



14 | IN THE LIBERATING ECCLESIA WITH GRACE SINTIM-ADASI

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Abstract

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (The Circle) started in 1989 as a place for women to write their own stories and contribute to the discourses of religion and culture that affect their lives from their own perspectives. Grace Sintim-Adasi is one such scholars whose voice has been raised through research and writing. Grace identifies inequalities in ecclesiastical and the academic spaces between men and women especially in the area of leadership and promotion, which is influenced heavily by the socio-cultural perceptions of Ghanaians. This chapter will examine the works of Grace Sintim-Adasi, by examining the contexts underlying her publications and what approaches she has employed in bringing out her main arguments. The paper will also identify the sources the matriarch has used by examining field case studies and her collaborations with other scholars. The paper will then highlight how Adasi has addressed patriarchy in religious and academic spaces and the way forward for the future for ordained women and women academics.

Keywords: Grace Sintim-Adasi, The Circle, ordained women, women leadership, church leadership

Introduction

In the Ghanaian context and I suspect, in many other contexts, the history of educational and institutional church has actively involved women in one way or another. In Ghana, we can speak of education in the domestic setting where women play a foundational and forefront role as well as the beginnings of formal mission schools. Within religious circles also, many churches and religious groups' stories can hardly go full circle without referring to the contributions of women. Yet, somehow, within these same spaces, when it comes to leadership, the door is suddenly closed in women's faces. Women's contributions to the development of

these spaces, therefore, are at best spoken of as minimal and insignificant and sometimes as non-existent.

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Circle) was formally inaugurated in 1989 as a place for women to write their own stories and contribute to the discourses of religion and culture that affect their lives from their own perspectives. “The Circle ‘do theology’ in the mode of resistance, in a ‘wakeup call’ for women to arise out of lethargy and describe their space in post-independence Africa” (Pemberton, 2003:159). Rev Dr. Grace Sintim-Adasi is one such scholars whose voice has been raised through research and writing to tell the stories of the contributions of women to ecclesial and academic development. Her writings seek to expose the relatively steeper hill that women in leadership, especially in the church and academia, are faced with in navigating these spaces.

This chapter will study the works of Grace Sintim-Adasi, by examining the contexts underlying her publications and what approaches she has employed in bringing out her main arguments. The paper will also identify the sources the matriarch has used for her research and writing by examining field case studies and her collaborations with other scholars. The paper will then highlight how Adasi has addressed patriarchy in religious and academic spaces and the way forward for the future for ordained women and women academics.

Overview of Writings of Grace Sintim-Adasi

Grace Sintim-Adasi has authored and co-authored many publications on themes of gender, women in ministry, hierarchies, leadership, inclusion and seclusion, and culture. Her flagship book, *Gender and Change: Roles and Challenges of Ordained Women Ministers of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana*, was published in 2016. It looks at the emergence of women’s ordination in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, as well as the roles’ ordained women have played and challenges they encounter in the face of attitudes and prejudices of the society. Generally, around the same themes also is her paper, “Multiple Roles of African Women Leaders and Their Challenges: The Case of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana.” This paper however cast more focus on the many roles of women in church

leadership because of culture stereotypes in a patriarchal society and the pressures these places on women. Before the publication of her book, Sintim-Adasi had also researched and published extensively on the gender roles and gaps in higher education institutions. Two of such publications were her 2015, “Culture and Changing Implications of Women in Contemporary Polytechnic Institutions, Ghana” and 2014, “Women and Contemporary Roles: Bridging the Gender Gap for Organizational Effectiveness. The Case of Accra Polytechnic, Ghana” which she co wrote with Rita Sarkodie Baffoe and Christine Ampofo Ansah. Both of these publications were published in the journal, *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*.

Sintim-Adasi has favored a deconstructionist approach through unravelling the stories of women and the exposing he cultural and religious perceptions behind the barriers placed on women leadership in church and academy. Sintim- Adasi has cooperated with psychologists and educationists in her work. We can speak in this regard, of her paper, “Gender Influence on Pre-service Teachers’ Emotional Intelligence at Selected Colleges of Education in Ghana”, published in 2020 in the *American Journal of Education Research* 8(10).

