



Research Article

An Appraisal of Select Pentecostal Women Fellowships in Nigeria in the Light of the Ethics of Care and Negofeminism

ABSTRACT

The global proliferation of women fellowships in Pentecostalism calls for attention. This phenomenon though harmless has no outright scriptural backing and seemingly negates the idea of the church as one body in Christ. Using the phenomenological method of research this paper ethically examines the rationale behind women fellowships in Nigeria. This study hinges on the ethics of care and negofeminism as a theoretical basis for its qualitative analysis. While women fellowships are considered as avenues for women to express themselves without the intrusion of chauvinistic structures of society subtly existent in the church, it is criticized as a drastic reactive measure which is ‘unChristian’ and untypical of the African feminist. It is argued in this paper, that instead of using separatist tactics, Pentecostal women should explore benign ways of working with the men in parent churches while asserting themselves in ways that are not confrontational. It is also important for Christian vis-à-vis Pentecostal denominations to jettison the pervasive sexist hermeneutics which places women in a subordinate position and instead, emphasizes the non-discriminatory gifts of the Holy Spirit. This would strengthen interdependence and foster unity within the church.

Keywords: Ethical, Women, Fellowship, Negofeminism, Sexist, Hermeneutics

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INTRODUCTION

Fellowship in Christendom is a familiar term representing the gathering of Christians for worship and interaction with one another. A lot of Christian fellowships exists in Nigeria and of course various parts of the world where members meet to discuss Scriptures and for the enhancement of their spiritual growth. These fellowships could exist within a particular Christian denomination or as an independent body. A good number of these fellowships in Nigeria incorporate both male and female membership, while some others are gender specific. However, in Nigeria, it is uncommon to find male-specific Christian fellowships. Instead, what is seen mostly are women’s fellowships. There are numerous Pentecostal women’s fellowships in Nigeria. Notable among them are Women Intercessors for the Church and for the Nation, aka Wailing Women Worldwide, Sisters Fellowship International, When Women Pray, Daughters of Deborah International Ministry in Ilorin and so on. Other small or not-too-popular ones are spread all over the country. These fellowships are usually independent of parent Church(es). Often times, women from different denominational backgrounds make up the attendance. During such gatherings, women express themselves without restraints from male church leaders or authority. They pray for themselves, their spouses, children and the nation, sing, dance, encourage one another, listen to homily by a woman and attend to special needs of members. They usually hold teaching sessions for young women who are yet to marry and seminars for married women on parenting and marriage. Some of these fellowships have their mission and vision well spelt out while others do not.

Apparently, their activities are not harmful to individuals or the society. As a matter of fact, they only exercise their freedom of association and worship. Underneath the obvious however, might be some untold or inconspicuous reasons for or consequences of such fellowships. One wonders the need for such fellowships meant exclusively for women who are already Christians and have denominational affiliations. The bottom-line is that these women separated

themselves from the men mainly to pursue whatever mission and vision they conceived. It is a known fact that African women are by culture, not separatists like some Western feminists. They believe in accommodation, collaboration and union with men and children.² They believe in complementarity and enhanced relationship. It is therefore a bit troubling to have women separate themselves for fellowship, a practice that does not have a clear-cut scriptural backing. It is worthy to note however, that membership of these characteristically Pentecostal women fellowships also feature women from non-Pentecostal churches. In an organization that is densely or even sparsely populated, people tend to create fragments while still considering themselves as part and parcel of a larger whole. Such groups afford women the opportunity to interact; share ideas and experiences; synergize to bring about development in church as well as help one another in various ways. Such fellowships exist within Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. The same also goes for men's fellowships as well as youth fellowship. It is however not common to hear of men's fellowships independent of a parent church.

