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VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL (HG.)

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KONTEXTUELL – INTERSEKTIONAL

THEOLOGY: BIOGRAPHICAL – CONTEXTUAL –
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A Voice for the Voiceless. Developing Practical Theology from Personal Experience

INI DORCAS DAH

Abstract

Dieser Beitrag befasst sich mit der geschlechtsspezifischen Diskriminierung von Frauen in der Gesellschaft, insbesondere in verschiedenen westafrikanischen Communities. Die Autorin, aufgewachsen in den Lobi/Birifor-Communities in Westafrika, veranschaulicht, wie stark sich die männliche Vorherrschaft auf verschiedene Aspekte der Bildung und des Lebens von Frauen auswirkt. Sie beschreibt einen Kontext, in dem Männer gegenüber Frauen bevorzugt werden, und reflektiert die Auswirkungen der Bevorzugung der Erziehung von Söhnen gegenüber Töchtern, der mangelnden Beteiligung von Frauen an Entscheidungsprozessen, der Vererbung religiöser Ämter allein durch Männer und der vulnerablen Position insbesondere von alleinerziehenden Müttern.

In einem zweiten Schritt zeichnet die Autorin nach, wie ihre eigene Biographie ihr theologisches Denken geprägt hat, insbesondere in Bezug auf die Rolle der Frau. Die Autorin versteht biblische Passagen als Ermächtigung zur Überwindung von Barrieren und beschreibt, wie Einflüsse aus anderen Gesellschaften in der Elfenbeinküste und Ghana ihr neue Möglichkeiten eröffneten. Ausgehend von ihren eigenen Erfahrungen und der Überwindung verschiedener Herausforderungen reflektiert sie auf ihre Entscheidung, praktische Theologie zu betreiben, um zur Stärkung der Rolle von Frauen in einigen Teilen Westafrikas beizutragen.

Die Autorin skizziert verschiedene Projekte, die sie zum Wohl von (jungen) Frauen in Gesellschaft und Kirche über die Grenzen von Burkina Faso, der Elfenbeinküste und Ghana hinweg gegründet hat: die Association Evangélique Sowtaa, um Frauen zu unterrichten und empowern; das House of Hope als sichere Anlaufstelle für junge Frauen in Not, die eine Ausbildung suchen; und ein Projekt zur Unterstützung von Geflüchteten, die von den Terroranschlägen in Gaoua betroffen sind. Ausgehend von diesen persönlichen und beruflichen Erfahrungen plädiert die Autorin für eine Theologie der Hoffnung, der sozialen Gerechtigkeit und der ganzheitlichen Mission, die die jeweiligen sozio-religiösen Kontexte berücksichtigt und eng mit den sich daraus ergebenden spezifischen Aufgaben und Herausforderungen verbunden bleibt.

This chapter reflects on gender discrimination against women in society, particularly in some West African communities. The author, who grew up in the Lobi/Birifor communities in West Africa, illustrates how male supremacy has a strong impact on various aspects of women's education and life. Describing a context that favours men over women, she reflects on the effects of prioritising the education of sons over daughters, the lack of women's participation in decision-making, the inheritance of religious positions by men only, and the vulnerable position, especially of single mothers, among other things.

In a second step, the chapter illustrates how the author's own biography has shaped her theological thinking, especially with regard to the role of women. The author understands biblical passages as empowering for overcoming barriers and describes how influences from other societies in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana opened up new possibilities for her. Learning from her own experience of overcoming various challenges, she reflects on her decision to do practical theology in order to contribute to the empowerment of women in some parts of West Africa.

The author reflects on different projects she has initiated for the well-being of women and young women in society and church across the borders of Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana. These include the Association Evangélique Sowtaa for the education and empowerment of women, the House of Hope as a safe haven for struggling young women seeking education, and a project to support refugees affected by the terrorist attacks in Gaoua. Reflecting on these personal and professional experiences, the author argues for a theology of hope, social justice, and holistic mission that takes into account the respective socio-religious contexts and remains closely linked to the specific responsibilities and challenges that arise from them.

