

# Catholic Religious Sisters' Identity Dilemmas as Committed and Subjugated Workers: A Narrative Approach

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**Abstract** Catholic religious sisters in their construction of identity position themselves as happy and committed workers for God. In addition, their narratives revealed that they are positioned by authority figures of religious life as subjugated workers, who are required to sacrifice professional skills, self-care and even their very commitment as religious to become subservient workers. Based on a doctoral thesis which sampled 18 participants from two religious congregations in Nigeria and using the lens of dialogical self-theory I-positions, this paper portrays the dilemmas of identity construction whereby the religious sisters integrate mutual and opposing positions to constructing a coherent sense of 'who they are' and 'are becoming.' Analyzing these findings, this paper presents the tensions and contradictions the participants encounter within the context of living religious life in reference to work. Consequently, this paper calls for further research toward exploring the impact of work on Catholic religious sisters' identity construction.

**Keywords** Religious sisters · Work identity · I-positions · Happy and committed/subjugated workers

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## Introduction

The construction of identity consists of a multiplicity of I-positions<sup>1</sup> that is ongoing (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010) and is shaped by different identity markers including gender, culture, formal and informal structures such as family, friends, work and religion (Matchinske 1998). In this regard, Catholic religious sisters, who are a cohort of women that live the Church's consecrated life by committing their entire lives to the service of God and others, in their narrative interviews, presented multiple conflicting work I-positions through which they construct personal and religious identity.

This paper draws from a doctoral thesis which explored how Roman Catholic religious sisters construct identity within the context of living religious life in the Church and in the wider Nigerian society. The sample population consists of 18 sisters from two religious congregations in Nigeria. The research tool used was narrative interview. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data collected. The results showed that the sisters have multiple contradicting I-positions through which they construct their work identity, reflecting self-positioning and self as positioned by others including the leaders in their various religious communities, priests and bishops. In discussing these findings, this paper argues that even though work is a fundamental aspect of the sisters' identity construction,<sup>2</sup> religious leaders need to be alarmed at the rate the participants used the discourse of exploited/subjugated workers to construct identity, which convey experiences similar to slavery. As a result, this paper recommends further research into exploring how work impacts on Catholic religious sisters' identity construction.

## Theoretical Framework

This is an interdisciplinary research which draws from theology of religious life the contextual background of 'who Catholic religious sisters are,' and dialogical self-theory that served as the conceptual framework through which the sisters' multiple work I-positions are examined and interpreted.

### Theology of Religious Life

Globally, the consecrated life of the Catholic Church is lived by men and women. This life form is marked by dedication of life of the faithful (in this particular case,

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<sup>1</sup> Dialogical self-theory uses I-positions to describe how individuals define themselves based on their personal experiences. These I-positions have both internal and external attributes. Its internal attributes reflect how the individual defines him/herself while the external is linked to how others define him/her. In this view, the individual's self-definition is a combination of both internal and external positions which might sometimes compliment or oppose each other.

<sup>2</sup> Present day religious life flows from the experiences of early Catholic Church Monastic lifestyle which strongly emphasizes the notion of '*Ora et Labora*' following in the Rule of Saint Benedict (c480–547). The expression '*Ora et Labora*' translated into English means 'work and pray' or 'pray and work' without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:13).

women) who feel ‘called by the Spirit’ to devote their entire life totally to God and to the service of others (PC 1).<sup>3</sup> The religious are ‘bonded to God’ through the evangelical counsels (vows) of consecrated celibacy (chastity), poverty and obedience, and they live in community (PC 1–2). The primary identity of every religious is modelled on the example of Christ as presented in the Gospels. In this way, the religious replicates the life of Christ in terms of developing an intimate relationship with God in which prayer and service (work) are integral parts of their personal and religious identity (CICLSAL 2008).<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, religious life is essentially focused on identity of prayer and service (work), reflecting the notion of *Ora et Labora* in imitation of Christ (PC 5).

However, it is important to note that every religious goes through initial and ongoing formation as ways of socialization into religious life and their various congregations. The initial stage of formation starts with pre-candidacy whereby the potential candidate begins to establish contact with a particular congregation of his/her choice. Through this contact the candidate may be accepted (admitted) to begin the initial formation program known as candidacy (postulancy) which normally last for a period of 6 months to 1 year depending on the need of the candidate. The candidacy program is the ‘probationary period’ which provides the congregation and the individual the opportunity to appraise his/her aptitude for membership (RC 564).<sup>5</sup> Usually, the candidates are under the direction of a mistress (a senior sister) appointed by the leadership of the congregation.

The next stage of formation is the novitiate. Religious life begins with the novitiate (Code of Canon Law 1983). The key purpose of the novitiate is to initiate the novice into the essential and primary requirements of religious life and also to prepare the candidate for the vows (evangelical counsels) of chastity, poverty and obedience which she will undertake later (RC 13). Primarily, the novitiate program includes study and meditation on the scriptures, instruction on the gospel ideal of charity, the evangelical counsels, and the principles of prayer, Christian asceticism and spirituality, and the relationship of apostolic action to contemplation and religious commitment. The novices are duly instructed into the particular spirituality (charism) of their various congregations (Romano 1989) and the cultural circumstances of mission territory, and of their country-of-origin (PC 3). Again, the novices are under the guidance of a mistress appointed by the leadership of the congregation. Successful novices are admitted to profess the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience and from thereon are recognized as temporary professed members of their congregations. After profession of the evangelical counsels, the religious begins the next stage known as scholasticate which is the stage of ongoing formation whereby the professed is expected to devote his/her time

<sup>3</sup> In this and subsequent citations, PC refers to Decree on the Up-To-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, October 28, 1965, found in Vatican II document edited by Flannery (1975).

