

Traditional gender discourse orients men and women to act as either superior or inferior, therefore, there is need to revise such discourse towards generating a more complementary stand.

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That is what my grandmother told my mother: The story of Nigerian and South African women subordinate position

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That is what my grandmother told my mother: The story of Nigerian and South African women subordinate position

C. Eze^{1*}, G.C. Lindegger² and S. Rakoczy³

Abstract: This paper presents the narrative voice of Nigerian and South African women religious (including men) in expressing that societal socialization processes produce gender-based discrimination which position women as subordinate. As a result, women become navigators of their own gender subordination. Therefore, this paper using thematic analysis through Foucault discursive lens presents gender dilemmas of identity construction based on a qualitative doctoral research design and postdoctoral findings which aimed at exploring identity construction of Nigerian Catholic religious sisters. These identity dilemmas emerged as a result of the complexity involved in unlearning lifelong socialization processes which continually ascribe conflicting gender positions to men and women. Accordingly, this paper presents the participants' dominant discursive claim that gender subordinate position is: What their grandmothers told their mothers, and their mothers in turn taught them; that to be a woman means to accept a responsible caring position for others, particularly for men. Consequently, this paper recommends that women who are salient stakeholders in family, Church and school socialization ought to act as counter-force in challenging gender discriminating discourse which position girls as second to boys and vice versa. In addition, this paper recommends further research towards exploring women's contribution to their own victimization of gender discrimination.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The corresponding author is Dr Chika Eze, SHCJ, who is a religious sister. The article draws from her doctoral and postdoctoral studies of 2012 and 2015. Presently, she lectures at the Institute of Youth Studies, Tangaza University College, Nairobi, Kenya. This article reflects her research interest, which is interdisciplinary reflecting psychology and spirituality exploring culture, gender, education and development. The co-authors are her doctoral modulators, both of whom share similar research interest. Graham Lindegger, an emeritus professor of clinical psychology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and among his research interest is the exploration of masculinity and its influence on identity development. Susan Rakoczy, IHM, a religious sister and a professor of Christian spirituality and Systematic theology at St. Joseph's Theological Institute and the School of Religion, Philosophy and Ethics, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. She has written widely in areas of feminist theology and eco-feminism.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Gender identity is a universal social phenomenon representing how men and women including trans-gender understand "who they are" and "they are becoming". This article presents how early socialization processes, particularly within African family settings influence women's gender identity of perceiving themselves as care-givers and responsible for others. The narrative voice of African religious men and women drawn from Nigeria and South Africa were presented to portray how traditional gender discourse has aided the transmission of gender identity, leading the religious sisters (women) towards constructing themselves as subordinate to priests (men). To some extent such cultural gender expectation is universal conditioning men and women to take up either superiority or inferiority role, and in this way they are not able to exchange mutual relationship. Consequently, all forms of such gender discourse need to be constantly challenged to ensure that human dignity is sustained for every individual.

Subjects: Arts; Behavioural Sciences; Development Studies; Education; Humanities; Social Sciences

Keywords: African Catholic religious men and women; gender discourse/discrimination; societal socialization; subordinate; counter-force

1. Introduction

In the recent past, women have made substantial and most likely irreversible progress in letting their voices be heard regarding gender subordination which position them as subordinate to men (Anugwom, 2009; Chittister, 2004; Johnson, 2002; Leonard, 2007; Nnaemeka, 2007; Nzegwu, 2006; Okure, 2014; Schneiders, 2004). This they have done through the different waves of feminism movements across the globe. Over the years, African women seem “to have shifted [their] focus from the plight of the servile housewife or the peasant woman to the engagements, whether restricted or not, of the professional woman in her (urban) society” (Sule, 2011). The paradox remains that, while women across the globe ginger-up energy to confront gender inequality, there still remains to a large extent instances whereby women act as navigators of their own gender discrimination. Accounting for sources of such inequalities, African Catholic religious men and women in their interview narratives based on doctoral and post-doctoral study maintained that African religious sisters through socialization processes in the family, school and Church struggle to challenge the dominant gender discourse and practices that position them as second to men. Hence, the participants’ narratives as presented in this paper express that religious sisters (women) co-construct their position of subordination based on societal orientation.

This article sheds particular light on the experiences of African Catholic religious men and women with the aim of understanding the process of identity construction of Catholic religious sisters in the Church and the wider Nigerian and South African society. In order to achieve this aim, this paper presents aspects of gender discourse available within African context that women use to subordinate themselves, particularly the religious sisters. Accordingly, these gender discourse are discussed in terms of its maintenance and mode of transmission including possible impact on self-understanding and presentation. To sum-up, some recommendations are made towards encouraging African religious sisters to take up a more proactive stance in challenging the familiar gender discourse which position priests (men) as superior to sisters (women).