1. Introduction

I have, for some time, been reading this post online: "I have learned to give. Not because I have much. But because I know exactly how it feels to have nothing." This caught my attention because it conveys exactly what I have started learning to do based on my own experience in life. When I was a student at the University, I used to listen to one of the Christian radio stations in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. One of the programmes I followed regularly was entitled "Perspective Reformée de la Femme Africaine" (Reformed Perspective of African Women). One saying I learned from this programme was "Chaque expérience de notre vie est une leçon" (Every experience of our life is a lesson). This paper looks at my experiences in life, the lessons I learned from them, and how they shaped my theological thinking about creation in general and, in particular, women in several contexts. In doing this, I make use of some literary sources about the general condition of women around the world and, in particular, in some parts of Africa. My own experience as a woman borne and bread in West Africa and some interviews conducted in some communities also served me when writing this chapter.

2. The Disadvantaged Position of Women (Lobi/Birifor Context)

Zimbalist Rosaldo (1974: 17) argues that “Women may be important, powerful, and influential, but it seems that, relative to men of their age and social status, women everywhere lack generally recognized and culturally valued authority.” This describes the situation of some women, especially among the Lobi/Birifor communities in West Africa, and their general condition in the world. Some women are not even part of decision-making processes in their own contexts – even when the decisions directly concern their lives. When women do not have a say in decision-making, they can only live to suffer whatever decisions the male folk take at the women’s disadvantage.

Discrimination against women in some communities in West Africa (Lobi/Birifor) is still a fact. Among the Lobi/Birifor, a male child is always preferred to a female child. This is reflected in various aspects of the lives of women and girls, and as Grace N. Ndyabahika (1996: 27) observes, “African women are afflicted also by traditional cultural values which favour men over women and sons over daughters.” Even though Ndyabahika talks about African women in general, in Burkina Faso for example, I would say that there is still a gender bias against women in various aspects of life including some of the Churches’ attitudes that do not make life easy for women in some contexts. Among some ethnic groups, such as the Birifor/Lobi, boys are still favoured when it comes to schooling children in some families. Even though the Birifor are matrilineal, religious offices are inherited by men, not women (cf. Evans 1983: 30). Thus, it is not common to find women priests in Birifor traditional society. Evans (1983: 27) notes that “ritual office and shrine custodianship is transmitted patrilineally, from brother to brother and father to son.”

In addition to the fact that they are not supposed to inherit any religious title, women are almost reduced to silence because, according to Andrea Behrends’ Dagara, “*pogminga*”¹ is a woman who is properly married and whose bridewealth is paid. Behrends (2002: 233) adds that she is

“[d]iligent and committed to her work, and quiet in the house and during social gatherings. She is a woman who never shows that she is tired, who cares for the household and her children, helps and respects her husband, receives guests in a friendly manner, and is a pleasure to be with especially for her husband’s family, where she lives, but also for her neighbourhood.”

This shows how women in some of the ethnic groups among the Lobi/Birifor are not only discriminated against based on marital status but are also to live and

1 The proper woman or the ideal woman. The Birifor expression for it is *poomē*.

endure since they do not have a say even if what is being discussed affects them directly.² In the same vein, April A. Gordon (1996: 249) comments that,

“[a]s in other parts of the world, African women have neither the political, legal, education, nor economic opportunities of their male counterparts. Men in Africa used their positions more often than not to further the control and advantages men have in both the public and domestic arenas.”

Gordon's claim indicates that men take advantage of their supremacy over women in every sphere of life. In so doing, they control women and restrict their freedom. In an unpublished interview I conducted for my PhD research (cf. Dah 2018), Joseph Truman Bayel also argues that many girls in some communities of Northern Ghana barely finish their secondary education because their fathers do not understand the importance of educating girls. This lack of understanding leads to a lack of care for these girls when they go to secondary school and exposes them to all sorts of social abuse. Thus, some of them often return home pregnant and must leave school. This shows how the deprivation of basic needs in one's life can expose a person to danger and lead them to actions that affect them for their entire life.

Being a single mother or bearing a child out of wedlock can be a real social burden for women. Even the Church does not often treat such women with respect. Thus, it would be appropriate for parents to focus on the well-being of both boys and girls to protect them from rejection in society. In a conversation on 24 November 2013 in Tuna with a Church elder, Daniel Posambu, who is also a Teacher and Parents' Association Head in one of the communities in Northern Ghana, reported that some girls in the secondary school from the surrounding villages get barely enough food to eat to enable them to follow the classes because they depend solely on their mothers for food supply. Therefore, whenever their mothers cannot afford the basic minimum life becomes very difficult for them in school. These various views reflect how disadvantaged women are in some parts of West Africa. This disadvantaged position sometimes makes it very difficult for women in life, damaging them physically, psychologically, mentally, spiritually, and so on.