Examination of Contexts of the Writings of Adasi

In examining the contexts of the writings of Grace Sintim-Adasi, I present a brief bio-graphical sketch. Dr. Grace Sintim-Adasi (born 15th March 1969) is currently the principal of the Agogo Presbyterian Women’s College of Education in Ghana. She is also affiliated with the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana as a Research Fellow. She received her PhD in the Study of Religions from the University of Ghana and holds an MPhil in African Studies from the same Institution. Sintim-Adasi also holds an MA in Educational Leadership and Management from the University of Ghana. She was commissioned and ordained as a Reverend Minister in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana in 2010 and 2012 respectively.

Sintim-Adasi is firmly situated in her Ghanaian contexts in her research and writing and as a Ghanaian woman, writes from the perspec-

tive of liberation theology, which “Miguel De la Torre defends as a revolutionary theory that entails Christian solidarity with the poor and oppressed, those on the “underside” of history” (McCracken, 2014:14), in a world where the histories of women in church and society have reflected marginalization of their contributions, Sintim-Adasi’s peculiar brand is therefore vested in Gender equity.

Grace Sintim-Adasi, being an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG), has many of her writings on the ecclesia and women in ministry and church leadership which are probably based on her own experiences and experiences of others with whom she can directly relate. Having spent much of her working life in academia and educational institutions, it is no surprise that her writings are also situated in that context, especially in relation to the challenges women in the field of academia and scholarship face in navigating the corridors of leadership.

In the next sections, we will investigate the sources from which Sintim-Adasi has made her arguments as well as the approaches she has used to make those arguments. After this, we will sample her main arguments, reading from various publications she has produced concerning women in both church leadership and academia.

Sources and Approaches used to arrive at main arguments

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (The Circle) initiated by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and other concerned women of her time and inaugurated in 1989, encouraged African women to write their own stories, that is, stories about women, told by women from women’s own contexts and perspectives. As Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler notes, “one of the concerns for organizing the Circle was that there were few books in the academic arena of theology that were written by women” (Fiedler, 2017:132). The aim was to help to include the stories, contributions and perspectives of women in scholarship in a patriarchal system where the contributions of women in societal or religious development had been washed over and where women were assigned roles which did not bring women to their full potential as persons.

Again, The Circle seeks to tell the stories of African women in the language of African women so that such stories will not be told through

the interpretation of others, especially Westerners. This follows the idea that a Western interpretation of the cultural context of Africa will be inaccurate at best. The Circle, in its research and publications, seeks to make space in religions and culture for the liberation of women. In Oduyoye's words, quoted by Carrie Pemberton, "what we are doing in the Circle is to see how the supportive elements which we have in the Traditional Religion and the supportive elements which we have in Christianity can support one another to support our life" (Pemberton, 2003:60). The Circle has historically done this by honoring the broad womanist and feminist traditions but leaning towards a contextual theology.

In line with the way the Circle has traditionally written, Sintim-Adasi's writings are based on stories of women. As such we find that case studies and the experiences of women inform her work greatly. Sintim-Adasi's writing therefore has many oral sources as can be seen especially in her work, "Multiple Roles of African Women Leaders and Their Challenges: The Case of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana" (Sintim-Adasi, 2014). She has also noted in her writings that literature on the role of women in religion is not difficult to find, "however most of the literature have been mainly Eurocentric. What exist locally in Ghana ...are not written by women but mainly by men" (Sintim-Adasi, 2016:4). This is a main motivation for writing especially her book on Gender and Change.

Again, Adasi's writings have been in the broad context of the Feminist and womanist traditions of the West and African-America. She has drawn from scholars like Letty Mandeville Russell, Sue Morgan, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Elizabeth Gossmann in her engagement with theological writing. But as Pemberton (2003:160) notes, "[t]he point of departure from Western feminist discourse for Circle writers was the rejection of the hegemony of white bourgeois culture of which those feminists were a part". The idea is that, African women's experiences are uniquely African and therefore, African women's stories must be told with African culture and traditions in mind. As Feidler puts it, "since Circle women are African, Circle theologies have an African slant." (2017:23). Sintim-Adasi tells the stories of African women in the context of Ghana.

Sintim-Adasi has used gender theory through historical lenses in many of her writings. In her book, *Gender and Change* (Sintim-Adasi,

2016), locates the roles and challenges of ordained women in the PCG within the history of missionary women in the church. She has also employed the theory of complement, again through historical analysis in other research and writing. For example, in her paper “Culture and Changing Implications of Women in Contemporary Polytechnic Institutions, Ghana”, she argues that whereas in the past, structures tended to focus on men, within existing structures, roles of women and men in higher educational institutions intersected.

