted that while women are held in some places as inferior to men and taught to believe so, original Africans hold the feminine species as one that fulfils the man. The extract from his article below states a highly placed feminine position in African culture.

Ancient Africans believed that one of the reasons God made a woman after making man was that he wanted to improve his art. He wanted that art to reflect, among other attributes, physical beauty, intelligence, tenderness, compassion, patience and

tolerance. That God had tried but miserably failed this combination in man. All he had were muscles, a bit of a brain and very little else. Forget about beauty! Africans also believe God knew that man would be lost without a woman. He would be incomplete; hence, he would only be half-human. In modern times, women in Africa remain influential figures. She is the essence of being and existence. A man without a woman behind him is not considered a man in Africa. Society often ridicules a home without a woman (Ibid., 129).

From the above, it is plausible that women represent a valued stake in the African context of worship. While some church bureaucracies may restrict women in the worship place, that worldview varies from place to place. This variety of respect for women in worship shows in some traditional cultic groups where women are accorded priestly roles as overseers.

While there are taboos regarding women and women's participation in traditional African worship, many traditional sects accord women with the highest liturgical office; for instance, the "Igbe ra' me" (water goddess) worship welcomes women as heads of 'Ogwa' (the worship shrine) and install or ordain them sometimes with separate Ogwas to oversee (Erhiano, 2021). Invariably, women and their sexuality are accorded the highest moral and spiritual value in those traditional worship settings and are treated with sacredness. This development is essentially the same in the Yoruba traditional setting, as noted by Oyeronke; thus, "powers held and exhibited in the African ritual setting could therefore be regarded as potent and active. Women occupy significant positions and play leadership roles in the ritual setting of the Yoruba religion. With this understanding transferred into Yoruba Christianity, this paradigm now provides women with an alternative avenue for power within the Christian tradition (Olajubu, 2003, p. 49). Therefore, it is not difficult to understand some semblance of these in some churches. Thus, there is no uniformity in how Africans treat women in worship. Moreover, many female bishops, pastors, evangelists, prophets, and music ministers serve before the throne of grace. While men predominantly occupy most functional liturgical offices, many women have also gained access to leadership positions.

Male-controlled Resistance to Women's Liturgical Leadership in the Sacred Space

Some mainline churches have resisted women's progression in African Christianity. For instance, on January 5, 1994, the Nigerian Anglican Communion annulled the ordination of three women a year earlier by Bishop Haruna of the Ilorin diocese on the grounds of their sex (Ibid., p. 51). There seems to be no place, where men's hindsight does not trail women aspiring to functional liturgical roles in the church because of their bodies. The global Anglican Communion could be in jeopardy from an African perspective, due to a supposed naming of a female Archbishop of Canterbury, Sarah Mullally. The writer attempted to understand why the system restricts women in the worship house. Could it be for their bodily reflection or things, which the culture excludes them from in public life? In the writer's opinion, two reasons could readily avail themselves.

First, different religious and cultural worldviews shape African worship practices, sometimes resulting in the wrongful treatment of women. Attending devotees come to the worship place with a sense of sacredness. It may be convenient to state that much of these indigenous perceptions of worship stem from how Africans capture the God they worship, Christian or not. Unfortunately, quite a handful of women see the cultural means of these devotional experiences as unfavourable to them. While this angle is understood, the goal is to state some mindsets that govern African devotional experience.

African worship presents an opportunity for more spiritual exploitations. Osadolor Imasogie mentions Idowu's description of traditional Yoruba religious worship as ritualistic and following guiding principles and patterns (Imasogie, 1991, p. 18). Thus, worship provides the platform for power demonstration and display of magical exploits. Also, he noted that it is common for worshipers to either try out the strength of another with charms or to use them for protection against any tests from fellow devotees (Ibid., p. 19). Hence, Africans are susceptible to a religion of power. For African Christianity, especially in worship, it is not a matter of words alone but the demonstration of Spirit and power (1 Cor. 2: 4; 1 Thess. 1: 5), a setting African consider inimical to women.