<sup>4</sup> In this and subsequent citations, CICLSAL refers to Catholic Church document designed by the *Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*. This body directly supervises the present day Catholic Religious life and is located in the Vatican.

<sup>5</sup> In this and subsequent citations, RC refers to *Renovationis causam*, Instruction on the Renewal of Religious Life S.C.R.I. (1969), found in Vatican II document edited by Flannery (1975).

to the development of spiritual and temporal skills to equip him/her for mission (work). To this effect, Vatican II states:

The up-to-date renewal of institutes (religious congregations) depends very much on the training of the members. For this reason, non-clerical religious men and religious women should not be assigned to apostolic task immediately after the novitiate. Their religious, apostolic, doctrinal and technical training should, rather, be continued, as is deemed appropriate, in suitable establishments. They should also acquire whatever degrees they need (PC 553).

Consequently, the religious are meant to be duly equipped through education, be it doctrinal or technical, in order to complete the process of formation before they embark on apostolic tasks (mission), and as well profess the final profession of vows inaugurating them as permanent members of their religious congregations. In a nutshell, this is the socialization process every religious experiences in order to acquire the religious identity as members of their religious congregations and God's workers through the auspices of the Church. That notwithstanding, religious formation is also seen as a lifelong process that is ongoing in which the religious is expected to keep growing and adjusting to everyday demands of listening to what God is asking of him/her through every passing event of life, and through the voices of their religious leaders. Hence, no religious is considered to have passed the age of human and spiritual growth.

### Dialogical Self-Theory

Dialogical self-theory proposes identity as a multiplicity of I-positions (Hermans 2003; Hermans and Kempen 1993; Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). These I-positions emerge from dialogical relationships that are both personal and societal. Hence, the self through relationship with others and also with itself constructs 'who I am' and 'who I am becoming.' Accordingly, the self's I-positions are usually multi-voiced reflecting the internal and external positions/voices of the self. This multi-voicedness of the self is filled with contradictions, oppositions and differences as is found in the wider society in which the self is located (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). Nonetheless, an individual involved in the act of identity construction brings these different voices/positions into open dialogue within the self and with others and in the process is able to move toward, move away or even oppose positions/voices he/she agrees with or disagrees with (Hermans 2006; Hermans and Kempen 1993; Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). Hence, the act of self-construction is an ongoing negotiation process (Bakhtin 1981), whereby the self has the ability to integrate mutual and opposing voices/positions into a coherent self of 'who I am' leading to construction of unity-in-multiplicity (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). However, the use of conflicting I-positions to construct identity reflects instances of 'identity-in-difference' (Gregg 1991, p. 21) reflecting the prevalence of identity dilemmas, which portrays how the individual's multiplicity of I-positions mirror the self's accepted positions as well as rejected

positions. In this light, individuals have the capacity to construct identity using both accepted and rejected I-positions.

### **Catholic Women's Religious Life and the Nigerian Context**

Although Catholic religious life as a Christian reality started in Africa, precisely in Egypt (Battelli 1990; O'Murchu 1991) much of its contemporary expression today came to Nigeria through the advent of Christianity from the West at the wake of nineteenth century. Consequently, its history in Nigeria is relatively young, dating back to early twentieth century (Okure 2007). That notwithstanding, Nigerians have overwhelmingly embraced religious life as a meaningful way of life. To this effect, Pope John Paul II (1998) stridently acknowledged the country as having the highest number of Catholics as well as priests and religious in Africa. The 2010 Nigerian Conference of Women Religious National Directory lists a total of 54 religious communities living and working in the country. These religious are estimated to be above 5,000 in number including members of the consecrated life, societies of apostolic life as well as monastic communities (Mbonu 2014). This affirms the fact that Nigeria experiences a 'vocation boom in Africa' (Lefevere 2011, p. 1) with sisters scattered across the country and engaged in different kinds of apostolates (service/work) in the Church and the wider Nigerian society. Coincidentally, Lefevere's report covers the period this research was ongoing. The work the sisters do includes running schools at different levels such as nursery/primary, secondary (high school) and tertiary institutions, particularly in terms of training colleges and vocational schools (Eze 2013). In addition, some of the sisters are qualified as medical doctors, nurses, laboratory technicians, social workers, accountants, theologians, etc.

The Nigerian Catholic religious sisters' vocation boom compares sharply with the obvious diminishing number of entrants among religious women congregations in the USA including other Western nations (Ebaugh 1993; Ebaugh et al. 1996). The reality is that while the West experiences decline of vocation to religious life, Africa on the other hand experiences a rise in vocation which is described as 'booming.' Although it has been argued that social structural variables such as professionalism, economic empowerment and secularization significantly influence the rate at which women take up religious life (Ebaugh 1993; Ebaugh et al. 1996), the Nigerian context may provide a different picture. The Nigerian women despite the complexity of being marginalized (Ekejiuba 1991; Sator 1992) have come a long way to enjoy substantial socioeconomic development in the last three decades (Anugwom 2009; Okure 2014). For instance, ILO (1992) argues that women constitute about 7 million of Nigerian labor force. It is from this general population of women that religious life sources its members who participated in this study. In some cases, some of the sisters enter religious life with or without certification including high school certificate, first degree, masters' or a doctorate but in the course of being sisters those who needed professional training enjoy the privilege (Eze 2013). Hence, the Nigerian women who venture into religious life are a mixed group who are either substantially qualified or yet to be trained.

