

Chapter 23

Towards Nonviolent Gender Relations in Africa: An Introduction to Inter-Gender Dialogue

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ABSTRACT

Despite global efforts, gender-based violence continues to be witnessed in varying degrees around the world. The use of dialogue as an effective tool in mitigating violence and conflict situations around the world provides an inspiration to conceive the need to extend the scope of dialogue to the domain of male-female relationship, which is fast becoming too complex, sensitive, strained, and tempestuous. In this study, the relevance of dialogue for a violent-free culture in the context of gender relations is interrogated. This study maintains that a dialogic mode of male-female relationship would go a long way to mitigate the persistent cases of gender-based violence. In an exploratory approach, Leonard Swidler's understanding and principles of dialogue are used as a framework to demonstrate what an inter-gender dialogue would look like. It concludes that, as dialogue offers an interactive framework for mutual understanding of one another, an inter-gender dialogue is constitutive of the social intercourse, which the very concept of dialogue represents.

INTRODUCTION

Dialogue has been recognized as the heart of all social intercourse. Leonard Swidler rightly argues that dialogue “is at the very heart of the universe” (2011, p.28) because as matter and energy interact as well as the creative interaction of body and soul, woman and man, and the dynamic relationship between an individual and society, the very essence of humanity is dialogue. Perhaps, it is in recognition of its relevance that global interest and engagements in dialogue have intensified in the past few decades;

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attention being generally directed to resolving misunderstandings and conflict among religions (inter-religious dialogue), cultures (inter-cultural dialogue), and ideologies (inter-ideological dialogue). Given the gains derived from these engagements in mitigating violence and conflict situations around the world, it is needful to extend the scope of dialogue to the domain of male-female relationship, which has been described as often sensitive, strained and tempestuous since the last century (Stolarek 2013).

This need is accentuated by the frequency and widespread nature of gender-based violence (GBV) witnessed in varying degrees across the globe. For instance, America, though generally acknowledged as being ahead of many other countries in its ability to contain violence arising from gender relations, the US is ranked 45th in the 2016 Global Gender Gap Report. This jeopardizes its foreign policy and social responsibility commitment in preventing and responding to GBV around the world, including Sub-Saharan Africa. On the other hand, Udo notes that difference in gender identities and the gendering processes in many other countries such as Nigeria has been skewed against the female gender (2017). This makes Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation to occupy a very low profile in recent Gender Equality Index. It could be said that the lower in the scale that a country occupies in the Gender Equality Index, the higher there are incidences of violence in gender relations. A dialogical dimension to gender relations, therefore, is an urgent necessity. The study proposes an inter-gender dialogue as an important ramification of dialogue. It is located under the category of deep dialogue or dialogue of life. Inter-gender dialogue seeks to advance a new way, a dialogical way of conceiving relationship between the male and female gender in contemporary societies; and focusing on improving inter-gender understanding, relationships and collaboration for the achievement of a violent-free culture as well as wholistic development of human communities, such as African communities.

THEORETICAL DIRECTION

Scholars often make use of two theories, egalitarianism and complementarism, in gender discourse. In this study, egalitarianism is adopted as a theoretical frame to demonstrate how a healthy inter-gender relationship might look like. Egalitarianism is "a philosophical theory that rests on the claim that human beings have some sort of fundamental worth and hence should all be treated as equal" (Afolayan 2015, p.1). This framework was initiated by the Stoics who affirmed the equality of all human persons in contrast to the predominant Greek ideology that human beings are never equal. According to Stoics, "It was the distinguishing mark of man that he was gifted with Reason. This set him apart from all animals; but in this all men, as men, were alike, and equal. To be a man was by definition to be so endowed: no question arose of more or less, better or worse" (Brown 1991, p. 22). The use of 'man' here should be understood to be inclusive of woman. In any case, from this position of the Stoics, the basic reason for human equality is the gift of reason in both male and female.

Egalitarianism as a theory that calls for the equality of all human persons has been criticized for two major reasons. The first reason is the non-equality of "the natural endowments, talents, capacities, limitations, vices, and circumstances that characterize our existence in the world. The second involves those different and unequal social advantages and disadvantages that humans are born into as members of the human society" (Afolayan 2015, p. 1). These objections to egalitarianism are further explained by Kekes:

Human beings differ in their characters, circumstances, talents and weaknesses, capacities and incapacities, virtues and vices; in their moral standing, political view, religious convictions, aesthetic preferences,

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