In post-colonial society, life becomes increasingly loaded for some women because, in some households, women must work to contribute to the family expenses as equal to their husbands but must still do all the house chores that they

2 For more details on the place of women among the Lobi/Birifor, see my work: Dah 2018: 42–46.

were expected to do in traditional society.³ As I indicated in an earlier publication, some pastors even preach during weddings that women should know that they must pay the water bill when their husbands are paying the electricity bill. However, these same pastors do not have the courage to tell men that if women have to contribute equally financially, then the men also need to share in the house chores with the women to make the burden lighter for them (cf. Dah 2018: 84). There is nothing wrong with women participating in the household expenses. However, I believe that for fairness in society, women deserve to be treated as human beings and not be overloaded as they are in some families.

3. Practical Theology: A Personal Response to the Issue of Gender Bias Among the Birifor/Lobi

As indicated above, going to school has not always been an opportunity that is available for women in the context I come from, let alone having the opportunity to pursue a PhD level. However, my father decided to send all his children (both girls and boys) to school and left each one of us to decide for ourselves whether to continue or not. Maybe, we had this advantage because we were born in Burkina Faso and did not live in a typical Birifor village in my childhood. In Ghana where we were born, both girls and boys attended school. Therefore, my father sent our firstborn to school in Ghana. Our second born and I attended a French school in Côte d'Ivoire. In Côte d'Ivoire, both girls and boys attended school in the community where my uncles lived and so my uncles' children were also attending school without discrimination of sex. This also created a favourable avenue for us to be able to go to school.

Things became challenging at secondary level when I was in Burkina Faso because school fees at that time were almost five times what my parents used to pay in primary school. For instance, in 1997, I was sent out of school one day while I was writing an exam paper in French, one of my core subjects. It took the intervention of a church member who went and talked to the accountant and convinced him to allow me to continue with the other exam papers. They were

3 Note that not only did I grow up moving between three West African countries (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana), but I have also been researching with women since 2008. I have interacted with women personally and can affirm what they go through. Sometimes, even sermons in some evangelical churches during church services and weddings condemn women and end up telling them to work to contribute to their families. It is not bad to work as a woman in order to take care of the family. However, men are not taught to also contribute efforts in the house keeping to make the burden of women manageable. I have personally attended some of the events but cannot add names and places to avoid disclosing some people's identity.

from the same tribe and so the accountant agreed and at the end of the month that church member paid my school fees. The French teacher was also kind and gave me another paper to write later. This is how I was able to continue with my secondary education until I got a bursary to complete the final years before going to university. Although a woman had to struggle to make her way through formal education in my context, one thing that I always kept in mind was to be determined, have courage, and move forward by having faith in every situation. As the saying goes, “To a valiant heart nothing is impossible” and above all, the Bible tells us that we will achieve exploits with God (Psalm 60:12 and 108:14). In the New Testament, in Luke 1:37, we read that “Nothing is impossible with God.”⁴ These biblical passages gave me the strength to continue and still encourage me in everything I do in my life today. As a child of God, I believe that God has the final say in my life. Therefore, I decided to rely on him in every aspect of my life, trusting that he would intervene whatever the situation. Being confident and holding onto God paved the way for me to reach where I am today. For example, even when I went to do my theological education in Ghana and the Church said they had no money to pay for my studies, that I should give up and return to Burkina Faso, I told them that God would see me through, and God really did. I started without a scholarship but later won one and was able to continue up to the PhD level.

As the first woman theologian with a PhD in Burkina Faso, it was very challenging to make it through and it is still not easy, especially considering the community I live in. The church I attend does not also foster education, especially not education for women. Studying in Ghana contributed to encouraging me because I was in a Presbyterian-affiliated theological institution. The Presbyterian Church of Ghana is different from the church I am from because they have many ordained women and women are encouraged to further their education in the church. My first supervisor for my Master of Arts degree was a woman and she really inspired me because that was my first time encountering a woman in that position. I must admit that my exposure to other parts of the world also broadened my vision and enabled me to yearn to know more. This also opened my mind to understanding that everyone can make it in life – no matter their origin or gender.

