


An investigation into the challenges confronting women-led ministries within Pentecostalism

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Background: Women-led ministries within Pentecostal churches continue to face significant barriers despite the early inclusivity of the Azusa Street Revival. Patriarchal interpretations of Scripture, restrictive cultural norms and historical biases continue to influence leadership spaces, limiting women's visibility and authority in ministry.

Objectives: This study investigates the challenges confronting women-led ministries within Pentecostalism, with particular focus on the South African and broader African contexts. It explores how gender, culture and theology intersect to shape the lived experiences of women in ministry.

Method: A qualitative approach was employed, using literature analysis and theological reflection to examine the structural, cultural and doctrinal factors that sustain gender inequality in Pentecostal leadership.

Results: Findings of this study reveal that although women contribute significantly to spiritual leadership, pastoral care, community development and church growth, their leadership continues to be restricted. Theological barriers, patriarchal church governance, limited access to theological training and sociocultural expectations continue to hinder their advancement. Despite these challenges, women demonstrate resilience and innovation within ministry spaces.

Conclusion: The study calls for a critical re-evaluation of doctrinal interpretations and church policies to promote inclusive leadership.

Contribution: This study contributes to scholarly discourse by highlighting the need for transformative theological frameworks that affirm the gifts, calling and leadership of women in the Pentecostal churches.

Keywords: women-led ministries; Pentecostalism; gender inequality; feminist theology; patriarchy; South Africa; church leadership.

Introduction

Historically, Pentecostal movements have exhibited differing degrees of acceptance of women in ministerial roles and notwithstanding initial advancements, such as the ordination of women in the Assemblies of God during the 1920s; obstacles persist. Female leaders in Pentecostal congregations often encounter gender discrimination because of conventional biblical interpretations that restrict their roles within the church hierarchy (CBE International 2023:5). This bias is founded on passages such as 1 Timothy 2:11–15 and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, which have traditionally been employed to rationalise the limitation of women's leadership roles within the church (Alvarez & Materne 2020:42–43). With these differing views on the subject, women usually find themselves victims of a patriarchal system of socialisation, with male dominance that does not appear to be challengeable, in most cases (Jaiyeola 2020:3–4). Powell (2014:249–268) asserts that people often judge leadership based on what is regarded as suitable behaviours for either men or women. This influences why women are more likely to be viewed in a less favourable way compared to their equivalent male counterparts, especially in settings where masculine styles are stereotypically favoured. Cuadrado, Navas and Molero (2012:993–1012) argue that women are more democratic in their approach to leadership and encourage participation more than men and that the evaluation of women leaders' effectiveness is dependent on several variables including work context and culture.

Alvarez and Materne (2020:46) promote women's leadership within the church, often using historical instances of influential female leaders in early Christianity, such as Phoebe, Junia and Priscilla, to illustrate the significant impact women have had on the church's history. The church's initiative-taking method involves reevaluating and reinterpreting theological principles to

enhance their relevance to contemporary circumstances. This theological perspective empowers religious leaders to direct and support their adherents in managing the intricacies of contemporary norms and standards. It entails balancing the adherence to fundamental principles with the adaptation of interpretations to address the distinct difficulties and opportunities of the current context. Aune (2015:122–145) asserts that women in leadership are often anticipated to prioritise their responsibilities as spouses and mothers; thereby, these are expected to constrain their capacity to dedicate time and energy to their ministries. Resistance to female leadership constitutes a substantial obstacle, as certain members and leaders may have conventional perspectives of women's roles in Pentecostal churches. This article investigates the challenges faced by women-led ministries within Pentecostal churches, with a particular focus on the South African and broader African contexts using literature review.

Literature review

Landsberg (2013:23–24) asserts that femininity is typically linked to qualities such as nurturing, empathy, care, sensitivity, intuition, compromise, cooperation and accommodation, which are progressively recognised as vital not only to human well-being but also for efficient administration in various contexts.

