

Chapter 10

Pastors, Preachers and Wives: A Critical Reflection on the Role of Pentecostalism in Women Empowerment in Zimbabwe



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Abstract While women constitute the majority of members in literally all religions, the top positions tend to be monopolised by men. New religious movements have often promised women liberation and emancipation. One cannot discuss these new movements without paying particular attention to Pentecostalism, which, without doubt, represents the fastest growing brand of Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa. One of the key reasons why this Pentecostalism is flourishing is because the church strives to meet the spiritual and material needs of its members. Pentecostalism therefore represents a highly significant religious phenomenon during the contemporary period. It is therefore strategic to understand the status of women within Zimbabwean Pentecostalism. This chapter examines women's notable rise to influential leadership positions through the Pentecostal movement in Zimbabwe.

10.1 Introduction

Based on texts like Gen 2:18, (Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him"), the status of women in the church remains contested. While women constitute the majority of members in literally all the Christian denominations in Zimbabwe, the leadership positions tend to be monopolised by men on the understanding that women should simply be 'helpers' of men. This is noted by L. Lagerfwerf (1990:43) when she argues that, "financially, spiritually and socially women in Africa are the backbone of the church... however, this fact is not reflected in the official structures of the church, with all its consequences, e.g. in the field of decision making." New religious movements have often promised women liberation and emancipation and one cannot discuss these new movements without paying particular attention to Pentecostalism, which, without doubt, represents the fastest growing brand of Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa (Kalu 2008). One of the key reasons why Pentecostalism is flourishing is

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because the church strives to meet the spiritual and material needs of its members (Maxwell 2006). Pentecostalism therefore represents a highly significant religious phenomenon during the contemporary period. It is therefore strategic to understand the status of women within this growing form of Christianity. Considering the fact that Pentecostalism is growing during the period when there are widespread calls for women empowerment, it is important to establish how this movement addresses this call.

This chapter examines women's notable rise to influential leadership positions through the Pentecostal movement in Zimbabwe. The chapter's distinctive contribution to the emerging body of knowledge on Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe can be located in its emphasis on the extent to which Pentecostalism has facilitated the emergence of "women ministries within the ministries." Although earlier authors had emphasised the point that Pentecostalism grants greater space for women within which to operate, the area of women's leadership of specific ministries within the Pentecostal ministries appears to have escaped scholarly scrutiny. This chapter plugs this gap in the scholarly literature by highlighting the extent to which women Pentecostal leaders have created, owned and controlled their own space. They have built their own niche and although they appear to submit to their husbands and elders, they exercise their own agency within that space. Utilising the testimonies of believers and some Pentecostal women leaders (whose identities I have not disclosed due to the sensitivity around power and patriarchal authority), the chapter highlights the role of women in selected Pentecostal ministries in Zimbabwe. Pentecostalism has the potential to ensure that women can enjoy "living with dignity". First, this study revisits the status of women by exploring traditional and missionary attitudes to women leadership in church. It is with this background established that we can then analyse how Pentecostalism has responded to the call for women empowerment.

10.2 A Brief Historical Overview of Women in Africa: Traditional and Missionary Attitudes

The popular adage that 'the world is a man's world' seems to be threatened in most aspects of the society at large with the call for women empowerment; be it in economy, politics, academia, and in this particular study, in religion. Even though Zimbabwean society remains male-dominated (Muchemwa and Muponde 2007), it seems some women have refused to accept male dominance without putting up a fight. Quite a number of women are challenging the 'norm' of simply being the shadows of men, or working with men behind closed doors. This is contrary to traditional beliefs and practices. Traditionally, women were not to be seen in the public sphere, but rather, their role as 'helpers' of men was emphasised. As will be illustrated, even colonial and missionary influence reinforced this attitude of women being solely 'helpers' of men.

But the status of women in Africa has never been homogeneous. It could also be labeled as paradoxical. On the one hand, culture denigrated women, while on the other it valued them. However, it is generally agreed that,

...throughout history, women have faced serious challenges. Patriarchal ideologies have left many women at the bottom of the heap. The history of women in Zimbabwe shows the multiple struggles that women have endured. Society should reflect critically on the silent and undeclared war between women and men and review its negative attitude towards women (Chitando 2008:17).

