

Couples and Roles: Issues of African Women

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Received 18 April 2015; accepted 9 July 2015

Published online 26 September 2015

Abstract

The paper is concerned with the ordained women in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG) and how gender prescribes roles in their families and in the PCG. Gender refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with male and female and their relationships are socially constructed, context/time specific. Christianity prescribes to women the role they must play in their matrimonial homes. In combining the traditional and contemporary roles, many women find themselves playing the roles as wives, mothers and reverend ministers. The PCG put strong emphasis on family life and the issue of relocation has greatly influenced some of the PCG's member's attitude to couple ministry. Thus another traditional practice where women do not take leadership positions when men are around. The study examines the theory of gender discourse as a theoretical frame using historical analysis method. The existing structures within both the church and society are patriarchal and the structures turn to focus more on men than on women in the various sectors of life. In the field work, the researcher came across an ordained couple where the wife was ordained first, went into the ministry first, in terms of educational qualification she is more qualified than the husband and they were put in the same district but the husband was rather appointed by the PCG as the district minister for the wife to be his subordinate. The African culture assigns women in the family to the domestic domain denying them from decision making positions but women and men should act in partnership.

Key words: Ordained; Marriage; Gender roles; Couple

Adasi, G. S. (2015). Couples and Roles: Issues of African Women. *Canadian Social Science*, 11(9), 104-108. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/7553>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/7553>

INTRODUCTION

Gender refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with male and female and their relationships are socially constructed, context/time specific. *Marriage in the African context is a union between a man and a woman who have consented to live together as husband and wife.* Gender prescribes roles in the Ghanaian family and the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG) is no exception. The PCG operates on the grounds of the prevailing patriarchal, social, cultural and religious environment of the nation in which the church exists and it is under the grab of cultural practices and norms through misinterpretation of religious tenets. Among the many world religions, Christianity for example, incorporates some beliefs, practices as well as culture that prescribe to women the role they must play in their matrimonial homes. One of such passages in the New Testament (NKJV) is Ephesians 5:22-24.

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and he is the Saviour of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.

This passage has often been quoted to confirm the position of wives in Ghanaian families. It can be seen from the passage that wives are expected to submit to their husbands. These Scriptural and cultural sayings are controversial and these are some of the sayings the men hold on to in the Ghanaian societies. (See Appendix, Table 1a & 1b) During the debate for and against women's ordination in the mid-seventies in the PCG for example, debaters against women's ordination deduced

their arguments from Biblical scriptures and cultural perceptions as mentioned above. Reflecting on 'the custom of all the churches; the creation of woman from and for man; her seduction by the serpent and her subjection to man by divine command' (Chapman, 1967, p.33). Women were thought to lack logic and they were thought to be fragile and needed to be silent in public gatherings. After several debates on whether or not women should be ordained in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG), the church eventually ordained women into the clergy and assigned their roles. As ordained ministers some are married with children and they are performing their roles as chaplains, congregational leaders, administrators of lay centres and managers of schools. Their other roles are married women ministers as presbytery chairperson and clerks and finally as missionaries.

It is surprising that as the PCG ordains married women into the clergy ministry and assigns them some roles, some of the issues rose for and against the commissioning of women, continue to follow them in performing their roles and this has affected their family lives. In performing their ministerial roles, the ordained women ministers are faced with some challenges in their marriages which are based on socio-cultural, theological and psychological factors. This paper will focus on the gender prescriptions of married PCG ordained women ministers.

This study will be analyzed within the theoretical frame of gender equity against women theory which holds men accountable for not allowing women equal role performance. The main argument is that the existing structures within both the church and society are Patriarchal in the sense that the structures turn to focus more on men while marginalizing women in the various sectors of life. Russell thinks women should be freed from male dominance stating that "there should be a political theory and practice to free all women...." (Russell, 1993, p.57). Women are performing their marital roles creditably and they are challenging the paradigm, calling for a change and equality. They are defining, establishing and asserting equal political, economic and social rights and equal opportunities for themselves in Ghana.

Oduyoye (1986, p.121) argues that women's experience should become an integral part of what goes into the definition of being human. Oduyoye further explains that there should be a movement geared toward liberating the human community from entrenched attitudes and structures that can only operate if dichotomies and hierarchies are maintained. By this, she argues that both men and women should be given equal entrenched attitude structures.

Gender based segregation is largely evident in the socio-economic and religious activities, patterns and roles set for women and men in traditional African societies. Thus, women were not only prevented from occupying certain societal and ecclesiastical positions in the church because of their sex but also assign different roles that centre on the home. Thus Oduyoye argues that

'in Africa, women make pots which are sold cheaply; men make ritual objects and carvings that are highly regarded (Oduyoye, 1986, p.123). In effect, the social differentiation between men and women was determined just as the wheels of culture were set in motion.

Russell is also of the view that the existing system does not encourage women to live their full potentials whether in the church or society in general. She therefore argues that women and men should act in partnership so that both men and women are given equal opportunity if they have the skills. However, scholars such as Gaba argues that in Africa, some women can be diviners and priestesses performing all the functions of priests (PCG, 1971, p.59). Hence wives should be allowed to perform equal roles with their husbands. It is within this frame of thought that this discussion on gender and marriage in the PCG of ordained women ministers is based.