Chaluvadi (2015:1–5) asserts that leadership styles of men and women are distinct. Men frequently perceive leadership as a sequence of transactions, but women exhibit transformative qualities, inspiring their followers via people skills rather than through positional status or authority. Most women exert influence by using their relationship competencies to disseminate power and knowledge, foster engagement and enhance the self-esteem of their followers.

Cuadrado et al. (2012:993–1012) contend that women exhibit a more democratic leadership style and promote engagement more than men, and that the assessment of women leaders' success depends on various variables, including the work environment and cultural context. Powell (2014:249–268) maintains that individuals evaluate leadership according to the perceived suitable conduct for either gender. This elucidates why women are more frequently seen unfavourably than their male counterparts, especially in contexts where masculine traits are conventionally esteemed.

Feminism is the examination of gender, aimed at comprehending and confronting gender-based inequalities, discrimination and societal norms (MacArthur, Tetteh & Mensah 2022:102635). It developed in response to the historical exclusion of women's experiences and perspectives from academic and public discourse (Dill & Zambrana 2020:108–116). Gender analysis, as a feminist tenet, rigorously examines gender roles, identities and expectations (Brassel & Anderson 2020:447–462). It recognises that gender is a socially constructed concept that transcends biological differences, impacting power dynamics and social structures.

Feminist scholarship recognises the intricacies of individual identities and experiences by analysing the intersections of many forms of oppression and privilege. Intersectionality underscores the necessity of examining multiple facets of identity to comprehend an individual's experiences.

Feminism is intrinsically linked to social justice objectives (Weatherall 2020:471–486). It aims to uncover and solve imbalances and injustices faced by individuals based on their gender, along with intersections including other identities such as race, class, sexual orientation and ability. It emphasises elevating the perspectives and opinions of marginalised groups, particularly women, who have traditionally been marginalised or silenced (Chaudhary 2023:207). It contests prevailing narratives and seeks to illuminate previously overlooked or undervalued experiences. Feminist research analyses power relations and societal norms that perpetuate gender discrimination and oppression (Mowafi & Al-Hasan 2023:4482547). It aims to deconstruct hierarchical frameworks and illustrate the mechanisms of power in diverse contexts. Feminism is a complex framework encompassing several theories and viewpoints (Gurung 2020:14). Various feminist scholars and movements may prioritise distinct aspects of feminism as a research paradigm. The primary objective is to interrogate and alter oppressive systems while simultaneously fostering the creation of a more equitable and just society for all genders (Garland-Thomson 2020:181–191).

Feminist theology is a prominent global movement wherein women from diverse histories and cultures contest patriarchal doctrines and practices within the church, offering their own interpretations of the divine (Fiorenza 2015:22). 'Notwithstanding variations in feminist theologies, they uniformly adhere to a shared faith in Jesus Christ grounded in women's experiences' (Hogan 2016:34). Clifford (2001:30) contends that feminist theology articulates women's experiences with the divine and their exegesis of Christian texts through various academic approaches. Clifford contends that a simplistic interpretation of the Bible fostered a negative perception of women within Christian communities, resulting in their marginalisation from ecclesiastical authority.

Feminist theology: South African perspective

Feminist theology is a branch of theological inquiry that reinterprets Christian faith, scripture and tradition from the perspective of women's experiences and struggles against patriarchy. It represents an effort to expose and transform gender-based injustices embedded within theological discourse and ecclesial structures. Feminist theology seeks to recover the voices and experiences of women in the biblical and historical record, emphasising equality, relationality and liberation as central to the gospel message. In the South African context, feminist theology should be applied not only as a critique of patriarchal church practices but also as a constructive approach that integrates gender justice into theological education, ministry formation and social transformation. Researchers must approach feminist theology from a South African perspective, with caution, to avoid