2. Gender socialization processes

Gender is recognised as an organising principle in all social institutions, including family, educational institutes, work places and legal systems (Hundhammer & Mussweiler, 2012). A similar trajectory can be detected in the Catholic Church as well as all other world religions. In all aspects of human existence there is ample evidence of different expectations for boys and girls graduating to men and women. These expectations are grounded in the different socialization processes that men and women receive. Accordingly, Gilligan (1993) though challenging Lawrence Kohlberg’s (1969) moral developmental stages as favouring men’s perspective over women’s still maintained that men are socialized into being independent and responsible for oneself while women are socialized towards interdependence and responsibility for others. In similar ways, various opinions affirm that there is a difference in the approach men and women are socialized into being ‘who they are’ and “they become” (Eya, 2005; Oduyoye, 1995). This acknowledgment of difference between men and women’s worldview is a pointer to the kind of socialization they receive which influences how they make sense of ‘who they are’ including ‘who they are becoming’. Recently, Watson (2014) delivers a game-changing speech on feminism in which she insisted that the discourse of perceiving men as aggressive need to change in order to make women less submissive. Likewise, Oduyoye (1995, p. 195) acknowledges that:

We African women have been brought up, and folktalk has been part of our education, to be devoted daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers, to always love others more than self. It seems to me that in this process we have also learned to vote against the self, always preferring others and loving them more than ourselves, doing for them what we decline to do for ourselves because we consider ourselves unworthy of such attention.

Obviously, there is nothing wrong in being socialized to become devoted daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers. But the challenge is that such orientation may be disadvantageous to both boys and girls (including men and women) in the sense that, it initiates the cultured established power relations influencing women's and men's access to and control of economic resources, and their ability to cooperate in decision-making in the family, work places and even in the Church (Egharevba, Chiazor, & Suleiman, 2013; Eya, 2005). In this context, extreme demands are placed on girls/women to become servants of others, while on the other hand boys/men are oriented towards seeing themselves as masters that need to be served (Mbata, Amusan, Olalude, Adetigha, & Ogunsanya, 2010).

One of the major issues is that if for any reason girls/women fail not to serve as they ought to or to say it in another way, if they fail not to be subservient as they ought to, they should be ready for the consequences. Typical examples of such consequences could possibly include subordination of varying kinds including verbal-abuse, physical beating, emotional torture, deprivation of resources and sexual abuse (Eze, 2015). All of these consequences can be summed up as representing gender-based violence. However, this paper focuses on gender discourse that act as antecedent for possible gender subordination. In this context, a woman is subordinated because she co-constructs her position of subordination due to family upbringing. Hence, women naturally surrender to the subordinate position as a result of learnt behaviour emerging from early and on-going socialization processes. As Oduyoye (1995) pointed out, the feminine identity of "vot[ing] against the self" needs to be critically engaged with. In this view, it is pertinent to explore which discourse provoke unequal social relations between men and women and how such discourse could be challenged.

On the other hand, it is essential to acknowledge that in spite of the cultural boundaries and development 21st Century African women have, a few of them are still negotiating spaces for full participation in the society they live in. In reality, some women actively participate in socio-political struggles in their societies which many literary writers have adequately represented such as in Alkali's Seytu in *The descendants* (2005) and Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Nenne children of the eagle* (2002). This paradigm shift reflects instances of "Evolution of Consciousness",¹ which is that call to be active participators in creating a better environment, to be part of the solution towards solving the world's problem. Accordingly, African women are not completely subordinated and typical example of their involvement is elucidated by the 1929 Nigerian Aba women's war of Eastern Nigeria that overturned colonial policy with regard to taxation and installation of warrant chief (Zukas, 2008). This reflects a celebrated achievement of African women's synergy.

Furthermore, Nnaemeka (1995) argues that the African women's position is complex and flexible, thus, quoting Chinua Achebe's viewpoint, that "whatever you are is never enough, you must find a way to accept something, however small, from the other to make you whole" (p. 80). With such argument she portrays how African women are engaging "complementarity" of opposites as the principle mode of operation in their context. Naturally, African women are capable of twisting the gender discriminatory discourse to reflect complementarity instead of inequality, thus the onus is on them to do so now in order to elicit a more gender equality stance for future generation.²

3. Theoretical concepts

The position taken in this paper is that gender-discrimination is a product of socialization processes associated with femininity and masculinity discourse. The context of this gender-discrimination is governed by patriarchal structures of society which often concede power to men while positioning women as subordinate. Consequently, women are cowed as the controlled group of the society. In this view, the concept of "discourse" is used to interrogate how women may have co-constructed

their position of subordination in the sense that gender discourse is/are “practices which form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). What we say, and how we behave and act is to some extent governed by prevailing discourse (Bakhtin, 1981). Therefore, gender discourse possibly facilitate gender-discrimination. This discourse exists as rules and discursive practices, which allow for the adherence to and longevity of particular discourse or world-view as truth by the people in society (Foucault, 1972). Affirmatively, Bolinger (1987, p. 159) acknowledges that:

The inertial mass of language is like the inertial mass of society. Women inherit their place as speakers inherit their words. We drag a vast obsolescence behind us even as we have rejected much of it intellectually, and it slows us down... The gun of sex-based language may be rusty, but it is there, and the greater danger is unawareness that it is a gun, and is loaded.