Today, I am moved to see other girls enduring the same situation and I cannot be silent about it because I have been through the same experience. The only difference between me and them is that, even though my parents were willing, they could not afford to pay for my education at some point. However, some of the girls I have met and decided to take care of are orphans while others are affected by

4 Note that I am not going to do an exegesis of these biblical texts.

socio-religious beliefs that you do not spend money on girls because they belong to a different family.⁵

Therefore, the struggles I underwent as a woman in my own society led me to start thinking about what I could do to assist other women so that we can work together to empower one another and improve their living conditions because women as well as men are created in the image of God and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Therefore, from the year 2000, I started praying to God and asking him for direction and wisdom on how I could be useful to my fellow human beings especially women who did not have the chance to go to school or women who have been to school but still face various barriers on their way. This led me to pursue the activities I have initiated based on my own experience which I now give an account of in the following sections.

4. Founding the Association

In April 2010, I was attending a seminar in Ghana as a student when people, in particular the names of some widows, started coming to my mind. The question I asked myself that day was, “How could I be useful to all these women in the Church and society?” During the break, one of my coursemates approached me and said, “*Maame*⁶ Dorcas, there is a programme in Nigeria that I want you to attend. I am sure you can not only help these women who have a good vision but struggle to organize the work, but this will inspire you in your ministry in Burkina Faso.” Thus, in December 2010, I travelled to Nigeria with eight women and young women from Burkina Faso and four women I invited from Côte d’Ivoire also came. Most of these women came from the Assemblies of God Church of Côte d’Ivoire (this has been my church from childhood and is still the church I attend when am in the country) and the Eglise Protestante Evangélique of Burkina Faso (my current church). These women were invited to attend the women’s convention with me in Nigeria to witness what was going on at the ‘All Women Jubilation Center’ in Nigeria in order to support me in establishing our own association in Burkina Faso and possibly Côte d’Ivoire as well. Thus, in August 2010, I started the Association Evangélique pour la Joie et le Développement de la Femme: AEJDF (the Evangelical Association for the Joy and the Development of Women: EAJDW) which was officially registered in February 2014 and renewed in December 2018 under the name Association Evangélique Sowtaa (the Evangelical Association for Mutual Assistance or AES). Note that we are independent and do not operate with the support of the Burkina Faso government.

⁵ I will give more details about the girls further down.

⁶ Mummy in Twi (a Ghanaian language).

AES aims to bring women together for them to join forces and work for their empowerment spiritually, socially, and economically in order to sustain themselves in life because, according to Bryant Myers (2011: 275): “There are always voices that are not easily heard. Among the most important is that of women”. He goes further indicating that change will not be possible if it is only sought through the consideration of men with the exclusion of women. Myers (2011: 277) further opines that there is a need to work towards a new “framework for life and living that begins to overcome oppression and marginalization within gendered relationships” if one wants to achieve effective development within society. So, even though we do various social activities, we also teach women and young women to understand that they have value in their society because they are also created in the image of God and thus, must not underestimate themselves – even if society does. Other initiatives emerged after the founding of the association.

5. 2016 Founding the House of Hope

After establishing the Association Evangélique Sowtaa (then the AEJDF) in 2010, I started the House of Hope in 2016. The House of Hope is mainly for the education of young women and children who are left to struggle for their education due to poverty and socio-religious beliefs. The idea of creating this home started in May 2016 when I met some young women in Batié, one of the towns in the South-west of Burkina Faso, travelling to Ghana during vacation to look for jobs. This was their way of trying to find some financial means in coastal countries in order to go back and pay for their rent and school fees during the academic year. I was living in Ghana at that time and had gone to that town for research on spirituality and hope in Africa as a postdoctoral researcher. I could not refrain from asking these girls to not go to Ghana because I had met some of them sleeping in bus stations and market corners in both the cities of Kumasi and Accra.⁷ Most of these girls go to these coastal countries in search of greener pastures. However, they end up on the street because they do not have relatives to host them. Although they are often employed by local people, their employers do not provide accommodation for them, so they have to go to work during the day and then find their own place to sleep each night.