However, the Nigerian religious women experience conflict within the Church, particularly in reference to gender-based discrimination which may seem a universal phenomenon (Eze et al. 2013; Fiorenza 1996; Okure 2014). In this view, Okure (2014)<sup>6</sup> challenges the Church to review its past legislations that excluded women from active participation in the Church. She recommends that the Church implement the good intentions of Vatican II and all other post-conciliar documents and encyclicals of Popes which loudly affirm that women share equal dignity with men as children of God (*imago Dei*) both in the Church and the society at large. This may be likened to the argument that many women religious have raised regarding the varying undeserving treatments women have received in the Church. For example, Schneiders (2011, p. 22) argues that the Catholic religious sisters in the USA are compelled to experience their sense of self as ‘personae non grata’ (strangers) in the Church, particularly in the face of the Vatican ‘doctrinal assessment’ of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR).<sup>7</sup> In 2009, the *Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life* situated in the Vatican launched an ‘Apostolic Visit’ to LCWR which lasted till 2011. Although at the beginning of the visitation, Vatican expressed its interest to reflect concern for decreasing number of membership but Schneiders (2011) describes the visitation as having ‘misogynistic agenda’ in which LCWR’s cooperation were unsolicited. The Vatican, following the report of the visitation in 2012, announced that LCWR needs reformation and appointed Archbishop Sartain of Seattle as an ‘overseer’ of this reformation and to date there are still some contestations over what needs to be reformed (Coday 2014). This kind of visitation and its outcome marginalizes LCWR’s voices/interests positioning them as women in the Church who have no free space to be and it seems quite belittling, yet LCWR has contended with such treatment primarily because they perceive themselves as ‘in-house-critics’ who will not in the face of subordination abandon the Church they belong to. To this effect, it could be said that Nigerian women religious in spite of all odds perceive the Church as big enough to accommodate everyone; thus, they have resolved to stay in and contribute their quota toward the Church’s reformation (Okure 2014).

### Literature Review: Religious Sisters and Ministry (Work)

The Catholic Church uses the discourse of mission to describe the communitarian nature of religious life, whereby mission refers to the ministry (services) that the sisters render as ‘God’s workers’ through their various congregations and on behalf of the Church (CICLSAL 2007, 2008; PC 5–15). In the Church’s perspective, it is communion that begets mission based on the notion that the religious come together

<sup>6</sup> Professor Teresa Okure, SHCJ is a renowned Nigerian religious sister who delivered a talk at SECAM colloquium organized by the Church in Africa in honor of Popes John XXIII and John Paul II on occasion of their canonization held in Rome April 2014. Her talk was focused on ‘Women in the Church.’ Prof. Okure has been vocal in criticizing the Church’s patriarchal structure which hinders women’s equal participation.

<sup>7</sup> LCWR is the leadership conference of the major Catholic women religious congregations in the USA.

in companionship to bear witness to/for God, with the primary intention to serve others (Pope John Paul II 1996). *Lumen Gentium*, one of the documents of ‘Vatican Council II,’ describes the ministerial nature of religious life in the following way:

Let religious see well to it that the Church truly show forth Christ through them with ever-increasing clarity to believers and unbelievers...Christ in the contemplation on the mountain, or proclaiming the kingdom of God to the multitudes, or healing the sick and maimed and converting sinners to a good life, or blessing children and doing good to all men [women], always in obedience to the will of the Father who sent him (LG 46a)<sup>8</sup>.

From the Church’s point of view, the paradigm of work is a predominant identity for all religious. For example, Fox (2012) reporting on behalf of *The Catholic National Reporter* presented the picture of African religious sisters as hard workers, whose lives are marked by ‘effective and uncharacteristic generosity to the wider society’ as they play major roles ‘in pastoral, merciful and charitable services to humanity’ (p. 1). Equally, Sr. Kathleen Judge, a US sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet who had lived and worked in Peru for over 40 years in an interview described ministry as part of her ‘DNA make-up’ (Ryan 2012, p. 1). She presented herself as an educator who not only taught in the formal school setting but also engaged in setting up breakfast programs in order to feed ‘undernourished children’ (p. 2). In this way, work (ministry) is an essential aspect of her identity.

Similarly, Mangion (2005) presents women religious as a professional workforce in the name of the Church and their congregations. She argues that the sisters’ personal/religious identities are linked to the labor of active service in the fields of education, health care and social services which flows from the mission of their congregations and the Church. Additionally, Mangion (2008) in her doctoral thesis proposed three segments of work identity for the religious sisters. Firstly, she presented the women religious as developing identity through work, in which she described religious sisters as primarily involved in running schools, visiting parishioners and nursing the sick. Secondly, she identified the women religious as having a ‘working identity,’ wherein she portrayed the religious congregations of sisters as visible in the public sphere through the institutions they build, and in their interactions with students, patients, parishioners and Church leaders. Thirdly, she portrayed the women religious as having ‘corporate identities,’ in which she highlights how each congregation reinforced the production of work identity based on the founder’s ideals and objectives.

Although Mangion is referring to sisters’ experiences of the nineteenth century, it is still relevant to this study as religious sisters of the twenty-first century continuously take up similar work identity in constructing ‘who they are.’ For example, Global Sisters Report presented the story of Dominican Sr. Shelia Flynn, who works among the impoverished women of South Africa in developing sewing

<sup>8</sup> In this and subsequent citations, LG refers to Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964, found in Vatican II document edited by Flannery (1975).

and craft skills (Robertson 2014).<sup>9</sup> Equally, Mmana (2014) presents Malawian Sr. Emma Kulombe as an indefatigable worker who has run the deaf/blind center for children since 2007. In her narrative, Sr. Emma remarks that she finds fulfillment working with these children, whose parents in the Malawian context are ready to disown them. In this regard, she positions herself, and as well was positioned by Mmana's story as a joyful worker. Likewise, Coffey (2014) argues that religious sisters continue to provide educational services to adults who have missed childhood education. Interestingly, contemporary religious sisters in spite of devoting their time and energy to carrying out traditional ministry of the Church also challenge some of their institutional religious precepts and engage in feminist-based transformative strategies to effect change both within and outside the Roman Catholic Church (Gervais 2012). In this light, Brock (2010) presents Australian/New Zealand nuns (sisters) as resisting the dominant discursive construction of nuns as self-sacrificing, which among other things include deciding and defining the kind of work they do. However, such resistance defines the nuns as deviants, but it does not stop them from exercising their personal agency through self-determination.