Division between the parent church(es) and Pentecostal women fellowships exists within the Pentecostal circle and as a matter of fact, exacerbates as women's fellowships proliferate. One wonders if this reality is as a result of feminist theology or to put it more vividly, a subtle protest against male domination of church leadership and sexist hermeneutics in most Christian denominations in Nigeria. Perhaps, similar issues exist in orthodox churches, little wonder some women from there find these fellowships attractive. The focus here, however, is on women fellowships that could be described as Pentecostal, which often draw most of its members from different Pentecostal denominations. One therefore wonders if independence is the best way to tackle the situation since the main issues, be they in Christian Religion or African culture are sexism, inimical patriarchal structures and disdain of women's rights as humans?³ Can the church borrow a leaf from African feminist theorists who champion and vanguard complementarity? Are Pentecostal women guilty of the same thing they find unpalatable in Pentecostal denominations? The question is; what is the main motivating factor for these fellowships and what is the ethical basis of their existence? Again, what is the immediate and possible remote outcome of Pentecostal women's fellowship in Nigeria?

This paper is therefore poised to beam a search light on the cause-and-effect relationship of this observed phenomenon. For the purpose of precision, three of such fellowships - Wailing Women Worldwide with headquarters in Port Harcourt, Sisters' Fellowship International (SFI) with headquarters in Onitsha and When Women Pray with headquarters in Abuja are selected for this study. These three were chosen to reflect the spread of women's fellowships in Nigeria. These fellowships have branches all over Nigeria and in the Diaspora. For this qualitative inquiry, ethnographic approach to research is adopted and data is basically garnered through participant observation, interviews and literature. Available facts and information with respect to ethics and Pentecostal women fellowships in Nigeria will be critically evaluated. The goal is to explore the why, how and the implications of independent women's fellowships in the Pentecostal sphere. Hence, a clarification of key concepts and terminologies will be done. This will be followed by a theoretical framework and a brief overview on the select women fellowships. Then, an analysis of women fellowships vis-à-vis ethics of care and negofeminism will be considered. Finally, some alternative perspectives will be given and conclusions drawn.

Clarifying Key Concepts and Terminologies

Such keywords as ethics and Pentecostalism will be conceptualized in this session.

Ethics

"Ethics is based on well-founded standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues."⁴ As a practical discipline, the aim of ethics is to determine how one ought to live and what actions one ought to do in the conduct of one's life. Ethical issues arise from reflection on situations in life that involve matters of morality.⁵ The study of ethics which emerged in the early 1970s

² Obioma Nnaemeka, "Negofeminism; Theorising, Practicing and Pruning Africa's Way," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 2 (2004); Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, *Africa Woman Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1996); Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, "Snail-Sense Feminism: Building on an Indigenous Model." (*University of Lagos, monograph series 17*. Lagos: Faculty of Arts, 2012).

³ Helen Chukwuma, "Love and Motherhood in Chinua Achebe's novels," in *Achebe's Women: Imagism and Power*, ed. Helen Chukwuma. (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2012), 89-100.; Loretta Ngcobo, "African Motherhood: Myth and Reality," in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, eds. Tejumola Olaniyan & Ato Quayson. (Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2013), 533-541.; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002).; Teresa Okure, "Unmasking Ephesians 5:22-33: An Arch Kyriarchal Culture in Christological Garb," in *Women in the Bible: Point of view of African Biblical Scholars*, eds. Paul Bere, Mary Sylvia Nwachukwu & Anthony I. Umoren (Abidjan: Panafrican Association of Catholic Exegetes, 2013), 351-371; Rosalind I.J. Hackett, "Women, Rights Talk and African Pentecostalism," *Religious Studies and Theology*, 36, no. 2 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1558/rsth.35161>.

⁴ Manuel Velasquez, Claire Andre, Thomas Shanks, S.J., and Michael J. Meyer, "What is Ethics?" in Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, revised January 1, 2010, <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/what-is-ethics/>

⁵ John Deigh, *Introduction to Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

features a rich collection of theories, principles which aid ethical analysis of a given situation and facilitates moral decision making.⁶ The importance of ethical theories lies in the fact that they establish a firm foundation for challenging situations or guiding decisions.