Traditional African societies were typically patriarchal. As Mapuranga (2011:27) says, patriarchy,

..... is a system of hierarchy that calls for the domination of women by men. In this system, the male is the head, and the woman is the minor. It draws its ideology from sexism, cultural influences and androcentricism.

The ideology of patriarchy reinforces the role of women simply as 'helpers' to their male counterparts, be they brothers or fathers. It can be argued that patriarchy affects women from the cradle to the grave. Traditional African culture centralised power within the males who were expected to provide in any social setting, particularly in the home/family. This idea was echoed by Mrs. Tavengwa in an interview, "the husband in the traditional setting had the power to make key decisions in the family, a 'real' wife would only listen and obey." But although patriarchy dominated the traditional African setting, women still had space to contribute towards family income. For example, they could utilise their given portions of land to ensure food security for their families. To some extent therefore, despite being patriarchal societies, African traditional societies (ATRs) somehow ensured that women play a role in the income generation for the family. Women remained the farmers, feeders and carers of their families and communities.

This study agrees with the notion that patriarchy was not a new phenomenon that came with new religions; it was already existent in ATRs. As such, missionary Christianity came to perpetuate the patriarchy that was already apparent in indigenous practices. Missionary Christianity reinforced an already existing practice of the domination of women by men. This form of Christianity enforced the idea that, 'The Victorian ideal of virtuous wife, selfless mother, and tidy, industrious house-keeper was the goal for which all African women should be taught to strive' (Schmidt 1992:145). This was more or less the idea that was in African custom as Ziyambi (1997: 7-9) puts it,

Incidentally, these notions of the subservient and industrious woman found resonance within traditional African culture. As a result, the collusion of white and black patriarchy resulted in the formulation and codification of the legal system known today as Customary Law... Under Customary Law, a black woman remained a legal minor all her life under the custodianship of her father, husband or eldest son as her life progressed from childhood, to marriage and widowhood or old age.

Many scholars have noted with concern how much the missionary church was fused with colonial mentality, which trained and indoctrinated women for domesticity,

while training and indoctrinating men as the family heads (Rogers 1981, Schmidt 1992:129–31, Labode 1993:128–34, Ranger 1995:34, Martineau 1997:386, and Mate 2002: 550 among others.) As indicated by R. Martineau (1997:386) in the South African education context,

From the beginning, South African schools steered males and females in specific directions and into different curricula designated for boys and girls. Pells (1970) describes the separate instruction that became the pattern: girls were instructed in domestic duties and boys were taught a trade. Early schools also gave less priority to the education of the females. In the mission schools, women were not encouraged, if even allowed, to obtain an academic education or skill training. Gaitskell (1988) characterises mission education for girls as ‘vocational, domestic and subservient, suited to Africans, to women and to subordinate classes.’

This notion that Christianity reinforced domesticity was supported by Mrs Mtetwa in an interview. She indicated that whilst her two brothers were offered an opportunity to further their education, she was never given that chance. She only went to school up to Standard 6. The only training she later got in life was to be a ‘good, Christian wife.’ Such a wife was meant to stay at home and look after the household.

This is echoed by R. Mate (2002: 550), who argues further in the context of Zimbabwe that,

From the colonial era the Christianisation of women was driven by the need to train corps of women who, as wives already Christianised men could facilitate the creation of ‘Christian homes’ through teaching about Christian domesticity, Christian wifehood, housekeeping and motherhood.

