

The Role of Women in the Development of the Catholic Church: A Study of Makurdi Diocese, Tivland

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Abstract

The role of women in Nigeria, especially among the Tiv people, was primarily that of caregivers, whether within the family, the Church, the state, or the nation. This was evident across all aspects of life, with women being underrepresented in decision-making when compared to their male counterparts in areas such as business, politics, culture, and religion. In Mainline Churches, women's participation was often restricted, except in Pentecostal Churches where they enjoyed more extensive involvement. However, some, like the Deeper Life Bible Church, adhered to traditional gender roles, emphasizing women's roles within the kitchen. A notable departure from this pattern occurred in the Catholic Diocese of Makurdi, where the Bishop made it mandatory for women to be included in key positions at all levels of the Church. This paper aimed to discuss the roles of women in contributing to the development of the Catholic Church in the Makurdi Diocese. The research methodology employed historical and narrative approaches, utilizing both primary and secondary data sources. The paper revealed that major roles performed by women in the Diocese were facilitated through the Catholic Women Organization. These roles included active involvement in church development, women's empowerment through skill acquisition training, the provision of essential items to the Bishop, orphanages, prisons, seminaries, hospital visitations, and care for the sick. Additionally, women participated in various societies, such as the choir, Holy Family, Biblical Movement, among others. Furthermore, women were elected to all positions within the Laity Council, ranging from parish to the Diocese. In conclusion, it was evident that women made significant contributions to the development of the Makurdi Diocese.

Keywords: Women Roles, Catholic Diocese, Gender Roles, Church Development, Tiv People.

Introduction

In the context of Africa, and more specifically, Nigeria, deeply entrenched beliefs and practices exert a profound influence on societal norms and gender dynamics. Historically, women have occupied significant roles within traditional religious frameworks. However, the advent of Christianity, along with its prescribed interpretations of gender roles, led to a transference of these roles to the ecclesiastical domain (Okure, 2000: 84). The influence of Christianity, notably in mission churches, contributed to the marginalization of women in ecclesiastical settings. Only recently, the Bishop of Makurdi Diocese, Rev. Anagbe, has made it obligatory to include women in leadership positions within the church. Notably, the Catholic Church ordains women as Sisters, although they are not granted the same

preaching privileges as male priests, thereby perpetuating gender inequality within the Catholic Church.

Furthermore, several factors contribute to the persistence of gender disparities within the church. These factors include the misinterpretation of biblical texts, entrenched cultural norms, and socio-economic determinants (Njoku, 2017: 43). These elements intertwine to create a multifaceted web of challenges that obstruct the full participation of women in religious activities within Nigeria, with a specific focus on Benue State and the Makurdi Diocese (Stott, 1999: 63). In Tivland, like many other African societies, the roles of women within the church, particularly the Catholic Church, have remained a significant issue. The Tiv culture prescribes distinct gender roles, and these traditional roles often infiltrate religious practices, consequently shaping the positions of women within the church.

In consonance with the aforementioned observations, Terhemmen highlights that Tiv society adheres to a patriarchal structure, with traditional gender roles dictating that women primarily assume caregiving, homemaking, and nurturing roles (101). This cultural backdrop has significantly influenced the perception and involvement of women within the church in Tivland. Historically, women were predominantly regarded as caregivers and were primarily tasked with cooking and serving visitors. When the need for provisions arises at the parish, deanery, or Diocesan level, women are often called upon to supply the required items. Despite their substantial contributions to the growth of the church, women have been allocated a disproportionately low share of leadership positions within the ecclesiastical hierarchy, failing to receive even ten percent of such positions. This paper examined the role of women in the development of the Catholic Church in Makurdi Diocese, Tivland. The specific objectives of the study were:

1. To examine the historical and contemporary roles of women, particularly among the Tiv people in Nigeria, focusing on their primary role as caregivers within various societal contexts.
2. To assess the extent of women's underrepresentation in decision-making processes when compared to men in areas such as business, politics, culture, and religion.
3. To explore the differences in women's participation in Mainline Churches and Pentecostal Churches, with a specific emphasis on the role of the Deeper Life Bible Church in promoting traditional gender roles.
4. To analyze the transformative impact of a specific case, the Catholic Diocese of Makurdi, where the Bishop mandated the inclusion of women in key positions at all levels of the Church.
5. To investigate and document the various roles and contributions of women in the development of the Catholic Church within the Makurdi Diocese, particularly through their involvement in the Catholic Women Organization, as well as their participation in various societies and leadership positions within the Laity Council.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This study adopted the Feminist Theory. The Feminist theory is a dynamic and multifaceted framework that critically examines the role of gender and the power dynamics associated with it. While it lacks a single founder, it has been shaped by the contributions of various scholars and activists throughout history. Notable figures in the early development of feminist thought include Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, and Betty Friedan (Smith, 2019). The theoretical perspective of feminism is grounded in several major assumptions:

