

# No More Glass Ceiling? Negotiating Women's Leadership Role in Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim

by

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## Abstract

This study explores ways in which women negotiate leadership role in the religious sphere, particularly in the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim Church against the patriarchal religious precepts that deny women space at the level of priesthood hierarchy. In the light of physical and spiritual challenges in the environment, women constitute the majority in any church population and play very active roles within it. Nevertheless, in spite of their size and social role, which should naturally provide expression of identity, they continue to be underrepresented and marginalized at the highest levels of religious leadership. However, in recent times, women have made concerted efforts to negotiate their relevance in either forming their own churches or striving for importance through evolving programs that put them on the leadership terrain. The degree to which they have succeeded in negotiating this role becomes the basis of this study. From the study carried out within the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim (ESOCS), one of the factions of the several Cherubim and Seraphim Churches, it has been observed that women do not challenge male constructions of leadership but strive to secure their rightful place in the church within the limited women space. This study is guided by the fact that religion though concerned with supernatural and eternal, is a cultural construct, which makes it imperative to examine its involvement in power relations and how power sustains it. This study concludes that in spite of the struggles to emerge at the topmost hierarchy, deep-seated traditional and spiritual factors continue to impinge on their overall leadership goal and until changes occur, women in ESOCS will continue to remain in the margins.

**Key Words:** women, leadership role, patriarchy, church, Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim

## Introduction

The issue of women and leadership in Africa's religious sphere has been a neglected discourse in gender studies. This attitude is characterized by the Western perception that views women's role narrowly as emotional, mothers of children and husbands' comforters and only relevant within the home. This perception contradicts Africa's oral tradition that places importance on women's role, including the political and economic space. For instance in Yoruba traditional society, the responsibility of a woman to provide for her family included providing the material resources for such care, believing that such provisions met their responsibility as women and citizens. Such services done by women were complementary to men's work, and the former achieved impressive status in the economic and social spheres. Likewise, traditional religion placed women as pertinent players in their various communities.

In fact, women were seen as the repository, sustainers and transmitters of religious traditions. This aspect is particularly salient since women held core positions in Yoruba traditional religious milieu such as Oya, Yemoja (the most senior goddess of Yoruba Pantheon), Otin (goddess of Otin River), Osun (goddess of Osun River) and the Gelede cult, which relates to fertility in women. As agents or leaders in the religious sphere, Coquery-Vidrovitch (1997) argued that men always worshipped female figures because they feared a power that they needed but could not control, including; the ability to give life, to obtain good harvests for the community through fertility rituals, to intervene as mediators in the complex marriage strategies engage in social relations among neighboring groups and villages; to defuse quarrels, handle children and women's medical needs, and to heal. In spite of these powerful roles played in the religious sphere, in some cases, women were exempted from participating in some core traditional religious practices (and still are), subordinating them in the public space. An example of this religious practice is found in the Oro cult festival. During Oro's procession, there is the popular cliché that women dare not look or peep at the deity or else, would die. Only men partake in the rituals leading to the Oro's procession and join in the celebration. Despite the lacuna in some religious practices, the leadership role played by women in African traditional political, economic, social and even religious spheres cannot be over-emphasized (Nwoye 2004, 1). With the advent of missionary churches all over Africa, and Southern Nigeria to be specific, most women were converted from traditional to modern Christianity and subsequently, their ability to exert influence reduced drastically regardless of their size (number) within the Church when compared to their role in traditional religion.

The current wave of Christianity, especially with the inception of new indigenous churches and more importantly, Pentecostal churches whereby women establish, lead and enjoy active control, has shown some improvement in the gap. Even in male-dominated Pentecostal churches, women serve pertinent roles over and above male counterparts. How does this new wave translate to and represent total breaking of Christian women's stained glass ceiling?

Has this transformation trickled down to women in the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim (ESOCS) or commonly shortened to Order, one of the factions of the Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S) Church denominations? What are the issues that discriminate against women's emergence as leaders within the Order? Can they be addressed? It is within this context that women's leadership roles in the Order, will be investigated. Based on the use of participant observation and oral interviews with some members from Gideon House of Prayer, one of the branches of the ESOCS in Nigeria, and Mount Zion Headquarters, this study explains the hindrances impinging on successful transformation of women into leadership positions in the church. The paper is divided into six sections. The first section is the introduction. The second section focuses on the conceptual analysis around which the paper is built. The third section highlights the origin of the ESOCS while the fourth section focuses on the analysis of findings, including an explanation of leadership perception in the ESOCS, women's place in it and the factors militating against their leadership role in ESOCS. The fifth section brings to the fore means and ways in which women have negotiated their leadership and resisted erasure. The sixth section is the conclusion.