In general, her writings can be situated broadly within the context of the work of third study commission formed by The Circle during the 1996 Convocation (Fiedler, 2017:139). This third commission focused on theological education and had among other goals, “the goal to trace contributions women have made and their challenges to ministry” (Fiedler, 2017:144). This is the focus of Sintim-Adasi’s writing following her recommendations, notably in her book, *Gender and Change*, on how training institutions and seminaries can improve women’s enrolment and accommodation. In the light of other writings that she has put out in the contexts of high education institutions, we can, still in an even broader sense, locate within the theological education commission’s work because it has to do with “investigating... institutions” (Fiedler, 2017:143) to see how ‘women-friendly’ they were. A paper such as “Culture and Changing Implications of Women in Contemporary Polytechnic Institutions, Ghana” investigates the cultural and institutional barriers to women performing leadership roles and how women were negotiating it.

Main arguments on patriarchy in religious and academic spaces

Sintim-Adasi approaches patriarchy in four ways. This section will reflect on these ways drawing from quotes from some her writings as well as conclusions she has drawn.

- a) Ordained women and women in leadership face peculiar challenges in their functional roles due to restrictions placed on them by tradition, culture and religion.

This argument is one of the main claims of Sintim-Adasi in her theologies of liberation for women in ecclesiastical spaces and in academic spaces. She asks the questions, “why commissioned women were restricted only to the chaplaincy ministries while their male counterparts who were commissioned during the same period were not restricted to the chaplaincy ministry?” (Sintim-Adasi, 2016:78). She further suggests that due to the cultural expectations placed on women, women are expected to play many roles in addition to church or institutional leadership. This, she argues, makes it especially challenging for women in leadership unlike their male counterparts. This feeds into the gender equity argument, that there is no level playing field for men and women, and therefore, for there to be equity, the structures must compensate for women’s cultural disadvantages in juggling so many roles at once. Sintim-Adasi’s strategy has not been to conclude on what should be done but to document and expose the realities of women in leadership positions revealing the ideologies behind those realities. The reader is left to face their own complicity in the matter or imagine what can be done to mitigate the situation depending on the context of the reader.

- b) Women are restricted from leadership roles because of cultural and religious beliefs held by patriarchal societies which assigns women’s roles to the domestic domain.

Further to Sintim-Adasi’s earlier argument is that historically women have been restricted from leadership roles in the church. This did not mean that women were not assigned other roles but when it came to leadership, culturally, it was a man’s domain, women were expected to remain in the domestic domain. From Sintim-Adasi’s research interviews, it can be deduced that the many roles of women, is an argument used against women taking up leadership (Sintim-Adasi, 2015:173; Sintim-Adasi and Frempong, 2014:65). Again, even though both men and women in leadership have to negotiate the difficult terrain of combining home, family and leadership roles outside the home, women have a more difficult task because of the expectations placed on them within the domestic domain whereas their husbands are free to choose whether to assist or not. (Sintim-Adasi and Frempong, 2014:64-66). Again, in church circles especially, whereas the role of the wife of a minister is defined

through long tradition of missionary wives as helpers (Sintim-Adasi, 2016:26), the role of the husband of the minister is not defined. The man wields the authority in the home as head of the home and makes it confusing in the church with the woman as minister and leader of the church. In this instance, Sintim-Adasi is pointing out the power dynamics that are at play in a male dominated world where men will do whatever it takes to hold on to power. “Relationships define the wellbeing of a community and reflects its ideologies” (Jacobs, 2007:15) hence the relationship between women and men in Sintim-Adasi’s writing can be seen to reflect the ideology of male dominance over the female, yet can this ideology be said to be for the wellbeing of the whole community? Adasi’s recommendations in her book *Gender and Change*, which is replete with seminars to change the perception of congregants towards ordained women, seminars to improve the self-confidence of boys and girls at an early age to appreciate that they can do what other humans can do, and also seminars to boost confidence of women to study theology at higher levels and to be ordained (Sintim-Adasi, 2016:144-145), seem to suggest that society is not well, until such limitations are consciously and systematically removed so that both men and women can participate fully in society at their full potential.

- c) The experiences and contributions of women in general and ordained women specifically are woefully underrepresented in the available literature.

