

THE LEADERSHIP ROLE OF WOMEN IN SELECTED CHURCH DENOMINATIONS OF KABWE DISTRICT, ZAMBIA

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Abstract

The study examined the leadership role of women in the church in Zambia, with reference to the views of adherents of different churches in Kabwe District. Using case study design, the study examined the adherents' views from the contemporary Christian perspective, based on the following principles that are relevant to the current status of women: since every individual is infinitely worth in the sight of God, humans should demonstrate respect for all persons, seek to create a social order in which neither laws nor customs should sanction any form of injustice; whatever may be the norm in the social order, in the Christian fellowship there should be no discrimination on the basis of sex, and all persons have the right and the responsibility to mature as individuals, to develop their own potential and to use their talents to the fullest extent possible. Basing on these principles, the study was carried out and data was collected, using qualitative methods, from 20 respondents. The study established that in Kabwe District, the leadership role of women in the church was a crucial issue. In the Roman Catholic Church, for example, women were ineligible for ordination to the priesthood. Though the sentiments gathered from the majority of the participants favoured women ordination in the Catholic Church, the situation was not likely to change in the near future. This was the same scenario among the protestant churches. In Pentecostal churches, however, the converse applied; most of the denominations, such as Bread of Life, accepted women as pastors. The study concluded that the church in Kabwe District remained predominantly patriarchal as far as distribution of roles on gender basis was concerned. An equitable application of gender equality within the church was yet to be realised.

Keywords: *Role of women, leadership, Church*

Introduction

The current situation on the status of women in Zambia, just like elsewhere in the world, has been a crucial matter and a subject of debate among different scholars (Simpson, 2017; Bird, J. 2017). In Kabwe District, such debate has not spared the church which of late, has witnessed the advocacy for women's rights in religious matters slowly taking a centre stage. This study, therefore, investigated the current situation on the status of women in the churches in Kabwe District. It sought to establish the views of adherents drawn from different church denominations within the district on the issue of women assuming leadership roles in the

church. The study further examined how the church incorporated the gender factor when allocating leadership positions to the congregants.

Conceptual Framework

We used the term church to refer to all the Christian denominations in Kabwe District that formed the sample of the study, that is, the Catholic Church, Seventh Day Adventist (SDA), New Apostolic Church, Reformed Church in Zambia, Bread of Life International, Deeper Life Bible Church and the Church of Christ.

In the Bible, the key verse in understanding the role of women and their importance in the eyes of God is Galatians 3:28 which reads: “There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male nor female, for ye all are one man in Christ Jesus”. The background here is that in Jesus’ day, there were sharp distinctions among people by which they looked upon each other as inferior or superior and, because of these differences, separated themselves from each other. These differences included religious backgrounds (such as Jew and Greek), special status (Slave and slave owner), or sex (male and female). The Apostle Paul wrote that none of these mattered as far as individual worth was concerned. He did not mean that when one became a Christian he or she ceased to be a man or a woman, a slave or a free man, a Jew or a Gentile. None of these, however, should cause separation, because all are of equal preciousness in Christ Jesus (Bird, 2017). This being the case, there should be no distinction in the allocation of leadership positions in the church.

Literature Review

The subordination of women in contemporary societies is supported by the weight of long religious traditions. For example, in an ancient morning prayer, Orthodox Jewish men said, “Praised be God that he has not created me a Gentile; praised be God that he has not created me a woman; praised be God that he has not created me an ignorant man.” With regard to Christianity, it is doubtful if all Christians understand Paul’s statement to women that they should “obey” their husbands (Ephesians 5:21). Some Christians actually try to soften this chapter and verse by using alternative translations (Crook 2013: 195).

Crook further referred to the vow made at marriage ceremonies, where ministers ask the bride to make a promise to “obey” her husband. He says in such ceremonies, the minister asks, “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?” The bride’s father usually responds, “I do.” The

bride is then handed over to the groom. Crook uses this example to show how women have been regarded as properties of men, and the extent to which they have been expected to obey their husbands (Ibid). Crook also asserts that in many countries although statistics show that the number of females is slightly larger than that of males, their status still falls much lower than that of their male flock. This gives an indication that women are still marginalised to a large extent.