In the above quote, Bolinger captures the intention of this paper in exploring how sex-based language serves as a weapon, specifically as a gun that is dangerous given the fact that it could promote negative constructions of “who women are”. The danger of the weapon is particularly in the form of discourse that it generates which in subtle ways lead to women’s perpetual subordination as second to men. Again, the emphasis is to deliberate on how women co-construct this discourse that is used to undermine ‘who they are’, leading them to perceive themselves as less important than men, always appreciating themselves as care-givers and responsible for others. Although, individuals have the right to assert ‘who they ought to be’ in spite of the initial and on-going socialization they participated in within the family and society, but the process of walking away from doing things the way you are taught is not always an easy practice. For some it may take a lifelong effort to achieve, just as much there is the dictum that says: “Old habits die hard”.

4. Research question

The key research question for the doctorate study was: How do Nigerian Catholic religious sisters in the context of living religious life construct identity? Based on this broad question, the Nigerian sisters’ presentation of gender discourse and its impact on their sense of self were extracted and used for focus group discussion among South African religious men and women. The aim was to further explore if South African religious identify with the Nigerian sisters’ claim that discursive gender influences “who they are” and “they are becoming”. Hence this paper examines the influence of gender discourse on Nigerian and South African Catholic religious sisters’ process of identity construction.

5. Method

5.1. Study design

This is a qualitative interpretive research study which aims at capturing the participants’ in-depth wealth of experience (Riessman, 2008; Ulin, Robinson, Tolley, & McNeill, 2002). The choice for interpretive approach is governed by the assumption that the participants’ act of meaning-making regarding “who they are” and “who they are becoming” is a subjective experience (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 2006). Thus, the participants are considered to be in the best position to voice their narrative of religious identity construction (Bailyn, 2002; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). As such this study uses narrative interviews to invite the participants to tell their own stories of living religious life with the aim of examining the participants’ act of self-construction from their own point of view (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). Theoretically, post-modern psychologists argue that in order to understand the self better, researchers should engage the use of narrative approach to elicit from the participants the in-depth meaning they make out of the world they live in (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Bruner, 2002; Crossley, 2000; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; McAdams, 2001; Riessman, 2008). In addition, focus group discussions was used to examine if South African religious men and women share similar gender discourse as was raised by their Nigerian counterparts in their individual interview data.

5.2. Study setting

The setting for this study was Africa, drawing data from African Catholic religious sisters (Nuns) and priests from Nigeria and South Africa. Data presented in this paper is a combination of doctoral and post-doctoral study. The initial data was collected from Nigerian sisters from two Catholic religious congregation through individual face-to-face interview schedule across January to May, 2010 for the doctoral research, and the postdoctoral research data was collected in July 2013 from South African priests and sisters through focus group discussions. The South African participants were drawn from two religious congregation as well.

5.3. Study population

All the participants were Catholic religious (priests and sisters) who live a consecrated active contemplative religious life, which means they were vigorously engaged in rendering day-to-day services (work/ministry) in the “name of God” through the auspices of the Church and their congregations and also were actively involved with prayers. That means the study population was restricted to Roman Catholic religious sisters/priests in Nigeria and South Africa. Two women religious congregations were purposively selected from Nigeria for the doctorate research and the postdoctoral study recruited participants from a male Dominican Order and Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood of Jesus both located in Pietermaritzburg and Durban of KwaZulu-Natal Province in South Africa. The inclusion criteria were that each participant must be an active religious female or male.³ Also, participation criteria demand that different voices of these men and women who live as religious were included, therefore, participants were drawn from temporary and finally professed members besides leaders (superiors/formators).

5.4. Sample size & method

A total of 30 participants participated in the study, 18 participants from Nigeria who were the initial participants for the doctoral study, drawn from two women religious congregations, and 12 from South Africa constituted the post-doctoral cohort composed of six priests and six sisters. The religious congregations from whom Nigerian sample was drawn were: Daughters of Divine Love (DDL) and Society of the Holy Child Jesus (SHCJ). DDL is a diocesan congregation founded in 1969. Diocesan congregation means that its foundation began in Nigeria though membership has spread to include sisters from other nations and it is recognised by the Vatican, thus, has pontifical status. SHCJ is an international congregation whose foundation started in England in 1846 and has spread to America and Africa. From the two congregations, three categories of sisters were invited to participate as shown in the Table 1.

This selection takes into consideration the different categories of sisters who live religious life in order to represent different voices, which act as information-rich cases affirming the validity and reliability of the narratives (Patton, 1990). The temporary professed are sisters who do not have permanent membership, while the finally professed and leaders are permanent members of religious life. The inclusion of different voices acted as a form of triangulation covering a wide range of positions. The participants were drawn from across Nigeria stretching through Abuja, Bauchi, Enugu, Jos, Lagos and Otukpo, representing different geographical locations. The South African participants were drawn from male Dominican Order, six males (priests) of whom two were in initial formation, two finally professed and two formators (leaders). The other half of South Africa participants were drawn from Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood of Jesus. Again, they were six in number and

Table 1. Demographic table describing characteristics of the participants

Participants	DDL	SHCJ	Participants' age
Temporary professed	3	3	30-35
Finally professed	3	3	30-50
Leaders: Superiors/formators	3	3	35-60

distribution was as follows: two temporary professed, two finally professed and two Superiors (leaders). The age range was 30–60 as was in the case of their Nigerian counterparts. And the two religious orders from South Africa were international congregations.