Consequently, one can argue that historically, just as in the traditional context, so was it in the churches, that there was no space for women in church, as they had been denied the opportunity to do so, through lack of necessary education and qualifications, as was dictated by the missionary education system. In as much as women had enjoyed considerable space and freedom in traditional African cultures, especially as providers for their families, Christianity was promoting women domesticity. The missionary emphasis was on developing “respectable and responsible women” (Heinfelaar 2001). Such women were to be confined to the household, while men were to go out and become ‘breadwinners.’ This was a new development as in traditional cultures both men and women had the responsibility ‘to win bread’ (Lindsay 2007), despite the dominance of patriarchy, as earlier discussed. The combination of Church teachings and the colonial economy altered the existing gender relations decisively in favour of men. This was reiterated by Mrs Bhunu (interview). She argued;

Our African culture was always patriarchal. Men were always with powers as we grew up. However, the major difference with what we inherited from the missionaries was that, Christianity stripped us the little say we had in our families as breadwinners. Whilst men in our traditional societies would spend time away from the home, we remained as the sole breadwinners. However, with the coming of Christian education, only males had greater opportunities and this denied us our roles as providers and breadwinners for our families. We could not also lead in church, as we did not have the required education to do so.

Women have therefore struggled to find leadership roles within the church and in contemporary society. However, despite the fact that it has been an uphill task for women to be preachers in the church, this has not made them completely inactive. In an attempt to seek liberation, among other reasons (Daneel 1987, 1974, Barrett 1971, Hastings 1994 and Anderson 2001), women have made strides to access leadership within the church. One such means is through the formation of African Independent/Instituted/International/Initiated/Indigenous churches, commonly referred to as AICs. Let us pay some attention to this below.

10.3 The Spirit of Leadership: Women in AICs

With the rise of AICs, women began to realise back some power as they had earlier on experienced in their traditional religions. The formation of AICs resulted in women becoming active members of the church, just as they had been priestesses, diviners and healers, amongst other leadership roles in ATRs. In AICs, women participate as important figures such as founders of the churches, prophetesses, priestesses, choristers and healers, amongst a variety of other functions. In Zimbabwe, a number of women founded AICs while others occupied positions of influence as prophetesses (Mabhunu 2010:63–84). Notable is Mai Chaza who founded the Guta RaJehovah Church (GRJ) in 1954. The empowerment of women through AICs is not only peculiar to Zimbabwe. D.H. Crumbley (2008:7) mentions the same trend in Nigeria where she investigated the beliefs and practices associated with institutionalized female roles in Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) and the Church of the Lord-Aladura (CLA) and the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC). She concluded from this investigation:

The leadership roles of women in these Aladura churches vary greatly, from acting as lay members of local parishes to being evangelists, church founders and ecumenically engaged, formally ordained clergy.

Apart from these highlighted roles, it is also important to note that the Church of the Lord- Aladura was founded by a woman. The spirit empowered the pastor – founder, whom the Yoruba women called ‘Mother’, to receive revelations through vision and lay hands on those needing healing of their bodies and lives. The ‘Mother’ also used the praying stick which is no ordinary object but one endowed with sacred power to cure diseases (Crumbley 2008).

This is also true of the Masowe Apostles as documented by Mukonyora (2007: 15) who says,

When I first met Masowe Apostles, I was most puzzled by the behavior of women members. Besides attending the prayer meetings in large numbers, they were active participants in ritual activities, especially at healing ceremonies where woman-oriented matters of fertility and the protection of life, with their corresponding feminine religious symbols, took centre stage. Meeting women who were articulate enough about their beliefs to raise questions about oppression led me to stop and think about the experience and perspectives that explain the behavior of women in *Masowe*.

From these two particular publications, one can discern that indeed, AICs provided a space for women participation and leadership. This is in sharp contrast to the patriarchal situation that the missionary churches brought. Here, leadership was only presumed for the white missionaries as “Reverend Fathers” and “Pastors.” Still, in the frame of patriarchy, African men were later trained and co-opted into these leadership roles, leaving women behind. Instead, as already mentioned above, women were trained for domesticity and their motherhood. Consequently, L. Dube suggests that, ‘mission churches can derive lessons’ from such AICs. She argues that,

If the process of freeing women into realizing their full potential in God has to be speeded up, the churches, particularly the mission churches, have to adopt a liberal attitude towards charismatic women. Not only should mission churches accommodate charismatic movements within their churches, they should actually promote them to allow the Holy Spirit to free women from gender and other bondages crippling the church. For where the spirit of God is, there is liberty. Mission churches can, therefore, draw lessons from charismatic figures within their fold and offer them guidance (Dube 2011: 156).