Conversely, Fahey's (1982) thesis presented Irish Catholic religious sisters as unskilled laborers. Fahey describes the sisters' ministry as 'caring for and training children, caring for the sick, attendants and comforters rather than technical experts' (p. 154 cited in Mangion 2005). Fahey's presentation of sisters as unskilled laborers has been criticized as reflecting widespread gender-based misconceptions of viewing women's work as centered on care and nurture (Reuther 1995). This Catholic Church gender-based misconception of women has been criticized as reproducing 'misogynistic agenda' in which the male is used as normative (Fiorenza 1983; Küng 2001; Okure 2010). As a result, Catholic religious sisters are not only excluded from the Church's leadership positions but also are expected to be submissive to the Church hierarchy in terms of allowing the male-dominated leadership to organize and run their lives (Brock 2010; Reid 2002). To this effect, Okure (2010) criticizes the Church's hierarchy as having pyramid features in which the bishops and priests, who occupy the top places dominate and control others at the bottom including the religious sisters, leading to the sisters' continual struggle to redefine 'who they are.' In this light, Leung and Wittberg (2004) reported that Chinese sisters in the face of patriarchal structures both within Chinese society and the Church relinquish power and authority to bishops and older priests as controllers of their convent life. Accordingly, the sisters are presented as 'vulnerable' in the hands of Bishops who construct them as 'extensions of the diocesan working team' (p. 76). In spite of that, there are multiple opinions that describe Catholic religious sisters as resisting the Church's dominant construction of them as self-sacrificing and subject to male domination (Brock 2010; Reid 2002). Therefore, religious sisters continue to grapple with the issues of re-defining 'who they are' and 'ought to be.'

On the whole, 'work' is presented as an essential identity marker for the religious sisters, and appropriately the religious sisters who participated in this research

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<sup>9</sup> Global Sisters Report is a recent project of National Catholic Reporter that engages in disseminating story about what Catholic religious sisters do.



explicitly maintained that work is an intrinsic aspect of their identity. However, the literature also portrayed that the religious sisters sometimes encounter conflict in the Church in terms of how gender has been used to define what sisters as women should do and what priests as men also do.

## Methods and Participants

As part of a doctoral thesis examining Catholic religious sisters' identity construction within the space of living religious life in the Church and the wider Nigerian society, this article draws upon qualitative data collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between January and July of 2010. The interview sessions were held at the participants' convenient places, sometimes in their offices or community space. The interviews lasted from 45 mins to 1 h at most. The participants in this study consisted of 18 Catholic sisters drawn from two religious congregations: the Daughters of Divine Love, which started off as a diocesan congregation but at present has gained pontifical status. Being a diocesan congregation means that its foundation began in Nigeria, but today membership has spread to include sisters from other nations. The other congregation is the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, an international congregation whose foundation started in England, and has spread to America and Africa. The two congregations share a common canonical status in the sense that they are both affiliated to Rome representing Catholic religious active contemplative life which comes under the supervision of the *Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life* situated in the Vatican. Both congregations are classified as living the Church's apostolic life in which case their members are engaged in active service to God and humanity under the auspices of the Church. In as much as 18 participants seem small in terms of the Nigerian vocation boom, the strength of qualitative research focuses on in-depth study of the phenomenon under investigation. Consequently, single cases can be used. The aged range of the participants was 30–60 as reflected in the Table 1.

The sampling technique employed was purposive, whereby participation was restricted to Roman Catholic religious sisters in Nigeria (Trochim 2006; Patton 2006). This involves non-probability sampling which entails that selection of participants is not determined by statistical principle of randomness (Durrheim and Painter 2006). The participants were rather invited through letter and personal contact after the official gatekeeper permission had been obtained from their

**Table 1** Demographic characteristics of the participants

Participants	Daughters of divine love	Society of the holy child jesus	Participants' age
Temporary professed	3	3	30–35
Finally professed	3	3	30–50
Leaders: superiors/formators	3	3	35–60

congregational leadership. Some others were invited to participate through snowball sampling wherein participants were invited through other participants. All the participants are Nigerians though drawn from across the country, and participation was voluntary. There is variation among the participants in terms of professionalism: Some hold teacher's degree certificate (including those without certification), medical certificate either as nurses, laboratory technicians or medical doctors, while some are trained social and pastoral workers. However, selection was inclusive of the different categories of sisters who live religious life in terms of temporary and finally professed including leaders such as superiors/formators. This kind of selection was to ensure that information-rich cases are included acting as boost for validity and reliability of the narratives (Patton 1990).

### Data Analysis

The 18 participants' interview narratives constituted the data set consulted for this research analysis. Interpretative thematic analysis was engaged (Braun and Clarke 2006) with the aim of deconstructing the meaning participants are making out of their lived experiences (Boyatzis 1998; Ulin et al. 2002). The initial coding of the data was based on the various themes the participants presented, whereby the frequency of occurrence was used as normative for re-reading and inclusion. For the purpose of this paper, the participants' work related I-positions are engaged toward identifying the themes used for analysis indicating how the participants position themselves and are as well positioned by others, reflecting the mutual and opposing (dilemmas) work I-positions.

