

**Overcoming Women's Subordination
in the Igbo African Culture and in the Catholic Church:
Envisioning an Inclusive Theology with Reference to
Women**

by
Rose Uchem

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OVERCOMING WOMEN'S SUBORDINATION

**IN THE IGBO AFRICAN CULTURE AND IN THE CATHOLIC
CHURCH: ENVISIONING AN INCLUSIVE THEOLOGY
WITH REFERENCE TO WOMEN**

A DISSERTATION

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of

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in partial fulfillment of

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

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DEDICATION

In honor of
Ezuruagbo Nworie Ajagwo and the women of Igboland
who have suffered on account of losing children

and in tribute to
George Ndubuokwu who inspired me to dream.

To the entire family of
COMFORT EZURUAGBO AND GEORGE NDUBUOKWU
UCHEM

This doctoral dissertation is
lovingly and gratefully dedicated.

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ABSTRACT

When African scholars lament over the near destruction of African cultures, they do not reflect the reality of African women's historical traditions of empowerment and inclusion in pre-colonial/pre-Christian African societies, which were also lost in the same process of Western Christian cultural imperialism. Similarly, most male Church theologians writing or speaking about inculturation do not address the deeper cultural issues, which impact heavily on African women. As Nigerian theologian, Rose Mary Edet rightly observed, "policy-related and other research projects concerned with "women in development" often uncover cultural factors without associating them with religious beliefs and myths that rule women's lives" (in Life, women and culture, 1991, Introduction). Yet, these deeper cultural issues sabotage certain efforts by Church and non-governmental organizations to improve the lot of women. Therefore, unless these religious beliefs and myths operating both within the Church and in African cultures are identified and reconstructed, they will continue to undermine all efforts at women's overall development.

This dissertation - "Overcoming women's subordination in the Igbo African culture and in the Catholic Church: Envisioning an inclusive theology with reference to women" examines the problem of women's cultural subordination within the context of African history as well as United Nations' global facts and statistics about women. This scholarly work is situated in concrete research through personal interviews with Igbo African women living in the United States. It focuses on the subtle biblical and cultural myths by which women are manipulated to accept their own oppression, to cooperate in maintaining it, and to resist their liberation. The work identifies these cultural and religious myths which elude the attention of many advocates of women's cause. It reconstructs these paradigms in the light of the inclusive and egalitarian ethos of the early Jesus' movement and pre-colonial Igbo African society as resources for women's empowerment today. In the light of her findings, the author makes some very strong proposals, which have high potentials for overcoming the pervasive and extensive negative effects of women's cultural subordination worldwide.

PART I

**HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT OF WOMEN'S
STATUS IN IGBO SOCIETY**

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCING WOMEN'S SUBORDINATION

The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me;
for God has anointed me and sent me to bring the good news to the poor;
to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight; to set the down-trodden
free, and to proclaim the Lord's year of favor [Luke 4: 18-19 paraphrased].

This was the way Jesus is said to have introduced himself to the people of his hometown, Nazareth as he began his public ministry. Drawing from Isaiah chapter 61, he summarized his meaning of the Good News as “what the poor, the vulnerable and dehumanized need to hear and to experience” (Oduyoye, 1996, p. 38). The question at this turn in history is: “To what extent has this Good News been translated into reality for women, whose lives are far from experiencing good news because of the oppressive social structures which impinge on them?” Secondly, “what is the Good News African women want to hear? What root factor continues to keep Jesus' Good News from becoming a reality and a freeing experience for women as Jesus had intended; instead of the mere theory it has remained for them? How can women's subordination be overcome?”

My dissertation entitled, “Overcoming women's subordination in the Igbo African Culture and in the Catholic Church: Envisioning an Inclusive Theology” attempts to address the reality of the lack of Good News entailed in women's subordination in the Igbo culture and in the Church. This focus serves as a springboard for articulating an inclusive theology, capable of overcoming women's subordination. In the light of the Catholic Social Teachings and the demands of a new evangelization in Africa, and in Igbo society, in particular, this dissertation examines the implications of the Church's reinforcement of women's subordination in the Igbo culture. The dissertation argues that only a change in the Catholic Church's stand on women's ordination will send out a message strong enough to initiate the kind of conversion and transformation required by a new evangelization in Africa and in Igbo society.