- **Gender Inequality:** Feminist theory assumes that gender-based oppression and inequality are deeply ingrained in society. It posits that women have historically faced systematic marginalization, resulting in a wide range of injustices across different facets of life.
- **Social Construction of Gender:** It asserts that gender is a social construct, not biologically predetermined. Gender roles, norms, and expectations are learned behaviors influenced by societal norms.
- **Intersectionality:** Feminist theory recognizes that individuals experience multiple forms of oppression and privilege, including those related to race, class, sexuality, and other factors. These intersections of identity are central to understanding the complexity of gender issues.

Feminist theory offers numerous strengths. It provides a critical lens through which to examine societal structures, revealing power imbalances and hidden inequalities. It has been instrumental in advancing women's rights and fostering empowerment, encouraging women to challenge oppressive norms and advocate for change. Moreover, feminism is a diverse framework, encompassing various branches and perspectives that can be tailored to different contexts and issues. One of the notable weaknesses of feminist theory is its lack of uniformity. The theory includes a wide range of perspectives, making it challenging to pinpoint a single, universally accepted feminist viewpoint. Additionally, feminism has faced resistance and backlash from individuals and groups who resist challenges to traditional gender norms and power structures.

Despite the weaknesses of the theory, in this study the Feminist Theory was applied to understand and analyse the historical and contemporary roles of women within the Catholic Church. This theoretical perspective was particularly used to examine gender roles within the Catholic Church and how traditional norms have influenced the roles and opportunities available to women; explore how women in the Makurdi Diocese have exercised agency and sought empowerment, challenging established gender norms; analyse how factors such as ethnicity, class, and cultural context intersect with gender, affecting women's experiences and contributions; and assess the challenges and opportunities women have encountered in their efforts to contribute to the development of the Catholic Church. The application of the Feminist Theory in this study highlights the struggles of women in challenging traditional gender norms. Additionally, it allows for an examination of the empowerment strategies employed by women in the Makurdi Diocese.

A Brief History of the Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church is under the leadership of the Pope, based in Rome. Its origins can be traced back to the original Christian community established by Jesus Christ and led by the twelve Apostles, with Peter as their prominent figure. The Catholic Church ranks among the largest Christian denominations globally and is recognized for its well-organized structure (Nwosu, 1982: 33). Throughout history, various schisms have disrupted the unity of Christianity. Major divisions occurred, notably with Arianism in 318 CE, the East-West schism in 1054, the emergence of the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Protestant Reformation in 1517. The core tenets of Catholicism are articulated in the Nicene Creed. The Church asserts that it is the one Holy Catholic Church founded by Christ through his great commission. Catholic doctrine emphasizes the preservation of infallible teachings through sacred tradition. The Catholic Church comprises the Latin Church, twenty-three Eastern Catholic Churches, and various institutions like mendicant orders, enclosed monastic orders, and third orders, each emphasizing distinct theological and spiritual aspects (Geoffrey 15). Among its seven sacraments, the Eucharist holds a central place, celebrated liturgically in the Mass. According to Catholic belief, through the consecration by a priest, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ.

The Virgin Mary holds a revered position within the Catholic Church as the Mother of God and Queen of Heaven. She is honored through dogmas and devotions, including teachings on Divine Mercy, sanctification through faith, evangelization of the gospel, and Catholic social teachings, which stress voluntary support for the sick, poor, and afflicted through corporal and spiritual works of mercy (Bokenkotter, 2005: 87). Furthermore, the Catholic Church operates a vast network of schools, hospitals, and orphanages worldwide and is the largest non-governmental provider of education and healthcare services globally. It also oversees numerous charitable and humanitarian organizations. The Catholic Church has had a profound influence on Western philosophy, culture, art, music, and science (Bokenkotter, 2005: 88).