1. FACTORS INFLUENCING GENDER ROLES IN THE PCG

There are many factors that influence gender roles in the Ghanaian societies and the PCG. In her book *Beads and Strands*, Oduyoye (2002, p.78) reflects on the position of the African woman and the roles they play in the society. According to her, "the position of women in Africa today within the wider society is normally prescribed by what is deemed to be beneficial to the welfare of the whole community of women and men." According to Oduyoye, issues of equality cannot be adequately spoken of in terms of African culture. The culture, she said, is replete of gender equality and fairness. This is particularly so because, according to her, role differentiations in Africa are clear and are not meant to be valued hierarchically (p.79). According to Oduyoye even though the African Culture from its very beginning, has allowed women to be in charge of shrines and cultic centres, it is also observable that there are more women in the secondary roles of mediums and cultic dancers, than there are women who serve as high priestesses of shrines or as healers. What is even more noisome, she observes, is that there are more women who serve as clients of the divinities of the cults (p.79). Such cultural or traditional notions of women's "religious responsibility" are canned into the institutions. Women, notwithstanding their equal or transcendent potentials are made to play second to men. Women who rise up and challenge or take up the challenge are resisted not only by men but even by their own colleague women due to the dominant socio-cultural sexual differentiations.

The interesting aspect now is that industrial revolution and scientific advancement have pushed women into new/contemporary roles and they are contributing to a new view of the part that women could play at work and in the family. The new role that women play in the society affects the PCG particularly.

2. P. C. G ORDAINED WOMEN, MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

In the Ghanaian communities women turn to play multiple roles in whatever situations they find themselves. In combining the traditional and contemporary roles, many carrier women find themselves playing the roles as wives and mothers and their jobs inclusive. It is not uncommon to find a woman playing multiple roles, a woman being a mother, wife and an ordained minister etc. at the same time. This implies that the ordained women ministers in the PCG like their counterparts in other sectors of life find themselves as mothers, wives, single parents, etc..

One of the problems facing the ordained women ministers in their marital lives is cultural and societal demand that every wife, irrespective of who they are, is to relocate to wherever their husbands are transferred to. I think this issue of relocation has greatly influenced some of the PCG men's attitude to married ordained women ministers.

Another problem facing the PCG ordained women ministers who are wives is the ability to efficiently perform their roles of being wives which demand cooking, washing, nurturing, making sure food is ready and cleaning the house. With the role of a woman minister which includes preparing sermons, preaching, visiting congregations, counseling, literally being on duty for 24 hours as a commissioned and an ordained minister.

In the Ghanaian society, it is a challenge when women still combine old traditional roles with contemporary roles. This affects married ordained women in the PCG because elsewhere in Europe, roles are differential and most women would not agree that men are the heads of their homes. In response to the question whether respondents think the Ghanaian expectations of women affect ordained married women ministers? Some claim it is difficult for ordained married women ministers to balance their lives carefully to be able to perform their roles as wives, mothers and ministers. A female minister in an interview remarked 'her husband is very supportive and he does not leave her alone to go about the house chores and he eats whatever is available' (Interview 18/ June/ 2008). Dolphyne (1991, p.5) writes on 'who does what in the home,' and to Dolphyne;

Every African woman grows up knowing that it is the woman who cooks the meals and generally sees to it that the house is clean and well kept, and that everything is in its proper place. Whatever her level of education or professional status she does not normally expect her husband to share the household chores. (Ibid.).

Dolphyne is of the view that when a husband enjoys cooking and chooses to cook breakfast or dinner one day, she appreciates the fact that he is being helpful, but she does not expect him to do so as a matter of compulsion. She continues further that husbands who have lived in Europe before used to help their wives in the house chores

but when they are in Ghana they do not help their wives. Professional women in Ghana like the ordained female ministers claim they employ house helps and pay their salary, thinking the house helps do their jobs for them. Sarpong (1974, p.69) also affirms Dolphyne's point that 'a good wife is obedient to her husband, faithful, hardworking, and helpful and she sees to it that all that he wants is forthcoming without him having to ask first, as for example, clean clothes, hot water for baths and food.' Motherliness requires a woman to provide by way of preparation of adequate food and shelter for her own children, others and strangers.

Generally speaking, in Ghana and in most African societies a lot is expected of married women. Dolphyne says women are supposed to be solely in charge of the kitchen, the children, marketing and the general running of the home. Hired helps in most homes, however, ease the amount of actual work they would have to do. However, some men insist that their wives personally do certain chores, for instance, preparing their food. According to Dolphyne, some aspects of African culture have a particular bearing on issues of women's emancipation (Dolphyne, 1991, p.1). She thinks, like Martey, Oduyoye and Sackey that these customs, traditions and beliefs have, over the years, helped to keep women under subjugation and make them feel generally inferior to men and incapable of operating at the same level as men in society. Marriage is one of such institutions (2006, p.49). Sackey has also refuted a review of the theory of inequality that revealed that

Evolutionary anthropologists used the concept of adaptation and division of labour to propose that the size and strength of men made them adapted for different jobs while the biological make up of women kept them at home as the only careers of husbands and children. (Sackey, 2006, p.49).