Additionally, Crook (2013: 195) viewed women to fit in the category of minority group, where he defines the term *minority group* as “a subordinate segment of society, conscious of being a distinct group without having chosen that status and assumed to have certain physical and cultural traits by which they are identified “

Crook (2013) also assessed the images of women in terms of the roles assigned to them by the family and society in general. He observed that human beings were usually classified by age, race, ethnicity, sex, marital status, occupation and religion, among others. Conversely, individuals are expected to act in a given way. Pressure is placed on individuals to conform to societal expectations. Crook (Ibid) contended, “By the same token, we expect women to fit a specific profile”.

Though there have been changes in the status of women in most societies today, the gender stereotype has remained substantially the same. Nearly four decades ago, an American woman Dekard (1975) stated that women were stereotyped as “emotionally rather than logical,” “passive and dependent,” “naturally mothers,” and “naturally subordinate to the male”. The stereotype was perpetuated in the home, in the schools, in television programmes and movies, in literature for children and adults, and even in the church. According to Deckard television programmes taught children that girls played with the dolls and boys played with guns, that girls could cry but boys could not, that girls should be pretty and boys strong. Deckard (1975) added that the programmes also taught children that women were free to work outside the home if they wished provided they could arrange for the care of their children, and that men had to work to take care of their families. This set a pattern for home life that presumed that housework was a woman’s province and that yard work was a man’s responsibility.

Observing that such stereotyping was costly for men as for women, Deckard described the stereotypical male as “aggressive, emotionally impassive, self-sufficient, athletic, brave in the

face of danger, a natural leader, and competent at any task defined as masculine. Commenting on the pressure for men to succeed, she observed, “While to men women are sex objects, men are frequently success objects to women. Because career success is defined as central to masculinity in our society, men often sacrifice all other values in pursuing it”.

Another scholar Wallace (1985) outlined what she considered to be the “underlying beliefs” about gender in society. First, there were natural differences in which men were strong, decisive, competitive, and not very emotional; women, by contrast, were smaller, softer, prettier, emotional, and poorly equipped to deal with the fierce competition in the business world. Second, God gave men the right to command and women the right to be protected by men. Third, men’s characteristics pushed them into the public sphere, whereas women’s characteristics required them to concentrate on the private realm and limited their public activities to matters that were secondary, short-lived, and relatively unimportant. Fourth, work for wages was the primary responsibility of men, and only as secondary responsibility of women.

Fifth, Wallace (1985) asserted that romantic love was the ultimate bond between a man and a woman. To win this kind of love, women should be physically attractive and men should be strong, assertive and successful in work. Sixth, for men, education was directly related to work, being their chief role in life. For women, however, whose chief interest was marriage and the home, education aimed at “a set of useful and secondary relevancies”.

Even in the fading years of the twentieth century, the stereotype appeared to be the same. A study that was done in 1995 in the United States of America by the Hunter College Women’s Studies Programme, for instance, identified the following five images of women that appeared in many cultures around the world:

- i. “ Frightening females,” the image of women as evil, dangerous and powerful
- ii. “ Venerated *madonas*,” the representation of women as self-sacrificing, pure, and content
- iii. “Sex objects,” the focus on women as instruments for male sexual gratification
- iv. “Earth mothers,” the idea that women are closer to nature than men, and therefore consigned to a lower status
- v. “ Misbegotten Man,” the image that emphatically denies women a place in culture, because we are neither threats, saints, sex objects, nor earth mothers; we simply are not there,”

While the authors did not give exclusive attention to the status of women in a particular nation, they did view these images as operating in every society, the Zambian society inclusive. Furthermore a study by Carter (2002) on men-women relationships summarised the male-female stereotypes in words that suggest that there had been no change:

- i. Women are more in touch with their feelings; men don't know how to nurture
- ii. Men are better at handling bill-paying and finances
- iii. Women settle into long-term relationships primarily for security; men settle into long term relationships primarily for sex.
- iv. Women, no matter how smart or successful, are expected to take on most household responsibilities
- v. The man should be in charge of making the important decisions
- vi. Women are the intuitive sex.
- vii. In the kitchen, the woman is the boss.
- viii. Men and women are from different planets.