All the participants were Africans who understood and spoke English fluently. Participants were recruited purposefully using a medley of two strategies, namely convenient and theoretical sampling. Besides, using convenient sampling technique, the study also used snow ball sampling wherein known cases led the researcher to recruit other rich information cases (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). All participants were invited to participate in the study after permission was obtained from the various gate keepers, and these gate keepers are the leaders of the congregations whose members participated. Besides, permission was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee to conduct the study.

5.5. Data collection instrument, process and management

The data collection instrument was narrative interviews conducted by the primary researcher who is the first author as well as a religious sister. In this view, the researcher was part of the data collection instrument and objectivity was maintained through keeping a field journal in order to evaluate biases that might arise from insider perspective (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The doctoral study data was collected using narrative interview schedules conducted on a one-to-one basis between participants and the researcher. These interviews took place at the participants' convenient choice of place/time, either in the community space or work spaces.

The researcher used semi-structured open ended questions with the aid of an interview guide to monitor the interview sessions for the doctorate research data collection. Each interview session lasted for 1 h. This gave the participants ample opportunity to express their views in their own unique ways. Depending on the narratives that the participants presented the researcher asked follow-up questions for clarification or in-depth explanation. Extracts of the doctorate data collected from the 18 Nigerian sisters were used as guide for the focus group discussions with the South African cohort. Primarily, the data extracts were linked to gender issues and its association with the sisters' development of identity. In this regard, the focus group discussions centred on exploring how/what meaning the South African cohort make of the positions taken by their Nigerian counterparts. The focus group discussions lasted for an hour as well. The language used for all interview and focus group discussions was English and with the participants' permission the interviews were tape-recorded for accurate capturing of what was said.

In each of the site for data collection the participants were assured of confidentiality and informed consent was obtained, as every participant signed the informed consent form. In addition, the participants were assured that they could decline to participate at any point during the study that they longer feel comfortable without incurring any partiality. Thus, participation was voluntary.

5.6. Validity and reliability of the data

Using a qualitative research approach validity of the data collected was ensure through member check (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this case, the interview data after transcription was sent back to participants to ensure that the text was a true reflection of what they said. In this process the participants' confirmation of the text prove that the data is credible, indicating that the research findings captured exactly what is occurring in the context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Besides, validity was also maintained through the use of triangulation, wherein data collected initially from the doctorate study from Nigerian participants were presented to South African participants in order to verify if they share similar experience in view of gender discourse and its implication on identity construction (Creswell, 2007). This triangulation occur at multilevel in terms of sourcing for data across African countries, specifically from Nigerian and South African religious priests and sisters and also using multiple data collection strategies—individual face-to-face interview and focus group discussions. Also triangulation of voices were heard across the different category of sisters

and priests who live religious life. Thus, the transferability of qualitative data proves to be achieved (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In terms of reliability this study initially had a pilot study to establish that the interview guide questions were focused on what it was meant to test, and the interview guide was rigorously critique by experts such as the modulators of the doctorate study. In addition, the research design has been clearly spelled out including process of data collection in order to present the minutiae of what was done (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Silverman, 2005). Besides, what follows next is reflectivity indicating how two of the researchers who are both insider and outsider researchers control against biases that could influence the data processing and findings.

5.6.1. Reflexivity

Two of the authors are religious sisters, researchers with both an insider's and outsiders voice (Pillow, 2003). This has both merits and demerits. From the merit point of view it allowed for easy access with the gatekeepers and also facilitated the position of co-construction as we could easily identify with some of the issues the participants presented (Riessman, 2008). On the demerit side, subjective positioning could influence the data collected (Heron, 2005) but this was addressed by keeping a research journal which enable the two authors to record issues arising from subjective point of view, and these issues were discussed with the third author, which helped to ensure that they did not constitute sources of bias.

6. Data analysis

The initial data text emerged from the 18 sisters' self-narrative interview from Nigeria. Extracts from the 2012 doctoral research were presented to the South African priests and sisters with the aim of identifying links of association within discursive gender themes that was raised by Nigerian participants (Boyatzis, 1998; Charmaz, 2006; Thomas & Harden, 2008; Ulin et al., 2002). The primary aim was to pick out what may seem common to both participants if any. The underlying rationale was to appreciate how these discursive gender themes impact on their sense of self-presentation. Hence, the analysis started by transcribing verbatim the data collected from the focus group discussions from the South African participants. The transcribed data were coded thematically in relation to the previous data from Nigerian participants following the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involved identifying, coding, interpreting/deconstructing, analysing and reporting patterns and/or themes, and also ideas and/or views. In this view, after transcribing the interview data into text, the primary researcher coded text into themes and re-read the text for confirmation of theme and re-coding. The use of discursive gender themes facilitated an understanding of how the participants drew from available discourses to argue or give account of the position they identify with (Bakhtin, 1981; Billig, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1998), which configured neatly with Foucault (1972) proposal that discourses are "practices which form the objects of which they speak people" (p. 49). Therefore, the analysis paid particular attention to how the participants' gender identity is influenced by prevailing gender discourse available in their social milieu. Finally, the themes were compared and contrasted to establish coherence and identification of patterns which permitted detail explanation of the phenomenon under studied (Hewitt & Cramer, 2010).