Therefore, it is right to assume that such a perceived atmosphere of intense spiritual activities will result in prescriptive codes that are adverse to female worshipers. In most cases, the charms and ritual practices have unique restrictions and issues affecting their reactions to the sexuality of those who practice them. Growing up in a traditional setting, the writer understands these restrictions to be vindictive toward women. It presupposes that these African sensibilities and practical effects in liturgical settings influence the positioning of women in worship experiences differently. Practices regarding women's sexuality that traditional practitioners operate for spiritual reasons are what African patriarchal Christian culture is also domesticating in Christian worship, such as restrictions based on the women's monthly flows. However, a situation that allows them to plant churches, preach, lecture, and lead women's groups should qualify them to head a church, prepare or conduct Holy Communion, and conduct naming or burial ceremonies, things the church forbids women (Adeshina, 2021).

Furthermore, traditional worship is a festival and a memorial of certain events of deliverance. Every Urhobo clan in Delta State has one festival or another to worship a particular deity. During these celebrations, it is common to find war-like processions staged to reenact an initial deliverance for which they worship that deity. During this period, the male folk, being a period of anything goes, hid under the cover of a feast to perpetrate sexual violence against women, ranging from forceful abduction as sexually enslaved people to the outright crimes of rape against single and married women. Hence, women are natural outcast in places of such intense dark festivities.

Protestations against Male-controlled Resistance

In a counter move, Luise Schottroff believes that Jesus Christ has liberated women in the worship place (Schottroff, 2004, p. 204). On this note of God's liberating effect in salvation, one can suggest that Paul's treatment was not to point out women in the gender hierarchy but to reflect in themselves the Christian dignity they possess. Given Genesis 1: 26-27; 2: 18, 20-24, Ericksen's discourse on the sexes leaves a significant margin for a possible theological reconstruction and appreciation of scriptural interpretation on the subject. Scriptural narratives of creation affirm that

the man created in the image of God is male and female. Also, the status of the female, described in the creation account as a helper to the male, does not mean subservient or inferior, but rather, she is to be a co-worker or enabler of the male. Consequently, he affirms that a male's rule in a marriage, for instance, is not one-sided (Erickson, 2013, p. 499). In essence, the equality of the sexes as true representatives of God makes a composite of humanity's whole, meaning humanity will not be complete without either of the sexes (Nihinlola, 2018, p. 72).

A Theological Reclamation of Women's Role in Liturgical Leadership

However, coming from a biblical background of celebrative praise, imprecatory prayers and festivities, Christian liturgical festivals should celebrate God's work of salvation retrospectively, without atrocities associated with human sexuality. This understanding of worship aligns with Erik Routley's assertion that worship is "routine punctuated by festivity. Worship is when the heart is freed to love and the mind to think" (Tittley, 2021). Here, the role and presence of women are highly valued. However, while African Christianity values women's participation in worship, on the one hand, it is adverse to how far a woman can participate in expressing herself, on the other.

The language of worship tends to be more inclusive and generally embracing, notwithstanding the dispute over whether a woman is to be silent. Esther Ayandokun argues that Paul dealt with a peculiar problem for the Corinthian Church (Ayandokun, 2012, p. 159). From I Corinthians 14: 23-26, the essence of New Testament (NT) worship is inclusive and intrinsic to its purpose as a church. This biblical outlook shows why women should be a scripturally integral part of the church's liturgical body. However, proponents of male dominance may argue that God made man first and took the woman out of the man. Hence, the headship of man is God's intention at creation and His motif of society, especially when they cite Scriptures like Ephesians 5: 22-24.

In this vein, Hawkins sees outside human indicators as essential manifestations of suitable gender roles and their place in the order of God's design. To blur the lines between males and females violates an essential set of variations (Hawkins, 2004, p.

170). Hawkins further stressed that Paul only relied on common sense to prescribe specific roles within the faith community. This occasion indicates women's need to cover their heads to suggest hierarchical gender differentiation (Ibid., 171, 181).