## **Conceptualizing Women and Leadership**

The meaning of leadership has been a controversial one and much confusion has been generated by the multiplicity of definitions exacted by scholars (Stogdill 1974; Fiedler 1981). The implication here is that arriving at a precise definition that encapsulates the salient issues within the leadership context becomes difficult, thereby, portraying the term to be relative and fluid. Be that as it may, leadership transcends the conventional understanding that limits it to the holding of higher ranking positions and authority over others but implies assertiveness in every situation one finds oneself as well as the ability to forge forward through all obstacles. In a broader perspective, Stogdill (1974) has helped reduce the difficulty embedded in defining leadership by positing that leadership is the process of directing and influencing task-related activities of a group. The implication here is that for one to be a leader, he must have followers and must be able to influence subordinates. To Balogun-Asako,<sup>1</sup> leadership involves being a role model and leading people without being biased and impartial. Another school of thought has shown that leadership transcends directing and influencing people, it gives the ability to take initiative and create opportunities for one's self and others, and to be proactive at whatever level one's status or responsibility might be (Zcheile 2007, 58). In other words, the leader functions as designer, steward and teacher as well as sharing power and authority by opening up space for others to act and pushing decision-making to the grass-roots level (Senge 1990). In agreement, Kouzes and Posner (2002, 28-29) also identify the ability to '*enable others to act*' by facilitating positive interdependence as one of the five exemplary practices of leadership. Supposedly, the ability to enable others to act, cuts across gender and other discriminatory features and should also incorporate all organizations.

Questions on who is a woman and what leadership role she should play in the society always attract debates about the power relations that exist between men and women in a patriarchal system that focuses on 'gender'. Though a social construction, gender has become a subject in which sex and gender conceptions have been manipulated by patriarchal discourse to further the entrenchment of male domination and this is impacted through the socialization process (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994). The manipulation is reflected in women's political, economic and social realities, including the religious sphere.

Religious systems both reflect and reinforce cultural values and patterns of social organization and women's role in them have been vacillating between the normative and modernized practices (Sinclair 1986). Normative discourses of gender and religion often stand in an inverse relationship to each other, showing asymmetrical treatment of women in the study of religion (King 2000, 9). Such asymmetrical relationships emphasize containment, obedience and chastity for women, and provision of strong support mechanism for the masculine self-image; men still imagined in social and development policy in their identities as household heads, fathers and breadwinners. Yet the contradictions of modernity in Africa have reconfigured older patterns and possibilities, giving rise to identities and interactions that contest the boundaries of normative gender discourses. Studies of the making and shaping of gender identities in Africa reveal the dangers of superimposing monolithic versions of gender relations on to African realities (Cornwall 2005, 1-6).

In Africa and specifically Nigeria, evidence can be found of women as active agents and religious subjects in their own right in both traditional and contemporary writings. Prior to colonization, evidence abounded in literature that silencing women's voices and limiting their exercise of political, economic, social and even cultural leadership were not familiar with Africa's culture, especially in pre-colonial Southern Nigeria where women occupied a complementary role rather than a subordinate position to men in political, economic and social spheres (Awe 1991, 211-20). Examples of how legends such as Iyalode of Abeokuta (Madam EfunporoyeTinubu), Iyalode of Ibadan (Efunsetan Aniwura) and Madam Omosa (known to have been the first trader in Ibadan to purchase Snyder rifles) wielded influence in local politics, forged large trading networks between the Yorubaland interior and the European traders on the coast, and maintained private armies, owned many slaves and operated extensive plantations are common (Denzer 1995, 11-12; Awe 1992). The Iyaoba (king's official member) and Moshade were responsible for crowning the king and must be present at the installation of any chief. Both women were selected by the Ogboni chiefs (Mba 1982, 5-6). In South-Eastern Nigeria, women had a degree of autonomy. Their participation in the governance of their communities was ensured through the dual-sex political system (Uchem,2003, 30). Women's prominence in this area provided evidence both for accounts of their subsequent marginalization as the world religions gained hegemony and male social dominance maintained in the prevailing social structure.

Traditional religion offered its own origin myths, in which female power was in the ascendant (Gleason 1987; Young 1987, 7). However, Lebeuf (1971), van Allen (1972) and Oyewumi (1997) in their works, stressed that the oppression of women in all spheres of life, especially in relation to religion can be traced to the imperialist ideas that undermined traditional religion. To these scholars, women were confined to the private space while men posed as the dominant power. The introduction of Christianity through Christian missionaries from 1838 and its increased influence by colonialism revealed women as the first converts who displayed great bravery and courage in the face of severe persecution at the hands of hostile husbands and in-laws (Ayandele 1966; Kalu 1978). Mba documents how women who had erstwhile attached themselves to traditional religion embraced Christianity more zealously and participated actively in church-sponsored organizations, and sustained the church in active membership. However, in spite of their loyalty to the church, the church doctrine impelled them to take care of the home while leaving men to handle public, including church matters. For instance, the Anglican Church did not give women seats in the synod, in the district councils or on the parochial committees. Very few women were made catechists. Even in the lay organizations, women held offices only in the exclusively women's associations (Mba 1982, 59).

To Grant (1982) in her study of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the conspiracy to keep women relegated to the background in the church was also aided by the continuous psychological and political strategizing that kept women from realizing their own potential power in the church. To her, not only were they rewarded for performance in "backbone" or supportive positions, but were penalized for trying to move from the backbone to the head position-the leadership of the church.