7. Findings and analysis

The findings for this paper are discussed under one broad theme of discourse of traditional femininity which is presented in two sub-units as follows: (a) discourse of care and responsibility, and (b) discourse of silence.

7.1. Discourse of care and responsibility

The majority of the participants maintained that family socialization processes condition women to see themselves as care takers and responsible for others. They expressed that their grandmothers in the process of socializing their mothers into society upheld the discourse of care and responsibility. In this context, the participants maintained that the popular discourse their grandmothers and mothers employed clearly indicated that women are naturally called to take care of others particularly for boys/men. For example, one Nigerian sister aged 40 in her individual interview said:

You know to be a woman means to be responsible for others particularly for boys and men. This is what my mother kept saying to us as we were growing up. She kept reminding us that this is the way it has been from the olden days. She told us that her own mother told her this and her mother did not in any way deceive her. The emphasis is always that you're the one to run the family, so learn to be patient with everyone, do the house chores and ensure that everyone is adequately provided for. Well, I grew up with this at the back of mind and that's what I do.

This sister clearly used the discourse of traditional feminine identity of care and responsibility for others, particularly for boys/men to represent the kind of orientation that her mother (the same way her grandmother brought up her mother) gave her and her other female siblings whilst growing up. The position taken is that girls/women are expected to take care of others. In recalling this orientation she presents it as an obligation that has to be carefully adhered to, thus she has not much option than to comply. It is what their mothers have been taught by their grandmothers and their mothers in turn also teach them, their daughters. In this way, it becomes like a relay learning process; whereby each generation transmits what they have learnt to others. Essentially, this learning process is done through no other means than rhetoric of language, which is transmitted through discourse of gender discrimination and role expectation (Bakhtin, 1981; Foucault, 1972). The discourse is that you are a woman and this is how a woman should behave. Consequently, women learn how to be 'who they are' by constantly hearing that this is the way to be a woman. In affirmation, another sister from South Africa aged 35 during the focus group discussions reiterated the argument that to be a woman means to serve others, as she said:

I can recall the practice when we were growing up, always the ones to stay back in the kitchen and cook all the meals including washing dishes while my brothers are out there playing football are the girls. My mother always insists that we learn how to serve others because that is what we are going to be doing all our lives, serving others particularly our husbands. So that is how it is!

Again, this sister sustained the argument that as a girl-child, she was oriented towards seeing herself as the one to serve others. In this way, she confirms the argument that girls are socialized into perceiving themselves as responsible for others. To express it in another way, it is the girls who have to take care of others; doing for others those things that they (girls) may not have the privilege to receive themselves. From all indications, these socialization processes are transmitted through the available discourse of making the girls/women understand and accept the position of being accountable for others as a responsibility of honour. Yet, another sister from Nigeria aged 50 (leader) in her personal interview claimed that the act of serving others which women have come to embrace is a societal expectation which is propagated through their mothers. In her own words:

Our mothers have a way of making you look like a deviate if at any point in time you want your brothers to help in cleaning the house, cooking of the food or washing dishes even sometimes washing their own clothing. Take for example in situations when you all come back from school and the boys drop their school bags and run off to play while waiting for the girls to cook the food and serve. Then you complain but you hear mother say to you, oh please, stop complaining and do the work, after all women must always embrace the position of taking care of others; that is the way the world runs.

This sister dwells on a long standing tradition to argue that women serve men all the time which she presents as a societal learnt behaviour. In this way, she confirms that women are the one comprising the position of being servants by keeping to what they have learnt, and as well hand it down to future generation of women. In this way, girls/women always act within the confines of traditional expectation of what it means to be a woman. They act within the box. There is no doubt that this discourse of girls/women as servants of others is a prevalent socialization discourse used by mothers in bringing up their girl-child as one participant aged 45 in the focus group discussions emphasised that the girl-child also learns this behaviour by seeing what their mothers do. Thus, she acclaimed:

Our mothers have learnt to serve men, that even when our fathers and mothers return from work you see the fathers sit down to reading newspapers or simply relaxing while the mothers are running around in the kitchen to prepare food including washing and ironing clothes.

There are variation of opinions within interview narratives as well as the focus group discussions pointing to the fact that sisters in African context due to long time socialization process of observing their mothers serve their fathers in carrying out different chores also tend to serve priests whenever there was a gathering or function. For example, one priest aged 35 in the focus group discussions said:

It is expected that sisters as women serve the meal when we gather for Church celebrations. The same way it happens in the family is how it also happens in the Church.

In his perspective, sisters are women and as women they are expected to serve the meal, which he presents as their dominant job description in the family. Following his argument, sisters ought to follow the same pattern of family life to continue to serve others in the Church. Hence, it is a norm that women serve others and what happens if these others are younger as this priest whose voice we are hearing. Would he possibly allow a much older sister than him to dish out his meal on the premise that women are cut out to serve others? To buttress this fact, one priest participant aged 45 in the focus group discussions wondered why sisters run around priests in the name of serving them:

It beats my imagination that sometimes you don't understand why sisters run around priests to do ABC for them. I mean I would like to see sisters take hold of their own lives and stop seeking attention from others.