Furthermore, women are much more given to worshipful alertness than men are, and the Bible captures women in devotional and socio-religious activities at a more personal and intimate level than is revealed about men. Elijah did not go to a man but a woman in Zarephath (1 Kings 17: 9-11). While men conduct liturgical functions, more women are revealed to commune in prayer with God (Exod. 23; 17; 24: 1-31:1-8 cf. Matt. 15:21-28; Lk. 2: 36-38; 1 Sam. 2: 1-10; Exod. 15: 21f). It is noteworthy that NT corporate worship services open up women to these kinds of participation due to the benevolence of the Holy Spirit on each member of the local church, and as the Bible puts it, it is for the work of the ministry (Belleville, 2005, p. 36). Moreover, this is in the absence of the OT animal sacrifices and rituals (Hebrews 10: 1-18). So far, although inclusive of both sexes in worship at different levels of involvement, Apostle Paul's biblical injunctions tend to be the NT church's standard. As Belleville observed,

the nature of early Christian worship is succinctly spelt out in 1 Corinthians 14: 26, 'when you come together,' Paul states, 'each one of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation....The gender-inclusive character of Paul's statement is not to be overlooked, nor is the public and verbal nature of this gifting. It was assumed both women and men were actively involved in worship in didactic and public ways (Ibid., p. 37).

Nevertheless, the main issue is the placement of restrictions on women's devotional activities. Reasons for this may not be far-fetched due to extraneous sexual orientation making inroads into the worship space. However, women are active devotional actors in the sacred place, and it holds a special place in the estimation of every worshiper. Obaje rightfully noted that the sanctity of the worship arena, even if it is under a tree, coming from the theocentric nature of the worship, is highly sacred. Therefore, Worship settings should not be subject to anthropocentric postulations (Obaje, 1991, p. 46). Recently, the issue of sexual orientation cropped up in the

Anglican Church in the USA, causing sharp divisions among worshipers, even that was not essentially, the making of women.

It took the Nigerian strand of the communion to respond by standing for what she felt was the biblical position, and more so, that her African sensibility could not allow such serious infractions to slip by following a gay bishop's ordination. The then Nigerian Prelate of the Anglican Church led the Nigerian communion to adopt a breakaway section of the church that stood for biblical prescriptions (Orji, 2020). Human sex and sexuality hold a sacred, spiritual, and cultural place in African devotion. In that setting, those who represent those sexes in doubt of the norms they must follow to prove their devotional authenticity.

Women Liturgical Prayer Initiatives and Approaches

Devotional scrutiny against women seems to encourage alternative worship places, which are springing up with the emergence of women's prayer ministries and independent women-led churches as a resultant impact on families and young Christians. Many of these are consequences of finding better means of liturgical expression in an atmosphere devoid of men's domination. Nevertheless, society expects these female ministers and pastors' wives to be mothers, women leaders, and faithful and loyal wives who support their husbands; to be a female pastor without a supportive, happy husband is to abandon God's first assignment.

The inclusive nature of salvation in Christ implies that He is opposed to any form of segregation on the ground of race, gender, or class (Gal. 3: 28; Eph. 2: 18). However, the Nigerian church especially has not read this freedom into the core social relationship there is, in worship, that of the composite sexes in terms of mutual and nondiscriminatory roles. Anagwo's call for cautious activism in worship participation does not show whether this includes women's struggle for more female inclusiveness in liturgical leadership (Anagwo, 2014, p. 65). However, there are indications that more pseudo-churches led by women are emerging by the day, and soon, the surging religious reclamations of liturgical works may force the hand of the male-dominated orthodox and evangelical churches to consider more concessions. This possibility is a critical necessity for the liturgical community of African Christianity to find a way

out of possible extremes. Women tend to get as much as their gross diligence to devotional commitment and worship.

Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground (Heb 11:35-38, NIV).

They represent a significant scriptural mention in the narratives, and the church cannot ignore their place in the artistic and liturgical language they contribute to corporate worship.

Conclusion

The debate surrounding women's leadership in the sacred space of worship where men are to follow her liturgical model and prompts can be intense and diversionary. It is clear that many view women in the sacred space from cultural lenses based on their natural bodies. Whereas, there are biblical grounds to rethink these sensibilities, patriarchal elements seemed to have misled the cultural place for women and the pedestal of equality place on all by grace. If Sarah Mullally qualifies as Archbishop, female or not, and she is truly called, spiritually sound, stands for the sanctity of the pure gospel of Christ, then, she deserves her place in history. It is the position of this study that the call to remove the basic restriction that inhibits women's right to the High Altar, calls for a reconsideration of feminist liturgical engagement in the sacred space of worship as transformative gender convergence for holistic spirituality, and renewal of the Christian faith and community.

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