The growing popularity of Christianity amongst African women formed the basis for the reconfiguration of identities, and with it new forms of Christian practice. Women's participation in Christian religion evoked complex intersections between 'traditions' and 'modernities' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Scarnecchia 1997). The rise of new wave Pentecostal Churches has brought about a change in the phenomenon. Women are now perceived as founders, managers and leaders of some churches, presiding over men. For instance, Margaret Idahosa (wife of the late Arch Bishop Benson Idahosa) of the Church of God Mission International has had to face criticisms from the male hierarchy in the church who argued that they could not work under a female leadership, especially so that the line of succession was tampered with. In other cases, women have had to engage in dual leadership roles with their husbands assuming Pastors-in Charge while they (women) serve as co-pastors and they include among others, first, Peace Okonkwo who is a bishop and co-pastor with her husband at The Redeemed Evangelical Mission (TREM). She is also the founder of the International Women Prayer Conference.

Second, Pastor Helen Mary Oritshejafor of the Word of life Bible Church is among other powerful women who have supported their pastor husbands in playing pertinent roles on the pulpit (Olashile-Alfred 2010, 33). However, it has been noticed that such leadership positions are attained due to their status as pastors' wives and as such, are perceived as appendages of their husbands. Hence while the wife is automatically co-opted in any husband's call into ministry, it seems rare and inconsistent with general principles of gender relations that the wife could be called into ministry and her husband co-opted, except in the long run, the role of the woman is undermined (Olajubu 2008, 174-175).

In spite of the extant literature on Pentecostal churches and the role of women in them, there is dearth of data on women's leadership role in the Eternal Sacred order of Cherubim and Seraphim (ESOCS), the largest Aladura church faction globally. Hence, to fill this lacuna, this study explains in detail, the origin of ESOCS and investigates the extent of women's pastoral leadership role in the church.

## **The Emergence of the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim and Its Ideology**

The C&S church has been cast within the context of the African Independent churches that emerged during the colonial era in Nigeria. It is viewed as the second generation development after the arrival of missionary Christianity. In fact, it is known as the first Aladura Independent Church to be established in Nigeria. Aladura Independent churches within this context include: The Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), Church of the Lord, Aladura (CLA), Celestial Church of Christ (CCC), Evangelical Church of Yahweh (ECY) and Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S), and its various appendages and splinter formations of which is the Eternal Order of Cherubim and Seraphim (ESOCS). They were known to have separated from the missionary churches from 1918. Most importantly, traditional religious movements were grappling with the intellectual challenge of a rapidly changing social scene (Peel 1968, 661-663; Horton 1971, 86). Drawn from existing mission churches (63% and 66% respectively of converts into CAC and C&S branches in Ibadan were from the Anglican church alone), the Aladura<sup>2</sup> churches had the undercurrents of being able to diagnose the causes of "this worldly misfortune by means of dreams and visions, and to be able to avert or remedy such misfortune by means of prayer and ritual", healings, prophecy, exorcism, trances, visions and dreams (Peel 1968, 205; Adogame 2004, 502-503; Omoyajowo 1982).

The C&S denomination popularly known as the '*white garment churches*' because of the angelic white robes worn by all members was founded by the joint collaboration of Moses Orimolade Tunolase and Captain Christiana Abiodun Akinsowon (a woman) in 1925 as a spiritual emphasis or renewal within existing churches. In fact, the founder of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Josiah Akindayomi, an illiterate farmer, converted by the Anglican Church Missionary, started off his RCCG ministry from the C&S Church (Ukah 2008, 15-18). Both Captain Abiodun Akinsowon and Moses Orimolade Tunolase shared the leadership position from its foundation until they parted ways (Sackey 2006, 165).

The C&S Church started out as an 'Aladura Band' but was changed to the '*Seraph Band*' on 9 September 1925 and on 26 March 1926, Cherubim was added by spiritual injunction to reflect the heavenly representation of the Cherubim and Seraphim. The Band was fully formed by the end of 1925 and Moses Orimolade reigned as the Sole Founder and Spiritual head from 1925 to 1933. However, Captain Akinsowon pulled out of the band in 1929 to form the Cherubim and Seraphim Society over an irreconcilable issue between her and father Moses Orimolade. Efforts to reconcile both of them proved abortive and this culminated in three splinter groups namely; the Praying Band of the Eternal Sacred order of the Cherubim and Seraphim; Holy Order of the Cherubim and Seraphim Movement; and The Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim (ESOCS) with Moses Orimolade as the Sole Founder and Supreme Head known as the Baba Aladura (Ositelu 2002, 86-89).

The Order believes in the word of God, trinity in unity, the use of incense, sanctification of water by prayer, purification by prayer and the curative effect of prayer for all afflictions, spiritual and temporal but condemns the use of charms and witchcraft or sorcery. Members are expected to wear white robes during church services and can be called upon at any time to perform religious rites appropriate for their age and gender. The church has an estimated five million members in about One Thousand and Five Hundred (1500) branches all over the world including Africa, Europe, and America (ESOCS 2011).