Pentecostalism

The extent of diversity within Pentecostalism makes it a difficult subject to define. “Pentecostals have defined themselves by so many paradigms that diversity itself has become a primary defining characteristic of Pentecostal and Charismatic identity.”⁷ However, this study embraces the definition of Pentecostalism which highlights the major unifying features of the movement. Thus, Pentecostalism refers to the belief that Christians are offered gifts of the Holy Spirit described in the New Testament, such as the gifts of speaking in tongues, interpretation, healing, apostleship, prophecy as well as the belief in signs, miracles and wonders.⁸ This definition also fits into the context of this study in terms of its acknowledgement of the bequeathing of the gifts of the Holy Spirit on members of the denomination, irrespective of age, gender or position. A similar definition adds that Pentecostal denominations typically value prophecy, visions, prayer, healing and deliverance from evil spirits.⁹ These definitions suggest that Pentecostalism is supposedly a platform for harnessing the gifts of the Holy Spirit as bestowed on members. The Pentecostal idea is basically associated with the Holy Spirit’s descent upon the first Christians in Jerusalem on the Pentecost day in Acts 2:4.¹⁰ The latter definition best suits this paper’s perspective on Pentecostalism.

Theoretical Framework

This paper will be explored within the confines of ethics of care and Obioma Nnaemeka’s negofemism perspectives. While ethics of care, is an ethical theory that is often attributed to the works of Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings in the mid-1980s and developed by feminists,¹¹ negofeminism is an afrocentric feminist theory of Nigerian origin. Both theories have feminist undertone and will complement each other in this discourse on Pentecostal women fellowships. Both theories would therefore be used to make sense of data collected and aid deductive arguments on the topic under study.

The Ethics of Care

As an alternative to the deontological and consequentialist schools which dominated ethical discourse in the 1980s, a handful of scholars, most notably Carol Gilligan proposed the Ethics of Care (EoC) also referred to as ethics of love or relational ethics perspective.¹² The ethics of care is a normative ethical theory often considered a type of virtue ethics which is also similar to communitarianism. Ethics of care is a moral perspective which places emphasis on the compelling moral salience of attending to the needs of others. The prospects for human flourishing and progress are fundamentally hinged on the care that those needing it receive.¹³

Inspired by the feminine instinct to care, this theory has its roots in feminist theory and focuses especially on the human dimensions of ethical dilemmas, especially the implications of ethical decisions for the key relationships among the people involved. In presenting and defending this relatively new approach to ethics, care theorists agree that universal standards and justice-based approaches such as deontology and consequentialism are plausible alternatives to ethics of care. However, they maintain that caring rooted in receptivity, human relationships, interdependency, relatedness and responsiveness is a basic and preferable approach to ethics.¹⁴

The normative core value of the ethics of care is twofold – the universal condemnation of exploit and hurt and the universal commitment to human flourishing.¹⁵ The moral epistemology of the ethics of care is not merely reliant on deduction and abstract reasoning, rational calculations or rule following. It also involves taking experiences into account, exercising-reflections and sensitive judgments where contextual differences are attended to.

⁶ Frederic G. Reamer, “Eye on ethics: The ethics of care,” accessed July 21, 2019, https://www.socialworktoday.com/news/eoe_0916.shtml

⁷ Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 10.

⁸ Terence Chong, “Introduction,” in *Pentecostal Mega Churches in Southeast Asia*, ed. Terence Chong (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2018), 1-18.

⁹ Knut Rio, Michelle MacCarthy and Ruy Blanes, *Pentecostalism and Witchcraft: Spiritual Warfare in Africa and Melanesia* (Switzerland: Springer Publishing, 2017).

¹⁰ Ogbu Uke Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Sandra Bhatasara, Rumbidzai Shamuyedova, Naume Zorodzai Choguya and Manase Kudzai Chiweshe, “Women and Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe: Negotiating] Leadership in the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God “Forward in Faith” Ministry,” *Annual Review of Sociology of Religion*, (2017). https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004344181_017.

¹¹ Laura D’Olimpio, “Ethics Explainer: Ethics of Care,” (May 16, 2019). <https://ethics.org.au/ethics-explainer-ethics-of-care/>

¹² New World Encyclopedia, “Ethics of Care”. Accessed on May 18, 2020, https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Ethics_of_care.