### Reflexivity

The first and third authors are religious sisters as such they are researchers with both an insider's and outsider's voice (Pillow 2003). This has both merits and demerits. From the merit point of view, it allowed them easy access with the gatekeepers and also facilitated the position of co-construction as they could easily identify with some of the issues the participants presented (Riessman 2008). On the demerit side, the subjective positioning could influence the data collected, but this was addressed by keeping a research journal to record issues arising from the researchers' subjective point of view (Heron 2005). For example, we could identify with the participants' experiences of humiliation in relation to the Church's male-dominated leadership which undermine women's service as unimportant and/or not valued. Initially, this identification raised feelings of anger; however, the recording of the research journal and further discussion of these issues with the third co-author helped to eliminate any biases.

### Findings and Discussion

The participants' narratives presented three dominant 'work identity' themes as follows: imitators of Christ-like identity, identity of subjugated workers and

gendered work-ordered identity. These themes reflect the mutual and opposing I-positions which the participants engaged in constructing ‘who they are,’ and ‘are becoming.’ Accordingly, the discussion in this section will focus on these.

### Imitators of Christ-Like Identity

The majority of the participants constructed themselves as duplicating Christ’s identity in the sense that they follow Christ’s example of caring for others. In this light, they present the services they render to one another in the community as integral aspects of their work identity. For instance, one participant aged 60 asserts that they joyfully render numerous services for/to one another:

You know there was something, something we called “*itu flower*” that’s a way of practical charity and prayer which we joyfully embark on. There was the fetching of water...washing of clothes, you know, sweeping corners... praying together...

This participant presents a list of what the sisters do for one another which she describes as an act of ‘*itu flower*’ in her Igbo language. Literally, *itu flower* means to spread flowers but metaphorically in this context, it represents act of practical charity in her own expression (LG 46a), which entails fetching of water, washing and ironing clothes as well as praying together. All these work activities summed up to the description of them as active laborers not only to others but also to themselves (Fox 2012). Relatively, she presents the argument that charity begins at home; in other words, they can only be of service to humanity after they have exchanged communal services with one another which now strengthen them to serve others. Accordingly, she used the I-position of ‘we-as-charitable’ to convey their expression of service rendered to one another. Besides, they are some of the participants who emphasized that commitment to doing ‘God’s work’ is part of their work identity as imitators of Christ. In this regard, one participant aged 38 says that:

The life of a religious is a life of commitment to God’s call, to God’s service ...life of availability to answer the call wherever God calls ... and share God’s love with other people...

This participant presented the religious as one who is passionate to serve God and others (LG 46a, Mangion 2005, 2008). In other words, they are full of zeal for the service of God and others; as such the religious aspire to imitate Christ’s identity of doing ‘God’s work’ anywhere and everywhere (Mmana 2014; Ryan 2012). Notably, she argues that the religious’ act of working for God transcends space and time; thus, it is a position that overwhelmingly consumes the religious irrespective of space and time (PC 1–2). Consequently, the participant’s dominant I-position is ‘I-as available to share God’s love with other people,’ which could be extended to ‘I-as-committed to doing God’s will’ (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). Another participant aged 48 highlights that part of doing God’s will is linked to duplicating Christ’s values which prompt their daily decision to work for God:

In terms of Christ's values, it is clear that Christ didn't joke with prayer. Prayer was his anchor point and service; he was always doing-doing-doing, feeding people, healing people, caring for people, loving people, reaching out to people. You see our life is about service, serving one another and all others we interact with. You cannot do without serving others: being present to others, that is what religious life is all about.

Again, this participant's I-position is focused on reproducing 'Christ-like identity,' reflecting a list of I-positions such as 'I-as-serving others,' 'I-as-loving others' and 'I-as-reaching out to others'. This participant's definition of a religious emerges from both internal and external positioning. In this sense, her description is part of her subjective understanding as well as communal orientation as she describes it as 'our life is about service.' Basically, all these I-positions entail committing one's entire life to God's employment of serving others (CICLSAL, 2008). Fundamentally, this participant's construction reflect the core traditional identity of religious life as focusing on 'Ora et Labora,' that act of following in the footsteps of Christ-like identity of selflessly reaching out to others (LG 46a), which the majority of the participants say makes them happy. Accordingly, one participant aged 35 maintains that she is happy sharing God's love by sharing her time with others:

I was working at the bookshop and ... people will expect that my joy was that I was making profit... I was rather happier that I was in contact with the people. I don't know, most of the time...the bookshop is crammed... it is not that they all came to buy books. Some will just come and sit down and chat. Some will come to say, 'Sister, look at what happened to me today,' little children they were there...some people that were working there in the Church: the cleaners, the gardeners and sometimes their children will come. If they have any assignment from school or homework they will bring it. I was sharing God's love and I felt good!

This participant's I-position was constructed around 'I-as a happy worker' or 'I-as-a-joyful worker' who creates the space for others to share their concern (Mangion 2008; Fox 2012; Ryan 2012). Clearly, this participant indicates that she finds fulfillment in the work she does (Mmana 2014). However, the experience is not always the same for all the participants; there are some participants who vacillate between positioning themselves as happy workers and being positioned as exploited workers by the leaders of their religious institute, particularly by superiors, formators and senior/older sisters. For instance, this participant aged 40 reflects on her struggles of holding-on to her conviction that her commitment is fixated at doing God's work:

A student was very sick...about 7:30 pm and some students rushed to the convent to call sisters. I ran out to see what the situation was and when I got there. I really saw that truly a student was really sick. So, I rushed back to the house and picked the car key and I ran out. But, then I remembered that oh! I have not said anything to the superior so I went back. I went to her and said, 'Oh! Sister, a student is very sick and I think she needs medical attention.' She asked, so where am I going? I said I am taking the girl to the hospital but she

said, ‘NO, where is the principal?’ I have to go look for the principal. She said that I should drop the car key. Well! I stood there and looked at her and I went out and you know, I took the girl to the hospital... three days after my superior brought the issue up. She said ‘YOU are the youngest in this community and a temporary professed but you are just disobedient. I said, don’t go and you went’. I said well, I agreed that I was disobedient...but I am very happy that I was able to save the girl’s life.