The problem in a global context

On the global scale, as the United Nations facts and statistics show, women form one-half of the world's population, do three-fourths of the world's work, receive one-tenth of the world's salary, and own one-hundredth of the world's land. Two-thirds of illiterate adults are women. Over three fourths of starving people are women and their dependent children (United Nations Statistical Department, 2000).

At the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, participating governments “determined to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of humanity” (United Nations, 2000a). Five years following the Beijing conference, a conference was held in New York (June, 2000) to review the progress since then.

The world's women 2000: Trends and statistics, a publication of the United Nations, reveals that "while progress has been made, real change in the quality of women's lives - the achievement of social, economic and political equality and basic human rights for women" is still very remote (United Nations, 2000b).

Violence against women and girls

Girls and women worldwide, across lines of income, class and culture, are subjected to physical, sexual and psychological abuse ... Around the world, at least one in every three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or abused in some other way - most often by someone she knows, including her husband or another male family member ... As many as 5,000 women and girls are killed annually in so-called "honor" killings, many of them for the dishonor of having been raped (United Nations, 2000c).

Furthermore, on the subject of violence against women and girls, five years following 1995 Beijing the UNICEF Division of communication gives some indicators of the present situation.

Studies from Costa Rica and the Philippines have indicated that 33% and 49% respectively of battered women are beaten by their partner during pregnancy ... In India, 6,000 women are killed each year because their in-laws consider their dowry inadequate ... (UNICEF, 2000a).

Every continent has its share of the crimes against women and "... many cultures condone or at least tolerate a certain amount of violence against women" (United Nations, 2000c).

Sexual degradation and exploitation

"Approximately 5,000-7,000 girls are trafficked across the border ... from Nepal to India each year, most ending up as sex workers in Bombay or Delhi" (UNICEF, 2000a). There are comparable figures for Sri Lanka, Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Japan.

In this connection, Ranjini Rebera (1996), a Sri Lankan living in Australia, draws attention to the age-old trade of prostitution and its new dimension as a fast growing trans-national, multi-dollar business of traffic of girls and women in commercial sex linked with tourism. She writes about patriarchy and women's collective power to challenge it when they understand the structural basis of its oppression, which entangles them. She describes prostitution as "a form of violence" against women and a "fast-growing trade in Asian countries" (Rebera, 1996, *Challenging Patriarchy*. In Ursula King (Ed.), 1996, Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader p. 107). Rebera (1996) describes their financial exploitation by all the intermediaries involved in the business; and how what is left to them goes to their families and dependents. Contrary to what many think, she says: "The majority of women who become prostitutes do so not because they enjoy this kind of lifestyle (which is what many middle-class people like to

believe), but because they have no other option for survival” (p. 108). She goes on to elaborate.

Most societies still consider sexuality and women as synonymous. Sexuality is still linked to temptation and sin, and female sexuality has always been the property of men. A woman has no right to enjoy her sexuality; it is something she offers to the man. With this kind of imagery embedded in our psyche, it is not difficult to see how and why women become easy victims of prostitution. It is often the only way they can earn a living ... when society closes the door to economic survival in the workforce, then a woman's body and her sexuality become the only tools of trade left (Rebera, 1996, p. 107).

Thus, Rebera (1996) throws two beams of light on “how and why women become easy victims of prostitution” (p. 107), namely, the psychological and structural economic pre-conditioning that sets the women up for it.

Although statistics are not available for some countries, it is believed that: Over the past few years, an increasing number of Nigerian girls have been trafficked to work as prostitutes in Europe, mainly to Italy but also to Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Spain ... tens of thousands of Russian and Ukrainian women and girls have been trafficked to Israel and North America ... and Bulgarian and Czech women and girls have been trafficked to Austria and Germany (UNICEF, 2000a, article 9).

Thus, the commercialization and exploitation of women and girls as linked with structural economic conditioning is on the increase around the world.