The question to ask is “How do such images function?” According to Crook (2013: 197), “They are the result of our effort to sort out what we see around us, to generalise about what we see going on in our society”.

In addition to noting these general images, Crook (2013) examined certain specific passages that usually involved in a discussion of the status of women in general and the place of women in church in particular. He cited the first three chapters of Genesis which are often in support of the subordination of women. In the older creation account (Genesis 2:4b-25), man was created first and placed in the Garden of Eden. Then when none of the other animals that God had formed proved to be fit “helper” for man, God made woman from one of man's ribs. Some Christians recognise, in this passage, the subordination of woman to man because man was created first and woman was created to be his helper. However. Crook contended that neither being second in time nor being of assistance to the other person, necessarily implied subordination; He further asserted that the passage may also imply the opposite. According to Crook (2013: 207), “The real point of the Genesis creation story is seen in the climatic statement concerning the unity of the man and the woman: *Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.*

Simpson (2017) added his views, from the Biblical point of view, to the debate on women's roles assigned to them in the church. He asserted that taken in the context of the 66 books, the Bible provided answers to the dilemma. He also asserted that the main conflict arose from the counsel by the Apostle Paul recorded in the Bible book of Ephesians. He further contended that

all scripture needed to be understood in the context of what is said, who it is spoken to, and what the culture is at the time:

I do not pretend to have all the answers, but I see an equally important role for women and men in the Bible. The problem comes with application. Many women are no longer in submission to their husbands or the church leadership. They do not show respect for their husbands and the church elders (<http://www.deceptioninthechurch.com/womensrole.html>).

According to Simpson, this led to the division in the church: there were those who wanted to tell women to be silent and those who wanted them to participate in the church activities. He added that the current situation where women were not in submission, and men allowed it, did not mean that women had no role to play in the church. On the contrary, he observed that some obedient and submissive women held the same responsibilities in the church as the men did. Simpson further stated that evidence from history showed that many people had been saved by women and many churches had been planted by them. He contended that prophecy came forth within the church through women.

Finally, Ndhlovu (1999) explored alternative ways of empowering every member of the church regardless of their gender to fully participate in all the church activities. He observed that church members who had the ability to lead the church should receive sufficient training in financial and personal management. This helped to embrace any member regardless of their gender.

Methodology

The study used phenomenology design. We relied on both primary and secondary data. For primary data, an interview guide was used to gather information from the 20 respondents. Three participants were selected from each of the denominations, except for the Church of Christ denomination where two participants were selected. The denominations were: the Catholic Church, Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Church, New Apostolic Church, Reformed Church in Zambia, Bread of Life International, Deeper Life Bible Church and the Church of Christ, all in Kabwe District.

As researchers, we were not concerned with the specific churches the respondents belonged to. The focus was on the views adherents held on the leadership role of women in the church. At each respective church denomination, respondents were chosen randomly. Since the

participants did not want their denominational identity to be known, the researchers assured them that this information would not be disclosed to anyone.

In-depth interviews were conducted with the seven female adherents who took part in the study (one from each of the denominations). Relevant secondary pieces of information were solicited from document sources to supplement the primary data. In this case, documents such as the church manuals, church creeds and church doctrines were analysed.

Findings

For easy flow of results presentation and discussion thereof, this section is divided into two parts based on two different schools of thought that emerged from the findings. The first school of thought consists of the views of those respondents that were against the ordination of women to leadership positions, while the second one comprises the views of those in support of women taking up leadership roles in the church.