Firmly, this participant opted to defy the superior’s instruction to drop the car key and not take the sick girl to the hospital. Probably, this participant felt oppressed by the superior’s commanding instruction for her to drop the car key. In response, she resisted the superior’s command in her bid to assert her position as God’s worker rather than a slave who is told what to do at all time. In this context, religious life which ought to facilitate charity rather hinders it (LG 46a). Therefore, she positioned herself not only as charitable and generous in serving humanity (Fox 2012) but also as determined in resisting the voice that constructs her as a compliant worker who ought to do whatever the superior asks (Brock 2010). Her self-positioning reflects the ideal work identity of bearing witness to God (Pope John Paul II, 1996), which reflects the position of ‘I-as-saving a girl’s life.’ Ideally, the religious engage with services that promote and proclaim God’s kingdom; therefore, every religious, particularly leaders need to loathe the conflicted position of forcing others to do otherwise, if not the religious may run the risk of experiencing work as sources of alienation.

### Participants’ Construction of Identity as Subjugated Workers

The results showed that the participants used the discourse of subjugation to construct their ‘work identity’ particularly in relationship to the demands of work coming from their leaders of religious life. In this context, many of the participants in spite of presenting themselves as joyful, hardworking and productive also maintained that they feel suppressed and/or exploited by leaders of religious life, who position them as subordinate workers with little or no time for other things including self-care but work. In this way, the participants claim that their leaders give extreme attention to work in disregard of every other aspect of their life. For example, one participant aged 32 said: ‘in my community all that matter is work to the point that nobody cares even if you are sick.’ Another participant aged 36 in supporting this view expressed that:

Oh! In my community we have no time for any other thing other than work; we find it hard to attend activities such as area sisters’ meeting or diocesan celebrations because we are working.

For this participant, work becomes the predominant I-position, such as ‘I-as-neglecting to attend area sisters’ meeting’ because of having too much work to do. In fact, she went as far as constructing all other sisters in the same way, when she said, ‘in my community we have no time for any other thing ...’ She presents work

as dominating everything they do, indicating that there is too much work to be done leading to the reflection of work as an ‘abuse’ whereby majority of the participants perceive themselves as misused or/and overused workers. The result is that a great number of the participants used the expression of ‘I-as-a-worn-out worker’ to construct identity which reflects the participants’ identity dilemmas of integrating the mutual and opposing I-positions. Holding such view, one participant aged 45 observes:

You see somebody going to work as early as 7 a.m and you are coming back to the house around 6:00 pm or after 7:00 pm. You-don’t-do-your Bible reading or spiritual reading or exercise...

This participant describes the busy work schedule of religious life as a source of hindrance preventing them from attending to their spiritual growth such as reading the Bible and taking care of one’s self. This participant seems to be torn between two poles: ‘I-as-a-busy worker’ versus ‘I-as-a-religious who neglects her spiritual life’ depicting what Gregg (1991) describes as ‘identity-in-difference.’ In this case, the participant remarks in subtle ways how work demands impact on her self-care, particularly in keeping up with her religious demands of prayer such as reading the Bible and other spiritual readings. Therefore, this participant presents work as an oppressive experience which she has to grapple with. In other words, work is no longer a joyful expression of commitment to God but rather a source of captivity that smothers every other space. In view of this experience, work becomes a means of imprisonment; introducing the idea of slavery for which some of the participants blame their leaders as lacking organizational skills for establishing appropriate work orientation. Accordingly, one participant aged 50 says that:

In religious life, one of the things that is not well taken care of is the apostolate (work). Our leaders have a long way to go. I see myself working from morning till night. It is very strenuous and it saps so much energy from me that I hardly find time to pray or to concentrate in doing some other things that my heart longs to do. I don’t find so much happiness in such a job and I think it affects the quality of service I give...

This participant reiterates that work dominates her life as a religious. In addition, she emphasized that work has been given unilateral attention by religious life leadership. In this regards, she maintained that work need to be appropriately organized to give room for the religious to do other things ‘that my (their) heart longs to do.’ The concern regarding these other things that the religious may long to do may include issues of finding a balance between work and prayer (including self-care) as has been remarked by some of the participants. By identifying this need for better work organization, this participant acknowledges that the onus falls on their leaders to foster suitable work expression. However, she moans that her lived experience of work is surrounded by the predicament of being aware that her commitment to God seems opposed by her commitment to work, thereby placing her in extreme dilemma of letting work dominate her sense of commitment and self-care. Consequently, she defines herself as a religious who is not finding happiness in the work she does leading to poor quality delivery of services. The experience of

work as exploitation is reflected in her use of words such as ‘saps,’ ‘strenuous’ and ‘wearisome’ at the expense of commitment and happiness. In this sense, work is viewed as sources of subjugation, if not imprisonment. Her argument portrays the need for the religious to have a dialogue with the conflicted positions of ‘I-as a committed worker’ versus ‘I-as an exploited worker.’