Women and development

In her book, African Women: A History: The Story of the Training and research Center for women of the United Nations Commission, Margaret Snyder (1995), co-founder of United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), clearly attests “there is now a widespread agreement about the fact that women are all but excluded from access to and control over national and international resources and about the harm to human well-being that results” (p. 8). Moreover, United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan reporting on the current state of women and development at the Beijing + five Conference, had the following to say on the progress on women's status: “Women form the main agricultural labor force in Africa and many other parts of the world. Yet, most of them are still denied the right to credit, land ownership and inheritance. Their labor goes unrecognized and unrewarded” (SC/SM/7430 as cited in White, 2000, p. 183). He goes on further to say that: “Study after study has confirmed that there is no development strategy more beneficial to society as a whole - women and men alike - than one, which involves women as central players” (SC/SM/7430 cited in White, J., 2000, p. 183).

Thus, an assessment of the global situation of women is one of a pervasive and persistent discrimination against women.

A pervasive and persistent discrimination

Discrimination is evident 'from birth' when girls are less valued than boys; 'within the family', when girls are taught the inferior and stereotyped roles considered more appropriate for girls and women; and are given less educational, employment, recreational and other opportunities; and burdened by a disproportional amount of domestic work and childcare; are denied the right to own property and are denied equal participation in decision-making; in schools, when girls are exposed to teachers, curricula, textbooks and teaching methods that reinforce gender stereotypes and discriminatory practices as well as sexual harassment; in communities, when girls and women are subjected to violence and abuse that is not only tolerated but also goes unpunished. Everywhere, in households, communities and national and international arenas, women are discriminated against when girls and women are left out of decisions that define the conditions in which they live (UNICEF, 2000a).

The report goes on to say:

Discrimination against girls and women is so profoundly entrenched in the home and the workplace, in classrooms and courtrooms, at worship and at play, that its elimination will require the transformation of the societal structures that tolerate it (UNICEF, 2000b).

Decision-making and leadership

Gender parity in parliamentary representation is also still far from being realized. In 1999, women represented 11% of parliamentarians worldwide (United Nations, 2000b). Sweden has the highest percentage [42.7 %] of women parliamentarians in the world at their 1998 elections; Mozambique, the 9th in rank [30.0 %, 1999]; South Africa, 10th [29.8%, 1999]; United Kingdom 30th [18.4 %, 1997]; United States of America, 48th [12.9 %, 1998]; Ireland, 52nd [12.0 %, 1997]; Ghana, 68th [9.0 %; Cameroon 87th [5.6 %, 1996]; Kenya 98th [3.6 %, 1997]; Nigeria 99th [3.4 %, 1999] (United Nations Statistical Department, 2000).

In the corporate world, women are still very much in the minority in leadership positions. The United States has 11 to 12% highest positions filled by women in the 500 largest corporations in 1999; Canada, 3%; Germany, in 1995, 1 to 3% top executives and board directors in the 70, 000 largest enterprises (United Nations Statistical Department, 2000).

While women's share of administrative and managerial workers rose between 1980 and the early 1990s in every region of the world, except in Southern Asia, the proportion of women in these positions is still low; from 7 to 14 % in Sub-Saharan Africa and 4 to 9 % in Western Asia.

The emerging picture: Women's subordination a global reality

In light of the foregoing statistics, it is evident that while African countries have their share of discriminations against women, they do not have the

monopoly of subordinating women socially, economically and politically. On the contrary, the emerging scenario is that women's subordination is a global phenomenon. On the whole, the catch phrase “Women’s Rights are Human Rights” adopted at the Vienna Conference on Human Rights in 1993 is yet to be translated into reality (White, 2000, p. 183).

In summary, the global scene is that in all regions of the world, “the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of humanity” remain (Overview: United Nations Statistical Department, 2000). “Women are physically and sexually abused ... and men do this to women in such a way that women do not do to men” (Johnson, 1990, p. 102). Consequently, women theologians point out the psychological damage on women in terms of “women’s self-image ... self-esteem and self-confidence as documented even among very competent women” (Johnson, 1990, p. 102). Thus, the resulting global picture of women’s situation is very far from being an experience of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The Igbo context

The Igbos resident in the United States, who constitute the focal group of this research share in the global reality of women’s status. For example, the women hold reasonably well-paying jobs. As wage-earners, the women are co-bread-winners in their families, most of which are two-parent families. In many cases, the women are the major bread-winners for the family. Consequently, some de-gendering of roles in the home has been necessitated and can be noticed especially in the area of taking care of children. At any rate, their socio-economic circumstances may have contributed to enforcing the few observable changes in the traditional sex-role definitions. However, there is not much sharing of the domestic chores by the Igbo men. Rigid gender roles still operate and weigh heavily on the women, who thereby carry a double workload of wage employment and domestic labor.