Although this priest participant sees the services sisters render to priests as nuisance which he constructs as act of seeking attention, but beyond this, it could be that these sisters who may run around priests have been taught from childhood to serve men. And as the case may be the traditional orientation of serving men included serving priests who are men. Based on this priest's argument it can be emphasized that sisters as women are the ones who subscribe to their own subordination. Accordingly, it is the responsibility of sisters to re-engage with this ever long standing tradition of yearning to serve men, be they priests or not.

On the other hand, some of the priests (participants) constructed this position of sisters as servants to be a cultural way of showing respect. The question is, what yardstick is being used in identifying to whom respect is due? In this view, one priest aged 60 (leader) in the focus group discussions said:

You see, sisters in the African context know that as women they are meant to serve others. It is an obligation and a mark of respect. So when we gather for a function it is only right that they take up the position of serving us (priests) and making sure that whatever is served as refreshment is well distributed to reach everyone.

For this priest, the sisters as women are meant to serve others, and probably these others who are supposed to be served are men. This priest participant raised the argument that it is an obligation for women to serve and this take us back to the question of who set-up this requirement. Is it men or women? In one way or the other, the source of this obligation seems to emerge from the societal orientation in which women as mothers have learnt as well as taught their children that girls/women are servants of others. However, this particular priest is an older person and when asked if such position of respect should be according to age or gender, he just smiled and waved it off by the swing of the hand. Therefore, it becomes ambiguous to really say what the position taken is. That notwithstanding one sister aged 45 in the focus group discussions maintained that even sisters who are older than most priests tend to serve these priests in the practice of traditional feminine identity. In this case, she said:

Sometimes it is so annoying to see an older sister get up during ceremonies to go and dish food and bring to a very young priest. Is it because this priest cannot walk or what. Well, I think it is because women have learnt all these years that they are servants of others that they don't even know when/where to draw the line.

This sister touches on a very important issue regarding the age difference between the servants and the served. The question is, should older sisters because they are women serve younger priests because they are men? These kinds of scenario need to be interrogated, should there be age restriction on who serve who. In this context, it can be argued that this sister lays emphasis on the fact that traditional feminine identity impacts on the 21st Century identity construction of African religious sisters. On the contrary, one participant (sister) aged 34 in the focus group discussions claimed that sometimes younger sisters would like to challenge this position of women as servants of priests but are hindered by their leaders (superiors/formators) who always remind them that, that is the way things are. Addressing this issue she said:

Well, often times the issue is that you cannot do much to challenge the position of women as servants of others particularly when you are dealing with the priests because who is your superior (sister-in-charge), she is still the same woman who is taught that to be a woman means to serve others. If at any time you raise some questions, all she does is to remind you that this is the way things are. Thus, you are compelled to be submissive.

Vividly, this sister re-echoes the affirmation that as women, the religious sisters embrace the identity of serving the priests because that is what they have learnt. To put it in another way, she confirms that this is the way things are, which she strongly present as the position their leaders of religious life advocate for. So, the 21st Century religious sisters may continue to act within the box as the status quo requires. Consequently, the religious sisters as women continue to grapple with the position of being responsible for others, particularly for the priests especially when this is not part of their primary assignment (ministry), and such situation positions them as subordinate and submissive servants for men (priests).

7.2. Discourse of silence

Some of the participants used the discourse of silence to express how their mothers have oriented them towards a subordinate position of being submissive particularly in the family and the Church. In this context, some of the sisters emphasized that their mothers have taught them to adopt a quiet and meek position of not challenging what others say or do, specifically when they feel uncomfortable with such actions, particularly when it is a man. Also some of the priests affirm that some sisters display to some extent behaviours reflecting inability to express oneself. Consequently, they are expected to abide by men's opinions and viewpoints. This kind of life orientation has inter-personal relationship implications whereby women co-construct themselves as humble, passive, gentle, and sometimes non-assertive. For example one sister aged 38 in her interview narrative elaborated that their mothers have always used the discourse of good behaviour to tame the girl-child into accommodating position of over-looking whatever boys do. In her narrative, she said:

You see, when we were growing up our mothers are fond of making us believe that a girl who is gentle is what the society needs, and usually the definition of gentleness is expressed in the instance of not answering back, hiding your hurting feelings and putting up a smiling face at all times. Actually, one of our proverbs (Igbo) says *agwa bum ma nwanyi* (good character is the beauty of a woman).

This sister emphasises that women's act of holding back their viewpoints or opinions is a product of learned behaviour emerging out of early childhood socialization processes. In her opinion, women do so because they want to maintain a good character, which is what their mothers taught them while growing up and as a result they continue to behave that way. Consequently, some sisters (including other women) have learnt to position themselves as passive and unassertive. Affirming such position one sister aged 36 in the focus group discussions stressed:

Our mothers lay so much emphasis on maintaining peace at all times that even when your brother says something that you know very well is wrong, what you hear mother says is don't mind him; he is only looking for trouble.