Catholicism was introduced to Nigeria by Portuguese explorers in the 15th century, though their early efforts were largely unsuccessful. Modern missions were initiated by priests from the Society of African Missions of Lyon in 1865 in Lagos, and a vicariate was established in Benin in 1870. By 1920, various missions were established in Igboland, surpassing the efforts of the Anglican Church Missionary Society. Similarly, the Holy Ghost Priests and St. Patrick arrived in 1932. In 1950, the first Archdioceses of Kaduna and Onitsha were established, and the world's largest Catholic seminary was founded in Enugu, in Southeastern Nigeria. Catholic schools played a significant role in promoting the English language, seen as a means of advancement in colonial society. However, the Nigerian Civil War that commenced in 1967 disrupted missionary work (Makozi and Ojo, 1982: 60).

Following the war, various organizations emerged to continue the work. Charitable organizations played a crucial role in giving the Catholic Church an indigenous Africanized character. These included lay societies and the Legion of Mary. The Catholic Church has experienced substantial growth in Nigeria, with parishioners drawn by the availability of

schools, medical services, and social support that the state failed to provide consistently and with high quality (Makozi and Ojo, 1982: 61).

In Benue State, historical records indicate that the Spiritans made deliberate efforts to evangelize the people of Lower Benue, including the Tiv, Idoma, Igala, and other smaller groups, following a visit by Fr. Joseph Soul, one of the General Councilors, to the region. By 1930, the first set of priests and two Brothers arrived in Benue. Their apostolic zeal led to the establishment of the Apostolic Prefecture of Benue Province, Northern Nigeria, in 1934, with its center in Makurdi and later Otukpo (Wegh, 2010: 29). In 1945, the German fathers were replaced by the English province, and Bishop Heerey described Benue as one of the most promising missions in Nigeria, apart from Onitsha and Owerri. In 1959, Monsignor James Hagan, the Prefect Apostolic of Otukpo, was made a Bishop and transferred his Cathedral seat to Makurdi. The Tiv mission eventually evolved into the Catholic Diocese of Makurdi (Wegh, 2010: 30). In subsequent years, this Diocese gave rise to the establishment of the Otukpo and Lafia Dioceses in 1995 and 2001, respectively, with more recent additions being the Gboro and Katsina/Ala Dioceses (Wegh, 2010: 31).

A Brief History of Catholic Women Organization

The Catholic Women Organization (CWO) plays a significant role within the Catholic Church, providing a platform for women to pursue their spiritual and humanitarian objectives. This organization serves as an umbrella body for Catholic women worldwide. Monica Atser explains that the CWO operates at various organizational levels, including the World Union of Catholic Women Organization (WUCWO) International at the global level. It extends membership to CWOs recognized by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, with a focus on being non-partisan and aligned with objectives consistent with those of WUCWO. Many continents, including Nigeria, have affiliated with WUCWO (personal communication, January 9, 2023).

Below the global level, there are regional and national councils. The organizational structure of the Catholic Women Organization includes the National Councils of Nigeria (NCCWO), which is accountable to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN). Provincial bodies report to their respective provincial Archbishops with the assistance of all the Bishops in a particular province. The Diocesan level operates under the jurisdiction of the respective Diocesan Bishops, followed by the Deanery level, which is supervised by various Deans, and the parish level, which operates under the guidance of parish Priests. The hierarchy further extends to station/zonal levels (Dooshima Aleva, personal communication, January 9, 2023).

Gary (2007:36) notes that the history of CWO in Nigeria predates the civil war. The Onitsha Archdiocese inaugurated the Catholic Women Organization, with the event held on May 5, 1964, under the leadership of the late Archbishop Charles Heerey CSSP. In 1965, the CWO, along with the Catholic Secretariat's Secretary, Rev. Byrne, and Rev. Funnvane, the Spiritual Director of Enugu Diocese, decided to hold an International Conference to chart the course of action for the Catholic Women Organization. These conferences took place in

Lagos, Enugu, and Kaduna, led by Professor Elizabeth Nimagen of the University of Holland. Following the conference in Enugu, Chief Mrs. Theresa Heart was elected as the first coordinator of the National Council of the Catholic Women Organization in Nigeria. The election occurred in the presence of late Archbishop Charles Heerey, clergy, CWO members, and international visitors. The National coordinating committee was inaugurated in Benin in 1974 by the late Cardinal Dominic Ekandem, then President of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (Gary, 2007: 58). In 1975, the National Council of Catholic Women Organization (NCCWO) was inaugurated in Jos, under the mandate of late Cardinal Ekandem. Angie Makinde became the first president of the Ibadan province. The primary vision and mission of the CWO are to unite all Catholic women at various levels, promoting and supporting programs that embody Christian morals and values. Additionally, the Port Harcourt branch of the CWO was established after the civil war, under the leadership of the Onitsha Archdiocese from 1970 to 1974. The Port Harcourt Diocese established its first official directory of the CWO with the goal of providing information on the activities of Catholic Women in the Diocese, facilitating planning, budgeting, effective implementation, and the execution of ideas or capital projects. The directory serves as a data repository for the CWO and the Church regarding member identification (Okpauke 72).