The First School of Thought

This school of thought constituted the majority (opponents), that is 14 (71%) out of the total number of respondents. This category held that the whole idea of allocating women leadership positions was against God's will. In substantiating this view, respondents argued with scriptural backing from Acts 5: 29 that it was good to please God rather than men. One male respondent indicated that it was clearly stated in the Bible that women should learn in silence (1Corinthians 14: 34-37), adding that the role of women in church should be limited to "admonishing young women to love their husbands and to love their children" (Titus 2:4-5).

One female respondent argued:

Jesus, in his time, never appointed women to the office of Apostleship. There is nowhere in the Bible where women were church elders or deacons. It should be known that the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of the Christ (1Cor. 11:3). However, apostasy has entered the church, especially in this current error, and the church has compromised.

The respondent urged all to respect the word of God which she said was the only truth, and that if Christians served God in truth, then truth alone would set them free from suffering. According to her, advocating for gender equality and assigning women leadership roles in the church amounted to disrespecting the word of God. This finding agreed with what Wallace (1985)

outlined as the underlying beliefs about gender in society in which men were strong and competitive while women were emotional and weak.

Additionally, a male respondent had this to say:

My view is that it is by design that women and men should have different responsibilities in the church so that there is balance in the decision making process. Many issues involving women can best be handled by women but they do not need to be pastors or priests to handle the issues. The Church is like a home. A home can only run well when there is a man and a woman. To both of them, God has given different leadership roles which need to be embraced by society.

The views stated above were supported by a male respondent who held that since the Bible (1Corinthians 14: 33) urged women to keep silent, Christians needed to respond appropriately to the word of God.

He said, “In order to receive God’s grace, we should be doers of the word, and not please the flesh by supporting ideas that are not based on Bible principles.” This disagreed with Simpson’s (2017) view that all scripture needed to be understood in the context of what is said, who it is spoken to, and what the culture is at the time:

Additionally, one of the religious leaders contended that he did not necessarily imply that women were not important in the sight of God, but that it was rather a matter of the ‘division of labour and specialisation’ based on gender lines that were in effect. When asked what he meant by the division of labour, the religious leader responded that women had specific roles assigned to them in the church which should not be confused with those assigned to men:

Women are keepers of the church and look after the children of God. They are cleaners; they make sure that the house of God looks presentable to God and the passersby. Women are also there to note errors and suggest solutions to problems men face. Besides, women take care of pastors by providing food and other necessities lacking in the pastors’ house. They also stand in the gap to pray for the pastoral work and encourage pastors in their duties. Women also play a vital role in visitations; for example, visiting funeral houses and the sick. In terms of preaching, women are allowed to preach to fellow women. This is enough responsibility. They do not have to be trained as pastors or priests.

Additionally, one of the female adherents gave similar sentiments as follows:

Being mothers, it is better for women to participate in a kind of leadership that requires leading the children; the youth and fellow women because they understand better the characteristics of these categories. They should not necessarily aim at being leaders of the men because this would imply taking over the authority God gave

the men. Leadership goes with authority. Commanding a man is not the will of God.

These views were supported by the majority of the female and male participants who generally indicated that Man was created first and then a Woman was created from Man. Thus, the church was not a secular institution; Christ who was male by gender was the head of the church.

“Besides, the disciples of Jesus Christ were all males. God knows why he put such an arrangement,” said one of the male respondents.

One male religious leader gave his views from the point of view of women’s biological nature. He said that since the Bible stated that women should neither preach nor hold high positions in the church, God considered their nature to be sacred. As such, they should not be allowed to display this on the altar.

The findings above gathered from the religious leaders and one female participant are in agreement with the findings of by the Hunter College Women’s Studies Programme (1995) that women were “Earth mothers”: the idea that women are closer to nature than men, and therefore consigned to a lower status.

