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Educating to Empower: A Theology of Hope for African Girls

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a liberative theology of hope rooted in African women's experiences, with a focus on educating underprivileged girls. Drawing from liberation theology, African feminist theology, and Christian social thought, the work explores how faith-based education has historically offered pathways of empowerment for marginalized girls. Highlighting the contributions of pioneers like Mother Mary Charles Magdalene Walker and the work of local NGOs such as the Charles Walker Foundation for Girls' Education, it argues that education—when grounded in justice, dignity, and spiritual solidarity—can become a powerful theological and practical tool for transformation. Using intersectional and decolonial lenses, the article examines structural barriers to girls' education and proposes faith-driven, community-based solutions. This theology of hope envisions a future where every African girl, regardless of socio-economic or cultural constraints, has access to education that nurtures her full humanity and divine purpose.

Introduction

In many African societies, the education of girls remains a deeply contested and unevenly realized aspiration. Structural barriers such as poverty, gender-based violence, early marriage, and socio-religious norms continue to undermine the full realization of girls' educational rights (Oduyoye, 2001; Ilo, 2012). These impediments are often justified by patriarchal interpretations of culture and religion, which prioritize male advancement and reinforce gendered hierarchies within families, schools, and faith communities.

Yet, amidst these constraints, African religious women—Catholic nuns, Pentecostal leaders, and laywomen ministers—have emerged as pivotal actors in reimagining education not merely as formal instruction, but as a tool for liberation and divine justice (Phiri & Nadar, 2006; Kanyoro, 2002). Their work is animated by a theology of hope: a liberative vision that insists that educating girls is not only a sociopolitical necessity, but a sacred act rooted in the Christian imperative to “set the captives free” (Luke 4:18).

Mother Mary Charles Magdalene Walker (RSC), an Irish Catholic missionary who founded educational institutions for girls in Calabar, Nigeria, exemplifies this intersection of faith and justice (Udemba & Ojukwu, 2024). Drawing from her legacy, as well as contemporary African women theologians and education activists, this paper argues that the education of underprivileged girls must be seen as central to the mission of African faith communities. Such a mission reflects what Chioma M. Udemba (2023) calls “liberation through knowledge,” a vision that affirms that every girl, regardless of class or location, is created in the image and likeness of God and thus worthy of dignity, agency, and opportunity.

By engaging feminist theology, African women's theology, and liberation theology, this paper articulates a theology of hope that challenges both religious institutions and cultural traditions to become vehicles of transformation. It centers the lived experiences and contributions of African religious women and highlights education as a sacred, justice-oriented vocation that can dismantle cycles of poverty and disempowerment. It asks: How are African religious women mobilizing theology to advance girls' education? What theological resources exist within African religio-cultural contexts that can inspire a more equitable future for girls?

This work contributes to a growing body of feminist theological scholarship that calls attention to women's leadership in education and development (Dube, 2003; Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012), while building on the author's own research and field experience with grassroots education initiatives in Nigeria and the United States (Udemba, 2022, 2023, 2024).

Theoretical Framework: Theology of Hope and Feminist Pedagogy

Jürgen Moltmann's theology of hope emphasizes the eschatological dimension of Christian faith—the anticipation of a transformed future rooted in divine justice and liberation. This theological stance resonates with Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which calls for education that awakens critical consciousness and resists dehumanization.

African women theologians have built upon this liberative framework by grounding theology in lived experience. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001) asserts that African women's theology must "challenge oppressive traditions while reinterpreting Scripture in ways that affirm life." Musimbi Kanyoro (2002) advocates for a *cultural hermeneutics* that critiques gender injustices within religious and cultural frameworks. Similarly, Teresa Okure (1993) emphasizes the necessity of reading the Bible from the perspective of African women, insisting that theology must serve the liberation of the oppressed.

Udemba (2022, 2023) integrates these frameworks into what she terms "a theology of hope in action"—an educational philosophy grounded in dignity, equity, and the inherent worth of the African girl child.

Theological Groundings: Feminist and African Womanist Perspectives

The theology of hope is informed by the liberationist teachings of Gustavo Gutiérrez and the African feminist theological insights of Mercy Amba Oduyoye. These perspectives emphasize a God who is on the side of the marginalized and whose justice is realized through human action. For African girls, whose lives are often marked by poverty, gender-based violence, and educational exclusion, this theology becomes a call to action. As Oduyoye (2001) argues, theology must begin with the lived experiences of African women and girls and respond to their cries for dignity and justice.

