# Male Chauvinism among Choirmasters of Orthodox Churches in Port Harcourt: An Exploration

**By**

**Maria Duononwi Abidiak**
**Department of Music, Faculty of Humanities,**
**Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt**
**Phone: 08035234673**
**Email: mariaduononwi@gmail.com**

**Abstract**

A noticeable trend in most Orthodox Churches in Rivers state is that choir directing/conducting is male dominated. Male choir directors/conductors predominate. There seems to be a systematic relegation of women to the background when it comes to the practice of choir directing/conducting. Though this seems to be a worldwide and an age-long problem, the scholarly attention it has attracted in Nigeria is scant. Using Port Harcourt, the state capital of Rivers state as a base, this paper investigated principally the issue of male chauvinism amongst choirmasters of Orthodox Churches in Rivers state. It relied on face-to-face and telephone structured interviews of ten choirmasters in identifying factors responsible for the marginal participation of women in choir directing/conducting. It found out that most women are very ardent about the art of choir directing/conducting but they are less encouraged by their male counterparts and the Orthodox Churches. Most of the interviews maintained that most men choir directors see the women as less capable of directing/conducting choirs; that choir leadership and conducting is mostly better handled by the men. To attenuate the male chauvinism among choirmasters in Port Harcourt, and perhaps elsewhere, the study recommended that discoverable competent and passionate female choirmasters be given opportunities or encouraged to participate fully in the art of directing/conducting choirs.

**Keywords:** Male Chauvinism, Choirmaster, Orthodox Church, Port Harcourt, Exploration

## Introduction

The practice of choir directing and conducting have generally, been traditionally male-dominated almost in all Churches. The issue of gender inequality is very prominent in directing/conducting choirs in most Orthodox Churches in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The researcher is predisposed to the fact that it is disheartening to see only men direct/conduct choirs in most of these Churches, whereas, there are so many competent women who may even be more skillful than most of the men, left out or marginalised because of their gender.

The women are seen as incompetent by most of the men, and are only allowed to sing or handle other responsibilities like secretary, financial secretary, public relations officer, and welfare officer, of the choir. Female choirmasters if found in Port Harcourt, face a lot of chauvinistic tendencies from their male counterparts. According to Carli and Eagly in Bryan (2016), "leadership has traditionally been viewed as a male endeavour, and women attempting to traverse this minefield must do so cautiously" (p. 15). Ridgeway (2001) says "gender stereotypes are interwoven with status beliefs that assume greater overall competence with men than women thus developing a system of inequality" (p. 67).

These traditional and status beliefs may supposedly be some of the reasons why the male feel superior in directing and conducting choirs in Orthodox Churches in Port Harcourt. Women are underrepresented in the field of choir directing and conducting and this should not be the idea; women should be fully represented in the art. Suffice to say that choir directing and conducting is not for the male gender alone; females can do it and may even do better than some of the males.

Obasi in Ugochukwu (2018) says that:

> Gender imbalance exists in almost all spheres of human endeavour everywhere. Nearly in every society, females face disadvantages relative to males in political, social, economic and educational spheres of life. There is then the danger that some aspects of knowledge may erode time-held values and even encourage marginalisation or outright oppression (p. 83).

According to Ugwuede (2013, p. 175), the issue of gender marginalisation has become a strong social construct especially in Africa. Among members of the society, there is this belief that gender inequality is a biological phenomenon and should be seen and held that way. Come to think of it, women in the world form half of the world population and as such they play major roles as mothers, managers, organisers, caretakers, wives and planners. Despite all these roles women play, the entire society and the male gender still deny them recognition and acceptance, coupled with the discrimination they face due to some cultural stereotypes, abuse of religion, traditional practices and patriarchal societal structures.

From the foregoing, it is seen that in all aspects of life, including music, women are most times being relegated; but the fact is that, it does not matter who stands in front of the choir to teach or who stands on the podium to conduct whether male or female; what matters is the person's knowledge and ability. Submission to several literatures on choir

directing/conducting has never proven that the practice or art is for the male gender alone. The researcher has observed that women do not really fully participate in choir directing/conducting in orthodox Churches in Port Harcourt, and the question is: where is the place of women in choral directing/conducting? Is the art for the male gender alone? The researcher's interest in this study began as a teenage female choirmaster in the Church, where her male counterparts always challenged her because of her gender. But thanks to God for the enabling power and her late father, who was her first music teacher and choirmaster, for the encouragement to carry on amidst all challenges.

**Statement of Objectives**

The objectives of this study are: to critically examine choirmasters in some Orthodox Churches in Port Harcourt, to find out why the art of choir directing and conducting is mainly dominated by the male gender; to advice/suggest to the men to give women the opportunity to be involved in the art, and finally to encourage women who have the skills and desire to pursue a career in the art to do so.

**Thesis Statement**

The central idea of this study is to examine some choirmasters (male and female) of some Orthodox Churches in Port Harcourt to find out why the aspect of choir directing/conducting is male dominated.