## **Perceptions of Leadership and Women's Space in the ESOCS**

The Holy Order, as it is called, holds unshaken belief in organization and hierarchical structure in its leadership terrain. In understanding leadership roles in the Order, one needs to understand the church hierarchy itself. A point of instruction is that the hierarchical structure changes as the society expands.<sup>3</sup> Hierarchy assumes differences at various degrees; hence, notions of superiority are obviously germane to the structure (Olajubu 2008, 174). For the men, at the topmost hierarchy is the Baba Aladura, who is the overall leader of the ESOCS and he is immediately followed by the Deputy Baba Aladura, Senior Apostle General, Super Apostle General, Apostle General, Special Senior Apostle; Senior Apostles; Super Apostles, Evangelist, Pastor, Rabbi, Senior Leader, Leader, Aladura and lastly, Brother (not ordained).

The Baba Aladura's position is never within women's purview because it is believed that women's holding of such positions would undermine men's authority in the church and moreover, there is no spiritual inclination to that effect.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the name itself 'Baba' denotes 'Father' or an 'elderly man', therefore, women are automatically and naturally disqualified from attaining this position. This, to a large extent symbolizes headship in the male gender.<sup>5</sup> At the national headquarters, Baba Aladura leads church opening and closing prayers, including grace. Though men are generally seen as leaders at the branch level, they submit to higher authorities at the district, provincial and national levels depending on their ordination hierarchy.

Women also have their positions, arranged hierarchically. From the top-down, there are the 'Three-titled mothers', comprising of Mother Cherub, Mother Seraph and Mother Captain. They sit together in the front row and are expected to lead and represent women in all spheres. This position is followed by: Senior Mothers; Mothers; Prophetess; Deborah; Dorcas; Lady Leader; Lady Aladura; and Sister (not ordained). Ordination of members is based on years of joining the church, level of hard work and efficiency.

Regardless of the seniority position, a cursory look at both categories shows that partly, men have more ordination rankings than women and partly, the rankings are hierarchically unequal, especially at the senior apostolic positions. The description in Table 1 reveals clearly that the higher the ordination ranks, the lower the level at which women can assume same ranks with men. This difference reveals subordination and is perceived as a way of denying women access to the priesthood position, which is considerably unfair.<sup>6</sup>

Another inequality present in ranking men and women exists in the age disparity placed on women's ordinations. Women moving up the ladder from Prophetess to Mother-in-Israel will only achieve this goal if they attain fifty two years of age, and they will have to attain sixty two years of age before emerging as Senior Mother-in-Israel. Meanwhile such age segregation does not exist in men's ordination rankings. Therefore, in addition to gender segregation, age disparity has been used to marginalize women's contribution and leadership role in the Order. The backlash of this decision is most visible in the promotion of aged and frail women who fill up the administrative gap.

Needless to say here, the rightful place of women in the administrative, social and spiritual life of the ESOCS church is an issue that has been neglected within the church context and also in academic fora. Therefore, the next section engages with understanding the leadership process in the Order and women's role within it is undermined.

## The Spiritual Level

Drawing on the practice, all men are potential leaders in the church, depending on the circumstances and events. The means employed to assume leadership roles in ESOCs varies, which is a pointer to the fact that leadership does not only reside with the elder-in-charge of church branches but transcends to other ordained male members. The general belief is that Baba Aladura holds the overall authority and power, however, conditions can make it imperative for any ordained or/and anointed man to undertake leadership assignments, which may include but not limited to: Sitting in the chancel (which represents officiating or leading church service); spraying incense, lighting up candles, reading the Bible passages for the service; taking up sermons; leading the service' prayer (usually done by the most elder-in-charge except he is unavoidably absent from the day's service); leading the grace at the end of the service and anointing members. In a situation where senior female members are present with a very junior male member, automatically, he has the authority to conduct the service and perform all leadership responsibilities expected during the church service. Women do not have any space within the aforementioned responsibilities. Very instructive to note at this juncture is that only anointed male members are the ones expected to hold staff for prayers as against anointed female members who are perceived spiritually weak to hold it. In line with biblical undercurrents, the staff is seen to symbolize spiritual authority, and only anointed men of God must hold it.

**TABLE 1: Ordination for Men and Women Showing Leadership Gap**

<b>Male Ordination Ranking</b>	<b>Female Ordination Ranking</b>
Baba Aladura	
Deputy Baba Aladura	
Senior Apostle General	
Super-Apostle General	
Apostle-General	
Special Senior Apostle	Three Titled Mothers
Senior Apostle	
Super Apostle	Senior Mother-in-Israel
Apostle	Mother-In-Israel
Prophet	Prophetess
Evangelist	Deborah
Pastor	
Rabbi	Dorcas
Senior Leader	
Leader	Lady Leader
Aladura	Lady Aladura
Brother (not ordained)	Sister (not ordained)