This participant continued to argue that her mother taught her to embrace the position of calmness instead of engaging in a mutual stimulating dialogue that may seem thought-provoking or confrontational. She argues that mothers take up this position in order to maintain peace at all cost which in itself might have moral value but the question is; can boys/men also not be part of the human society that need to learn to keep peace or hear other people's opinion.

Traditionally, according to the participants' point of view, women (mothers) tend to use ethical orientation of being virtuous to lay themselves backward, therefore, may not vote themselves as worthy of being heard rather would prefer to be seen. This feminine notion of presenting self as not worthy was challenged by one sister aged 42 (leader) in her interview narrative. Here she said:

There was a sister who attended the association meeting of priest and sisters' in her town and came back to share with me that they were looking ... for somebody to be the president of the association, and the person has to be a priest. I asked her if it must be a priest. Can't it be a sister, she said no! That it has to be a priest so that he will be able to organize them. I said for what; can't a woman organize you, so this is our mentality, and for me ... it is not because a woman cannot also take up that position of organizing the meeting and sometimes even do it better. But we (women) have been socialized into thinking we cannot and we accept it without questioning ... as far as I am concern whether it is a woman or a man the important thing is that this person can do it ... that is how I look at it.

Clearly, this sister testifies to the fact that women sometimes do not only capitulate to the position of silence but also relegate themselves to the background because they have been socialized into perceiving men as better organizers or leaders than women. However, this sister thinks that such kind of orientation need to be critiqued and in this perspective she argues that the criterion for selecting a leader should be based on individual ability not gender. In her views, women need to consciously re-engage with some of the societal expectations that have indoctrinated them to accept and think of themselves as not equal to men. Interestingly, she is a leader which offers a new perspective, in the sense that some women religious leaders also challenge the prevalent gender discourse. Equally, some of the participants in the focus group discussions maintained that women must take the lead in attempting to challenge their subordinate position by critically evaluating the kind of socialization they receive from their mothers. In this view, one priest aged 36 said:

The onus is on women to realize that the demands of early socialization they had received from their mothers always compel them to be dutiful women who accept the status quo by allowing others, particularly men to have their ways. I am not saying that women should learn how to fight but they should at least be aware that they often give in to unnecessary domination.

This priest takes the position of invoking women to be active participants in the world they live in. Probably, what he is advocating for is the space for women to be conscious of 'who they are', meaning that women should live more responsibly; owning their actions. In other words, he is inviting women to claim their human dignity in order to partner with men as responsible actors instead of relinquishing all power position to men and in this way act as second class citizens. Another priest aged 47 in the focus group discussions reiterated that some sisters often appear passive that he (you) wonder why they cannot say exactly what their opinions are in simple conversation:

Yeah, I have known some sisters who find it difficult to say what they think or want. Sometimes I get angry at such sisters and I always feel like giving them a twist of shake-up to make them speak what they think. Maybe it is part of their up-bringing. But I think they need to drop some of these attitudes.

According to this priest's opinion women need to deconstruct some of their life orientation, particularly in situations where it is required that they express their view points. Apparently, this participant argues that these sisters who hold back their opinions should be challenged to exercise their freedom of expression, as part of sustaining their human dignity. It may not necessarily mean that all African sisters are acting in this manner of not saying what they think but certainly they are some who act in such manners. Therefore, the onus falls on sisters themselves, particularly those sisters whose members participated in this study (including those who share similar experiences) to challenge the societal expectations of them as care-givers and/or gentle and docile members of the society in order to negotiate a more proactive position of seeking complementary service between sisters and priests. With this we turn to the discussion of the findings.

8. Discussion

Vividly, the participants' narratives both from the individual interviews and focus group discussions portray that Nigeria and South African religious sisters as women have learnt to embrace subordinate position as second to men through long life socialization they received particularly from their mothers. This seems to reflect the argument raised by Kohlberg's (1969) and Gilligan (1993) that men are socialized into being independent and responsible for oneself while women are socialized towards interdependence and responsibility for others. In reality, this contrast in gender roles and expectations is constructed in prevailing gender discourse, which Bolinger (1987) captures as sex-based language, which serves as a dangerous weapon because women (and probably men) tend to act according to the precepts of their language of construction (Bakhtin, 1981; Foucault, 1972). Consequently, it is imperative that the ways in which the participants construct 'who women are' is based on early socialization processes, whereby they claim that to be a woman means to serve and attend to others including embedding the attitude of conformity by not expressing their opinions, particularly when engaging with boys/men.

This construction of traditional feminine identity of women as care-givers and responsible for others is a gender discourse which has been transmitted into discursive practice of making religious sisters think and take-up the position of caring for priests (Foucault, 1972). Hence, they become what they are discursively constructed through gender discourse. Such self-positioning might act as ways of devaluing the self-image of religious sisters in spite of the tremendous effort and achievement that women have made in the recent past to empower themselves and move away from subordinate positions (Anugwom, 2009; Chittister, 2004; Johnson, 2002; Leonard, 2007; Nnaemeka, 2007; Nzegwu, 2006; Okure, 2014; Schneiders, 2004). Based on the participants' narratives one of the main sustenance for such self-construction emerges from gender discourse of early socialization processes. Therefore, the 21st Century African religious sisters need to challenge such gender discourse by negotiating a more reciprocal way of relating to the male gender in order to sustain their human dignity. Otherwise, religious sisters may present the front of subscribing to gender disparity which may position them as less human than priests.

