

## **Biblical Intervention in the Reconciliation of the Misconstrued Understanding of Gender Complex in Marriage**

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### **Abstract**

Gender complex in marriage has been an age-long issue clamouring for intervention because of the supposedly oppression associated with it. It is with this understanding that this paper focused on the three passages of the biblical literature often quoted and misinterpreted to support the gender complex in marriage. Gender complex as used in the context of this study was defined and the place of women in marriage briefly analyzed. Having used descriptive and analytical methods, the paper revealed that the Genesis account of creation from chapters 1 to 3 need to be reread and re-contextualised in order to have a full understanding of the fact that the narratives there do not portray the subjugation of women in marriage. The headship role in that context assigned for men is expected to be used in a positive manner to support the female gender. The messages of Paul and Peter in Ephesians 5:22-24 and 1 Peter 3:7 were discussed and it was equally noted to be cases of negative religious discourse that had received much ovation in Christendom and the society. However, the work showed that a thorough reflection of the passage by biblical scholars had revealed distortion of ideas due to what textual critics referred to as scribalidiosyncrasies. It in light of this that this article concluded with the submission that male responsibility requires soft patriarchy. That is, husbands should identify with the sacrificial and steadfast love of Christ in dealing with women especially in marriage. The headship and submission being emphasized in the scripture should not be seen in the perspective of subordination, oppression, subjugation and disrespect for women, rather marriage should be based on complementarity, respect, love and mutuality.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Gender disparity complex, Equality, Biblical intervention, Soft patriarchy.

### **Introduction**

The gender disparity complex in marriage has been an age-long discourse among many religious groups or within human communities. The bible and some other scriptures are often used to support the claims that the male gender is superior to the female. Many scholars in the field of religion, particularly preachers also use the same to substantiate this patriarchal phenomenon. Meanwhile, it is a misconstrued or a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the scriptures. A proper understanding of the scriptures shows, rather than support of masculinity or patriarchal culture, the scripture presents a balanced arrangement of the creation of humanity in male and female. The misconstrued understanding of the scripture in the support of patriarchy or a patriarchal culture has caused more disservice than service to humanity.

The world would have been a better place if the God-given talents or gifts of humanity in male and female or put together had been used for its development. A few countries in the world today, for example, the United States of America (USA), United Kingdom (UK), among others, have realized through feminist agitations and feminist theological discourses, the advantages of balancing the equation of the gender geared towards the development of their nations. The same scripture that some scholars and preachers use, misuse and abuse to meet the masculine and patriarchal ends could be applied to reconcile the discriminations and disparities in gender. Politically, certain nations, such as the USA, Germany, India and even some countries in Africa have proved that the female gender cannot be pushed aside or undermined in leadership positions. This article, therefore, is an interventionist attempt at the reconciliation of the misconstrued understanding of gender disparity complex in marriage as exemplified in the Bible.

### **Social Construction of Gender in Marriage**

Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men. Hannelie also refers to gender as socially

constructed differences that assign the attitudes and opportunities for males and females and their social interactions and relationships between them. It also determines what is accepted, permitted and valued for both women and men at any given time, and it differs from context to context, thus being context-specific (p. 7). It varies from society to society and can be changed. While most people are born either male or female, they are taught appropriate norms and behaviours - including how they should interact with others of the same or opposite sex within households, communities and workplaces. Gender creates the social differences that define woman and man. Gender ranks men above women of the same race and class (<https://www.who.int>).