Chioma Maureen Udemba (2023) further this argument in her work *Promoting the Rights and Dignity of Women in Calabar, Nigeria Through Educational Contributions of Mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker (RSC)*, highlighting how religious women historically led educational initiatives as a form of spiritual liberation. In connecting religious identity with educational justice, Udemba positions religious women as torchbearers of hope.

Religious Women and the Mission of Education

Historically, women religious have been at the forefront of educational initiatives that uplift underprivileged girls in Africa. Their work not only addresses material deprivation but also articulates a theology of liberation that links faith to social transformation. Figures such as Mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker (RSC) exemplify this model of spiritual leadership. As Udemba (2024) underscores in her study *Reviving Women's Voices in Faith-Based Education: The Untold Legacy of Mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker*, education is not merely a ladder to social mobility, it is a sacred act of resistance, compassion, and justice. Through her missionary work in Calabar, Nigeria, Walker pioneered educational programs that prioritized the most marginalized—girls from poor and rural communities—planting seeds of structural change within a patriarchal system.

Building on Walker's legacy, organizations like the Charles Walker Foundation for Girls Education, founded by Chioma Maureen Udemba, continue to champion girls' access to education as a spiritual imperative. This ministry model reflects what Phiri and Nadar (2006) describe as "agency within submission"—a dynamic where African Christian women mobilize faith-based practices to challenge systems of oppression from within religious frameworks. Rather than separate faith from activism, these women integrate the two, developing a praxis that embodies both gospel values and human rights advocacy.

Chioma Maureen Udemba's broader body of work emphasizes this intersection. In her article *Promoting the Rights and Dignity of Women in Calabar, Nigeria Through Educational Contributions of Mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker (2023)*, she argues that religious women have historically deployed education as a form of spiritual liberation and cultural disruption. This assertion resonates with Kwok Pui-lan's (2005) notion of "postcolonial imagination," which sees religious women in the Global South not as passive recipients of Western missionary influence, but as innovative leaders forging new paths toward justice.

These efforts also align with Mercy Amba Oduyoye's (1995) call for a theology that listens to the experiences of African women and responds to their cries for justice. For Oduyoye, education is not a privilege—it is a theological right. Religious women, by offering education to marginalized girls, act as midwives of hope and transformation.

Moreover, these educational ministries are embedded in a broader vision of holistic development. As Teresa Okure (1993) notes, faith-based education must address not only cognitive empowerment but also spiritual and communal healing. The schools, vocational centers, and leadership training programs led by Catholic sisters and Protestant women ministers in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and beyond do just that.

In essence, African religious women redefine what it means to be ministers of the Gospel. They preach not only from pulpits but through schoolhouses, feeding programs, health initiatives, and advocacy campaigns. Their work invites us to embrace a "public theology of hope", one that sees girls' education not as optional charity but as divine commission.

Historical Legacy: Mother Mary Charles Magdalene Walker

Mother Mary Charles Magdalene Walker (RSC) offers a compelling historical case study. An Irish Catholic missionary who worked in Nigeria in the early 20th century, she pioneered a model of girls' education that was both rigorous and holistic. Walker believed that educating girls was key to transforming society. As Udemba & Ojukwu (2023) write in their study of Walker's legacy, "Mother Charles transformed classrooms into spaces of resistance and dignity. Her theology was not written in books—it was lived through chalk, scripture, and service."

Walker's model emphasized not just academic achievement, but also spiritual growth, moral formation, and leadership development. Today, her legacy continues through the work of Catholic sisters and women educators across Nigeria, including initiatives like the Charles Walker Foundation for Girls Education, founded by the author.

Contemporary Voices: Grounded Practices of Empowerment

Faith-based initiatives in Africa today continue to place the girl child at the center of their mission, reflecting a holistic understanding of empowerment that integrates education, health, nutrition, and spiritual development. Organizations such as the Girls Education Empowerment and Hope Foundation exemplify this multidimensional approach, which aligns with Maluleke's (2001) concept of "people-centered theology." Maluleke describes this theology as a transformative praxis rooted in solidarity, emphasizing that faith communities must engage concretely with social realities and work toward systemic change.