¹³ Virginia Held, *The ethics of care: personal, political and global* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ “New World Encyclopedia,” Ethics of Care, accessed June 24, 2019, https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Ethics_of_care

¹⁵ Tove Pettersen, “The Ethics of Care: Normative Structures and Empirical Implications,” *Health Care Anal* 19, no. 1 (2011).

One basic criticism of care ethics is the fact that it appeals to sentiment and likely to be given to favouritism which violates the ethical principles of fairness and impartiality. Care ethics is also criticized as working against the goals of feminism by recommending the very attitudes and activities that have kept women in a disadvantaged position in relation to men throughout the ages. A great deal of what happens in Pentecostal women fellowships is in tandem with the ethics of care perspective. Hence, this perspective in Pentecostal women fellowships in Nigeria will be crystallized in this paper.

Negofeminism

Obioma Nnaemeka put forward “nego-feminism” in her painstakingly researched 2005 paper titled: *Nego-feminism: Theorizing, Practicing and Pruning Africa’s way*. Having discovered that women’s issues and patterns of tackling same issues are not homogenous across continents and nations, she proposed negofeminism as a culturally appropriate and compliant model. It is ‘negotiation’ feminism and ‘no ego’ feminism.¹⁶ Negofeminism upholds negotiation as well as feminism without ego either from the men or women as the theory of egoism is despicable and ‘unAfrican.’ Nnaemeka contends that African women should be willing to negotiate with and around men in conflicting circumstances in ways that are congruent with Africa’s historical and cultural context. She valorizes negotiation and compromise which she believes is rooted in the value system of Africans. By negotiation here, she does not mean pacifism. In her words, a woman should know “when, where and how to detonate patriarchal landmines. In other words, she knows when, where and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts.”¹⁷ Nnaemeka’s theory is built on the indigenous, charging all humans male and female to be keen partners in the progress journey. “Nego-feminism surrounds issues of peace or conflict management, negotiation, complementarity, give-and-take, collaboration, bargaining, mediation, and arbitration.”¹⁸

So far, the contention that not all afrocentric theories address gender issues in a non monolith Africa remain a rate limiting step for this theory. Again, the suffix “feminism” on “negofeminism” does not go down well with some African women who want to distance themselves from feminism because of their reservations as a result of the manner it is practiced and applied in the West. They will rather go by any other term other than feminism.

Nnaemeka’s negofemism is relevant to this paper as it sets out to dig into the cause of separation by women in Pentecostal circles and recommend the application of negotiation as well as no ego tactics to achieve inclusion, equity and gender sensitivity. With Negofeminism therefore, more could be achieved without confrontations. “Efforts are needed to proffer ways for women to achieve their objectives without recourse to injurious methodology. Negofeminsim in this exact sense sets out to achieve just that.”¹⁹

SELECT PENTECOSTAL WOMEN FELLOWSHIPS

When Women Pray

When Women Pray (WWP) is an interdenominational Christian women fellowship with over 26 branches nationwide and in the USA. The ministry reportedly started with eight women in Lagos in February 2010 and later in Abuja with eight other women in August of the same year. WWP was born out of a revelation to the founder and President Pastor (Mrs) Opuaya Bipiminayefie Agha (fondly called Pastor O) in 2010. She had just moved from Port Harcourt to Lagos on a job transfer and was said to have been directed by God to start up a women prayer group. This revelation was said to have been further confirmed when she travelled to Abuja on a summer holiday. She claims that while speaking on phone with a woman in Port Harcourt, God spoke through the woman alluding that there was a woman whose marriage was in trouble and she would be of immense help to the lady if she started up this ‘revealed’ fellowship. Heeding to this voice, she later contacted a couple of female friends who resided in the city of Abuja for a prayer session at her residence. Those women came along with their friends and they all summed up to eight women who gathered at what was to become an inaugural meeting of the When Women Pray held on the 24th of August 2010. It is important to note that the woman whose marriage was in trouble was present at this maiden gathering. She reportedly, gave her life to Christ and her marriage also survived the strain.