In a gendered stratified society, what men do is usually valued more highly than what women do because men do it, even when their activities are very similar or the same. Wherever a task is done by women it is considered easy, and when it is done by men, it is considered difficult. When gender is a major component of structured inequality, the devalued genders have less power, prestige, and economic rewards than the valued genders (Bern, p. 122). Even in a country, for example, Nigeria that discourages gender discrimination, many major roles are still gendered; women still do most of the domestic labour and child rearing, even while doing full-time paid work. In marriage which is the main concern of this work, patriarchal ideology keeps the male in control; if the woman makes too many claims, he can abandon and reject her with relatively no cost. Historically, women have always been disadvantaged by the institution of marriage. In reality, when it comes to marriage, men win and women lose and women are starting to realize it. Marriage is an institution based on the alliance between two unequal partners, which requires one partner, the husband, to be dominant and the wife to be subservient in order to function. Women are often told by church authorities that their role in the home is to be the support person for the husband and to submit to his divinely ordained authority in the home. Then when abuse occurs, a woman may be told that she is to continue to submit because that is her role, and God will change her husband because of her obedience to God's commandments (Susan, p. 484). This situation is discussed in such a way to prohibit divorce, which possibly prevents women permanently from leaving abusive marriages.

Women are made to feel like low-value, perishable goods. Even the most egalitarian households will ultimately conform to traditional gender roles. This attitude came from a misunderstanding of the scripture. Once married, a woman's legal rights are subsumed under those of her husband, and the so-called marriage restricts her ability to work outside the home. Many married women cannot even leave the home without their husband's permission. Women, who protest or try to escape or so much as talk to another man, risk being beaten, sent packing or even murdered. A married man is likely to pursue his career as though he were still single, while a married woman is expected to forfeit her public life to follow her husband or care for the young, the old and the family. The question that arises from all these is that, does the bible actually teach subjugation of women. However, the question that strikes a moderate feminist is: how may these biblical narratives which have, for so long, influenced the subjugation of women be re-interpreted and applied to reconcile the misconstrued gender complex in marriage.

### **Re-reading the Text against Women**

Here, three major texts among many are singled out for critical analysis and re-interpretation. They are:

#### **(a) *Genesis 1:28, 2&3***

Male-Female Equality and Male Headship (Genesis 1-3).

One may ask, why go all the way back to the first three chapters of the Bible, if the concern is reconciling the misconstrued understanding of gender complex in marriage? The reason for this is because the chapters lay the very foundation of biblical manhood and womanhood. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate from Genesis 1-3 that both male-female equality and male headship, properly defined, were instituted by God at creation and remain permanent, beneficent aspects of human existence and thus there should not be any room for gender complex in marriage. What God intended at Creation in Gen 1: 26-28:

Then God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the

earth. So God created man in his own image in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of their and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.

From the above, it could be said that the first clear teaching of the bible is that men and women are equal in terms of value and dignity in creation and redemption. Then, it could be said that each of these three verses makes a point; verse one asserts the divine creation of man, line two overlaps with line one, except that it highlights the divine image in man. Line three boldly affirms the dual sexuality of man. Finally, in verse 28, God pronounces His benediction on man. "God blessed them and said to them..." With man alone, male and female alike without distinction, God shares relationship. In His benediction, the Creator also authorizes male and female together to carry out their mission to rule the lower creation. To sum up: man was created as royalty in God's world, male and female alike bearing the divine glory equally (Raymond n.p.).

The second clear teaching of the Bible is that men and women stand in a complementary relationship to one another. God made man and woman to be one flesh neither is complete without the other. God presented Eve to Adam not as an inferior or a superior but as a suitable helper (Gen. 2:18) who would end Adam's loneliness and with her subdue the earth. This primal event explains why we see men and women pairing off today. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." The garden of Eden is where it all started – not in the social evolution of mankind but in the original, pre-fall creation by God. At its very heart, marriage is not just merely a human custom, variable according to changing times; but a divinely created institution, defined for all ages and all cultures in our shared, primeval, perfect existence (Geoffrey, pp. 82-85).