categorising it in a manner that is just pertinent to feminist theologians. Individuals ought to perceive themselves as engaged in perpetual interaction and dialogue with one another, notwithstanding their significant differences in methodologies. Feminist theologians are a heterogeneous collective, thereby embodying a diverse array of concepts and methodologies. The limited number of publications in this area indicates that feminist theology in South Africa remains nascent (Ackermann 1991:23). Draper, Ackermann and Mashinini (1991) released – ‘Women Hold up Half Sky’ – a compilation of writings by black and white women, alongside a select number of males, addressing the topic of women in churches in Southern Africa. Feminist theology is endeavouring to secure its rightful position in South Africa because of numerous factors. These include prolonged isolation from counterparts in Africa, North America, Europe and the developing world that has impaired South African female theologians, a situation further intensified by the patriarchal structure of the culture and churches. The movement against apartheid has conventionally emphasised racial injustice as the principal wrongdoing. The structural mechanisms of race, gender and class in human subjection remain inadequately comprehended in this process. Women have historically been divided by class, geography and economic status (Oduyoye 1995; Rakoczy 2004); these differences have estranged us from one another instead of offering solutions for conversation, as this divide has been entrenched and perpetuated over many years of repressive white dominance. Feminist theology encounters many obstacles in achieving prominence in our culture owing to its scholarly standing. It is a recent theological subject; however, its insufficient representation in educational institutions, in contrast to other contemporary theologies, raises issues about priorities, anti-sexist commitments, curricular content and pedagogical approaches. Achievement may be possible if both male and female students receive enough education regarding gender differences. The scarcity of female voices prompts significant enquiries on the essence of knowledge and its dissemination; thus, feminist theologians ought to highlight this subject in their research agendas (Ackermann 1991:13).

As stated by Rakoczy (2001:45), the objectives of the ‘Action for Justice and Transformation for Women’ programme are formidable, with a focus on promoting women’s rights, tackling gender inequality and fostering a more just and equitable society. This endeavour should consider applying various procedures and approaches. Each community is distinct, and the methodologies employed may differ based on cultural, social and economic influences. The essential task is to heed the requirements of the women in the South African region and modify the plan accordingly while preserving the initiative’s emphasis on women’s empowerment and development. An admirable woman conducts herself with propriety. Women who acknowledge their intrinsic value as individuals can unite to transform their environment into a flourishing centre for human existence. The generosity of women manifests in behaviours that confront surrounding

malevolence while collaboratively fostering new avenues for justice and peace within the human society, akin to healthy trees yielding bountiful fruit. Ethics, the foundation of moral action, spans a broad spectrum of interrelated issues with the individual as a moral agent, being the paramount concern. Many women have not operated from a robust sense of self, making this a crucial starting point for them. In conversations about women as people, they have frequently been held accountable for the world’s immorality. The choice to act virtuously is fundamental to ethical conduct, yet malevolence is occasionally justified under the guise of benevolence (Ducan 2019:7). The disparity between men’s and women’s perceptions of evil and sin is therefore a secondary issue. Sin transcends mere individual actions; it constitutes a societal reality, an intricate web of oppression that inhibits the possibility for life and progress in individuals and society (Rakoczy 2001:12).

African views of women

This section investigates how traditional African civilisations have historically positioned women in subservient roles, citing cultural instances to demonstrate gender hierarchies. Women’s secondary status in traditional African communities was more than just social; it also included spiritual ideas about their core nature. An extremely dramatic example came from certain parts of South Africa, primarily within Xhosa culture, where the concept of *Thembaletu* (literally ‘Our Hope’) expressed profoundly ingrained gender-based spiritual discrimination. Under this traditional belief system, women were seen as spiritually imperfect beings, with some believing they lacked a spirit totally (Chinchen 1999:118). Because spiritual essence was regarded as a basic component of personality, this theological perspective positioned women as inherently inadequate in their humanity. The natural conclusion of this notion was that women could only reach spiritual fulfilment through marriage. Women were believed to get access to their husband’s spiritual essence by marrying, borrowing or sharing in his spirit to compensate for their perceived spiritual lack. This transformed marriage from a social institution to a spiritual imperative for women to acquire full personhood within the cultural framework. This conventional viewpoint explains how cultural and religious ideas converged to promote women’s reliance on men, defending their subservient status as a natural or divinely appointed arrangement rather than a societal construct.