Pastor (Mrs) Opuaya Bipiminayefie Agha considers herself a product of the practical school of life and believes firmly that there is no life that cannot be positively changed and marriage that cannot be salvaged. This belief is said to be evident in the numerous testimonies of thousands of persons that have been impacted by the ministry in its ten years of existence. Fellowship meetings which feature prayers, preaching, testimonies and praise are held weekly at different WWP chapters nationwide and also transmitted through its fast-growing website ministry. These testimonies range from

¹⁶ Ezeigbo, “Snail-sense.”

¹⁷ Nnaemeka, “Negofeminism,” 377-378.

¹⁸ Muhammad Alkali, Rosli Talif and Jariah Mohd Jan, “Violence and Sexual Harassment in Nigerian Novels: The Nego-feminist Option,” *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 3, no. 9 (2013): 10-14, accessed June 22, 2019, <https://www.iiste.org/Journals/index.php/RHSS/article/view/6307/6618>

¹⁹ Alkali, Talif and Jan, “Violence and Sexual Harassment,” 11.

restored broken homes, fruits of the womb, marriages being contracted, financial breakthroughs, freed prisoners and confident self realization through the knowledge of God.²⁰

Wailing Women Worldwide

Wailing Women Worldwide (WWW) is an apostolic and prophetic women fellowship which started in Port Harcourt, Rivers State in May 1998. It was reported to have been inspired by a cry from God's heart to women concerning the spiritual condition of the Nigerian nation and the church as captured by the book of Jeremiah 9:17-20. In that portion of Scripture, the Bible calls for women and their daughters to gather and wail for Zion which was in ruin and shame. It is claimed that the divine instruction given was for women to be raised across denominations in the thirty-six states of the nation to intercede for the nation and the church. This is given as a background to authenticate the women's parachurch organization that was to take off, albeit in a purely Pentecostal manner. They claim that the command to intercede for Nigeria was to avert the impending judgment of God. They were also purportedly conferred the responsibility of praying for their families, tribes, cities and so on.

The mission of the wailing women is to ensure a wholistic development and empowerment of members with Godly values and skills, to positively influence nations through intercession, training and enhancement and raise disciplined leaders for the purpose of establishing God's kingdom principles in every domain. Love, righteousness, obedience, justice are some of its core principles and a hierarchical leadership structure is used to coordinate the smooth operation of the fellowship both in Nigeria and the Diaspora.²¹

Sisters' Fellowship International

Sisters' fellowship International is an interdenominational women organization founded by Rev. Nches Iredu whose eight years of barrenness reportedly played a significant role in the emergence of the fellowship. She prayed to God to raise spiritual children for her, since she couldn't have biological children. The vision of the fellowship came to her while on her undergraduate programme in the University of Birmingham, United Kingdom in 1984. After the completion of her studies she returned to Nigeria and started a small fellowship of four converts. Since then, Sisters' fellowship has grown in leaps and bounds within Nigeria and abroad. The essence of this fellowship is basically to demonstrate to the world that God's love is unconditional, infallible and real as expressed in John 3:16. Members are thus encouraged to live exemplary lives of love and appreciation. Mrs Nches focuses on messages of peace and reconciliation to broken homes and fruitfulness to women who suffer infertility.

The fellowship, with its headquarters in Onitsha, is on a mission to give hope and gladness to the broken hearted, the neglected, destitute through acts of charity. Other missions of the fellowship include: to bring Christians together to genuinely appreciate each other's gifts and talents, to create room for capacity building and training of women and youths to develop skills and potentials for daily living and to impact the world.

Common Features of Select Fellowships

A common feature of these fellowships is the fact that they were founded by women who claim to have been inspired by a message of solution and redemption from the Holy Spirit. They share similarities in their activities which include studying the Bible, praying together, learning various crafts and home remedies, listening to health and lifestyle nuggets and discussion of interpersonal problems and possible ways to handle them. They are also involved in philanthropic outreaches to orphans, the elderly, widows, the less privileged, among others. The order of service of these women fellowships are not regimented and features praise and worship, testimonies, homily, seed sowing and prayer sessions. The highlight of each fellowship session is usually the grand finale, where the leader or founder of the fellowship (usually called 'mummy' or 'mama') steps up the podium to minister. Ministration features prophetic utterances, admonitions and usually rounded off with prayers. The women are most importantly encouraged to remain steadfast in faith despite life's challenges. At the completion of each fellowship session, participants feel connected to each other and that feeling of not being alone is reignited.²²