This research examined the perceptions of clergy womens' views on how being a minister have influenced their marriages, specifically the negotiation and distribution of marital authority since their ordination. For instance, wives are often at a disadvantage in marriage simply because of the 'implicit hierarchy in worth' which assigns a greater value to men and masculinity's "invisible power". Socially, the issue of women's rights has been affirmed by secular society and women's ability to perform well in a number of traditionally male occupations stands as a visible affirmation of these rights. At the same time, theological interpretations within the Christian tradition are often actively mobilized to support resistance to female roles. In addition to this, historical patterns within Christianity have been dominated by male imagery, which makes it difficult, on a cultural and cognitive level, for some laity to accept female leadership roles (Sintim-Adasi, 2013, pp.115-117). As the local church sorts through these issues, the female minister is often left in a vulnerable position and even in her marriage. Another category had the subjection of married women to their husbands in

mind. "A woman cannot be a church leader because if she is married she is under the responsibility of her husband". The Bible says she belongs to him and, therefore, cannot make an independent decision (Cody-Rydzewski, 2011).

Some respondents accept the bible as authority behind women's subjugation. Thus every injunction against women is taken in its totality. In addition, the question of who is going to look after the home and the children? Is the frequently asked question.

The point is that culture decides what women's work is and what men's work is. As girls grow up they are taught at home that women's work is. Cultural demands are interpreted as God's will for women. The place of a woman is in the home and her major roles are child-bearing and child-rearing. Patriarchal culture which is concerned with preserving the ruling power in the hands of men at all cost is called upon here against women sharing leadership roles in the church. There are also the assumptions that in culture, under no circumstance do women have power over men (Ibid.).

3. CULTURAL PREJUDICE CONCERNING WOMEN'S POSITION IN THE HOME

The reasons outlined for the position of married female clergy in the PCG included issues about home management, child upbringing and the problem of posting them to separate stations other than their husbands. Respondents are very much concerned about home management and child upbringing which is very critical for an African family. Most of the reasons given could, however apply to all women who have careers to pursue. For example home keeping is a shared responsibility. Findings show that while the women did not find any problem with their ministry, marriage or family upkeep, members of the society were concerned. Interestingly, when women had not entered the ministry, people did not think about the responsibilities of the minister father in the home. Respondents' answers to the question on how they assess their ministries as mothers and wives were varied between effective and ineffective. The majority expressed strong resistance to the ordination of wives/mothers into ministry for reasons that centre on family keeping and marital relations. In essence, the challenges that women leaders are facing are only part of the cultural prejudice concerning women's position in the home.¹

CONCLUSION

The experiences of PCG women clergy in their marriages are vivid and it seems evident that there is a change in the

African society. Findings indicate that the challenges of the ordained women in their marriages and in the PCG are closely linked with some of the various issues that were raised during the debate on women's ordination. Some of the negative issues used against the women have become challenges in their marriages and ministry affecting, to some extent, the roles assigned to them. The research clearly demonstrates that even when ordained women have been assigned similar roles of men, influence of the socio-cultural and psychological issues for example, made them second to men. Similarly, the culturally assigned roles of being wives and mothers for example continue to hunt the ordained women in whatever positions they found themselves. These and other related socio-cultural and psychological perceptions continue to follow the women leaders. These centered on marriage, couple ministry and the combination of traditional and new roles. Industrial revolution and scientific advancement have however pushed women into new roles and they contribute to a new view of the part that women could play in the work of the church and society.

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¹ PCG report of ad hoc committee to research into marriage of couples who are Presbyterians ministers /ordination of spouses of ministers.

APPENDICES

Table 1a
Argument Against Women’s Ordination (Male Ministers’ Views)

Nature of Argument	Frequency	Percent
Marital child-bearing and home-keeping responsibilities will affect performance	36	23.1
Paul’s injunction that women should remain silent(quiet) in public (Biblical argument)	36	23.1
Socio-cultural argument regarding menstruation of women	32	20.5
Women are feeble	10	6.4
Women are to assist their husbands in the Ministry	12	7.7
Men supposed to be heads (not women)	8	5.1
Women cannot leave husbands when transferred	4	2.6
Women not as industrious as male counterparts	18	11.5
Total	156	100.5

Note. Source: Field Data: 2011.

Table 1b
Arguments Against Women’s Ordination (Female Ministers’ Views)

Arguments	Frequency	Percent
Theological argument based on Paul’s injunction (women should not speak in public)	18	42.9
A woman’s place is the home (marital and domestic roles)	17	40.5
Women are spiritually unclean (traditional and Pauline theology)	5	11.9
Women are inferior to men and should not lord over men)	2	4.8
Total	42	100.1

Note. Source: Field Data 2011.