This aligns with Augustine’s notion that a woman embodies God through her husband, as articulated in his theological anthropology, where he argues that woman is made in the image of God only in union with man (Augustine *De Trinitate* 1998:XII.7; Brown 1988:403). Men held the belief that the blood associated with childbirth and menstruation rendered women impure. African Christian men were also significantly impacted by the notion that women are inferior to men. In an anecdotal account, a Kenyan pastor was asked about the number of individuals accompanying him. He replied, ‘There are two males and three ladies in the group’, as he did not regard women as persons (Chinchen 1999:119).

Women have historically been divided by class, geography and economic status; these differences have estranged us from one another instead of offering solutions for conversation, as this divide has been entrenched and perpetuated over many years of repressive white dominance. According to Oduyoye (1995:13) and Rakoczy (2004:21), these divisions reflect the broader intersectional realities that have shaped African feminist theology, where gender oppression is compounded by race and class hierarchies that hinder collective empowerment among women. p. 12

Numerous African narratives and proverbs employ pejorative language to belittle women; hence, statements such as – she is the origin and foundation of all her husband’s misfortunes; she is an object of contempt; she possesses numerous flaws; she is gossipy and incapable of keeping a secret; she is incessantly critical and envious (Nasimiyu 1992:23). Wasike (1992:106–107) posits that the conventional foundation for polygamy was the notion that women’s status and dignity were contingent upon their capacity to bear children and enter marriage. A woman was required to be under the protection and guidance of a male, initially as a daughter and then as a first, second or third wife (Wasike 1992:106). Nyambura Njoroge, a distinct Kenyan woman, was responsible for a legislative proposal presented in the Kenyan Parliament aimed at criminalising domestic violence against wives; however, it failed because of the strong opposition from all male members of the Parliament (Njoroge 2015). This crime of violence, therefore, was perceived not only as a personal issue but also legitimised by tradition (Njoroge 2000:80). African proverbs often exhibit negative sentiments towards women. A Gikuyu proverb reflects the Kenyan men’s conviction that – ‘Women possess no honest words, just deceitful ones’, encapsulated in the Kenyan phrase ‘Do not disclose to a woman, a secret’ (Ayanga 2016:16).

Pentecostal churches’ leadership by women

The Pentecostal movement came about in 1906 because of the renowned revival in Azusa Street in Los Angeles, where many people experienced conversion, got filled with the Spirit of God and spoke in other tongues, under a black minister, William Seymour, from Louisiana (Langford 2017:70). That Azusa Street mission accommodated all races and genders and became immensely powerful, even though Pastor Seymour involved women in the church leadership. A number of women leaders like Ozman and Taylor were role models for those who followed in their footsteps, like Aimee Semple, Lucy Farrow, McPherson and many others; these were courageous and godly women without any fear of spreading the good news of Pentecost (Simoneaux 2017:11). At one stage, at least half of Azusa’s leadership committee composed of twelve members who were women (Langford 2017:71). Such bold women believed that the Holy Spirit’s baptism had empowered them and justified their engagement in activities traditionally meant for men. Unfortunately, since the Azusa Street revival, there has been a downward trend in

the ministry of women. The Assemblies of God in America had women making up only 17.4% of the clergy in 2003 and 3.64% serving as senior pastors of churches (Clifton 2009:172). The empowerment of women leaders, which followed global Pentecostalism and brought about a revival, could not be sustained and appeared to fade over the centuries that followed (Clifton 2009:72). Church leadership by women is still subject to a variety of cultural factors that limit such women’s ability to be as effective in ministry as they could be (Mudimeli 2011).

Women in the Apostolic Faith Mission

The Pentecostal revival organised by Charles Fox Parham at the Bethel Bible School in Houston, Texas, in 1901 gave rise to the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM), a Pentecostal congregation. Prominent AFM theologians in South Africa, including Burger (2008:18), attribute the movement’s beginnings to his student and do not acknowledge Parham as the founder of the Pentecostal revival of the 20th century.