Then, what does marriage of Adam and Eve mean? What distinguishes this particular social institution? Moses reasons that marriage is the re-union of what was originally and literally one flesh – only now in a much more satisfying form, we would all agree. This is why "he who loves his wife loves himself for no man ever

hates his own flesh" (Ephesians 5:28-29, RSV). Becoming "one flesh" as husband and wife is symbolized and sealed by sexual union, is true but the "one flesh" relationship entails more than sex. It is the profound fusion of two lives into one, shared life together, by the mutual consent and covenant of marriage. It is the complete and permanent giving over of oneself into a new circle of shared existence with one's partner. Therefore, it could be said in the conspicuous phrase, "a helper suitable for him" (2:18, 20), we encounter the paradox of manhood and womanhood. The Genesis account makes it clear that while the work of the man and the work of the woman are related, they are not identical. Adam had a primary responsibility in working and Eve a primary responsibility for bearing children. According to Geoffrey that point is made in their names: 'Adam' echoes the Hebrew word for "ground," or "earth" as in soil; and "Eve" is related to the Hebrew word for "life". Their primary roles also reflected in Adam's working of the ground and woman's curse on childbirth (Geoffrey, p. 83). This is equally reflected in the curse placed on both of them after their sin. The man's related to the soil while that of the woman is related to life giving.

It is the word "helper", by common interpretation, that suggests the woman's supportive rather than complementary role. Spencer argues, however, that this description of Eve "does not at all imply inherent subordination" (Aidan, p. 26). She adduces the fact that God Himself is portrayed in scripture as our "Helper," which He is. She then interprets this fact: "If being 'one who helps' inherently implies subordination, then, in that case, God would be subordinate to humans" (Gilbert, p. 22). This reasoning is not fallacious. The fallacy lies in the implication of what she says, namely, that God cannot be subordinate to human beings. It is entirely possible for God to subordinate Himself, in a certain sense, to human beings. He does so whenever He undertakes to help us. He does not "un-God" Himself in helping us; but He does stoop to our needs, according to His gracious and sovereign will. Yet this does not diminish or lessen His essence, majesty or sovereignty. But, someone will say, "doesn't hierarchy in marriage reduce a woman to the status of a slave?" Not at all. The fact that a line of authority exists from one person to another in both slavery and marriage, and, for that matter, in the holy trinity, in the body of Christ, in the local church, in the parent-child relationship – the fact that a line of

authority exists from one person to another in all of these relationships does not reduce them all to the logic of slavery. Some Feminists seem to be reasoning that, because some subordination is degrading, all subordination must necessarily be degrading. On the contrary, what biblical headship requires and what slave-holding forbids is that the head respect the helper as an equally significant person in the image of God (Derek, p. 71).

However, in Genesis 3, God imposed male headship/ domination upon the woman after the fall. Some claim that male headship is the product of the fall and cite Gen. 3:16 to substantiate that, "your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." It should be noted that, interpreters of that passage should not advocate demeaning, oppressive "male dominance" (Stott, p. 270). What should be advocated for is selfless male headship, in which the man undertakes to serve his wife and family by providing the leadership that will glorify God and benefit them without regard for the price the man must pay to fulfil that responsibility. Headship calls us men to lay down our lives for our families.

*(b) Ephesians 5:22-24*

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Peter teaches the same way in 1 Peter 3:1-2, 5, 6:

Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husband's so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives ... for this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

The above are the notable cases of negative religious discourse transmitted in scripture and blamed on Paul since ages. The text has received much ovation and had become acceptable in patriarchal

exegesis that had for so long influenced some Christian practice in marriage and even in society. It could be said that the obedience to which wives are called in these texts is not a grievous burden when balance with the love and care a Christian husband is to show his wife. A thorough, but brief, exegesis of this phrase may prove if the interpretation people had given the text has been right or not. If the head of the woman is man as the head of Christ is God, then man and woman must be equal as the father and the son are equal (Gilbert, p. 22), even when there exist a hierarchy.

On the other hand, headship implies some degree of leadership, which, however, is expressed not in terms of authority but of responsibility. The husband headship of his wife, therefore, is a headship more of care than of control, more of responsibility than of authority. As her head, he gives himself up for her in love, just as Christ did for his body, the church. And he looks after her, as his own body. His concern is not to crush her, but to liberate her. As Christ gave himself for his bride, in order to present her to himself radiant and blameless, so the husband gives himself for his bride, in order to create the conditions within which she may grow into the fullness of her womanhood (Ruether, p. ix).

