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WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION – CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Introduction

Mainstreaming gender into theological discourses has been a long struggle in the history of Christian tradition, until fairly recently. Theology has been defined by men and in terms of God's relationship with the male gender. This gender disparity is partly because of selective reading of the Bible to deny women ordination to priesthood and senior positions of leadership in the church.

Sharing My Story of Women in Leadership in Theological Education

My struggle with theology and women in church leadership began when I was still in my mother's womb. When my mother was 4 months pregnant, she expressed a wish to God and said; "God, if the baby that am carrying is a boy, I will dedicate him to your house." Unfortunately for my mother, I was a girl. In those days the theology of my Anglican Church in Kenya and the Church of England as well, did not allow women to be ordained to priesthood.

Later after High School, I joined St. Andrew's Theological College in Central Kenya to pursue a 3 years certificate in theology from 1987-1989, but even then, women were still not being ordained. While our male counterparts were made Deacons and then ordained to priesthood after a probation period of six months, women were licenced as Lay Readers and then made Deaconesses.

I enrolled for a Bachelor of Divinity between 1992-1995 at St. Paul's United Theological College, currently St. Paul's University in Kenya. I was a young mother with my firstborn. In the first year, I gave birth to my second born and in the second year, I was blessed with

my third born. It was a very difficult experience to be pregnant, give birth bring-up babies and excel in studies all at the same time but I found a lot of support from my husband. I was ordained much later after completing my Master of Theology in African Christianity Degree, having served 11 years as a deaconess.

My husband encouraged me to push on to PhD. Unfortunately, he died after a short illness, only two months before my scheduled time to pursue my PhD in 2004. This was a big shock. I had begun a long journey of widowhood. However, after 2 years, I joined the University of Kwazulu Natal, South Africa, for my PhD and graduated in 2010. My mother in law, my family and friends attended to my children while I was away.

In 2012, I offered myself as a candidate to be the Bishop of my mother Diocese, but even with my PhD, I didn't succeed because of my female gender. I was disqualified under mysterious circumstances.

My story offers challenges and opportunities for women in leadership in theological education.

Challenges

(a) Social Norms

- **Social Norms construct masculinities and femininities in asymmetrical ways:** Men are associated with symbols of *leadership, decision-making, knowledge, headship, ownership and superiority*. On the other hand, women are associated with symbols of *weakness* such as being emotional rather than rational. As such, leadership in all areas of life including the church, is associated with men.
- **Social norms** construct gender roles- women are associated with the role of nurturing and care. Consequently, this can become a challenge to young mothers who want to pursue further education, unless they have family support as I had from my husband and my mother in-law.
- **Social norms** dictate the social status of a woman who should pursue theology and one who cannot not. Traditionally, doing theology is linked to ordination or preparation for full-time Ministry. Certain categories of women are considered not eligible for theological education. These include single mothers, divorcees, women

who are separated from their husbands, sometimes widows and women with disabilities.

- **Social norms accelerate harmful cultural practices such as** Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), which leads to child marriage. Child marriage reduces the opportunities of the girl-child to pursue education and a meaningful career. Consequently, even girls who may be willing to pursue theology, may not have qualifications for admission.

(b) Gender-Biased interpretation and Application of Biblical texts- One of the most influential texts is 1 Corinthians 11: 7;

A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man (NIV)

This text, which actually excludes woman from the image of God, was taken up by future theologians after Paul, to mean that since woman is not the image of God, she cannot represent the male God. Other passages forbid women from speaking in Church (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:11-12). These biblical texts reinforce similar traditional beliefs in patriarchal cultures, where, traditionally, women do not assume authority over men.

Opportunities

(a) My success story

I share my success story to challenge gender-biased social norms. Through the story, I demystify the norms that confine a woman at home and the belief that women cannot lead men. In so doing, I encourage women including widows and girls to excel in leadership.

(b) Interpreting the Bible in life-giving Ways for Women and men

African Women Theologians have offered new ways of reading the Bible in life-affirming ways through Feminist Hermeneutics.

As a Postcolonial Biblical scholar, I have published a book that offers postcolonial Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Feminist Hermeneutics as methods of interpreting gender

Biased Biblical texts in liberating ways for women and men. The book is entitled: *Gender and Imago Dei: A Postcolonial African Reading of 1 Cor 11:1-16*. It's available on Amazon.

(c) My Education, ordination and Experience

My education, ordination and current position as the Director for Gender and Women in AACC have given me a wide range of experience in advocacy for gender justice and empowerment of women and girls in Africa and beyond.

My contribution to church and society as a scholar and astute advocacy in gender justice in Africa received recognition through my receiving the Lanfranc Award for Education and Scholarship from the Archbishop of Canterbury on 30th June, 2020.¹

(d) Engendering Theology: The Role of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

In reaction to the long-standing gender-biased theology, Scripture, interpretation, church tradition and African culture, African Women Theologians, through the initiative of Prof. Mercy Oduyoye, launched “The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians” in 1989.² The circle has engendered theological education in the following ways among others:

- Development of gender sensitive curriculum in theological education
- Liberalizing Theological Education by encouraging excluded categories of women to pursue lay theological training and offering scholarships to them

(e) Influence of the Global and continental campaigns for gender justice on Religious leaders

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), African Union Agenda 2063 and many national development agendas have focused on gender justice. These advocacy campaigns have an impact on gender justice in the church, especially because of increasing engagement of religious leaders in promoting these development goals.

(d) Engagement of men in advocacy for gender justice – the contribution of AACC

¹ <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/latest-news/archbishop-canterbury-announces-2020-lambeth-awards-recipients>

² For more details about the Circle, see Phiri, 'Major Challenges for African Women'.

In recognition of the important role of men in advocacy for gender justice, AACC is establishing Platforms of Male Champions for Gender Justice in identified Pilot countries in Africa. The platforms are aimed at amplifying the voices of men especially church leaders to eliminate all forms of discrimination and Gender based violence. Church leaders are therefore more sensitized to increase women's participation in church leadership.

(e) **Finally, the other opportunity is that the attitude towards women in leadership is slowly changing for better.** The Rt. Rev. Dr. Emily Onyango for example, was consecrated as the first woman Bishop in the Anglican Church of Kenya in March 2021. More women are occupying positions of leadership both in church, society and in the political arena.

Conclusion

In conclusion, engendering theology and women's full participation in church leadership is instrumental to the achievement of gender justice in church and society, and a significant way of respecting the dignity and God's image in every human being, as well as enhancing the global and continental development agenda.