Considering these strides made by AICs in empowering women, what role then has Pentecostal churches as new churches, played in the empowerment of women in church and society? We discuss this in the upcoming section.

10.4 Women Empowerment in Pentecostal Churches

Despite the efforts made by AICs to accord women space as leaders, it is in the Pentecostal movement that the strides have gone further. This is apparent in that within Pentecostalism, the numbers of women leaders have blossomed. Furthermore, unlike AICs that appeal to Old Testament purity codes to restrict women’s participation in leadership (for example, barring menstruating women from participating in rituals), Pentecostals are less restrictive. There are two ways by which Zimbabwean Pentecostalism can be said to have further empowered women.

10.4.1 *The New Woman for the New Era? Pentecostalism and Women ‘Helpers’ or Leaders*

Pentecostalism has ushered in a new phenomenon where women are accorded space as leaders and helpers for their husbands in ministry. Women have embraced the notion of ‘helpers’, as they stand by their husbands in the ministration of the gospel. Unlike wives of missionary churches and AICs pastors whose area of jurisdiction was only amongst other women, wives of Pentecostal pastors and preachers are indeed standing with their husbands and being their ‘helpers’ in the true sense of the word. According to Gillian Matikiti (Interview 2012), a wife to an elder in Faith in God Ministries International, one of the Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe,

“the wife of a Pastor is an intercessor and should support her husband in his ministry. As such, once your husband is a leader in the church, as a wife, you also automatically become a leader as well, in support of your husband.”

This dimension is noticed even in many advertisements of crusades and on church logos, where women are presented alongside their husbands. Where the men are prophets, their wives are also known as prophetesses and where the husbands are apostles, the wives are also apostles or some other leadership titles. Popular names that emerge in Zimbabwe’s Pentecostal ministry showing this trend of women leadership together with their husbands include the likes of:

- Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa and Prophetess Ruth Makandiwa of the United Family International Ministries which, arguably, has so far drawn the largest congregants in one sitting in Zimbabwe.
- Prophet Uebert Angel and Prophetess Beverly Angel of the Spirit Embassy Ministries.
- Apostle Ezekiel Guti and Dr. Eunor Guti of arguably Zimbabwe’s largest Pentecostal church (David Maxwell 2006), the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA).
- Apostle Tavonga Vutabwashe and Pastor Chipu of Heartfelt International Ministry.
- Apostle Matthias Madzivanzira and Pastor Mildred Madzivanzira of Matthias and Mildred Ministries.
- Bishop Tudor Bismark and Pastor ChiChi Bismarck of the New Life Covenant Church.
- Apostle Charles Chiriseri and Senior Pastor Petunia Chiriseri of His Presence Ministries International.
- Dr Goodwill Shana and Pastor Maureen B. Shana of Word of Life International Church.
- Apostle Langton Kanyati and Apostle Florence Kanyati of Grace Unlimited Ministries.

These few examples are just but a drop in the ocean, but suffice to clarify the argument that women are indeed ‘helping’ their husbands as leaders in the ministry. It is almost always the case that preachers, pastors and prophets (which ever title one uses) in Pentecostalism hog the limelight with the company of their ‘helpers’ who are their wives. Compared to mainline churches and AICs this is a phenomenal improvement in the status of women in ministry. As such, one could argue that Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe has ushered in a new phenomenon of women ‘helpers’ and leaders who are brought to the frontlines, rather than continue to serve the congregation behind the scene, as was the case in most missionary churches. Manzvanzvike (2012:7) therefore describes Pentecostalism as having created, “leading ladies walking with leading men.”

In some instances, pastors’ wives have been given so much space that they become leaders in their own right, instead of always being seen as appendages to their husbands, as is discussed in the next section.

10.4.2 Becoming More than Helpers?: Women Leaders in the Pentecostal Ministry

The second way by which Pentecostalism has empowered women is that wives of leaders have outgrown the notion of just necessarily being helpers to their husbands in ministry as they have become the leaders of the churches as well. They have been accorded space to preach and prophesy. Mrs Kaitano (Interview), who is wife to an elder agreed with this notion. She said in her church, Faith in God Ministries International, some women had become pastors in their own right, not as appendages to their husbands.