**(c) 1 Peter 3:7:**

The passage is another vicious text, it reads;

Likewise, you husbands should live with your wives in understanding, showing honour to the weaker female sex, since we are joint heirs of the gift of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

The question is, how have generations of Christians interpreted this passage? Many are the answers. According to Thompson, the early Christians would not have considered the term, weaker vessels to have been in any way derogatory to women (Thompson, pp. 324-326). In the passage; Peter makes the point that women are weaker than men because women were greatly disadvantaged in Greco-Roman society. They had considerably less privileges and rights than men. Peter wanted husbands to acknowledge and be considerate of the more vulnerable situation of their wives - their "vessels" - so that they would take care not to exploit them (cf. 1 Thess. 4:3-6).



Many times, people in positions of privilege are not fully aware of the disadvantages of those in weaker positions. Instead of exploitation, Peter wanted husbands to treat their wives with respect and even honour.

Peter instructs the Christian husbands to give their Christian wives respect, or, more accurately, honour (time). For some in the church of Asia Minor this may have seemed an extraordinary request of Peter. The teaching of the New Testament, however, unlike some other religious writings, show that women are to be treated with honour and respect. Peter tells the husbands to assign honour to their wives because, in Christ, men and women are coheirs of the life of grace. The Greek of 1 Peter 3:7 uses language which unmistakably highlights the mutuality and equality of Christian husbands and wives. Peter also gives a warning to husbands. He writes that if husbands do not give their wives honour as co-heirs, or equal partners, their attitude and behaviour will hinder their prayers. A husband's prayers are hindered when he fails to truly honour his wife or when he dishonours her. The insistence of many Christians, that submission in marriage is the sole responsibility and duty of wives, is not biblical. Peter strongly implies that husbands are to be submissive to their Christian wives (1 Pet. 3:7). In Ephesians 5:21, Paul urged all Christians to be mutually submissive to one another (Hurley, p. 13). Submission in Christian relationships is not to be understood in the military sense of subordination, but more in the sense of loyalty, mutual cooperation, support, deference, humility, consideration and cohesion.

Peter sums up his passage on submission by saying, "Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble." (1 Pet. 3:8) This is what submission between husbands and wives looks like. Moreover, this is what Christian submission between all of God's people, regardless of gender; ethnicity, socio-economic status, or church status, look like. Thus, it could be said here that Peter's reference to women as weaker vessels does not imply that they are lesser person as some people thought. It could be rightly argued here that Peter was against the Greco-Roman culture of his time that already subordinated the woman and hence warning and teaching men on how better to deal with them.

### **Deducible Facts from the Above Passages**

The institution of marriage in Genesis 2:18-25, if put in its proper exegetical context, provided a beautiful platform for the personhood of woman and most especially does not give room for gender complex in marriage. Taking a closer look at the passage as rightly observed by Alabi, honour was given to woman, when Adam remarks: 'This is now my bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh, she shall be called woman. Adam did not say she should be called a subordinate, a subsidiary, a slave, a property or a nonentity (Alabi, p. 143). The priority of Adam's creation before Eve does not teach gender complex in marriage. If the primal creation was intended for authority over women, then the animals should be masters over man because they were first even before Adam. It is observed that patriarchal domination had long been transmitted in the scripture and narratives; hence it has continued to play down the appreciation of the positive, relevance and importance of women in most African cultures. This idea of patriarchy according to Hannelie run so deep in the fabric of society, it is difficult to change, because patriarchy is so deeply rooted in the principles of control, male dominance, identification and centeredness (Hannelie, p. 4). The negative hermeneutics derived from these sacred texts discussed above have continued to make majority of men to relegate women to the background and even deprived them leadership positions in the society.

Women denigration originated from Genesis 3:16 and that male leadership is the product of the fall. Men have misused the judgment of God as an excuse to maltreat and subjugate women in ways God never intended. Examples could be given from many cultures. Husbands regard themselves as Lord and master of their wives. But to claim that male leadership begins with the fall is to ignore the evidence of leadership before the fall. It has made male gender to dominate the marriage even to the extent that the female gender in most cases have no say in their marriage and yet it takes two (male and female) by ordinance to make marriage. Apostle Paul in Ephesians 5:22, while using the language of wifely submission in some places, equally reminds his readers in other places that spouses belong to each other and that husbands are to be ready to sacrifice, like Christ, unto death for their wives. Paul even though indicates that he supports women's freedom in Christ but that for the sake of

spreading the gospel, he does not want their freedom to go to their heads.