Nonetheless, there are substantial bastions of conservatism and resistance to change both within the Igbo communities in the United States and in the wider American society. Consequently, many Igbo men are not sufficiently challenged to change towards a greater practice of equal partnership in gender relations, as reflected in Pope John Paul II’s (1988) Mulieris Dignitatem.

The challenge presented by the 'ethos' of the redemption is clear and definitive. All the reasons in favor of the 'subjection' of woman to man in marriage must be understood in the sense of a 'mutual subjection' of both 'out of reverence for Christ' (no 24).

Moreover, in the Igbo Catholic community, women make financial and material contributions for running the community. Yet, consciously or unconsciously, leadership roles are determined not by personal giftedness, but rather by sex. Irrespective of changed times and socio-economic circumstances, women are still restricted only to subsidiary roles, such as cooking and serving during social functions. In the particular community, the Makera community in

the United States, which I observed as described in chapter four, burgeoning charismatic leadership of women is curtailed in the community in the name of Church tradition, even for such a simple thing as making an announcement. At the community's social functions, the idea of women taking turns with their partners to make a speech and give a donation on behalf of themselves and their partners is frowned upon, on the pretext that it is against tradition. St. Paul is quoted as saying that women should be silent and not speak in the Christian assembly. Besides, there was no woman among the Twelve; and a woman is said to be secondary because Adam was created before Eve. These reasons have also been used to exclude women from participating in the blessing of the Kolanut, an Igbo communion ritual explained in chapter three.

Moreover, the chauvinistic Igbo males invoke "our culture," That is, the Igbo culture, to put down the women who stand up for themselves and resist subjugation. They are confronted with intimidation, "after all you are a woman!" to force them into submissiveness and compliance; and to frighten others from rising to claim their humanity as well. These discriminatory attitudes and unjust practices against women in the Makera community have been a great source of pain and hurt for the women who are so humiliated. They feel hemmed in, not given scope to exercise their full human abilities, which thereby become lost to the community. They feel their human dignity abused; and that they are not respected for who they are as persons; but rather exploited for their material resources.

Besides, the Igbo men who are more egalitarian in their attitudes and behaviors towards their partners are ridiculed and taunted by those hegemonic males as not being able to "control their wives". In such a case, therefore, an ideology of male domination, the ability to dominate and "control a woman", becomes the criterion and definition of "maleness" and "manhood". Thus, male domination reaches its peak and creates a loophole for unkindness, authoritarianism mistaken for authority in the community; all in the name of enforcing Igbo culture and Church tradition.

All this, therefore, raises questions as to whether these claims for Igbo culture and Church tradition in this kind of subordination of women and unquestioning compliance demanded of these women is really "Igbo culture", and truly "Church tradition" or what? Ironically, all these things are happening in the United States, where some of these same men have women as "boss" in their workplaces or chairpersons of their parish councils. On the other hand, some of them are beneficiaries of the minimal changes in the Catholic Church. For example, some of them are lay Eucharistic ministers, an experience, which they as laity would otherwise never have had in Igboland. They have seen women Eucharistic ministers and have received communion from them in their respective parishes. They all felt happy and proud to have seen one of their fellow Igbo men ordained a married permanent deacon. Thus, Igbo men happily welcome a departure from culture and tradition when it suits and promotes them but raise the

trump cards of “culture” and “tradition” when it concerns Igbo women. They even accept the leadership of white women but not that of Igbo women.

It, therefore, raises the further question of how the perpetuation of women’s subordination and its accompanying tensions in the Makera community in this twenty-first century all fit in with Pope John Paul II’s re-interpretation of the much abused words of St. Paul cited earlier? Thus, contemporary Igbo women’s experiences reveal that the Church’s exclusion of women from ordination is currently serving as a justification for men’s continued subordination of women. This situation is particularly disturbing, as it blocks possibilities of growth and conversion towards a greater sense of social justice required by the principles of the Catholic Social Teachings and called for in the new evangelization in Africa. In other words, in the Igbo cultural context, women’s subordination in the Catholic Church counteracts the principles of the Catholic Social Teaching, which states that:

Action on behalf of social justice promotes social change in institutions, policies, and systems. Social justice is central to being Catholic. It is not new, nor is it optional. It is an essential “... dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, of, in other words, the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation (Justice in the World, No. 6).