Also in some instances, probably due to old age or ill health, some pastors have allowed their wives to almost ‘take over’ the ministries. This is particularly true in ZAOGA where Eunor Guti has been gradually assuming the role of ‘head’, probably because Ezekiel Guti is retiring due to old age. Respondents from this church stated that within the last 5 years, Mrs Guti’s role as the leader of the church has been more apparent.

In Pentecostalism, women are not only being leaders through their husbands, rather, women have taken it upon themselves to lead some sections of the church and creating their own sub-ministries. These include the following (Dete 2011:D5):

- Dr Eunor Guti of Gracious Women’s Fellowship
- Dr Rutendo Wutawunashé of Precious Stones Ministry
- Prophetess A.C Manjoro of Women of Virtue Ministries
- Pastor Florence Kanyati of Grace Unlimited Ministries
- Bishop Patience Hove of Elshaddai Ministries International
- Pastor Victoria Mpofu of Women Weapons of Warfare
- Prophetess Veronica P. Mwale of Intercessors International
- Pastor Bonnie Deuschle of Celebration Ministries
- Pastor Delia Mandisodza of Trinity Deliverance Ministries, and
- Pastor Barbara Bassie of Women of Hope and Honour Ministries

Although missionary churches also run women’s fellowship groups often led by the pastors’ wives, there is a sense in which the Pentecostal women’s fellowship groups are more than fellowship groups. They, indeed, can be considered as ministries within ministries. Thus according to Florence Kanyati of the Grace Unlimited Ministries, Pentecostalism has created opportunities that are “unleashing the Uncommon Woman” (Kanyati 2012). For her, it is time that women unveil their capabilities in the church. This was supported by Pastor Dhlakama (Interview 2012) who said, “I am a pastor and a preacher in my own right. I have no husband, my husband is God. I do not need any man to direct me except the one who sent me.” Such ideas support the notion that some women Pentecostal women have become pastors in their own right, without any influence from their husbands.

However, despite the rise to leadership of some few women in the Pentecostal churches, it seems these women are not willing to share their status with their fellow women, who have thus remained at the periphery of the church’s leadership.

The next section therefore discusses how wives of Pentecostal leaders have themselves behaved like ‘men’ in order to remain at the top. This is what Kandiyoti (1998) refers to as ‘bargaining with patriarchy’.

10.5 Wives of Pentecostal Leaders: ‘Helpers’ in Perpetuating the Gospel of Patriarchy?

Despite the fact that Pentecostalism has given women room to be at the helm of ministries, on the other hand, their position as wives of Pentecostal leaders needs to be approached critically. They have continuously preached a gospel which (wittingly or unwittingly) perpetuates patriarchy. Instead of these women perpetuating the gospel with liberation hermeneutics, it seems, they are not willing to share their newly found powers with the ordinary women who are not themselves pastors or pastors’ wives. This confirms what S. J. Ndhlovu-Gatsheni (2003: 229) writes of African women in general,

...women in African societies sometimes contribute, directly and indirectly, to the sustenance and resilience of patriarchal oppression. One of the ways through which women continue to sustain and perpetuate patriarchal oppression is by, ‘domestication’ of each other in their daily lives.

Alternatively, this means that the few women who have accessed leadership at the top are striving to be like men: to preach the same patriarchal gospel that reinforces servitude and resilience to their fellow women, and to have a similar identity to that of their male counterparts. Wives of Pentecostal leaders use such titles as Prophetess, Bishop and Apostle. These titles seem to suggest that these women are no longer appendages or ‘helpers’ to their husbands in ministry. They are titles that exert authority in themselves. Whatever titles are applied to them, the point here is that these women are preachers as well in their churches. Their titles do not in any way strip them of their role as preachers and teachers of the gospel. As the popular adage says, ‘a rose, by any other name, would smell as sweet’. Tapiwa P. Mapuranga (2011: 14–15) argues that ‘with these other male power –oriented titles’,

Are these women not trying to be like ‘men’? Such identities are meant to install power and authority in these women as leaders, just as their fellow male leaders would appropriate the same titles to bestow the same identities and get authority from other men and women in the church. Some of these titles have been coined from Christ himself. By adopting such identities, figures in the church want to be associated with the identity, character and authority that Jesus had, some of which were passed on to his disciples. The earlier males to get leadership in the church then adopted these titles as well, and thus, women follow suit. Some of these titles, one can argue, stem from colonial mentality where there were hierarchies of master and servant, King and servant, et cetera).