## **Administrative Level**

At the administrative level, the ESOCS church has different modes of maintaining the growth and development of the church. The most common mode is to group branches (known as Houses of Prayer) for administrative convenience. From bottom-up, there are the branches, groups, zones, provinces, Administrative Council and the National Advisory Board. At each level of the hierarchy, there are Executive Councils. For instance in Gideon House of Prayer, the Church Executive Council comprises of men from the post of Apostles to the elder-in-charge, and for the women, Mothers and Senior Mothers. At the Zonal level, this also varies because several zones, divided numerically, exist globally where ESOCS churches are established. In most cases, a few women are part of the Executive Council.<sup>7</sup> However, at the provincial level (CMC) and the two Special Management Councils, the Executive Councils in all the six provinces of ESOCS are male-dominated. At the national level, only the Three Titled Mothers are members of the National Advisory Board whereas only Senior Mothers-in-Israel are invited to attend the General Administrative Council Meetings. In most cases, the Three-titled Mothers and Senior Mothers are aged and cannot contribute objectively and actively to discussions or object to issues raised by men.

## **The Social Level**

Another way in which leadership is viewed in the Order is through the social programs organized by the church. Associations are formed within the church at the branch, zonal, provincial and national levels. At the branch level, committees for church development in various ways may be formed or committees for anniversaries. For example in Gideon House of Prayer branch, children's anniversaries and adoption anniversaries are held and unique to the branch. To organize anniversaries, few members are nominated into committees to plan programs for such anniversaries, including the welfare, food, security and church service. At the Zonal level (whereby churches in the same areas are grouped together as zones), there are the zonal adoption services and other anniversaries, and committees are set up to celebrate such anniversaries. At the provincial level (which includes all the branches within a particular state or region), all anointed ranks in all branches are permanent members of the provincial council and it is led by the most senior male in the state province. Lastly, at the national level, a few anointed members are nominated from each branch or zone or provincial level to serve at national functions, and the most senior male automatically becomes the leader.

In all these groups, men and women are always appointed to such committees, meetings or events. However, in branch formations, the most senior ranked male occupies the leadership position, while the most senior ranked female takes up the Deputy, finance or treasurer positions. In all cases, female members of such committees are always assigned to ensure the aesthetics of the church environment, purchase of food items and the welfare of guests and members (cooking and service), even then, males do assist at this point. The most senior ranked female takes up the headship of this sub-committee and is assisted by other female members. This arrangement cuts across all the administrative levels.

The aforementioned administrative groupings are the major platforms through which leadership is portrayed in the Order and women are characterized as subordinate to men. This subordinate perception of women runs contrary to the recorded history of C&S in which Captain Abiodun Akinsowon excelled compared to men, especially in the areas of gospel delivery, healing, charisma and conversion of people to C&S group before separation from Father Moses Orimolade Tunolase. With her departure, women's place in the ESOCS in broad sense, faded into subservience. A departure point in this respect can be seen in the Gideon House of Prayer's (one of the ESOCS' branches) past programs in which women were made to compete effectively with men in some priestly assignments. For example, women were made to preach on week days' and forty days fasting services as well as revival programs but a general policy from the headquarters stopped women from displaying their spiritual gifts in these areas, and authorities of Gideon House of Prayer had to succumb to this policy. In grappling with reasons impelling the alienation of women from core leadership roles in the Order, some factors have been highlighted and are discussed forthwith.

## **Traditional Phenomenon**

Patriarchal system ingrained in men has engendered the infusion of societal traditional injunctions into the church. Ebo,<sup>8</sup> depressed by the level of women's subordination in the ESOCS asked these vital questions. Is it right for Christians to live as individuals or as a church according to the traditions or cultures of societies they come from? Or rather, should Christians live by the traditions and cultures of heaven which Jesus taught in the scriptures and God demonstrated in some female characters in the Bible such as Deborah (she gave Gideon the spiritual direction and guidance as a spiritual leader on how to win a war) and Mary Magdalene (the first person to see Jesus after resurrection and preach the gospel of the resurrection of Christ to the congregation of the earliest church that were gathered together (John 20: 11-18))? To Taiwo,<sup>9</sup> the Order's doctrine and traditional theory of seeing the woman as a weaker vessel continues to infiltrate into the various segments of the church. Religion on its own is seen as a cultural construct, therefore, its methodologies and expressions are informed by guidelines dictated and interpreted by practitioners.

These guidelines are in turn shaped by a people's collective, historical and sociological experience. The relationship between tradition and religion manifests itself in the involvement of religion in the configuration of power and power relations in the society, especially in societies where religion wields considerable influence (Olajubu 2005, 3402-3403; Olajubu 2008, 173-178). The marginality of women is a consequence of conscious efforts on the part of male interpreters of religion to politicize every source of information about the female in order to entrench patriarchy such as presenting the male as the active participant and the female as docile and passive. Men are seen as leaders by nature whereas women are expected to support them.