Community-based programs led by African women religious, including notable figures such as Sr. Dr. Teresa Okure and Sr. Jude Nnorom, employ intersectional frameworks that address the overlapping social, economic, and spiritual vulnerabilities girls face. These programs do not treat education as an isolated intervention but embed it within broader concerns of health, protection, and gender justice, consistent with the advocacy for "holistic development" described by Phiri (2006) and Oduyoye (2001).

Anthropological and ethnographic research further demonstrates that empowerment in these contexts is often fostered through quotidian acts of care and resistance. As Comaroff and Comaroff (2001) argue, such micro-level engagements, whether feeding a child, offering a scholarship, or challenging gender biases in religious teachings—can become radical gestures of hope and agency. These everyday acts resonate deeply within communities, nurturing resilience amid systemic marginalization.

Similarly, Sugirtharajah (2003) emphasizes the importance of "subaltern voices" within theology—those of marginalized women who translate faith into liberatory practices. These voices challenge dominant narratives and open spaces for inclusive educational practices that reflect the lived experiences of African girls.

Thus, contemporary faith-based educational initiatives not only advance academic learning but also cultivate spiritual and social empowerment, embodying a theology that is responsive, relational, and deeply grounded in the realities of girls' lives.

Barriers to Girls' Education and Theological Responses

Structural barriers like early child marriage, deep economic hardship, pervasive gender-based violence, and theological misinterpretations continue to deny countless girls access to education and personal agency. In many contexts, parents remove girls from school—whether through forced labor at home or marriage—shutting down both learning and future leadership potential. Religious systems and traditional beliefs frequently reinforce male-centered norms, discouraging girls from pursuing knowledge or contributing to theological discourse.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye, often called the "mother of African women's theology," has spent decades shining light on how cultural and religious forces marginalize women. Her theology is born from a deep recognition that African women are often presented as invisible in both religious practice and theological reflection. She insists on naming oppressive cultural norms—structures that equate a woman's value to her service for others, relegating identity to marital status or familial duty—and she challenges these limiting narratives through a feminist, context-rooted theological lens. Oduyoye pioneered the **Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians**, bringing together women across the African continent and diaspora to use collective scholarship, cultural hermeneutics, and theological reflection to critique patriarchy and racism and to affirm women's agency across domains like health, education, and poverty relief.

In practice, this prophetic theological reconstruction demands creating spaces—whether in schools, worship communities, Bible study groups or public forums—where girls' stories and leadership matter. Drawing on traditions of storytelling, communal ritual, indigenous spirituality, and lived experiences, these spaces help girls to articulate theological meaning, build resilience, imagine alternative futures, and become agents of justice and transformation.

By nurturing hope, proclaiming equal dignity, and dismantling systems that obscure female agency, a liberative theology works toward both individual empowerment and communal transformation. Women and girls cease to be silent figures within theological and educational narratives; instead, they stand as integral voices shaping the path toward justice, equity, and flourishing human community.

A Theology of Hope in Practice

A theology of hope is not an abstract concept—it is lived in communities, classrooms, and grassroots movements. It is embodied in the girl who becomes the first in her family to go to school. It is practiced by the teacher who mentors students beyond the syllabus. It is preached by faith leaders who reimagine scripture through a feminist, justice-oriented lens.

As Udemba writes (2022), "Hope is not mere optimism—it is a revolutionary act of faith that disrupts injustice, awakens possibility, and affirms the sacredness of every girl's life." In this way, education becomes a form of sacred resistance—both pedagogical and theological.

Conclusion

Educating African girls is not just a social or policy challenge—it is fundamentally theological. When we teach, mentor, and support African girls, we respond to a divine summons toward justice, dignity, and communal wholeness. In doing so, we participate in restoring voices that have historically been silent, and we invite them into the shared work of healing broken structures and narratives.

African feminist and liberation theologians—exemplified by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and others—offer a vivid theological grounding for this call. Their work affirms that lived experience is theological data, that education and spiritual formation are inseparable, and that theology itself thrives when it emerges from the cries and hopes of those on the margins. These voices dismantle colonial and patriarchal legacies in theological discourse and re-center African girls' whole humanity—body, mind, spirit, and community.

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