Unfortunately, these powerful words which promise liberation for those who know where the shoe hurts, and challenge all to social gospel-consciousness simply remain on paper. They do not influence day-to-day imagination and practice in the lives of many Christian men and women. This is because “human beings are guided not so much by ideologies as by symbols and myths that are activated through the collective [human] unconscious” (Boff, 1987, p.3). In effect, the Church’s continued ambivalence about women, concretely signified in the Church’s denial of ordination to women, nullifies all the beautiful affirmations of women’s equal dignity found both in the Igbo culture and in Church documents such as this:

The dignity and the vocation of women - a subject of constant human and Christian reflection -have gained exceptional prominence in recent years. This can be seen, for example, in the statements of the Church’s magisterium present in the various documents of the Second Vatican Council, which declares in its closing message: The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect, and a power never hitherto achieved ... At this moment when the human race is undergoing too deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling (John Paul II, 1988, No 1).

These beautiful words will never catch people’s imagination, as long as women are excluded from ordination, as Anne Carr cogently points out:

As long as women are barred from full recognition and sacramental completion of the service they are already fulfilling, ... the language of the Church is unfortunately, [loud, and] clear, in what it is saying to women and to the world about women (Carr, 1988, p.39).

Thus, this dissertation calls Christians to grow, from merely saying kind words to and about women, to tackling the root-cause of women's problems, namely, their continued subordination to men. It invites Christians to rediscover and live out an alternative model, that of equal partnership in gender-relations in all facets of life in the households, in the society and in the Church.

In the Igbo cultural context, one way to do this is by retrieving the egalitarian aspects of the Igbo culture; and in the Christian context, by recapturing its original egalitarian ethos in the Jesus' movement of the early Christian communities. It will also help to take seriously the Church's call to social action for justice.

Furthermore, in order to free the Christian imagination, which has been conflicted by what might be termed a multiple or fragmented consciousness, it would be necessary to revise some of the psychological and Christian cultural myths, which have been supporting the subordination of women. A suggested way forward and an alternative is a non-literal approach to the scriptures; informed by an inclusive image of God, as embodied by Jesus Christ. Theologically, this dissertation goes to the heart of the matter. It pinpoints operative images of God, and meanings of revelation and inspiration as crucial factors under-girding various positions in theology. For example, insisting on women's subordination as divinely ordained, betrays a fragmented or a multiple consciousness in Christians arising from:

knowing that God is not sexual, and yet speaking and acting as if God is male and on the side of men, sanctioning women's secondary position; secondly, declaring that God is gracious and inclusive, yet insisting on a policy of subordination and gender stratification as God's plan; and thirdly, implicitly accepting the scientific theory of creation on the one hand, and using literal interpretations of the Genesis creation stories and other biblical stories, on the other hand, for justifying women's subordination even in face of numerous, obvious contradictions.

Situated in the original participative and inclusive cultural experience of Igbo women, this dissertation highlights the seeds of gender equality and complementarity inherently present in the egalitarian tradition of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, West Africa. The dissertation aims at retrieving this reality together with the original egalitarian Christian ethos, as gifts to be salvaged and offered in service to a world in need of models of inclusion. The dissertation argues that, given Igbo women's head-start in their original egalitarian cultural experience of inclusion and participation; by now, in the wake of global women's movement, the Igbo people should have advanced further towards greater gender justice and equality, had it not been set back by contact with Euro-Western version of patriarchal Christian culture, which suppressed

Igbo egalitarianism and reinforced aspects of Igbo culture which are oppressive to women.