However, to some interviewees, tradition is always misconstrued and reconstructed when men want to assert power and authority over women. Naturally, women have important responsibility when it entails arbitration and settling of disputes among men or women and between both men and women. The case is not different in the Order where women have been seen engineering settlement of disputes among elders, encouraging and welcoming new members into the church and are very pertinent to the coordination of the women folk since they make up the majority in the Church.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, due to traditional factors that existed before the emergence of Christianity and incorporated into church's doctrine, the founder of the ESOCS did not lay emphasis on the role of the woman in the church and that has affected the way women are treated.<sup>11</sup> The traditional dimension alone does not itself explain why women's leadership role is subjugated within men's contested abilities, and other issues need to be understood.

## **Biblical Injunctions**

The most important factor militating against women's assertion of leadership role in the church is the biblical injunction, especially that posited by Apostle Paul whereby he advised that all Christian women must '*keep silent*' during church services. In Paul's admonition to Timothy (2:11-14), 'Let a woman learn in silence with all submission...and if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home... for it is a shame for women to speak in church.' "... And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression." Paul identified two activities, which he does not permit women to pursue: 1. Teaching to a man; 2. Having authority over a man. In other words, women were not expected to offer prayers, lead songs, read scriptures aloud or have any leadership role during or after services, and as a result, unable to contribute the gift God has given to them. Paul's opposition to women teaching or exercising authority over men is explained by appealing to two historical precedents: 1. Adam was created first-implying the headship of the man; 2. Eve was deceived by the serpent whereas Adam was not-being responsible for Eve's disobedience (Garland, 2010).

Moreover, God said in Genesis 3 about woman submitting to their husbands and men ruling their wives.<sup>12</sup> Other arguments have evolved to clarify these biblical injunctions. But the one-sided view to explaining women's role in the church has not only reduced their capabilities but has brought about an iterated social practice in which women are seen as weak, powerless and hence, confined to the home's responsibilities. However, contradicting this trend, Ebo<sup>13</sup> argues that;

Without sounding imprudent, one is persuaded that the menfolk, either consciously or unconsciously failed to follow several lessons taught in the scriptures concerning women's place and leadership role at different times, which enhanced eventual successes or positive results that manifested. It is important to mention that no individual or group can achieve any meaningful success without truly adhering to God's kingdom principles. For instance, in Genesis 2:18, God said 'it is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him' (NLT version). God looked at the man and saw that he lacked some abilities. To correct the shortfall, He created woman and imbued her with the abilities that the man lacked. Therefore, the woman was God's own way of making up for man's deficiencies or in other words, man needs the presence and participation of the woman in every endeavor. But because men lack this Kingdom principle, a lot of women in the church have gone to their graves without manifesting God's talents and abilities deposited in them to uplift the church and in another sense, many women have also left ESOCS to manifest such gifts among the Pentecostal brethren were they are allowed to use such gifts amply with men.

Supporting this argument, Balogun-Asako<sup>14</sup> confirms the need for Christians to read and understand the nitty-gritty of the Bible. To him,

Women are as important as men and the greatest message on earth that leads to man's salvation was sent through a woman, known as Mary Magdalene. She was the first to see Jesus and she was also the one Jesus sent to tell other disciples that He had risen and they should meet Him at Galilee.

## **Women's Uncleanliness: Monthly Menstruation**

Restrictions and prohibitions based on the woman's biological and psychological make-up are a common denominator to women's roles in the church. "Most times, women observe their monthly cycle and consequently, are not supposed to enter the church but it has been observed that some of them overlook such matters and deliberately enter the church. Since you do not know who to trust, it is better those sacred issues are left to the men."<sup>15</sup> In the Order, women are barred from entering the church premises during the monthly menstrual period for fear of contamination. In fact, the process is perceived as '*unclean*'. Interviews confirm the assertion that women are not allowed to enter the Chancel because it represents holiness or a holy place that is forbidden to women in their monthly cycle.<sup>16</sup> Menstrual blood associated as it is with notions of mystery, awe, and pollution has been a limiting factor to women's leadership role. In fact, the Bible refers to monthly blood as contamination, which should be barred from the sacred space to make it holy (Leviticus, 15: 19). Be that as it may, this argument is debatable because women in their menopausal ages are also denied entry, therefore, turning it into a gender phenomenon rather than 'menstrual' limitation.

Whereas in some cultures, menstrual blood is barred from the sacred space due to the assumption that it defiles, in others, the ban is predicated on the belief that menstrual blood is powerful as the carrier of potential life (Oyeronke 2003). Major outcomes of women's uncleanliness in ESOCS include the barring of women entering places tagged 'holy' such as the chancel; lighting candles, making incense, holding staff and even entering the vicinity of the church during the '*unclean*' period. According to Oneh,<sup>17</sup> "if the baton of leadership is given to women, what happens to the church service when all of them become unclean at the same time? It is just the rightful place of men who are always '*clean*' to hold the mantle of leadership." The ESOCS spiritual perspective of 'women and monthly cycle' achieves the aim of providing a concept of power in the religious space. However, a close observation of some Pentecostal churches such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) shows that they do not lend themselves to undermine, marginalize or relegate women due to the 'unclean' nature of menstrual blood. For instance, in a study done by Olusola and Ojo (2010, 123), RCCG women are made Parish pastors, Area pastors, Zonal pastors and Provincial pastors despite monthly menstrual cycle.