Parham, however, is frequently acknowledged for formulating Pentecostal ideology. He actively participated in disseminating the message and many of his students acknowledge him for this. Hyatt (2002:153) states that when Parham established a short-term Bible school in Houston, Texas, Seymour also enrolled. Parham contravened conventions and regional customs to permit Seymour’s enrolment in the Houston Bible School. Owing to segregation regulations and protocols, Seymour was permitted to attend courses from a neighbouring room, where he could listen to lectures through an ajar door. At his Houston camp gathering, Parham allegedly appointed Ms. Lucy Farrow, an African American woman, to the position of minister. Hoel (1964:37) stated, ‘Ms. Farrow showed an extraordinary capacity to convey the Holy Spirit by the imposition of hands’. The prayer group expanded as additional members joined, and the house became inadequate to accommodate all attendees. They relocated to the more spacious residence of Mr. Richard Ashbury, a Baptist, where six individuals in his residence commenced speaking in tongues. Seymour led a significant revitalisation that moved to 312 Azusa Street. Parham did not intend to establish a church; rather, he designated the movement as ‘The Apostolic Faith Movement’ or ‘The Apostolic Faith Mission’ (Burger & Nel 2008:23). Interracial relationships were common throughout the Renaissance. Seymour designated it the should read as Apostolic Faith Movement and Mission for the Azusa edifice (McClung 2012:28). This perspective highlights women’s involvement in the Pentecostal awakening that initiated the AFM in Zimbabwe in 1915 (Burger & Nel 2008:24). In South Africa, the movement was referred to as the ‘Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa’.

Women’s historical participation in the AFM in Zimbabwe has been theologically conservative; hence, the church evolved into a comparatively insular organisation. The documentation of women’s history at that time was inadequate, restricting current access to vital knowledge. Women’s difficulties and concerns have not been sufficiently

documented or addressed. This led to the marginalisation of women in an inequitable society, depriving them of the capacity to effect change. Women perceived the existing *status quo* as a manifestation of divine will on a theological level. In this perspective, each human community is characterised by the intrinsic structural injustice of an imbalanced relational dynamic between the sexes, wherein males collectively exert dominance over females (Slee 2003:18). The author goes on to say that this fundamental injustice has persisted throughout recorded history, is ubiquitous and is ingrained in mythology, religion, language, culture and social interactions. This is true in many fields where both sexes participate. Although males only hold numerous key leadership positions within the AFM, women and men work together in many capacities. This article examines the leadership options available to women within the AFM ministerial services.

Historical context and gender discrimination

Historically, Pentecostal movements have had varying levels of acceptance for women in ministerial positions, but despite early progress, including the ordination of women in the Assemblies of God in the 1920s, challenges remain. Women pastors in Pentecostal congregations frequently face gender discrimination because of traditional biblical interpretations that limit their position in the church hierarchy (CBE International 2023). This prejudice is typically based on texts like 1 Timothy 2:11–15 and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, which have historically been used to justify the limiting of women's leadership roles in the church (Gabriel 2018:60). Pillay (2017:2) claims that philosophical and theological discourse, throughout history, has influenced social and faith communities' perspectives and treatment of women. Biblical narratives capture the cultural circumstances of their day, particularly those involving women. The New Testament books emerged within the Greco-Roman culture, where the church fathers' thoughts have had a considerable impact on the development of Christian theology, particularly on women's worth, status and function. The works of the church fathers, especially the Greek and Latin fathers, reflect beliefs from their various eras (Sawyer 1996:149–152); these cultural settings have altered people's attitudes towards women; these ideas have become the cornerstone of the treatment of women. Various philosophical and theological beliefs about women have had and continue to have a negative impact on their dignity, environments, relationships and livelihoods, both directly and indirectly. The prevailing beliefs define social and religious discourse regarding women, which in turn determines their status and function within their communities, as well as the churches they attend. This tradition will be briefly investigated, and its impact on the AFM in Zimbabwe will be assessed.

