



Challenges of Single Ordained Women Ministers in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana

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Abstract

In the Presbyterian Church of Ghana every woman is expected to marry because within the Ghanaian culture marriage is believed to confer on a woman a high degree of respectability. Again, women who decide to remain single for one reason or the other are looked upon with suspicion that they sleep around with men. In some instances some men take sexual advantage of the single women. Even if a woman is ordained and manages her affairs successfully without a man the negative perceptions on single women affect them and their work as ministers. Indeed such negative perception on single women has so much affected the mindset of the congregational members of the Presbyterian church of Ghana that some congregations feel so reluctant to accept ordained women ministers as their congregational leaders. Even the single ordained women ministers who lead congregations feel uncomfortable working so closely with their male counterparts for fear that they will be accused of sleeping around with men. This paper examines the challenges that ordained women ministers face in the Presbyterian church of Ghana. It examines how the existing structure which in my opinion is very patriarchal helps in maintaining such stereotype of ordained single women in the church. Again, the cultural, religious and moral bases for such stereotyping of single women are examined.

Key words: Patriarchy; Ordained women; Singleness; Culture; Presbyterian church

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INTRODUCTION

Although women constitute the bulk of the Christian church, their plight in the church have, throughout history, been a subject of concern. Particularly in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (hereafter referred to as the PCG), females have always been more than males. The Bible has, over the years, been used as a weapon for the subordination of women. Women's inferior positions to men have always been explained using the creation story of Adam and Eve as the basis. As indicated in Genesis 2: 21, God made Eve the woman, from the rib of Adam. Hence the man's divine superiority over the woman. Such indeed has been the general attitude towards women. It is one of discrimination. Social, cultural and traditional limitations always set women apart in the church. This paper provides information on the plight of single African women ministers in the PCG.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to understand the challenges of single women ministers in the PCG properly, this article employs the theory of feminism as a theoretical frame. The existing structures within both the church and society are Patriarchal in the sense that the structures turn to uplift the image of men while marginalizing women in the various sectors of life. Russell defines feminism as 'the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women ...' (Russell, 1993, p.57).

In effect, feminism is about challenging the paradigm, calling for a change and equality. It refers to movements aimed at defining, establishing and asserting equal political, economic and social rights and equal opportunities for women. Thus, feminism advocates that women need to emerge as full human beings liberated from all forces which have kept them in subjugation. This article is on the plight of the single ordained women ministers of the PCG.

It is however surprising that even when the PCG have been ordaining single women into the clergy and assigning roles, some of the issues raised for and against the commissioning of women continue to follow them in the performance of their roles in the PCG.

SINGLENES

Singleness is one of the issues that pose a challenge to the ordained women ministers of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana.¹ In this paper singleness implies women who are not married, who have been divorced and women who are widowed but have children to take care of. There are certain obstacles in the form of cultural restitutions that inhibit their performance. In the Ghanaian cultural context in which the ordained PCG women live, every woman is expected to marry at all cost because marriage as Dolphyne puts it: “Confers on a woman a high degree of respectability in her community. Whatever her level of education, professional status or economic independence, an African woman would not normally choose to remain single, although it is also true to say that higher education and professional status do confer a very high degree of respectability on a woman, irrespective of her marital status”(Dolphene, 1991, p.16). Oduyoye in her work supports Dolphyne that within some African cultures or communities, women who fulfil the societal expectations of marriage are highly respected. On the other hand, those who choose not to marry are perceived negatively. Oduyoye writes:

“In Africa, the very idea of a “free woman conjures up negative images. We have been brought up to believe that a woman should always have a suzerain, that she should be owned by a man or a husband. A “free woman spells disaster. An adult woman, if unmarried is immediately reckoned to be available for the pleasure of all males and is treated as such ...” (Oduyoye, 1996, pp.3-4). Oduyoye says “the single woman who manages her affairs successfully without a man is an affront to patriarchy and a direct challenge to the so-called masculinity for men who want to “possess her”.

Sarpong in his work also emphasizes that “... Every Ghanaian however wants to marry and the right to do so is only corollary to a girl’s introduction to sexual life through the performance of her puberty rites ...”(Sarpong, 1974, p.69). Sarpong says in Ghana motherhood is the principal, if not the ultimate end of the Ghanaian woman. Fertility for girls is crucial especially in the matrilineal societies because it ensures the continuity of society. (Sarpong, p.69). As such there are some common Ghanaian sayings about single parents who again do not have children. One respondent from the field work enumerated some of the sayings about single women who do not have children as:

‘*Awoo yedi no nanti aka, yenni no yen nua ba*’ translated as ‘you cannot take your sister’s child to be your biological child.’

The interviewee continues with the sayings about single parenting in the Ghanaian community that:

‘*Wonom ahina koro mu a wonsa si fam*’ translated as one person cannot fight a dozen all by her/himself’.

Nsa koro twere aduro a egu/ ankonam, obaakofoo translated as ‘it takes two to build.’