Aim and objectives of Catholic Women Organization

- i. To unite all Catholic Women in Nigeria in purpose direction and action in religions, educational social, cultural and economic fields.
- ii. To direct all Catholic Women for the purpose of love, light, unity and peace among them.
- iii. To teach the Catholic Women throughout the nation the Church doctrine and deeper understanding and participation in the Church.
- iv. To serve as a medium through which the Catholic in Nigeria may speak and act as a unit for the good of the organization, nation and the world at large.
- v. To help Catholic Women in their efforts to give service in their respective fields.
- vi. To encourage, establish and maintain inter-religious and inter-religious relationship with others religious organizations, shining similar or complementary aim and objectives in Nigeria and abroad without compromising Catholic moral and values (CWO amended constitution 2017, 12).

Formation of the Makurdi Diocesan Council

According to Mary Fese (2010), it is documented that Catholic Women within the Diocese of Makurdi established parish-based groups referred to as the "Confraternity of Catholic Women" prior to the year 1975. This initiative was undertaken during the tenure of Bishop Rev. D. J. Murray (CSSP), who served as the Bishop of Makurdi at the time. These groups engaged in commendable apostolic activities within their respective operational areas. Following the formation of the National Council of Catholic Women Organization (NCCWO) for the Kaduna Ecclesiastical province in February 1975, the Catholic Women Organization

(CWO) was officially inaugurated in the Diocese of Makurdi on July 4, 1975. This date marked the first formal meeting, and while it was attended by only a few stations, it was led by Mrs. Susana Iher. Subsequently, the organization faced irregularity in its meetings due to the absence of elected executives. This situation persisted until the years 1979 and 1980 when the first set of executive members were elected, comprising the following individuals.

Lady Maria Fees President

Mrs. Janet Ogenyi Vic President

Lady Mary Ochefu Secretary

Lady V. N. Tian Assistant Secretary

Mrs. Justina Abeda Treasurer

Mrs. Elizabeth Iyoryisa Financial Secretary

Rev. Fr, Simon Iverver Spiritual Advisor

Rev. Sis Rosemary William Sister Advisor

After the inauguration of the Executives, meetings were held twice a year on rotational bases. The goal of the Diocesan meeting was to create spinal awareness at grassroots level. That particular time, doneness was not yet in existence so the Diocesan Council were communicating directly to parishes in the then Makurdi dioceses respectively (Feese, 2010: 55 - 56).

The Roles of Catholic Women Organization in Makurdi Diocese

A. Meetings

Initially, as previously mentioned, meetings were exclusively conducted at the Diocesan level. These gatherings occurred twice a year on a rotational basis. However, following the establishment of Deaneries, Diocesan meetings became more regular but without a fixed schedule. Meetings were convened as the need arose. In the present context, a structured arrangement has been put in place, with designated times on the Catholic year planner. These scheduled meetings are observed at the Diocesan, Deanery, and Parish levels during the annual celebration of Mother's Day, which takes place in both March and August. The March celebration is marked, whereas in August, the Catholic Women Organization (CWO) is permitted to conduct a second collection to facilitate the effective management of the organization's activities. At the Parish level, meetings are convened once a month across all parishes in the Makurdi Diocese, albeit on different dates as determined by each individual parish (Mary Orkaa, personal communication, January 9, 2023).

Likewise, both English and Tiv branches of the CWO exist at all organizational levels. At the Parish level, in addition to the monthly meetings, the English and Tiv CWOs typically convene their meetings on separate dates. Some hold meetings twice a month, while others gather on a weekly basis. Both the English and Tiv CWOs are accountable to the Parish President, and the Parish CWO Executives report to the Deanery they are affiliated with. Similarly, all Deaneries operate under the oversight of the Diocesan President (Tina Tyonah, personal communication, January 9, 2023).