## **Women's Home Responsibility**

One cannot ignore the significant roles played by women, especially wives and mothers at home in addition to other 'survival' responsibilities, both formal and informal. As wives, they are burdened with the responsibility of ensuring the cleanliness of the home, preparing of food and sexual satisfaction of husbands; as mothers, they are expected to play important roles in carrying pregnancy till maturity, which comes with varieties of discomfort, breastfeeding at birth and generally, the upbringing and nurturing of children in the home.

These responsibilities take a huge part of women's time. To some of the respondents, juggling between motherhood role at home and leadership role in church is most times, complicated. Since men are not pre-occupied with domestic chores, they have more time to contribute to reading the Bible and engaging in core church activities.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the issue of motherhood raises questions about women's ability to lead the church.

What makes women active in the home, and not in the public? The answer lies in the fallout of some African cultures that maintain a rigid division of labor between what females and males are expected to carry out as duties and responsibilities both in homes and in the society. Though a social construction, the perception by men is that women have less personal autonomy, limited resources at their disposal, and limited influence over decision making processes that shape their own lives and societies. Most men fail to realize that women are multi-taskers and therefore, can engage in several activities simultaneously. This multi-tasking trait reflects in the way women have negotiated, deconstructed and reconstructed their role in the Order.

### **Resisting Erasure: Women's Negotiation of Leadership Role in the ESOCS**

All the factors explained above militate against women's leadership role in the ESOCS. Nevertheless, women have negotiated their own space as active members in order to be relevant. Does this negotiation obliterate the stained glass ceiling placed as limitations on women's voice? The first time women tried to recapture their relevance in the religious space within that Order was in 1974 with the urge to form Women Association.

The idea to form the Women Association came through the inspiration of Mother Cherub Olugbusi (then Mother-in-Israel) and Prophetess B.K. Otubu. Prophetess Otubu brought the matter up with Baba Aladura Ogunyadi that women would like to come together as one body to be '*praying for the upliftment of the Holy Order and protection of all the members, especially, women and children.*' Baba Aladura had to consult other "*Elders*" (senior male members) and after due consultations, women were '*given the blessing*' to form the Association. The Association's first meeting was held in September 1974 where the executive council was formed. In 1976, the church elders travelled to the then Three Eastern Region of Nigeria, in order to inaugurate Women Association. However, the Eastern elders, citing patriarchal structures and instances, refused to establish a Women's Wing of the Order. After a heated argument, Mother Olugbusi was asked to present her case and she had to give examples of how the men told Deborah (in the bible) that they would not go to war unless she went with them and how her presence made them win the war. To her, the intention of women coming together "is to help men and not take over their responsibilities" (Ogunbiyi 2010, 2). It was at this point that the Eastern elders endorsed the formation of the association and the inauguration proceeded.

Through the Women Association structure, women have made efforts to assert their position in the church as peacemakers, intercessors for men (who could be their sons, husbands, family members and Church elders) and healers. At the national level, Women Association organizes prayers within the women folk at the provincial and branch levels, where women take charge of the church programs including officiating, preaching (but not stand in the chancel or pulpit or hold staff) and engaging in other activities as deemed fit and approved by the authorities . This association has remained the basis of women’s organizing in the Order. Interestingly, they hold their annual anniversary in all countries where ESOCS branches are situated. During these anniversaries, apart from the fact that first, the most senior male elder in the State leads the opening and closing prayers, and second, women are not allowed to sit in the chancel, women make the general announcement, recite biblical passages for prayers, stand in the pew to preach and exhort the congregation with both male and female in attendance, while men take up the onlooker position throughout the program. This annual platform always creates opportunities for women to temporarily exercise leadership roles, gain popularity and in the process, exercise their God-given spiritual gifts.

In addition, some women assume leadership positions, mobilizing and organizing themselves at different stages of the ordination ranks. For example, Mother-In-Israel and Senior Mother-in-Israel ranks hold meetings together with prayer vigils monthly with the most highly ranked female, leading the program. Beyond the fact that the most senior woman in each of the ranks has the opportunity to lead other women within those ranks, the major leadership position rests with Senior Mother-In-Israel or Mother-in-Israel (depending on the highest rank in a branch) in all the branches, who organizes women for prayer meetings, makes decisions on behalf of other women and represents women at broader meetings that include men. At the topmost are the “*Three-Titled Mothers*” and they represent the totality of all women in the Order. The role of the Three-Titled Mothers is often times as figure heads because most of them are usually aged at this rank, therefore, they are not always active in mobilizing women but they represent the ‘*Mother*’ figure for other women and are relied upon to pray for women. More importantly, they represent women at the National Advisory Council.

Third, the formation of associations, known in the traditional parlance as ‘*egbe*’, has been used to promote female solidarity and leadership within the church. ESOCS creates associations to promote the growth and development of the Order in which men and women can flourish separately or as groups. While the men’s associations include, “Egbe F’ogo Olorunhan (the band that shows God’s glory), King David and Eternal Torch Bearers Associations to mention but a few, women’s groups include, “Egbe Ayaba Esther (Queen Esther Band), Egbe Ayaba Sheba (Queen Sheba band), and Eternal Sisters among others.” Traditional titles such as Iya Egbe are used to designate their women leaders.