‘*Aware bone ye sen sigyadie*’ translated as ‘a bad marriage is better than being single’ (Sintim-Ofosuhene, interview, 2012).

Again the interviewee says in the Ghanaian society widows are thought to be ‘*mboa abonsam*’ meaning satanic women. The ordained women ministers in the PCG like any other Ghanaian women in the society are expected to marry and have children. The PCG values marriage and that it is expected that the women including the ordained women clergy marry and have children as expected of them in the Ghanaian society. This is because it is perceived that the woman who do not marry turn to be morally weak and some members of the PCG base their argument on the sayings stated above (Sintim-Ofosuhene, 2012).

As presented in Table 1 there are some perceptions in the Ghanaian society about the ordained single women ministers in the PCG.

Table 1
Perception About Ordained Single Women Ministers

Perception	Frequency	Percent
They are morally weak	40	32.5
Ghanaian culture is anti-woman	12	9.8
Some churches look down on single women	24	19.5
Having been brain-washed by the word of God and the Ghanaian society - cultural and psychological factors.	8	6.5
Every Ghanaian woman is to marry and have Children	16	13.0
6. God created man and woman to be together	15	12.2
Single women ministers cannot counsel people for Marriage or couples in marriage	8	6.5

Source: Field data is 2011.

The most frequently mentioned perception against single ordained women ministers from the congregational members of the PCG is that single women in general are morally weak and the ordained women ministers cannot be exempted. The most commonly cited sayings are seen in Table 1 which demonstrates that the Ghanaian culture is anti-women. Some expect women to marry because they think during creation God created man and woman to be together thus it is both unnatural against God’s will for women to remain single. Others used the moral argument that single women may be tempted to sleep around with men (even married men) or men could take

sexual advantage over the single women. Is this argument implying that, just because a woman decides not to marry necessarily make her sexually a weak person? If a person has the tendency to be sexually promiscuous that person can be so, even within the marital home. In any case, within the PCG, there have been ordained women who never married others are widowed or divorced but they respect themselves so much that they are not sexually promiscuous.

In fact, so far, we have not come across any document or information about promiscuous, adulterous ordained single women ministers. The negative attitudes on single women ministers are just speculation without factual bases. If a person (man or woman) is promiscuous she/he will do it whether a clergy or lay. We have already mentioned earlier on that to be a woman and to live a fulfilled life in the Ghanaian culture is to marry and have children. In the research, we found out that indeed, in the traditional set out the unmarried and the childless person was in some cases ridiculed and marginalized as stated in the sayings above.

Such marginalization, to some extent, results in psychological violence to the unmarried and single person. However, in critiquing such perceptions Oduyoye, points out that, to some people life is not all about marriage but it is also about the ability to manage one's life properly. In empowering one's life properly, in encouraging single mothers or parents Oduyoye uses traditional proverbs such as 'the tortoise does not have breast but she finds her children. However inconvenient the path is to the nest the brooding hen will get to her eggs' (Oduyoye, (2002, p.58). Women in Africa exercise motherhood against all odds. In other words whether married or single, African women exercise motherhood against all odds. Some women do not have to be attached to men but they are capable of taking care of themselves and their kids. We have such ordained women ministers in the PCG.

The issues related to being single and ordaining women in the PCG have effect on some of the single ordained women in the PCG in the performance of their roles. For example, some of the congregations openly reject single ordained women to man their congregations. Other church members also have the perception that, the ordained single women, especially those who have never been married do not have experiences on marital issues, or problems thus, they cannot be effective in counselling couples before or after marriage. As a result some members shy away from single ordained women as their councillors with regard to marital or parental issues. However, this argument does not follow logically because it is also the case that those who are married can be bad councillors on marital issues. Again, there are possible cases where couples have been married for a while but their marriages are so bad that people will not feel comfortable using them as marriage councillors. Even though some of these single women

continue to perform their duties, they feel psychologically and emotionally dejected and this may affect them in performing their roles efficiently. Lydia and Phoebe are examples of single women in the Bible who did God's work. Lydia was a wealthy woman who lived in the town of Thyatira. The story of Lydia shows that in the New Testament church, a woman did not need to be married in order to serve (Thiel B, [Accessed, 26 July 2012]).

CONCLUSION

Single ordained women ministers in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana have been performing their various roles as ordained ministers but it is without doubt that they encounter some challenges especially in the discharge of their duties as congregational leaders. The argument that single women are morally weak is not true. When a woman decides to remain single, it does not make her sexually weak. In any case, within the PCG, there have been ordained women who never got married, others are widowed or divorced but they respect themselves so much that they are not sexually promiscuous. The negative attitudes on single women ministers are just speculations without factual bases. Oduyoye for example thinks life is not all about marriage; it is rather the ability to manage one's life properly.

END NOTES

In this work singleness as used implies women who are not married, who have been divorced and women who have been widowed. These categories of singleness are found in the PCG. Some of the Ordained Clergy have never married, some are divorced and others are widowed. Thus we have ordained women who are single because they have never married; those divorced and widowed but have children to take care of.

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