Therefore, in August 2016, I looked for a house to rent for these young women during the academic year that was starting at the beginning of October. From 2016 until 2022, I have been able to host more than almost 30 young women and,

7 I have pictures of some of them. I have also met some girls while traveling from Dubai to Accra, returning home after being to Saudi Arabia looking for greener pastures. However, some of them ended up returning home more miserable than how they left their countries.

since 2021, I have sent five children to class one. I believe that everyone regardless of gender or social class is created in the image of God. Thus, discrimination against a child based on gender is a social injustice, and this needs to be corrected. Hence, my commitment to seek a decent education for these young women in a sound environment and see to it that they become good future leaders for our society. Caring for people's needs as a Christian mission is an act of compassion because it cannot be a true Christian mission without compassion for the people one is working with. Loving care also shows that, as people with a Christian mission, we are conscious of treating people with dignity and respect instead of using them as a "mere means to an end" (Maggay 2008: 50).⁸ Thomas H. Groome (1983: 73) also argues that

"[w]e must live now according to God's will. That will becomes a law for us that Jesus summarized as the radical law of love. His preaching of the law of the Kingdom is radical in that it is not only a law to love God and one's neighbor, but a law to love God by loving one's neighbor as oneself, with 'neighbor' knowing no limits."

One can understand from Groome's words that there is no expression of our love for God unless this is done through the love that we show the people around us.

I personally understand that caring for these girls is part and parcel of creation care because they are all created in the image of God and have the right to thrive in all aspects of their lives, including through education and any other things that will make them enjoy life on Earth fully. In other words, I believe that no one should be excluded based on their gender.

6. Assistance to Internal Refugees (The Training of Women and Young Women in Gaoua)

Talking about sustainability in life, Myers (cf. 2011: 193) states that a major job to do is to help the community understand that sustainability involves a transformation of people's entire being physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually. Although many programmes designed to improve the living conditions of both men and women are being initiated in Burkina Faso through the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the recent terrorist attacks in the country have caused a massive displacement of people. Statistics show that 2.06 million internal refugees have been displaced in the country (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). Most of these people can no longer go back to their origi-

8 Some of these girls are Church members, yet they cannot afford for their basic needs. Others are also non-Christians.

nal settlements and have become social work cases in their own country. Various humanitarian actors are bringing their support but the need is still high, and the numbers keep growing from day to day.

Life is becoming increasingly difficult for families living in zones that have been invaded by terrorists. Many people who have had to move out of their villages to find safe havens elsewhere, especially women, are facing various challenges. As we know, in 'war', women and children are the most vulnerable. For instance, I have read about women struggling to cope with the current situation and that is a cause for deep reflection and action. Recently, a man asked his wife to leave his home under the pretext that she was the cause of his bad luck because the man's business was no longer as prosperous as it used to be before the family was forced to move from the Eastern part of the country to the central plateau due to insecurity (cf. Bationo 2023). The account published in a newsletter indicates that this man is no longer able to provide for his family and so he has started blaming his wife for his misfortune.

To avoid many more women finding themselves in such a situation, I decided to bring my small contribution to the relief of people affected by the terrorist attacks in the town of Gaoua. Thus, my team and I launched the internal refugee training programme in August 2022. Forty women and/or young women are currently receiving training in different skills for a period of two academic years. I know that my team and I cannot reach out to every refugee in the country, but by learning from Timothy Richard's example in China,⁹ we can contribute the little that we can offer. When Richard went to China as a missionary in the 19th century, a famine broke out between 1876 and 1879. Richard contributed to the famine relief by distributing his own resources and sharing his experience in China with other people who made contributions to assist the Chinese at that time. Richard could not intervene everywhere. However, he did his best to touch as many people as he could in Shanxi and Shandong (cf. Walls 2000: 236–258). I see Richard as a role model for me because, in the current situation in Burkina Faso, it would be unrealistic to seek to bring relief to everyone. There is no region in the country without internal refugees. Hence, my initiative to contribute in a small way by training these forty women and young women internal refugees with my limited resources. This project providing training and education for the internal refugee women and young women seeks to bring about development that is sustainable in their lives because "sustainable development is a socio-economic and environmental development. It affects all aspects of societies: education and training, eliminating child labour, doing recycling in order to protect the environment" (Lehtonen et al. (eds.) 2002: 4). It is also an integral and transformational mission

9 Timothy Richard was a Baptist missionary from Wales, who served in China from 1870 to 1914 (cf. Bohr 1972: 11).

in a sense that these women will be transformed both physically and spiritually because the goal of the mission is holistic and to see people transformed as a whole.

Darrel Whiteman (1990: 125) defines integral human development as “a process by which people gain greater control over themselves, their environment and their future in order to realize the full potential of life that God has made possible”. Integral development considers, among other factors, the general well-being of the individual and includes the spiritual factor. Myers (2011: 178) also argues that “[w]e must know who we are and the purpose for which we were created. Therefore, restoring identity and recovering vocation must be the focus of biblical understanding of human transformation”. In other words, the transforming message of the Gospel is preached through practical deeds and helping people be aware of their vocation in their communities so that they do not rely on one-time gifts handed over to them but grow out of dependency to contribute to the building of their society (cf. Myers 2011: 193–202).