Furthermore, studies show that among the major motivations for some of these women fellowships is women's gender equality sentiments in some Pentecostal Churches, where women are relegated to play only supplementary and supportive roles.²³ Pentecostal-charismatic women leaders argue for justice, equality, inclusion, women's dignity at home, among others, in their communities. With reference to African women Pentecostal-charismatic leaders, "we

²⁰ Opuaya Agha, "Our Ministry: From the President," accessed June 14, 2019, https://whenwomenpray.org/index.php/our-ministry/?page_id=50

²¹ "Wailing Women Worldwide," About Us, accessed April 10, 2020, <https://www.wailingwomenworldwide.org/about/>

²² "Sisters' Fellowship International Houston Area," Vision of Sisters Fellowship International, accessed August 21, 2019, <https://sistersfellowshipinternationalhoustonarea.com/about>

²³ Rosalind I.J. Hackett, "Women, Rights Talk and African Pentecostalism," *Religious Studies and Theology*, 36, no. 2 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1558/rsth.35161>.

have noted recurring themes in their discourses on freedom for women: the freedom to preach, lead, and enjoy access to spiritual power, the freedom to develop as individuals and communities.²⁴ There is therefore no gainsaying that most of the perturbations in Pentecostal churches lie on gender disparity and exclusion.²⁵ On the other hand, it has been argued that the Pentecostal movement in Africa fully mobilizes everyone – male and female in reconciling the world to God.²⁶ Yet, a different claim avers that “gendered rights discourse continues to be both expressed and resisted in Africa’s ever-evolving Pentecostal-charismatic communities.”²⁷ When asked probing queries, a great deal of interviewees suggests that women’s fellowships provide women a platform to express their religious vocation.²⁸ It is however the position of this paper that many Pentecostal women fellowships arise as a result of patriarchal bottlenecks in Pentecostal churches.

Pentecostal Women Fellowships in Nigeria vis-à-vis Ethics of Care and Negofeminism

For many reasons, the ethics of care is compatible with Pentecostal women’s fellowships overriding concern for women’s general well-being, relationships and interdependency. In as much as the main reason for women fellowship is to worship, pray for themselves, their families and the nation and deepen their understanding of God, Christian women basically come together to build relationships with other women. Rather than criticizing the practice of women segregating themselves from the larger circle of the church to fellowship together, the ethics of care ultimately provides an understanding of this phenomenon.

In a world where women are constantly overwhelmed by a myriad of expectations including marriage, child-bearing, home-making, how to look and how to behave, it is only natural that women seek for ways to confront their struggles while maintaining their sanity and staying true to their religious beliefs. Findings from this study reveal that a larger percentage of women/ladies who attend Pentecostal women fellowships are women who experience one life challenge or the other. These challenges amongst others include: the need for a life-partner, barrenness, marital issues and widowhood. These fellowships create avenues for women to pray about these issues. This does not mean that some of these problems do not affect the men, but the blow dealt by these problems is more severe to the women because of the way African societies are structured.

These women, weighed-down by these problems seek for solutions through prayers and also desire to be in the midst of people who share in their struggles, a place where they get reassured of God’s unconditional love amidst their feminine struggles. A place where they can build bonds of friendships with people of like minds who motivate, encourage and support them through the course of life. Women fellowship groups are also a sort of momentary escape for women who sometimes feel exhausted from their predicament. The aura of women fellowship centers are fashioned in a way that gives women a feeling of safety and freedom to share their feelings and life challenges with one another. Certain ethical conducts such as refraining from gossip, praying for one another, being there for each other when the need arises are preached and practiced to some extent. It is refreshing to them to be in a place where they can loosen up and not be judged because other women easily relate to what they go through as they have either been there or experienced first-hand someone who had the same experience. It is a place of encouragement through biblical admonition and references to biblical personalities who had gone through similar fate.