9. Implications

As Oduyoye (1995) says there is nothing wrong in serving others but based on the findings of this study it is evident that if African mothers continue to teach their daughters that it is their sole prerogative to serve men, then such orientation has lasting implications on girls/women's act of self construction. It takes away some vital aspects of women's value as one of the participants (priest) describes women as 'attention seekers'. The lasting impression is that if religious sisters (women) continue to act in this box that they are meant to serve others, then they present themselves as asking for permission from priests (men) to be; which is contrary to many giftedness that they bestowed to the Church and the world they live in.

In addition, such orientation makes sisters (women) appear as helpers who cannot allow others (men) to reciprocate in serving them as well. In this context, such socialization process is disadvantageous to both men and women (Eya, 2005; Watson, 2014), because in both cases it debases who

a man is and equally who a woman is. Basically, it takes away their human ability to relate with each other mutually. Although, it is not all religious sisters who may act in such ways of seeking to serve priest as some voiced in the interview text and focus group discussions questioning such position; but what is important is that once one sister does that, then it can extend to what sisters (women) do. And since this emerges from societal learning, it should be critically reviewed. Therefore, some aspects of traditional feminine identity that are not life-giving need to be challenged until it is completely revised.

10. Recommendations

In consideration to the findings of this study indicating that religious sisters (women) based on gender discourse of early socialization learn from their mothers that to serve men is a virtue, which promotes their identity as subordinate the following recommendations are made. It is recommended that women in general, particularly African religious sisters critique this gender-based discourse to highlight and challenge its negative impact on their sense of self making. In this regard, religious sisters (including priests) are invited to imbibe some elements of 'Evolution of Consciousness' whereby everyone enthusiastically engages ways of ensuring complementarity of service rendered for and to each other. This will not be an entirely new paradigm because majority of the African women are already negotiating this space of being agentic in contributing meaningful to their society (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2002; Alkali, 2005; Nnaemeka, 1995), and the Nigerian Aba women's riot of 1929 is a clear indication that the African women are not completely subordinated. Rightly so, the African women have a right of place and must rise up to take possession of it. Therefore, in spite of what their grandmothers told their mothers, the African religious women ought to begin the process of counteracting and minimising their perception of themselves as solely care-takers and responsible for others or passive participator in the world they live.

In this regard, religious sisters are invited to create the awareness not only for themselves but also for all other African women as majority of them take the lead in providing educational, social and pastoral services within the context they live. This creation of awareness should be done through seminars and workshops. These seminars/workshops should explore among other things the available gender discourse and how it impacts on women's identity and behaviour. In these seminars and workshops sisters should be stimulated to enact the proposal raised by Achebe that whatever one is, is not enough, therefore, sisters should learn to extend their hands to receive from the other as well as give in return (Nnaemeka, 1995).

In addition, this paper recommends that continual research be conducted on religious sisters' socialization processes in order to further understand how early and on-going socialization processes impact on their sense of identity. It is anticipated that such further research might recruit a wider population of religious in order to broaden the scope including using a mixed method research design. It is hoped that more and more salient findings might emerge, and such findings will not only add to available literature but foster in-depth understanding towards how religious men and women construct 'who they are' and 'they are becoming' based on the kind of worldview they encounter.

11. Limitations of the study

One of the major limitations of this study was the size of sample population. Participants were drawn from four religious congregations, two from Nigeria and two from South Africa. This size of sample may seem small in comparison to the large number of religious congregations found in the two countries or even Africa in general, but being a qualitative research design, a single case study could suffice; provided rigor in research process is maintained (Patton, 1990, 2002; Silverman, 2005).

12. Conclusion

Evidently, the participants' narratives indicated that due to early socialization processes in the family, school, and Church, the religious sisters (women) adhere to presenting themselves as taking care of others as well as assuming the position of responsibility, particularly for priests (men). By subscribing to such position, the religious who participated in this study presented sisters (women) as

subordinates who serve the priests (men), although a few of them challenged such position. As much as there is nothing wrong in serving others, this paper calls religious sisters' attention to the fact that they should seek for collaboration (collegiality) in the way they render services to others, particularly to priests (men) in order to preserve their human dignity.

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Notes

1. Barbara Max Hubbard describes "Evolution of Consciousness" as the active engagement which is required from each of one of us in order to make life worth living through the conscious choices we make. Also, Teilhard de Chardin describes it as a state of acting as *Ultra Human* or *Homo Progressivus*: the act of awakening self-agency.
2. Notably, African women feminist such as Catherine Acholonu, Nkiru Nzewgwu and Obioma Nnaemeka argues that women subordination within the Continent emerged with the advent of colonialism. In their opinions the African women had always enjoyed instances of complementarity with the men before the advent of Colonial Masters. Therefore, the African women ought to find it a bit easier to go back to what was the olden practice.
3. Religious community refer to the houses where the priests and sisters live. It is important to note that male and female religious live separately.

Cover image

Source: Author.

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