Sintim-Adasi makes this challenge clear as she strives to put together oral interviews, and scraps of data available to make data on women’s contribution to the growth of the church in Ghana, particularly the Presbyterian Church of Ghana accessible. She presents a historical sketch of the contributions of women to the development and growth of the PCG from the time of the missionaries, a fact which she says is conspicuously missing from the history as is usually presented by the church. “The records have consistently displayed a certain pattern: the omission of the contributions of women to the establishment of the PCG’s mission in Ghana. These omissions should not be taken as an oversight. Rather it reflects the general attitude towards women and their contribution in the church (Sintim-Adasi, 2016:6, see also 27). She hints in her writing that, women

in leadership, is not new in traditional African settings as women were leaders in politics and socio-economic spheres. She argues that, these omissions notwithstanding, women have continued to play their part in church leadership and development, and documents the persistence of some women and the advocacy that has led to successes in present times where women in the church, particularly the PCG, can now be ordained and women in academia can take up leadership positions.

- d) Current trends suggest that women are breaking the boundaries placed on them by patriarchal culture and religion.

The conclusions Sintim-Adasi draws in her research are testimony to the resilience of African women in the face of such inequity in the church and academy. A typical conclusion is:

The women discussed in this work have demonstrated their enterprising capabilities beyond the acknowledged physical boundaries of the Polytechnic. They have penetrated profoundly into the educational domain and challenged the prejudices of the arguments against their roles, testified that there lies an inert dynamism in women which, when given the appropriate recognition, would rekindle and be employed for the benefit of mankind in other dimensions (Sintim-Adasi, 2015:173)

This suggest that women have much more to contribute to growth and development of institutions such as the church and academy if barriers and restrictions continue to be broken down or were completely removed from their path. Sintim-Adasi would have us continue to tell the stories of the women who have found ways to resist the barriers so that their stories will be out there to show that yes, women can (in President Obama's words). She shows that women have helped to advance the mission of institutions in which they have served not just by performing roles traditionally assigned to them but through the performance of significant leadership roles. This indicates that, it is not a universal truth that the place of the African woman is in the domestic domain or that women lack specific skills or gifts set to be in leadership and those arguments can no longer hold as basis for confining women to background roles.

Conclusion and way forward

Liberating ecclesia is surely not over, it remains a continuing task that we must continue to engage in. As long as the church remains a human institution, the ethical struggle must continue. Once the task of sanctification is not complete, there will always be ways improve relationship dynamics. The history must continue to be written so that as we measure what was with what is now, and we can continue to re-imagine what can be still.

In calling out institutions like the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, on its tendency to give prominence to male ministers over female ministers, Sintim-Adasi is certainly engaged in a 'theology of resistance' to a system and a history gone wrong in the understanding of gender theory. Perhaps being part of the marginalized group in this situation, Sintim-Adasi may be in a vulnerable place and it may be the reason for the exercise of caution that is detected in her writings. For example, in her recommendations in her book (Sintim-Adasi, 2016:144-147), the language is mainly passive where it could have been direct. A quote here, "[i]t is our recommendation that equal posting opportunities be made available to all ministers without discrimination on the grounds of gender" (Sintim-Adasi, 2016:146) is an example of what could have been stated in more active terms and directed at the intended subject. This can also be detected in her research from the higher educational institutions where she worked as well. For example, a statement like, "From our findings, we are convinced that, it is worthwhile for women at the Polytechnic to be given equal roles in decision making positions" (Baffoe, Sintim-Adasi and Ansaah, 2014:65), in the concluding remarks could have been stated more actively. Perhaps, in this regard, Pemberton is not far from right when she claims that, "[t]he writings of the Circle constitute nothing less than a brave 'will to write', and announce a reconstruction of African theology on women's terms. In this reconstruction there are numerous tensions which surface both in text and encounter, and which have not been addressed in a sustained critical manner by the Circle" (2003:160). It may be about time as we 'return home' to Ghana in 2024, to re-look at these tensions and make it a focus for consultation and scholarship.

Mignon Jacobs (2017) writes that “the assumption that the problematic aspects of female-male dynamics in the private and public domains have been resolved by including women in aspects of decision making and leadership is challenged by the continuing struggles to achieve, maintain, and advance equitable relationships between men and women.” Grace Sintim-Adasi’s exposure of the struggles of women to attain to decision making and leadership in church and academy, and her conclusions that boundaries are being broken must only lend credence to the fact that a persistent theology of liberation brings results. This realization should lead to a continuous calling out to systems and structures that resist equity.

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