The ethics of care, through its focus on interactions, is alert to certain societal structural biases such as patriarchy which are characterized by inequalities. These biases create a lot of dissatisfaction and infect relationships between institutions and individuals. Sadly, these inequalities exist in the church especially in the aspect of women not being accepted as clergy or given key positions in many Christian Pentecostal denominations. Power and authority are understood and interpreted as the right of males and as such, women are pushed to the background while men occupy centre stage. A woman could be filled with the Holy Spirit but the way she puts it to use is curtailed by an unwritten rule of subordination to male power. In this sense, Pentecostalism is a movement filled with ambivalence, tensions and paradoxes. This is because the accessibility of every person to the gifts of the Holy Spirit is preached, yet, biblical interpretation upholds patriarchal dominance and power.²⁹

Based on the findings of this inquiry, aside the claimed purpose of these fellowships, Christian women fellowship is a subtle reaction of women to male dominance especially of power. Even though women’s rights are not outrightly violated, there is an issue of a dominant party (men) neglecting or restricting the roles played by the less empowered party (women). Disempowerment can breed ill-feeling, especially in the mind of the individual or group of persons who

²⁴ Hackett, “Women, Rights Talk,” 254.

²⁵ Musa Dube, “Between the Spirit and the Word: Reading the Gendered African Pentecostal Bible.” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 70 no. 1 (2014): 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2651>

²⁶ Kalu, “*African Pentecostalism*.”

²⁷ Hackett, “Women, Rights Talk,” 254.

²⁸ Amaka Egba, interview by author, Port Harcourt, May 19, 2020; Hannah Felix, telephone interview by author, May 18, 2020; Evangel Eze, telephone interview by author, May 18, 2020.

²⁹ Rosinah Mmannana Gabaiste, “Pentecostal Hermeneutics and the Marginalisation of Women,” *Scriptura* 114, (2015), accessed April 9, 2020, <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/scriptur/v114/05.pdf>

feel marginalized. These women may feel silenced and aggrieved and are inclined to seek avenues to properly harness their ‘God-inspired’ abilities, a sort of safe-haven where they can undauntedly exercise their spiritual gifts and a place where they are not judged by chauvinistic standards. The ethics of care truly resonates with the predicament of women in Pentecostalism who play second fiddle to their male counterparts in the church. It particularly gives moral backing to the ability of ‘spirit-filled’ women to create an expressional platform for themselves. While traditional ethical theories (deontology and consequentialism)³⁰ would consider whether women are duty bound to have fellowships that address their peculiar needs or whether forming such groups would produce the best outcome for all involved; ethics of care justifies the pressing need of women to take care of themselves particularly because they feel oppressed by their male counterpart. Not that the considerations of traditional ethical theories are not important, but they do not necessarily factor in the critically important need for women to find a way to express themselves, an opportunity which they feel they have been denied in the church.

As harmless as it may seem, Pentecostal women fellowships negate the very idea of interdependence which is a core value of the ethics of care. It contradicts the concept of the church as one body in Christ, involving the working together of both genders for the actualization of communion with Christ who is the head of the church. It also opposes the primary principle of this theory, going by the true definition of ‘care’. “The caring motivation is based in and sustained by our human capacity for empathy with others.”³¹ This means that women’s instinct to care should be comprehensive and should incorporate the men who are equally on the same heavenly race. Women separating themselves from the larger church circle for an exclusively women fellowship goes against the motherly instinct to care for her family unconditionally. Would a mother whose child exhibits negative character traits simply abandon her child? Is it not typical of African mothers to lovingly correct and guide that child to be a better person? Pentecostal women in this context seem to have diverted attention from the erring child towards the other children perceived as better behaved. This line of action is inappropriate, judging especially from what Jesus Christ would have done. Besides, it would seem as though Pentecostal women are using the same marginalization tool which they have frowned at against the opposite sex. Care should be all-encompassing, void of discrimination and done without the slightest trace of ill feeling. In the Catholic Church for instance, Reverend Sisters used to be seen and treated as passive and somewhat eclipsed in a patriarchal structure. Right inside the church, they strived and deconstructed some of the patriarchal landmines that held them bound and began to thrive with some level of independence in the church. Hence, rather than evade male domination through sidelining men, it is more appropriate to call for a level playing ground for both sexes to play their Holy Spirit-inspired roles in various capacities in the church. This line of thought is what Negofeminism propagates.