Through the 'Association' platform, women have been able to exert their financial capabilities vis-à-vis men, help and support members financially, physically and psychologically, organize prayers for families and the church with highest ranked female leading the service, and making decisions that are binding on female members. Some of their positively impacting decisions have been espoused by the church authorities.<sup>19</sup>

Possession of psychic and spiritual powers has endeared gifted women in the Order to gain positions of authority and prestige, and for the dramatic reversals of relations of subordination. There are many female prophets in the Order and their psychic abilities, which are seen as God-given gift is recognized to a much greater degree. Through this platform, they have been given the opportunity to assert limited leadership role over men. When they reveal visions shown to them by God to men, the latter are expected to act according to what is uttered (Mba 1982, 59).

Lastly, increase in the level of educated female members has also given rise to women's recognition in the Order. Highly educated women such as medical doctors, journalists, lawyers and other academic leanings within the order are most times invited to anchor special programs and give talks at seminars that are male dominated. In another way, it has resulted in the evolution of women as branch secretaries. In a sense, the increase in women's education, especially in the areas erstwhile perceived as male-domain is gradually shifting the glass ceiling towards giving opportunities to women in the religious public space.

## **Conclusion**

This study reveals high level of marginalization of women's capability and capacity in the Order despite the fact that they constitute the majority of the church worldwide. Their marginalization have been seen to be in stages, ranging from ordination ranking, officiating in general church services, touching certain instruments in the church to involvement in the church's administrative and social programs. Issues raised for the emergence and perpetuation of women's suppression are explained within the context of tradition and cultural issues that perceive women as weak, soft and powerless; biblical injunctions; women's monthly menstruation blood; and women's private space burgeoning responsibilities.

Women's efforts at creating leadership space have been evident with the establishment of the Women Association, which serves as the major avenue to assert their leadership role; organizing special prayers and events for themselves; formation of groups known as 'egbe'; and academic achievements. However, a deep evaluation at these achievements reveals that efforts at getting out of the margins have only resulted in a narrow construction that does not tilt or expand the general male domain construction of leadership. It is perceived that their efforts have been to construct leadership in the church within the limited women space. This limited construction has the tendency of ignoring and sometimes, undermining women's rights and needs in the Order.

In view of the inherent qualities of women and taking into consideration, the positive role played by them in their narrow construction of power, women in the ESOCS needs to be actively involved in leadership functions even in the topmost hierarchy of the Order. Though gradual changes are occurring, it will take some time before the glass ceiling over women is finally broken, especially as those militating factors continue to exist. These challenges can be positively harnessed to make ESOCS women prove their mettle while competing favorably with men in the Order.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Senior Apostle Balogun-Asako at Gideon House of Prayer, Isheri Street, EB. 5 March 2011

<sup>2</sup> The *aladura* concept derives from the Yoruba word *al adua*, meaning people who pray.

<sup>3</sup> ESOCS, 2010 retrieved 12 February 2011 from <http://www.esocshurch.org>

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Senior Apostle Balogun-Asako, Gideon House of Prayer, Isheri Street, EB, Lagos on 4 April 2011

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Mother-in-Israel Oluwaniyi, Gideon House of Prayer, Isheri Street, EB, Lagos on 27 March 2011

<sup>7</sup> This fact is evident in Zone Four where a female is made the Assistant Secretary of the Zone Four Executive Council.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Mother-in-Israel Ebo, ESOCS, Mount Zion Headquarters, Surulere, Lagos on 29 April 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Phone Interview with Prophetess BukolaTaiwo, ESOCS, Abuja district, 10 March 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Prophetess Ayo Erinle and Prophetess Lojede, Gideon House of Prayer, 14 March 2011

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Senior Apostle Balogun-Asako, Gideon House of Prayer, Isheri Street, EB, 13 March 2011

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Brother Oluwatobi Akanji, Gideon House of Prayer, 11 March 2011

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Mother-in-Israel Ebo, ESOCS, Mount Zion Headquarters, Surulere, Lagos, 29 April 2011

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Senior Apostle Balogun-Asako, Gideon House of Prayer, Isheri Street, EB, Lagos on 6 March 2011

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Pastor Yomi Sojebe, Gideon House of Prayer, Isheri Street, EB, Lagos on 13 March 2011

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<sup>16</sup> Mother-in-Israel Oluwaniyi, Ijaiye Medium Housing Estate, Ogba, Lagos on 14 and 15 February 2011

<sup>17</sup> During Group interviews with men in Gideon House of Prayer, Isheri Street, EB, Lagos on 13 March 2011

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Apostle Paul Idowu, Gideon House of Prayer, Isheri Street, EB, Lagos on 11 March 2011.

<sup>19</sup> One of the decisions espoused by the church authorities in Gideon House of Prayer is the idea started by Egbe Esther to hold monthly prayers in the church. This policy awakened the men to their spiritual responsibility.

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