The feminine imagery created of woman as the originator of evil, the agent of death and the cause of the withdrawal of primordial bliss remains a threat to the emergence of articulate womenfolk in our contemporary society. The passage in question should not be used to reinforce the oppressive divisions of class, ethnicity and gender inequality, a menace that Jesus fought against in his earthly ministry when he embraced women and had many of them around him. Jesus treated women with openness, respect, acceptance, and tenderness. In this way he honoured the dignity which women have always possessed according to God's plan and in his love. Families need authority, but this does not require that the male be the final authority and that the female must be submissive. Husband and wife can create patterns of family authority by interpreting together the Bible, tradition, and experience and by dialoguing together in mutuality and equal regard to establish the religious narrative, values, and moral principles that will govern their marriage.

Equal regard does not mean that men and women do not have particular roles and unique contributions in marriage and in societal demands. Also, equal does not mean same or identical. Women and men have distinctive contributions in bearing and rearing children, and children benefit from the contrast between parents. Difference between husband and wife in family life need not be rooted in ideas of female inferiority; indeed equal regard may make women to recognize that gendered meanings in the family spring from female superiority, at least feminine powers. When mothers no longer actively support or encourage the fatherhood of men, when the assent of the mother is withdrawn, the practical result in most cases will be the eventual end of fatherhood. As rightly noted by Soren, through her I am man, for only a married man is an authentic Man; compared with this any other title is nothing and actually presupposes this. Through her I am Father, any other position of honour is but human invention, a fad that is forgotten in a hundred years. Through her I am Head of the Family, through her I am defender of home, breadwinner, guardian of the children (Soren, p. 123).

## **Conclusion**

Is there, really then, no hope of a substantial change of orientation of the gender complex in marriage? We know that women have been groaning in pain as in the pains of domestic abuse, deprivation of rights, segregation and relegation to the background in marriage and societal matters. Even though in the Old Testament there are unlawful exploitations of women as a husband was certainly the patriarch and Baal (lord or ruler) of his clan. Yet, the women folk were not despised or ill-treated, marriage was held in high esteem, modelled on Yahweh's covenant love to Israel, the beauty of sexual love was celebrated as in the Songs of Songs and the capabilities of a good wife praised (Proverbs v 31). Thus, it is the contention of this article that readers of the scripture particularly male and female should derive comforts in the teaching of Christ and with the understanding of the facts that there could be misinterpretation or misrepresentation of ideas. Ann Brown remarkably notes that: Jesus attitude runs counter to those of any culture. He valued women, affirming them as being equally made in the image of God and fully man. There is no hint of oppression, domination, depreciation or ridicule, in his interaction with women. He never silenced or interrupted them nor did he ever appear to be threatened by them (Brown, p. 53).

Jesus' dealings with women is worthy of emulation, he treated women as real humans, created in the image of God. Then on the misinterpretation, readers of the scripture should note the position of N.T Wright that we need to understand the Bible and the story of gender relations within it, to actually argue for the positive and mutual independence of male and female in marriage (Wright 16). Also, Thompson Healey and Sybertz noted that, many portions of recent New Testament scholarship have seen the hand of redactors/interpolators or pastors acting as surrogate evangelists as Paul or as Peter in order to press their own theological viewpoints. Therefore it could be said that there is little doubt that such reviewers had patriarchal interest to protect in a world where women were given little honour (Thompson, pp. 324-325). In marriage, men need to recognize this fact that the authority they have does not authenticate their person. Authority is not a privilege to be exploited to build up ego. Authority is a responsibility to be borne for the benefit of others without regard for oneself. In marriage, there should

be mutual love, understanding, respect and submission. It is in this spirit that there would be peaceful co-existence that would be translated to the society.

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