Furthermore, it is essential to note that all matters concerning the Catholic Women Organization follow a hierarchical structure, commencing at the Diocesan level, extending to the Deaneries, and reaching down to the Parish levels. Typically, discussions at the Parish level are limited to matters that pertain solely to the members of the Church. Nonetheless, the organization encounters several challenges, with the most significant being funding. Raising sufficient funds for their projects remains a formidable task for the women involved (Mary Orkaa personal communication, January 9, 2023; and Tina Tyonah, personal communication, January 9, 2023).

B. Spiritual Activities

One of the primary objectives of the Catholic Women Organization is to foster a closer connection between women and their faith, recognizing their pivotal roles as the initial educators within both their households and the broader society (Kate Tergu, personal communication, January 9, 2023). In accordance with Mercy Tyosha's insights, CWO meetings encompass a range of spiritual activities. These activities notably include the recitation of the Rosary, the study of the Bible, and the singing of psalms. Additionally, members are encouraged to expound upon the Word of God, emphasizing the importance of fostering love and providing exemplary care to both spouses, thereby reinforcing familial and marital bonds.

The CWO is also actively engaged in spiritual exercises, such as the observance of Novena prayers. Novena involves a period of prayer and, at times, fasting, extending over three to nine days, and is dedicated to the welfare of the nation, the state, the sick, families, and personal intentions. Furthermore, the prayer of the Rosary, a series of Roman Catholic prayers consisting of five to twenty decades, contingent on the preferences of the individuals or groups involved, is conducted during these sessions. This prayer ritual commences with the recitation of the Lord's Prayer and culminates with the "Glory Be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Additional prayers, such as the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Memorare, the Prayer to St. Michael, and the Prayer to St. Joseph, are also included in the spiritual repertoire (Rosemary Ikyaa, personal communication, February 9, 2023).

In a similar vein, as emphasized by Christians John, the systematic study of God's Word holds a paramount position within CWO meetings and programs. Women are appointed specific topics in advance of these gatherings, and they are expected to thoroughly explore and prepare their presentations. During the meetings, these individuals are called upon to share their knowledge and insights on the chosen subject with fellow members. Moreover, time is allocated for other members to contribute their perspectives on the same topic. This educational aspect of the meetings is considered pivotal, as it serves to deepen understanding of Scripture, fortifying the spiritual connection of the attendees with their faith (personal communication, February 9, 2023).

C. Visitations

The Catholic Women Organization normally goes out periodically to visit some places. There are different kinds of visitations and at different levels too. The following are the various visitations embarked upon by the women.

Visit to the Bishop: the catholic women organization normally pays homage to the Bishop once a year. During the visit, the CWO does not go empty handed, just as one visit the biological father with food items. The organization also carries some food items ranging from yams, Rice, Semolina, varieties of teas, vegetable oil, palm oil, and meat and so on to the Bishop. The visit is done at the Diocesan level. During the meeting, they also intimate him on the progress and also problems faced by the organization. This is done in line with one of the commandment of the Catholic Church which stipulates that members should support their teachers and leaders in the church. This is done not just to show solidarity to the sitting Bishop. But also to fulfill the scripture which says, "Whoever gives prophets a cup of water because he is a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward. As such, the visitation to the Bishop is seen as a duty or a responsibility at the same time (Martha Uke, personal communication, February 9, 2023).

Seminary Visitation: The organization pays visit to the major seminary Kanshio especially during mothers' day. The seminaries are like children to them, so the usually carry along with them some food items to them. As mothers, they encourage seminarians to be serious with their studies and avoid acts of disobedience that may lead them astray or sent them away from school (Regina Verka, personal communication, February 9, 2023).

Visit to the Orphanage Homes: The women are instructed to take the visitation seriously since they are going to visit the children who have no parents with them. For that reason, women, usually contributes various items ranging from toilet tissues, Indomies, Clothes, writing materials, yams, rice, beans, garri, cooking oils and so on. On reaching there, they share the word of God with them and encourage the children to be of good character and also take their studies seriously so that they can become great people in future (Joy Iorkaan, personal communication, February 9, 2023).

Visitation to the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP): One in a while, the catholic women organization gather some relief materials like food items, toiletries, shoes, clothes and money to the IDP camp at Daudu. Some women even collected some of the children who have no hope of going back to school in order to train them in school. This is one of the ways the organization extends her support to the society. The visit to the IDP is done periodically to offer their own support (Dorathy Ahangba, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

Prison Visitation: The visit to the prison is another way the Catholic Women Organization in Makurdi Diocese shows humanitarian services. The goes to the prison first and famous to reach out to the inmate with the gospel of Jesus. During the visit, the gospel is preached to them and some gets converted and start fellowship right in the prison and when they are out of prison, they become better citizens in the society. Besides, relief materials are also distributed to the inmates like cooked food, toiletries, clothes Bibles and prayer books. Apart from the preaching and sharing of relief materials, the inmates are prayed for and

encouraged to continue with prayers for God's intervention for their lives. Many inmates have testified that God has actually heard their prayers as the sick were healed and some were released shortly after the visit of CWO members to the prison (Janet Udoo, personal communication, March 9, 2023).