Focus of the Study

This dissertation sets out to show: firstly, that there is a relationship between women's subordination in the Catholic Church and in the Igbo culture, epitomized by male-headship model of family, civil and Church life; and ultimately symbolized by women's exclusion from celebrating public sacramental ritual [Eucharist] in the Catholic Church and [the Kolanut] in the Igbo culture. Secondly, this apparent similarity nullifies and suppresses affirmations of women's dignity present in both the Igbo culture and in the Church's teachings. Thirdly, women's subordination in the Catholic Church reinforces those aspects of Igbo culture, which are oppressive to women. Fourthly, justifying women's subordination, on the authority of the Bible and tradition undermines the Catholic Social Teachings, discourages critical thinking and social-gospel-consciousness among Igbo Christians, and fosters passivity towards despotic governments in Nigeria and other African countries. Fifthly, this dissertation aims at showing that only a change in the Church's theology, policy and practice towards women by a definitive inclusion of women in the ordained ministry can send out a strong enough message to overcome women's subordination. Finally, it demonstrates how everybody, especially, women can actively contribute toward hastening the day when women's full humanity will be eventually acknowledged through ordination by actively using present available little opportunities to foster increasingly inclusive communities and ministries.

The significance of the work

The unavailability of theological works based on Igbo women's experience, and the scarcity of other types of literature focused on Igbo women and by Igbo women scholars and theologians point to the significant contribution of this dissertation towards filling this gap. As Nigerian theologian, Rose Mary Edet rightly observed, "policy-related and other research projects concerned with 'women in development' often uncover cultural factors without associating them with religious beliefs and myths that rule women's lives" (Life, women and culture, 1991a, Introduction). Therefore, this dissertation is a major step in that direction as it explores the theological underpinnings of women's subordination, which this researcher considers the root cause of other dimensions such as economic, social, political and ritual marginalization of women. All the various manifestations of discriminations and violence against women as exposed earlier in the global context can ultimately be traced to the male headship model of gender and social relations.

The dissertation contributes significantly to gender scholarship by correlating the political and ritual subordination of women in the Catholic Church and in the Igbo culture, which no one has yet undertaken. Moreover, it comes at a time when seminaries in Nigeria have been mandated to study the Igbo religious

tradition to identify and teach its points of contact with the gospel message (Onwubiko, 1991, Introduction, p. xx). In this connection, it is remarkable that when Igbo scholars lament over the destruction of African cultures, such as the Igbo culture, by Western Christian cultural imperialism, it does not occur to any of them that the destruction of Igbo women's traditions of socio-political inclusion in pre-colonial/pre-Christian egalitarian Igbo society is part of it.

This dissertation, which evokes Igbo women's traditional history of agency and participation also comes on the academic scene at this time when non-Igbo and non-African scholars of women's issues are showing a growing interest in recovering Igbo women's lost traditional political institutions as a rich resource for women's empowerment today (Agara-Houessou-Adin, 1998; Van Allen, 1972; 1976). Therefore, the unique attempt to retrieve and bring together the original egalitarian ethos of both the Igbo tradition and the Jesus' tradition is a special contribution to the current theological debates on women's emancipation globally.

Moreover, most previous works on African women merely look to external authorities in Church and society to empower women. They do not suggest the necessary means or model for women's empowerment within Church communities. This is why this dissertation suggests actions by which women can help the Church to attain its destiny of becoming an inclusive community of God's people. Consequently, the dissertation includes an account of experiences of Igbo African women's pastoral initiatives for inclusive models of ministry and community, with a potential for transforming the wider society.

Strengths and merits

The strengths and merits of this work lie in a number of facts. The fact that I am a woman and from the same ethnic group as the subjects of the research, namely, Igbo, is a great advantage. This provides the vantage position of an insider with a feel for the experience under discussion. This location is further enhanced by my not being married and therefore, having enough distance from some of the concrete issues, which enforce subordination in the lives of most married women. On the other hand, as a member of an ecclesiastical community, my ministerial experiences and those of my colleagues provide a parallel text for studying women's subordination in concrete ecclesiastical settings, which mirror women's subordinate positions in the households and in the wider society.

Furthermore, I bring to this research a bird's eye view developed from my trans-national and trans-cultural experiences of extended periods of living and interacting closely with people of different backgrounds in the United States, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Ireland. My close interactions with individuals and families in all these places supplement my academic insights and provide the concrete basis for my reflections, analyses and evaluations, which run throughout the dissertation. Thus, while the focus of the research is on Igbo women, a global consciousness of the issue of women's subordination and marginalization influences the work.