Furthermore, some of the participants adduced that their expertise skills are sometimes neglected by their leaders when assigning them to different apostolates (work). In this context, the participants claim that some of their leaders disrespect their various professional skills when sending them to mission (work). The participants expressed that this kind of experience is demeaning and make them feel suppressed and compelled to compromise their professional skills. In this way, they present themselves as subjugated workers who are totally controlled by their leaders. One participant aged 46 explicitly portrays her plight:

I am a trained Music teacher but when I was sent to one of our communities to teach Music in a school that we run, the superior changed it...she said that I should teach CRK (Christian Religious Knowledge). I had to accept that, even though I found it very difficult because I don't understand why I cannot teach Music which I studied. When I met with my spiritual director she said ‘okay since you have accepted it ... accept it with love.’ That advice I took! I used my music skills to dramatize the teaching of CRK. Eventually the students began to enjoy the subject and they performed excellently even in external exams ... that was the first time the students started making A's in CRK ...

This participant's professional identity as a Music teacher is disrespected by the superior who compelled her to teach CRK. She integrated her musical skills into teaching the CRK which enable her to achieve brilliant results (Hermans and Kempen 1993). Her self-construction is multifaceted in the sense that she was able to combine different I-positions, such as ‘I-as a music teacher’ and ‘I-as a subservient CRK teacher,’ who is brilliant in producing excellent results because I used musical skills to teach CRK (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). These two I-positions portray the tensions and dilemmas she encounters within the context of living religious life. On the one hand, she had to give up her professional identity, but on the other hand, she gained recognition as a brilliant teacher who could juxtapose professional skills in order to achieve excellence. Another participant aged 36, who re-echoed similar experience described how her personal ability was disregarded when the superior sent her to go and teach Mathematics. Here, she says:

I think it was four days to my profession, the provincial (superior) called me and said, ‘Z, I think you are very good in mathematics.’ I said sister, ‘mathem: what? I don't know  $1 + 1$ ’, but she said, ‘yeah, that they need a mathematics teacher’. I said, ‘Sister, I can't manage Mathematics but English I can cope with.’ She said, ‘no ... you could read that up and all of that ...’ Anyway I didn't want to argue too much over the phone, I said, ‘fine ... whatever you people think I could do, then I will try...’

This participant describes how she took the risk of teaching Mathematics even when she has no expert knowledge or interest in the subject. As a result, her predominant

self-construction becomes ‘I-as an unskilled mathematics teacher.’ Aptly, she was cowed into teaching mathematics, and this kind of experiences fosters the notion of slavery whereby the participants are controlled, having no active contribution to the decision made about their work life. In this context, they are constrained to do whatever the leaders say. However, there are some participants who in spite of defining themselves as cooperating in subjugating their voices/interests after a while begin to revolt and oppose the voices that construct them as such. For instance, one participant aged 45 indicated that she resisted being positioned as a subjugated worker:

In the community project, I worked at different sessions including the primary school, and the pharmacy ... but one day the sister in-charge of the clinic requested that they needed more hands at the cashier desk ... so I was asked to go and help out there but not long after that, she started complaining... She said they were closing earlier; now they are closing late ... the implication is that I was not working hard enough. I was sent back to the school and I gladly left. Shortly after that she started complaining again that she needed me back. One day after school, the superior said to me, ‘see if you can go and help out,’ I said, ‘Sister I am not going back there,’ and then she tried to explain. I said, ‘Sister both of us saw what happened... I was not productive, so there is no point me going back there.’ Up till that time, I was missioned (sent) to the clinic, I had no problem, I went and worked in the clinic, then back to the school ... and now you’re asking me to come back ha:ha I think, I have had enough of the disgrace.

Explicitly, this participant portrays how she has been cooperative in subjugating her own voice/interest by following the dictates of the superior, who sent her to work in the different sections of the congregational project. But after a while, when she felt she cannot cooperate any longer because she felt humiliated, she resisted (Hermans 2006). Her humiliation was conveyed in her expression of the feeling of ‘disgrace’ within the context of constant unsolicited transfer and subsequent rejection by the sister in charge of the pharmacy who in her opinion defines her as not productive. Possibly, she used the word ‘disgrace’ for a number of reasons which may include a sense of shame at being treated as a ‘ductile worker,’ who could be floated around different work sections. Her use of the word ‘disgrace’ could also be an expression of the feeling of disrespect at being treated as an unimportant or background worker who is a ‘jack of all trade,’ meaning that she can do so many things but not really skilled in any, therefore can be used and discarded anytime. In a subtle way, this kind of positioning reflects the gender-based depiction of religious sisters as unimportant and controlled workers of the Church as is presented in the next section.

### **The Gender Order of the Participants’ Work Identity**

The results also revealed that religious sisters’ identity construction is structured by gender. In relation to gender, the participants strongly opined that men are



positioned as superior to women; as such the priests/bishops on the grounds of gender are constructed as superior to sisters, who are positioned as subordinates. As a result, the participants present themselves as persons struggling to have access to the Church's public work space as well as being recognized alongside priests and bishops as people called by God to serve in the Church (Brock 2010; Okure 2014; Reid 2002). Holding such view, one participant aged 60 explains that gender determines who does what:

There is one of their (Church) hospital that we (sisters) are managing...and just about three weeks ago they (the Catholic diocese; headed by bishop) were saying that the matron (sister) will no longer be the matron, just like that. The sister, who was serving as matron was sacked, then this other sister, who is the administrator was asked to become the matron while the reverend father becomes the administrator... He did not go to any school for hospital management...