D. Care of the Aged

This is one of the cardinal values of CWO in the Catholic Church. CWO cares for her members especially the older ones among them. When a member is old and cannot fend by herself, CWO periodically visit such members and give them relief material, food and clothes. If they are found sick during the visit, the sickness is treated. In case of those aged who does not have anybody to care for them. Arrangements are made for CWO members that will take good care of the person every day (Ladi Zuwa, personal communication, April 4, 2023). According to Ene John, this kind gesture is not just among CWO members (personal communication, March 9, 2023).

E. Care for the Sick

Sickness, whether of physical or spiritual nature, is a ubiquitous occurrence that can affect individuals at any given time. The Catholic Women Organization (CWO) plays a vital role in visiting and providing assistance to their members who are unwell, whether they are hospitalized or receiving care at home. During hospital visits, the CWO offers support by covering medical expenses or providing medications for those who are financially challenged, as elucidated in Doom Bem's interview. In cases where surgical procedures are conducted without prior notification to the organization, such individuals are offered Akamu, a nutritious porridge, upon visitation. It's noteworthy that the CWO extends its compassionate outreach not only to its own members but to any individuals who are within their means to assist (Victoria Ver, personal communication, April 4, 2023). Franca Mlan shared a personal testimony affirming the CWO's benevolent spirit. She recounted a period when her illness led her to deplete her financial resources, even necessitating borrowing to cover her medical bills. Upon her discharge from the hospital, she found herself unable to settle the accumulated expenses. At this juncture, CWO members stepped in and generously paid off her outstanding bills. It's important to note that at the time of this charitable act, she wasn't even a member of the CWO in her church.

In another poignant account, Mercy Joseph recounted her involvement in an accident near the Wurukum roundabout, resulting in hospitalization. Upon receiving news of her accident, CWO members from her parish visited her in the hospital. Their support went above and beyond mere visitation, exceeding her expectations. This compassion from the CWO, despite her not being a registered member at that time, inspired her to join the organization. She saw it as an opportunity to pay forward the kindness she had received, ensuring she could help someone else in need. Visiting the sick is a cornerstone of the organization's mission in both the church and broader society, guided by the principle that an injury to one is an injury to all (personal communication, April 4, 2023).

Contribution to Church Development is another significant aspect of the CWO's involvement. Augustina Onah underlines the crucial role of women as the backbone of families, communities, and the nation. In essence, they serve as builders of the church and the nation. The Catholic Women Organization has been instrumental in supporting church development through financial contributions and material assistance. When the church embarks on building projects, the CWO members typically oversee the provision of meals for the workers until the project's completion. Additionally, they contribute funds to support these initiatives. The organization consistently provides substantial support for various parish-level projects, including schools, hospitals, church halls, and more within the Makurdi Diocese.

In recent times, the Catholic Women Organization has initiated its independent projects. Notably, they have successfully established a nursery and primary school in Makurdi. Furthermore, they have acquired a bus to facilitate their members' transportation for organization-related matters, as shared by Elizabeth Joe. In summary, women have emerged as principal contributors to church and societal development. Their dedication and commitment have significantly contributed to the growth of the Church. While there is a Catholic Men Organization within the Catholic Church, the presence and influence of the women's organization, particularly in the Diocese of Makurdi, are more prominent and robust, as explained by Lydia John. Women exhibit a remarkable dedication to the service of God, evident in their contributions and support for various church projects. Their commitment is steadfast, and it extends beyond offerings, making them a pivotal force for advancement in the Church (personal communication, April 4, 2023).

F. Women Empowerment

The Catholic Women Organization (CWO) actively engages in the promotion of women's empowerment, despite being a self-sustaining entity that relies on the financial contributions of its members rather than external sponsorship. While the organization primarily operates through small levies imposed on its members, it still manages to provide support to its members when necessary. Ada Agbo underscores the organization's commitment to addressing the needs of the less privileged within their ranks, particularly widows who lack the familial support required to educate their children. In such cases, the CWO offers financial assistance to help these individuals establish businesses, thereby enabling them to maintain their families without resorting to seeking assistance from others (personal communication, April 4, 2023).