The Second School of Thought

The category of respondents who held this school of thought (proponents) had no reservations on women being in leadership positions in the church. There were six respondents who belonged to this group (eight less than the other group).

One religious leader blamed what he termed as ‘retrogressive orthodox attitude’ towards women in general, which in his view was marred by traditional myths and cultural practices which subjected women to a lower level compared to men. The religious leader viewed such an attitude as detrimental to women’s development in general. As such, it should be discarded of and be replaced with modern inclusive attitudes.

One female respondent said:

- . Honestly, I feel women should be highly regarded because a woman was favoured by God to give birth to Jesus our saviour. A man alone cannot manage to run a church, that is why in the Bible [Genesis 2:23] God decided to create a woman for Adam. In the Bible, there

are prayers, such as that of Hannah and Mary Magdalene –the first person to see Jesus after his death, among others, which are good examples of how women can be held in high esteem. These examples should be cited when trying to highlight the importance of women in the church. I feel that we have many women out there who can take up the roles of bishops, chief apostles, evangelists, church elders and as priests.

Others who supported this view included a male respondent who argued that women should be allowed to take part in all church duties because they were also a blessing to the church. When asked what he meant by this he said, “For our own good, it’s high time we regarded everyone, regardless of sex or gender as equal. To God, every human is considered the same.” Another male participant indicated that women were the greatest assets the church could ever have. He added that women had a special gift, of being caring individuals, which the church could benefit from. Thus, they deserved to be treated as equal to men.

He went on to say that: since there was no difference between man and woman, women deserved to be respected and be given the responsibilities accordingly. Women had also proved to do better than men in certain responsibilities, simply because they were passionate and committed to serving God.

There was a general feeling by those who subscribed to this school of thought that, in most church congregations in Kabwe District, women were in the majority in terms of church attendance, a fact which they observed was not factored in the current debate on women and the leadership roles they carried out in the church. They contended that women provided a different and dynamic perspective in the general welfare of the society, hence the need to attach more value to what they offered in church.

Another religious leader offered what sounded to be a radical and revolutionary view:

We need to follow the debates on the status of women and roles ascribed to them critically. In doing so, we have to consider the cultural, political and socio-economical environments that surround the respective historical dispensations we wish to achieve. For instance, in the first century during the time of the apostles, men were very few and women were in leadership positions. The reason why some men could not hold leadership positions was because they were closed to the gospel, whilst women were open to the message. From the early 1900s, the church was again largely led by women.

Another female respondent who supported the idea indicated that women should be permitted to assume leadership roles in the church because they once they were assigned leadership roles, they dedicated all they had towards work.

She applauded some continents such as America and Europe that were far much ahead in championing the move to allow women take up leadership roles in the church. She also called for further concerted effort and caution in advocating for women's rights in Africa where, according to her, there was still reservations in implementing the processes.

She concluded, "Men should consider Ruth mentioned in the Bible and allow women to take up leadership roles in the church."

In summary, this category of participants felt that the issue of women taking leadership roles in the church should be supported since both men and women were one in the sight of God. In their view, since the Bible was silent on who (men or women) should be leaders and who should not be, this means that women should not be hindered from becoming religious leaders. These findings were in agreement with Ndhlovu (1999) who advocated for training of both men and women so as to prepare them for managerial positions in the church.

The findings gathered from the participants in support of women being assigned leadership roles in the church were in agreement with Crook (2013) who contended that neither being second in time nor being of assistance to the other person, necessarily implied subordination; and that the real point of the Genesis creation story is seen in the climatic statement concerning the unity of the man and the woman implying that women can take part in the leadership roles of the church.

Discussion

The results of this study showed that women have been subordinated in most churches in Kabwe District. This subordination was to a large extent due to a long religious tradition that justify the marginalisation of women in the District. It is no wonder most of the respondents provided justification for their stance to assign less important positions to women, most of which had scriptural support from the Bible. The commonly quoted Biblical reference respondents gave was 1Corinthians 14: 34-37, in which the apostle Paul is quoted ordering women to be silent in the church. This doctrine provided inference from which Christian

communities in Kabwe District derived their justification for stripping women of their right to assume leadership roles in the church. It was an old tradition which commenced as far back as the first century period of the early Christians.