Principle 1 of the Rio Declaration also states that “Human beings are the centre of concerns for development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature” (United Nations 1993, 1). Thus, I believe that these women and young women deserve better living conditions than those imposed on them in their insecurity, and thus, training them will lead them to discover their vocation and create desirable conditions that will be sustainable and/or holistic. For, holistic development encompasses sustainable, integral, and transformational development. It emphasizes the need to balance economic, social, environmental, and cultural aspects of progress to contribute to the overall well-being of individuals, communities, and nations through the creation of positive and long-term changes for the benefit of individuals and societies for both now and future generations.

7. 2022 Founding the Impew-Nouma School Complex

According to Lilian Ayete-Nyampong (cf. 2015), seven of the 10 countries in which people are least educated are in West Africa: Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea Conakry, Mali, Niger, Sénégal, and Sierra Leone. As already indicated above, education is considered part of sustainable development. However, the scarcity of schools in some areas also affects children’s ability to attend. My school complex project is a recent action in the vision of the holistic development work that I am doing in West Africa in order to contribute more to the education of people, especially girls, in Burkina Faso. The process has already started with the registration of about eight hectares of land. On this land, I plan to build a school complex that will cover nursery to university level education because education is key for

the development of any country. As stated in Principle 20 of the Rio Declaration (United Nations 1993), “Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development.” If women play a vital role in development, then their education is also necessary for their effective contribution socially, economically, and so on.

8. Writing and Publishing Academic Papers to Promote Women’s Achievements as a Way of Unearthing their Hidden Identity

Talking about Greco-Roman women, Kuen (cf. 1994: 34) explains how Catherine Kroeger argues that literature about women in the Greek context was written by men with the result that we know the least about women’s religious life. Kroeger’s argument shows that historically, narratives have focused on men’s achievements and we are ignorant about what women have accomplished. Even though Kroeger is referring to Greco-Roman women, her statement enables us to place the Lobi/Birifor women in the general context of women around the world and throughout history.

Talking from a biblical perspective, Akon E. Udo (cf. 1997: 21) argues that it is important to consider pairing in creation as it were initially to avoid unfairness because both males and females play significant roles in creation. Therefore, for Dorothy Bea Akoto (cf. 2004: 39), the voices of everyone should be heard in the mission. Akoto encourages the writing of women’s stories to reach completeness in the mission.

If history has been written by men at the expense of women, women need to write their own stories – hence the need to conduct research on ‘marginalized women’s groups’ in order to make them known to their society first and other parts of the world. Thus, for Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (1997: 19), there is no biblical justification that allows people to consider some people above others based on “race, class, or gender.” This means that all people are equal in God’s creation. Although women in some contexts experience double marginalization, it does not mean that God cannot use them for his work. Thus, documenting what women are able to achieve regardless of their social status is a way of empowering them to achieve more and impact society and the Church positively. It is also a way of encouraging those who are idle under the pretext that they are marginalized to act.

You will realize that most of the initiatives I have come up with as practical theological work were borne in an academic context. In my pursuit of education, I decided to contribute to the promotion of women by not only learning about them and writing about their daily lives and predicaments but by focusing on

their positive achievements despite their difficult living conditions. This is the reason my PhD thesis was on the role of women in Christian History with a particular focus on Birifor women.¹⁰ In my book, the focus is on the positive impact of women in the expansion of the Christian faith in general, regardless of whatever negative pressure they endured in our communities and sometimes even in our churches. In most communities in West Africa today, Birifor women work together with women of other ethnic groups. Therefore, the work talks about all women with a particular focus on Birifor women whom I call “the marginalised within a marginalised ethnic group” and the major role these women played in the Christian mission in West Africa through their contribution to the establishment of the various churches in their communities and beyond. I also looked at their participation in the various women’s movements among the Birifor and how they transform lives by bringing relief to people spiritually, socially, morally, emotionally, and so on.