Furthermore, Regina Tyav attests to the support provided by the Catholic Women Organization within her parish in the Makurdi Diocese. This support facilitated her involvement in the yam business she presently operates. Additionally, some parishes have established local financial schemes, referred to as "bams" or banks, where members contribute funds every Sunday following the church service. These funds are available for women to borrow when they aim to initiate a business venture or address pressing personal issues. Part of the funds collected is designated for contributions to the parish bazaar, which

serves the broader objective of developing the parish and the Diocese as a whole (personal communication, April 4, 2023). It is essential to note that members who default on their financial obligations are held accountable and required to reimburse the borrowed funds to ensure that others may also benefit from this supportive initiative.

G. Skill Acquisition

In addition to the aforementioned activities, the Catholic Women Organization (CWO) also regularly arranges skill acquisition programs aimed at training interested members in various profitable handicrafts such as bead-making, cake baking, soap production, and other crafts. The primary objective behind these initiatives is to equip members with the skills needed for self-reliance, as articulated by Agatha Zever (personal communication, May 5, 2023). This sentiment finds further affirmation in the testimony of a CWO member from St. Mary's parish who herself has directly benefited from this skill acquisition scheme (personal communication, May 5, 2023).

Martha Ahura, in her account, shared her experience with a CWO-organized skill acquisition program. She acquired the knowledge and skills necessary for cake baking and chin-chin production, subsequently launching her small-scale business. Over time, her enterprise has expanded, and she now engages in both chin-chin frying and baking. This personal transformation has enabled her to attain financial independence, eliminating the need for small loans and financial assistance (personal communication, May 5, 2023).

Moreover, the Catholic Women Organization, particularly those members who hold influential positions in government, actively support other women in the organization by facilitating their access to job opportunities when such opportunities arise. In practical terms, they assist fellow women in securing employment. Becky Terwase shared an example of her sister benefiting from such a gesture. A former president of the CWO announced job vacancies within her workplace, and interested candidates were encouraged to apply. Becky's sister, who had been unemployed for an extended period, seized this opportunity and successfully secured employment, demonstrating the tangible impact of the organization's efforts in enhancing self-reliance among its members (personal communication, May 5, 2023). These multifaceted endeavors collectively reflect the Catholic Women Organization's commitment to fostering self-reliance among its members.

H. Participation of Women in the Annual Bazaar

Besides the women empowerment is the annual Bazaar, CWO also participate in annual Bazaar at all levels in the Diocese. At the parish level, women play very important role for example, CWO takes part in dish- Opening. This means they are the ones that cook different kinds of food and plenty meat especially chicken for the invited guests. Cards are printed and shared out to members of the organization to invite the public for the Bazaar. The day of harvest and thanksgiving marks the climax of the events. On this day which is the grant finally of the Bazaar, the women come with their food and drinks. As the invited

guest open a dish with money, the person is presented with food and drink which depends on the amount announced. And the woman that invited the person is also blessed with a token.

Apart from that, CWO are asked by the parish priest to give a particular amount as a group contribution of their bazaar to the Church. So, the women are told to contribute one thousand five hundred to two thousand naira for each person in order to make the sum total of money to be given as CWO bazaar to the Church. Also, women are told to give products from their farm as harvest gift to God. At the end of the day, the money realized from the sales are given to the Church for development (Theresa Ali, personal communication, May 5, 2023). Those are some of the ways CWO members contribute towards the success of Bazaar in Makurdi Diocese.

I. Seminars / Workshops

Seminars / Workshops are organized by CWO at all levels starting from the Diocese down to the parish levels. The major theme of the seminar is given by the Diocese to the Deanery down to the parishes. The organization normally starts their meeting with citation of the Holy Rosary followed by studying the word of God. Then time is given for question and answers followed by testimonies of the goodness of God in their lives (Lucy Iorchi, personal communication, May 5, 2023). Every year the women choose a different topic but all the topics are meant to educate the women in different ways. Last year's (2022) topic was to imitate our mother Mary. The women studied the life of Mother Mary and drew lessons from her life.