**Review of Related Literature**

This section reviews the relevant literatures related to this study. According to Elkins (2008), a few studies have discussed the challenges that women faced in the early 20th century regarding the roles of women choral conductors as opposed to male conductors. Macleod (2001, p. 24) says from the late 19th and 20th centuries, women have been generally viewed as the gentler, more fragile sex. They are not expected to be dominant figures like their male counterparts. For this reason, it is difficult for many people to view them as choral directors/conductors and virtuosos; reason obviously being that choir directing connotes the ultimate in forcefulness, leadership, and control. O'Toole (1998, p. 9) says even into the late 20th and early 21st centuries, society constructs gender differences based on the constraining notion that men should be masculine and women feminine. Bartleet (2008c) also says many studies of women conductors have stated the need for women to assert, or prove themselves to their ensembles in this traditionally male dominated role. In the words of Sandberg (2013), this assertion, has caused many women to be labeled in derogatory terms as 'feminist,' 'difficult to work with,' or 'too assertive.'

From the foregoing, it is seen that gender inequality or male chauvinism in choir directing/conducting didn't begin today; it has been an age-long issue. Women are seen as weaker vessels than their male counterparts, and as such, they are hardly given the opportunity or encouraged to participate in choir leadership.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theories for this study are the theory of male dominance propounded by Stephen Goldberg (1973) and the expectation states theory by Joseph Berger (1989). The theory of male dominance states that social institutions that are characterised by male dominance may be explained by biological differences between men and women (sexual dimorphism), suggesting male dominance (patriarchy) could be inevitable. The expectation states theory proposes that the obstacles that women face in leadership are based upon status beliefs; it explains how expected competence forms the basis for status hierarchies in small groups (Ridgeway, 2001, p. 637).

The first theory above implies that it is natural or biological for women to be dominated by men, while the second theory implies that women who find themselves in leadership positions outside of traditionally female spheres might face negative repercussions from their male counterparts. However or whatever the case may be, men should not always see women as inferior or weak vessels when it comes to some aspects of life. In the area of choir directing or choral conducting, there are women who are very ardent about the art, some with experience and some just have passion for it. These women should be encouraged by their male counterparts rather than marginalising or relegating them.

**Methodology**

This study used structured face to face and telephone interviews to collect data from the respondents. Five men and five women in five Orthodox Churches in Port Harcourt were interviewed. The Churches are: New Wine Anglican Church, Rumuodara, The Presbyterian Church, Rukpoku, The Apostolic Church, Woji, Our Lady of Fatima Choir, Corpus Christi Cathedral, and Seventh Day Adventist Church, Rumuokuta. Four interviews were carried out face to face, while, six interviews were through the telephone.

**Discussion of Findings**

This study explored the career paths of men and women in choir directing/conducting through semi-structured interviews. Men and women were examined to find out why the women are not fully involved in the art. As mentioned in the method section above, the interviews were semi-structured to allow the participants discuss whatever they felt was

pertinent to the research topic. The participants were encouraged to express themselves as much as they desired.

On the findings from the interviews conducted, the women disclosed that the men most times see them as inferior, thus lacking the ability to lead the choir. They explained that though they have the enthusiasm for the art, the men's attitude towards them, discourages them. Through all the conversations with the women, they spoke of the sacrifices they have made to personally develop themselves and the passion they have for music and for teaching and conducting a choir. Though their responses varied slightly, the comments Peace Ile of Seventh Day Adventist Church choir, Rumuokuta, encompassed those of the other women. According to Ile, "no matter what I face with my male counterpart in the area of choir leadership, I will never give up. I believe strongly that someday, God will help me, and I will become an outstanding female choir leader/conductor; I will never give up no matter the discouragements and challenges I face."

As a wrap up to the interviews with the women, the question - In your opinion, do you think that women are not capable of directing/conducting choirs like the men? was asked. Peace Ile, Victoria Francis, and Victoria Soye in very enthusiastic manners, strongly objected, stating that there are women who may be better than the men in choir leadership; the challenge is that we are not encouraged to showcase our skills – "what a man can do, a woman can also do; sometimes even better."

While interviewing the men, though they still had different views, they truly expressed masculinity; the women are weak vessels and may not be very strong in choral directing/conducting. The question – How do you feel when a female choirmaster teaches you? was asked. Godwin Edem said: "I don't fancy it all; a man is supposed to be the leader. I can't encourage a woman to be a choir leader/conductor." Justice Amadi and Sampson Job were also of the opinion that choirs should be led only by men, that they cannot sit down to sing while a woman stands in front of them to teach or conduct. However, Clement Mea-ol expressed thus "I love seeing women teach and conduct choirs, but my female counterpart lacks the courage to stand before the choir to lead; I keep encouraging her to do it, but she feels very shy." Again, Obed Nweke expressed thus – "I have nothing against it, if the woman is good or is passionate about it, then, she should be encouraged."

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study reveal that women's inability to participate actively in choir directing and conducting in Port Harcourt is as a result of discouragements from their male

counterparts. Most of the men see the women as incapable, meanwhile, there are very competent and ardent female choirmasters who can only be discovered if given the opportunity or encouraged to participate fully in art. Notwithstanding, some women who are skilled in the art are shy to participate in it; this is most times caused by the men's attitude towards the women. However, be it as it may, to the women; no matter the discouragements faced from the male counterparts should keep on encouraging themselves with continuous hard work, hoping that someday, the men will see women's abilities and give them the opportunity to even teach and conduct them.

**Recommendation**

The study recommends that discoverable competent and passionate female choirmasters should be given opportunities or encouraged to participate fully in the art of directing/conducting choirs; as the art is not for the male gender alone.

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