As indicated earlier in this chapter, the issue of women's subordination is a global phenomenon, wearing different faces of marginalization in different degrees in different parts of the world. Thus, contrary to appearances, women's subordination is not peculiar to Africa or the Igbo society. While the Western world now appears to have advanced more in de-gendering roles in the home and in the labor market, male supremacy and a mentality of gender division of labor persists in Europe and the United States. In other words, while women's marginalization has fairly reduced, their cultural subordination has persisted. Thus, subordination, which is the source of women's marginalization is very much in place both in concrete lived reality and in "the human collective unconscious," a phenomenon which will be explained in chapter seven.

There is still much resistance against the full acknowledgment of women's equality of human dignity with men in reality. Since the mythological, psychological and theological roots of women's subordination have not yet really been addressed and healed in Europe and the United States, for example, this state of affairs is not unconnected to the situation in Igbo society, which resists change only where it concerns relations with women. Therefore, while focusing on Igbo society, the researcher very much keeps the global reality in mind.

Another source of strength for this thesis is my personal experiences of racism in my relations with some white Europeans and Americans, which have sharpened my social consciousness about the evils of every kind of subordination. They scandalized me and opened my eyes to the sinfulness of every form of subordination; and the enormity of the evil especially when enforced in God's name. They helped me to see through all ideological pretensions sustained on God's word and done in God's name. Having realized the similarities between African's marginalizing experiences of racism and women's experiences of subordination and marginalization, I have become convinced that women's subordination to men is not God's will, as Christians have long declared and continued to claim. I sensed that there must be some other explanation for it. Hopefully my theological research has uncovered those other explanations, which will be exposed at various points in this dissertation.

Thus, my own social consciousness growing out of experiences of racist and sexist discrimination as an African and as a woman, coupled with a liberative consciousness, imbued with the spirit of the Catholic Social Teachings bring a sense of urgency and conviction to this dissertation. Consequently, the dissertation is rooted in the Church's own growing sense of social justice and in the charism of the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary, and the Servant of God, Joseph Shanahan in their commitment to promoting the dignity of women.

Scope and limits

From the outset, it is necessary to point out that this study is not intended to be exhaustive; nor is the nature of the community observed supposed to be representative of the totality of the Igbo African reality either in the whole of the United States, in Nigeria or elsewhere. Only a sampling is intended. Undoubtedly,

the unavailability of theological works specifically dealing with Igbo African women in particular, or even Nigerian women in general, is certainly a limitation on the study. Since existing works of African women's theology is generalized, it does not do justice to the reality of Igbo culture about women. At any rate, it serves as a springboard for delineating the status of women in the particular experience that characterizes women in the Igbo culture. Thus, given the nature of the subject of this dissertation, one cannot presume to exhaust all of its ramifications. As such, there is much scope for further exploration of the subject by other scholars.

Furthermore, although the context of this in-depth analysis is that of the historical and contemporary experiences of women in the Igbo African culture, the outcome of this research will benefit people of other African cultures, and indeed other cultures of the world. Regardless the great diversity in the backgrounds of the women in the study, in terms of class, social, economic, educational and marital status, their common experience of cultural subordination is the subject of focus. Their other common denominator is that they are all Catholics, with the exception of one who is an Anglican. Accordingly, the exploration of women's subordination in the Church is with reference to those Christian Churches, which still exclude women from ordination to the priesthood, especially the Catholic Church. The accompanying analysis reflects women's lived experience as well as selected Church leaders' views about women.

Defining the terms

A distinction must be made between subordination and marginalization. "Women's subordination" refers to cultural claims and customs, which maintain that men are primary and pre-eminent, and that women are secondary, subordinate and under men. It is a belief, which excludes women from public leadership of family, Church and society, most especially, from decision-making and from officiating at cultic/ritual and political leadership positions. Subordination is distinguished from marginalization, in that the latter is an offshoot of the former. Thus, women's marginalization amounts to their being relegated to the periphery and margins of society economically, socially and politically, as a result of subordination to men.

As the women's conference in Beijing showed, there is no nation under heaven, where women are not subordinated. "The Declaration recognizes that the status of women has advanced but that inequalities and obstacles remain" (Beijing Declaration, 1995, paragraph 4). This dissertation intends to explore the theological roots of these 'obstacles' to women's full emancipation, equality and dignity.

Experience and observation show that there are different degrees of women's marginalization in different cultures in the world. It is more severe in some than in others. Yet, subordination is the common running thread in women's status in all human cultures and religions, including Christianity. This synchronicity with human cultures raises a question in itself about Christianity,