Juliana says that she discovered that the Catholic Church is not the only ones that honours Mother Mary. Even Muslims instructed their women to take after the life of Mother Mary (personal communication, May 5, 2023). In agreement with the above Rose says, she learnt that CWO and she as a person are to emulate the ways of Mary by always turning to God for every problem; to be filled with the Holy Spirit and not social life; to study the word of God and meditate upon it; to receive insight from God; allow God to use us as Mary did; And to be modest in behavior; to be submissive to our husbands and God and be humble since then her life never remained the same because she has changed for good (personal communication, April 6, 2023). Mwuese Uta also points out that she has gained so much from the seminars she has attended. She learnt home management, personal hygiene, how to care for her husband and children above all the fear of God in her. She concludes that attending seminars/workshops have made her a better woman, mother and wife (personal communication, April 6, 2023).

Charity Iornenge also shared her experience that it was at a seminar that she knew how important a woman is to the family, society and the nation at large. The topic treated at that time was women as the Bedrock of the society. The mother is the first teacher that laid the foundation of the child in moral values or Christian values and trains the children to be good people in the society (personal communication, April 6, 2023).

J. Administration in the Church

Apart from participating in the Catholic Women Organization, women are recently allowed to vote and be voted for into key positions in the parishes, Deaneries and at the Diocesan levels. For instance, Dooshima Aondoakaa is the current president of the Agasha Deanery. Kate Orih is the council's vice president of St Dominic Catholic Church Shachi. Some of the CWO members are council presidents, secretaries, Treasures and so on. Some of them are heads of some societies, such as Catholic Biblical Movement, Holy family, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, St Vincent De Paul to mention just but a few (Dorcas Veana, personal communication, April 6, 2023).

Similarly, CWO members are also appointed to lead some of the committees at all levels in the Diocese, for example, Elizabeth manger is currently heading the welfare committee in St Dominic Catholic Church. On the other hand, Tina Sorkaa is the chairperson of Bazaar planning committee (Kwaghdoo Augustine, personal communication, April 6, 2023).

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- **Promotion of Gender Equality in Religious Institutions:** The study highlights the significant gender disparities, particularly in Mainline Churches. It is recommended that religious institutions take proactive steps to promote gender equality by encouraging greater female participation in decision-making processes and leadership positions. They can follow the example of the Catholic Diocese of Makurdi in mandating the inclusion of women in key roles.
- **Support for Women's Empowerment Initiatives:** Women have demonstrated their potential to contribute significantly to church development and societal well-being. It is recommended that religious organizations, as well as governmental and non-governmental bodies, support and invest in women's empowerment initiatives, including skill acquisition training, to enhance their capacity for leadership and community development.
- **Sustaining Women's Involvement in the Catholic Women Organization:** The Catholic Women Organization has been an effective platform for women's contributions to the church and society. It is crucial to sustain and further strengthen this organization to continue its work in church development, charitable activities, and women's empowerment.
- **Encouraging Women's Participation in Various Church Societies:** The study shows that women participate in various church societies, including choirs and Biblical Movements. Encouraging women's active involvement in these societies can help them develop leadership skills, foster a sense of belonging, and further their contributions to church life.
- **Recognition of Women's Leadership in the Laity Council:** Women have been elected to all positions within the Laity Council in the Makurdi Diocese. This practice

should be recognized and encouraged in other church dioceses and denominations, highlighting the value of women's leadership in church governance.

- **Documentation and Dissemination of Best Practices:** The successful experiences in the Catholic Diocese of Makurdi should be documented and shared with other dioceses and denominations as a model for promoting gender equality and women's involvement in religious institutions.
- **Advocacy for Gender-Inclusive Policies:** Advocacy efforts should be made to ensure that gender-inclusive policies and practices are adopted in religious institutions beyond the Makurdi Diocese. This can include campaigns for equal opportunities, zero tolerance for gender discrimination, and the appointment of women to key positions.

Conclusion

The Catholic Women Organization is the group of women in the Catholic Church that aims at adding value to the Church and life in general. By so doing they engaged in activities such as visiting the sick in hospitals, prison and caring for the aged people among them. CWO also empowers women so that most of them will not rely solely on their husband for everything like firewood. So they are taught skills like making of soap, Baking of cake, Weaving and so on. It is observed in the Catholic Church that when it comes contribution towards developmental projects, CWO contributes more than the CMO or their men counterparts. They also participate equally in administration of the church as long as they are allowed to do so. They women also belong to other societies in the church and they participate very well. The societies are Choir, Ushers, St Vincent de Paul, our lady of perpetual help, Holy Family, Charismatic and so on. That is why CWO has seen themselves as the pillar of the Church because they are always supportive.

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