Andrew F. Walls (cf. 1996: xiii) argues for the use of personal and institutional biographies for the writing of Christian history. Watson A. O. Omulokoli (2000: 41) also states that “One of the greatest needs for Christianity in Africa today is the writing of its history”. Thus, he suggests that the writing of African Christian biographies is one of the ways to make African Christians’ contributions to Christianity known. He notes, “Christian biographies have played a substantive role in Christian history, by enriching the store of information relating to the nature and activities of key Christians and their contributions to the Christian faith” (Omulokoli 2000: 41). Christian biographies, whether individual or institutional, are significant for highlighting the activities that Christians have played in Christian history. I, therefore, write the stories of women to highlight their achievements so that they do not remain hidden in Christian history when they have also contributed enormously.

Another thing related to mission in my work is the work every Christian can do for the expansion of the good news of the Gospel. The mission here is not about going out there to impose the Gospel on or waging war against people and force them to become Christians. Rather, it is about living in such a way that people see the image of Christ in us and voluntarily accept Him. Yes, some of the women went out of their comfort zones to preach the Gospel, but they also lived out the Gospel to touch people’s lives with their actions, they sacrificed their resources for the wellbeing of both the Church and society to bring about positive impact in their various communities. Thus, regardless of gender, every Christian is a missionary who can impact people’s lives in their communities and lead them

10 The published book title is: *Women Do More Work Than Men: Birifor Women as Change Agents in the Mission and Expansion of the Church in West Africa* (Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana) (cf. Dah 2018).

to Christ. It does not matter which society you come from or how society treats you. It is a matter of availing oneself so that God can use you to accomplish marvellous things for his glory. Thus, in my research, I discovered that some women are missionaries, evangelists, pastors, apostles, and priests even though they do not bear these titles and sometimes, they themselves tend to undermine what they are doing because society belittles them. I am saying this because most of them travel miles on foot, putting their lives in danger, in order to share the Gospel with other people. Many of them have sacrificed their finances and resources to contribute to the expansion of the Church in their communities and beyond. They have also been able to overcome cultural, denominational, and religious boundaries to preach the Gospel while working in inter-religious women's groups and organizations within and outside their countries.

Documenting women's work, therefore, enables them to acknowledge their worth in creation because, as God himself said after he commended everything as "good" or even "very good", it is "not good" for man to be alone. This is the same for society, the Church, and the Christian mission. It is not good for the Church to be a church of men first and foremost. The fact that women are always excluded, often makes them underestimate themselves at the pleasure of society. Documenting the achievements of women not only unearths their hidden stories, it also creates awareness for our churches to be deliberate about the inclusion of women in all spheres of the Church if we really believe that both man and woman are created in the image of God. The value we give to a woman should be based on the first value God gave her at creation and not on what our various societies dictate to us about women.

I also documented women's associations and groups in the churches and society. M. J. Ada (cf. (2000: 17) argues that these movements, formed by women after the establishment of the churches, are the most dynamic and productive. She further indicates that it would be difficult to overlook them in the Protestant churches if one wants these churches to grow. I have personally observed that despite the fact that most churches and societies undervalue women, this does not deter them from joining forces to impact their societies. Therefore, researching and documenting their achievements is another way of valuing them and empowering them in what they are already doing. Many pastors from Protestant churches have testified to me, during my research, that they recognized their ministry would never make progress if women were not working hand in hand with them. Yet, they also recognized that they do not give leadership positions to these women in their churches.

One important thing about writing about women is that they are key agents upholding society and the Church even if some of them are not aware of the important role that they are playing in society. J. A. Kayode Makinde (cf. 1998: 75) opines that women are the first to inculcate life values in children, teaching them

about norms and all good manners that hold society together. This idea is also emphasized by Edith Deen (cf. 1959: xix) who argues that women are not concerned about competition but, rather, spend their time educating their children for a better future for our societies.

9. Conclusion

As I have explained here, I come from a very difficult background. I struggled to meet vital needs in order to reach where I am today. Indeed, I was only able to complete a PhD by God's grace. Therefore, I have made the resolution to not close my eyes and ears to the cry of any person, especially any woman I meet in need of vital resources for survival. I believe that my theology of hope, social justice, and, let us say, holistic mission is, in short, useless if it does not take the socio-religious context within which I live and work into consideration. As Kwesi A. Dickson (1984: 223) points out, "[t]o preach the Gospel should involve facing the issues that confront society" and women's challenges in some West African countries, especially among the Lobi/Birifor, are issues that confront society today because according to God's original intention for his creation, both males and females have the same value as God's representatives in the universe.

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