The results further showed that opponents to the debate whether women should be assigned church leadership positions or not, justified their stance by drawing another reference from the Bible that as Christians, they were duty-bound to obey the Bible to the latter and be doers of God's word as clearly reflected in the Bible, rather than 'pleasing the flesh'. This was one of the requirements to attaining everlasting life.

The chapter and verses stated above (1Corinthians 14: 34-37), were not adhered to by a few sections of Christians within Kabwe District. They perceived it as a misinterpretation of scripture altogether. They insisted on the need to understand the context of the message in order to appreciate its meaning. According to them, when Paul used the term 'women' in his counsel to the Corinthians, he actually referred to married couples; the context being wives and husbands. According to this interpretation, Paul was not saying women (married or unmarried) could not teach men, but that 'wives' should not be talking against their husbands while in church as this would bring embarrassment to their husbands and show disrespect for them. The main purpose of Paul saying that wives should be silent in the church was that they were causing disruption and disorder in the church (Simpson 2017: 2). In this context, Paul wrote the letter to the Corinthians to deal with problems of Christian life and faith that had arisen in the church which he had established while in Corinth. The apostle's chief concerns were with problems related to divisions and immorality in the church and with questions about sex and marriage and not whether women should be given leadership roles or not.

Additionally, the results showed that the problem with the current situation was that women did not feel worthy to be in leadership positions, and that they had given up their rights to their male counterparts. This might have contributed to the reason why men assumed more leadership roles in church than women. Many Christians regarded the apostle Paul's counsel away from the context without considering the obtaining circumstances in that particular community at the time. It could be that the many homes that Paul visited at that time had more women in leadership positions than men, and most of the women in those homes could have been unruly. This prompted the apostle Paul to give them an order to be silent. This did not

mean to shut the voices and confidence of women in general. He felt women simply needed to have the confidence that they were capable of applying in the church.

The findings gathered from the proponents showed that as long as a woman had capability, leadership potential and was led by the Holy Spirit, she could hold a leadership position in the church. Furthermore, women were created in the image of God; they, therefore, possessed inborn leadership qualities that needed to be utilized within the church sphere.

Furthermore, this category of participants supported the idea of empowering women with leadership roles in the church. In their view, the division of roles based on sex had taken recognizance of some unique attributes of respective gender categories. There was progress in the church when both categories (male and female) brought together their different specialized roles in a complementary manner.

Conclusion

This study established that women in Kabwe District were marginalized in terms of their involvement in leadership positions in the church. There were adherents that did not support women to ascend to the hierarchy of the church leadership. This was despite current efforts in the advocacy for justice and equity in the assigning of leadership roles between men and women in the church. These specific church adherents did not show signs of allowing the situation to change in the near future, despite the on-going debates aimed at changing the situation in favour of women. This was because their subordination of women in matters of leadership was engendered by deep-rooted religious traditions. The study, therefore, concluded that since the matter at hand involved issues to do with faith, it would require time to enable the opponents question, search and thoroughly re-examine their faith for the betterment of maintaining unity and gender equality in the church.

Nevertheless, the scenario was different with regard to adherents who supported that women should be involved in the leadership of the church. These were optimistic that the scenario might change in future. The possibility of an equitable-interdenominational application of religious rights to enable women compete favourably with men in the church in Kabwe District and Zambia in general, remains as something yet to be achieved. While commending the church in Zambia and Kabwe District in particular for the strides taken in enhancing the leadership roles of women in the church, we recommend that the advocacy for the rights of

women to participate in leadership roles in the church should be done within the Biblical understanding and dictates on the role of women and their importance in the eyes of God. There is also need to sensitise the church members and society at large on the importance of according women opportunities to take part in the church leadership.

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