

Crashed Realities? Gender Dynamics in Nigerian Pentecostalism

by Itohan Mercy Idumwonyi Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2023.
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Crashed Realities is a study of the challenges women in the Pentecostal movement encounter in churches that are not only male-founded but also male-dominated. The author, Itohan Idumwonyi, casts a critical gaze on Pentecostalism that prides itself on equality (of social classes or even gender) and how it holds up on that promise in contemporary churches. As it turns out, gender dynamics within the church is barely different from the gender politics that plays out in the Nigerian secular sphere whether in the business world or its vicious and high-stakes competitive politics. Idumwonyi's analysis focuses on the gender dynamics at play in a particular church, the Church of God Mission International, a Benin, Nigeria-based church where – one can rightly argue – the Nigerian neo-Pentecostal movement originated. In a way, this book is about returning to the 'source' to see how the church that largely propelled the Pentecostal movement has held up the equality essence. By revisiting the 'drama' that played out in the wake of the nomination of the first woman Pentecostal archbishop in Nigeria, Bishop Margaret Idahosa, and her challenges taking over a position that has been taken as normatively male (she inherited the church after the death of her charismatic and renowned husband), Idumwonyi's book underscores how Pentecostalism's promises of egalitarianism maintains gender disparity.

The book overall argues that the socio-cultural invention of genders in ancient earlier eras cannot be extricated from the religious ideation of female personhood. At the end of the book, one sees how and why *Crashed Realities?* carries a question mark that leaves open the conclusion of the status of women in Pentecostalism. By 'crashed realities?', we get to ponder whose realities are being crashed, and whether the book is optimistic or pessimistic of the current condition. Does 'crashed realities' mean that the Pentecostal women's hopes of equity have been dashed or that their assertion of themselves in male-dominated church spaces is crashing the constructed realities of a male supremacist world? Despite the categorical interest in Mrs. Idahosa, one does not learn much about her as a leader and her evolution from this work. A book like this would have greatly profited from a closer access to the woman being studied or at least archival materials that show pivotal moments in her self-fashioning as a pioneering woman holding such an exalted post. Much of what we end up knowing about archbishop Margaret Idahosa from this book are second-hand accounts.

What this book misses in ethnographic focus on its subject, it tries to recoup through an exploration of the socio-cultural context in which the Church of God Mission is domiciled. Methodologically, this socio-historical engagement with Benin also helped to critique how much Pentecostalism owes to its respective cultural contexts. One of the popular assertions about Pentecostalism is how much its practice is based on making a break with the past. *Crashed Realities?* shows that the past never quite goes away but continues to interpenetrate the realities of the present. In exploring the ambiguities that result from an underlying commitment to patriarchy, Idumwonyi shows the factors that make the calls to inclusivity trying. She proposes the *Pentecost Experience* as favourable to gender inclusivity and, in turn, human flourishing. While one cannot discount the empowering capacity of an ideology like feminism, how effective is it in speaking to gender issues in Pentecostalism without first deconstructing it beyond assuming this is all about faith? The Pentecostal church is as much of a church as it is an entrepreneurial enterprise that thrives according to norms that rule a society at a time. *Crashed Realities?* approaches the church as just a church and therefore expects certain gender discussions can be anchored around its status as a spiritual entity whereas the struggle against women leadership is also about the protection of invested capital.

That is why, to some extent, female church leadership has not had as much bearing on gender equality. The book itself demonstrated this several times that Mrs. Idahosa's ascendance to the position of archbishop has not necessarily improved women's fortunes in the church. Yes, there are superficial changes whereby men understand their wives' charismatic capabilities and even put their faces on billboards and other visual materials. But that in itself is evidence that the church is responding to a market that is percolated with the ideologies of women empowerment and therefore positioning their wives to be the face of progressiveness. The author attributes some of this to Mrs. Idahosa's influence but what we are also seeing is a change according to market realities. This is not to be merely cynical but to urge a caution in taking superficial signs of progress as the wonders of fundamental change. Even the market can be a source of progressiveness, but the sort of change it produces must be seen for what it is.

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