Negofeminism appreciates the peculiarity of the African woman in presenting her dissatisfaction with male chauvinism and in demanding for better opportunities. Rather than being reactive like the white feminists, the African woman negotiates for a more favourable atmosphere. Pentecostal women are definitely not at loggerheads with their male counterparts and should learn to fashion out ways to negotiate equal treatments in the church.

As earlier insinuated by Nnaemeka in negofeminism, African women who are victims of sexism should not join the bandwagon of western feminist fundamentalists who are known to employ stringent measures to drive home their point. In her opinion, this hitherto traditional feministic approach has created more problems than they intended to solve. Besides, women who have experienced the unfairness and effects of marginalization should not resort to the same measure in tackling the issue as two wrongs cannot make a right.

Moreover, immediate and remote consequences of these fellowships may be catastrophic to Pentecostalism. First, it could create unhealthy rivalry between men and women in the Pentecostal circles and perhaps rivalry between different women fellowships like it happens between male-led Pentecostal churches. Furthermore, these women fellowships could metamorphose into churches and such churches will appeal more to women. So women will preponderate in such women fellowship-turned-churches and the gender divide in Pentecostal Churches will further widen, defeating Christ’s prayer that the church, the body of Christ, might be one.³²

Some men interviewed expressed their skepticism about such fellowships. They suppose it is just a convenient platform for Christian women’s struggles and issues with men, albeit in disguise. With the spate of gender sensitization, often misconstrued by persons that do not have a holistic view of the concept, Pentecostals might begin to float diametrically opposed hermeneutics, one from a feminine perspective, the other from a masculine perspective. This will only breed confusion and division in the Pentecostal circle.³³

Alternative Perspectives

³⁰ Deontology judges the morality of an actions based on rules, while consequentialism judges the rightness or wrongness of an action based on its consequences. Both are however, in the class of normative ethical theories.

³¹ Michael Slote, *The ethics of care and empathy* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2007), 4.

³² Amaka Egba, interview by author, Port Harcourt, June 11, 2019.

³³ Edmund Aniago, interview by author, Enugu, July 24, 2019.

Men in Pentecostal churches can deconstruct their highhanded and patriarchal notion of church leadership as their exclusive preserve. Those are old-fashioned. The Christian scripture, but for distorted interpretation by some men, does not have sufficient reasons why women should be locked out from leadership roles in church.³⁴ A more balanced and gender-inclusive hermeneutics in Pentecostal churches could be helpful in curbing the proliferation of women's parachurch organizations. Women theologians could be of help in this regard. The use of gender-inclusive pronouns during homilies would give women a sense of belonging. Again, if the roles played by female leaders in the Bible are valorized like that of the men, women too will feel divinity in them just like the men. This could heighten their sense of comfort and belonging in Church. When women are included in the scheme of things in Pentecostal churches, the church will grow more rapidly and achieve more.

The body of Christ is one and should remain as such. Instead of widening the gender division gap already existing in Pentecostal Churches by branching out to form women's fellowships, women can negotiate around and with men to get integrated in Church. This can be achieved through dialogue, proper application of self in little offices in church, gender sensitization, imbibing of appropriate mien by women and utilization of gender inclusive hermeneutics. Women can also embrace the activities that endear men to the church such as; church financing, punctilious dressing, missions and all other roles that prepare men to take up leadership positions in church.

CONCLUSION

The proliferating trend of exclusively women's fellowships in Nigeria is becoming a cause for concern. It subtly projects a feeling of dissatisfaction on the part of women of what obtains in the parent church which is mostly dominated (especially in terms of leadership) by the men. While it is not exactly wrong to have women's fellowship, it is also important for Pentecostal women to explore benign ways of registering their dissatisfaction and reconciling their differences with the men within the parent church. This would strengthen interdependence and ensure unity in the church which represents the united body of Christ.

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³⁴ Dube, "Between the Spirit."

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