Resultantly, the appropriation of such titles as women identify themselves in Pentecostal Christianity are there to reinforce power and authority, as was/is the case with male Pentecostal leaders. Rieger (2007: 198) says modern theology therefore has been found with a ‘colonial structure’, where authority was defined in terms

of master and servant. Whereas his interpretation is contentious, it does have some merit. One could argue that women leaders in the church realize that for them to be accepted on the table of theological discourse by their male counterparts, they too have to perpetuate the gospel of patriarchy and be 'like men'. Here, one should acknowledge the extent to which women have become subversive by taking over the structures that have been used to oppress them. The same scenario is presented by S.J. Ndhlovu-Gatsheni (2003) in his interviews on aunts and elderly women in society in general. Ndhlovu-Gatsheni (2003: 241) established that the traditional role of aunts and elderly women as advisors is no longer accepted by younger women:

What makes the value of elderly women to depreciate and to be unacceptable is that they have confined themselves to outdated teaching leading to oppression of women. They teach that men are superior to women and that in marriage men must be the head of the house.

Aunts are no longer relevant as advisors of women during weddings. They oppress women. They never advise about your rights as a married woman. They emphasise such issues as acceptance of abuse and ill treatment as part and parcel of marriage.

Pentecostal women leaders tend to do the same. As Rekopantswe Mate (2002) also noted more than a decade ago, Pentecostal discourses of femininity in Zimbabwe tend to promote male dominance and female subordination. She observed that most women leaders teach women to respect their husbands and not to question male abuse of power and authority. Others teach that women will be saved through childbirth, thereby promoting women's domesticity. According to Mate (2002: 565),

Gracious Women and Precious Stones (women's ministries in some Pentecostal movements) use religious ideology to control women through the emphasis on domesticity, which keeps women under patriarchal control...women are told not to be persuaded by post-Independence talk about 'equal rights' and worldly liberation.

Mate's critique is important as it reminds us that it is not enough for women to rise to positions of power: they must be seen transforming oppressive structures and ideologies. This is unlikely to emerge, as women leaders in Pentecostalism teach the gospel of submission throughout, and thus, 'consequently they are no threat to men's patriarchal prerogatives' (Mate 2002: 566). Mate's critique, however, fails to appreciate the survival strategies that women have adopted. Before they can transform the oppressive structures and ideologies, they need to first take control of them. I am arguing here that Pentecostal "wives of prophets and preachers" have taken the first and critical steps towards full liberation: fight for space and own/control it. The second level of the struggle will be to rid these systems and structures of their patriarchal outlook and institute new theologies that promote the humanity of all.

10.6 Conclusion

The Pentecostal approach to gender is ambivalent. On the one hand, this study concurs with the idea that women pastors /leaders are just helpers to their husbands and thus appendages who draw their authority from the male figures. As such, they stand

behind. Surely Eunor Gutu draws her authority from Ezekiel, as much as Prophetess Beverly Angel is supported by her husband, Uebert, among many other couple leaders. However, on the other hand, Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe has indeed brought/opened up more avenues for women in the church as ‘helpers’ and leaders in their own right. Ordinarily portrayed as ‘helpers’ behind the scenes; wives of Pentecostal leaders have indeed been ushered into a new era where they have been allowed space in the public sphere of the church. The rise of Pentecostal Christianity has appropriated the religious significance of women in indigenous culture. In Zimbabwe, particularly after 2000, there are names of women who emerged as leaders in churches, particularly in Pentecostal Christianity. Despite the intimidation and challenges that come to most African women who lead, particularly the resistance by men, ‘women continue to serve as effective church leaders’ (Lagerwerf 1990: 50). Be that as it may, this chapter has also shown that those women who have found power within Pentecostal Christianity have not used it to empower other women as they continue promoting patriarchy.

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