In this extract, a Catholic Bishop has used gender as basis to determine who does what. Although religious sisters might have higher qualifications in comparison with some priests, they are positioned as inferior workers on the grounds of gender, particularly when they work in Church's run hospitals. In this context, being a male is the normative (Fiorenza 1983; Küng 2001; Okure 2010), nullifying competence. The dismissal of the matron duly portrays that the priest is privileged over sisters. As Schneiders (2011, p. 22) puts it, religious sisters are meant to feel their sense of self as 'personae non grata' (strangers) who are not accepted and valued in the Church they serve and belong to. In this context, religious sisters could outwit the priests in terms of academic qualifications, yet they are subjected to the subordinate position based on their gender as women. Similarly, another participant aged 50 portrays the conflict she encounters in her ministry as gender based:

I served as 'Assistente Paroissiale.' It's someone who assists, you work in the parish on full time basis, but you're not the assistant parish priest but you collaborate with the priest. I did all the work: catechist, secretariat, counselling and one Sunday in the evening we were having a programme and the priest said we must leave because he is going to say requiem Mass for a family for their deceased but I said that he should let us finish. But the priest didn't like it... Then on the following Sunday his homily was on "Sister who thinks she knows it all and acts as the parish priest... So that day, after Mass I went to my office and packed all the documents: the registers, the files, everything and drop them on his table...and I told him to start doing all those things... I said, 'Father, the Catholic Church has not started ordaining women so I am not a priest. Now everything you think I am doing... I am sorry you can continue, 'do your work.'

This participant argues that on the basis of gender, the priest has positioned her as not having access to the Church's public work space reflecting the tension women encounter not only in the Church but the society at large (Brock 2010; Okure 2014; Reid 2002). In this context, her argument portrays the reality that as a woman she is excluded from sharing active working space in the Church with the priest; thus, she

should not construct herself as a collaborator but rather as a subordinate who takes order from the priest (Coday 2014). In this sense, she is expected to learn to accept that the priest for the mere fact of being a male holds the power to dictate for her when/how to serve (Leung and Wittberg 2004). In other words, the priest gives direction and the religious sister ought to obey otherwise must be cowed to that subordinate position of being reminded that she is a religious sister not a priest, nor a member of the Church's hierarchy. Somehow this is reflective of the Church's 'misogynistic agenda' of viewing women as second to men (Fiorenza 1983; Küng 2001; Okure 2010). However, this participant refused to be a passive worker, whom the priest dictates the boundary to. Systematically, she presents her resistance by first asking for extra time to roundup the activity instead of being shoved off as an intruder. When the priest took the power of the pulpit to remind her that she is not a priest, by inventing that rhetoric of a 'sister who thinks she knows it all and acts as the parish priest,' she responded by boycotting work. By returning all the Church documents in her care to the priest and eventually boycotting work, this participant not only confidently but also assertively expressed her displeasure at being positioned as insignificant or background worker who ought to do what the priest says. In this way, she asserts her self-worth as a valued worker and demands that the priest recognizes her as such (Brock 2010; Fiorenza 1983; Reid 2002; Okure 2014). The discriminations she experiences are reflective of the dilemmas women religious encounter in the Church and in most cases they have to develop strategies of engagement for making their voices heard (Brock 2010; Fiorenza 1983; Reid 2002; Okure 2014). In similar ways, there are some participants who reported that some priests think that because they are males, and then sisters as females are servants who are meant to serve them. In this regard, one participant aged 35 says:

Religious women are regarded as nothing, that even a priest told us that our function is to be working in the parish house—cooking for him, mopping his rooms, you know, just like house help, you know. That is what we are supposed to be doing...

This participant indicates that some priests position sisters as domestic workers simply on the basis of gender. In this context, this priest constructed sisters as inferior to priests who have the privilege to be served (Leung and Wittberg 2004). Consequently, being male is a superior position which the priest uses as an advantage to discredit the sisters against the equality that men and women share as children of God (*imago Dei*) (Okure 2010). Therefore, the participants are constructed as designated to doing household chores leading them to experience their sense of self as 'strangers' if not 'insignificant' in the Church they serve and belong to (Schneiders 2011). It is anticipated that the Church, particularly the male Church needs to resist the act of using past legislations that undermine women to construct 'who they think women are' (Okure 2014). Women deserve to be equal participants with men in the Church and the society at large and should not, in any way, be constructed as unimportant or slave of anyone. Women have a right of place in the Church as much as men do. Basically, the Catholic Church hierarchy represented by men need to explore an inclusive way of collaborating with women particularly religious sisters, who also are living the consecrated life of the Church.

The Church is big enough to accommodate everyone; thus, no one should be sidelined.

## Conclusion

The participants' narrative voice presented a multiplicity of I-positions reflecting self-positioning and self as positioned by others. These I-positions that the sisters presented fluctuate between 'I-as happy/committed worker' versus 'I-as subjugated/subservient worker' reflecting the dilemmas of identity construction. Definitely, their self-presentation portrays contradictions, oppositions and differences which according to dialogical self-theory are intrinsic aspects of a healthy functioning self (Hermans 2003; Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). However, the many instances of their constructing themselves as subjugated workers should be a source of concern for leaders of religious life and the Catholic Church in general. The notion of subjugated workers present religious life work identity as a form of oppression reflecting multifaceted dimensions, representing the notion of how work dominate every other aspects of their religious life particularly in the area of prayer and self-care. Another area of oppression is expressed in the gender-based stereotype of perceiving sisters' work as less important and on this basis should be carried out in the background not within the Church's public space as when compared to the priests' work. Therefore, this paper calls the attention of religious leaders to address such animosity. To do so, there is need to organize conferences/seminars where the religious could dialogue on how they experience ministry (work) and its impact on their construction of self.

In addition, there is a need for further research toward understanding the religious work identity particular as this present research focused only on two religious congregations. The mere act of drawing sample from two religious congregations particularly in the context of Nigerian Catholic religious vocation boom serves as sources of limitation which can be overcome by widening the sample scope. Probably, further research with a wider population of sisters and even beyond Nigeria will go a long way to surface interesting findings with deeper understanding of how work impact on Catholic religious sisters' identity construction. Consequently, this study and further studies will prompt the religious, particularly the women religious to keep in the forefront issues that concern them as well as be in the best position to make changes where it is most needed.

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