The New Testament writings and the founders of the church were both impacted by the concepts of Plato and Aristotle. This study will examine key biblical verses including 1

Corinthians 14:33–35, Ephesians 5:22–23 and 1 Timothy 2:8–15 that are pertinent to the AFM in Zimbabwe's perspectives on women, leadership and ecclesiastical roles. A range of methods, including literal and metaphorical interpretation, will be used to analyse these scriptures. The views of male theologians have historically had a significant influence on women's day-to-day life.

Lerner (1993:142) expands on this by maintaining that women are inherently inferior, according to the scriptures and the early male theologians, who refer to the male intellect, implying that greater intelligence is awarded to men and inferior intellect to women, like Eve. These church fathers' views of Eve have had a lasting impact on current women.

Theological and cultural barriers

Theological barriers play a significant role in the challenges faced by women in Pentecostal leadership. Many Pentecostal denominations adhere to a 'theology of submission', which posits that women should submit to male authority within both the home and the church. This theology is often reinforced by cultural norms that view leadership as inherently male, creating a significant hurdle for women aspiring to leadership positions (CBE International 2023:8–10). Additionally, the integration of Pentecostalism into mainstream evangelicalism has often led to a retreat from earlier practices of empowering women, as churches seek broader acceptance within conservative Christian communities (Gabriel 2018:60). Cultural and societal influences on women's leadership also play a significant role in shaping how women are viewed and accepted in positions of authority, particularly within religious institutions. These influences, which are deeply embedded in social structures, customs and gender norms, often determine the level of access women have to leadership roles in various contexts, including churches. In the context of Pentecostal churches, these cultural and societal factors often present unique challenges for women seeking leadership roles.

Institutional and structural challenges

Institutional and structural challenges also impede women's leadership in Pentecostal churches. These challenges include limited access to formal theological education and training, which are often prerequisites for leadership roles. The hierarchical nature of church governance in many Pentecostal denominations means that decision-making power is typically concentrated among male leaders, further marginalising women (Ikyernum 2023:19). These structural barriers are exacerbated by local cultural expectations that prioritise male leadership in both religious and secular spheres; these limit women's access to and effectiveness in leadership roles. These challenges are deeply rooted in patriarchal structures and historical traditions that have persisted over time. While women in leadership have made significant strides, institutional and structural barriers continue to inhibit their progress in both religious and broader societal contexts.

Patriarchal church structures

One of the primary institutional challenges that women face in leadership within religious settings is the patriarchal structure of many churches. Historically, most religious institutions have been led and governed by men, with decision-making powers and leadership positions reserved for males. In many cases, church leadership positions such as pastors, elders and bishops are occupied by men, leaving little room for women to assume roles of authority (Amanze 2013:3–5). These structures are often maintained by deeply embedded theological interpretations that emphasise male headship, such as readings of 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 11:3, which are used to justify male-only leadership in the church (Piper & Grudem 1991:2). In Pentecostal churches, this patriarchal hierarchy is reinforced by church governance models that limit the decision-making power of women. Even when women are permitted to serve in ministry, they are often confined to roles considered appropriate for their gender, such as leading women's groups, children's ministries or administrative tasks. Leadership roles that involve preaching, teaching or leading the entire congregation are often off-limits to women because of institutional policies that prioritise male leadership (Gaitskill 1990:1–2). These patriarchal structures not only limit women's opportunities for advancement but also reinforce the perception that women are not suited for leadership roles in religious contexts.

Social and interpersonal dynamics

Women leaders in Pentecostal churches often navigate complex social and interpersonal dynamics. They frequently face resistance from male colleagues and congregants who question their authority and legitimacy. This resistance can manifest in various forms, including overt opposition, subtle undermining of their leadership and exclusion from essential decision-making processes (Gabriel 2018:34). In addition, women leaders must often balance their ministerial roles with societal expectations related to family and domestic responsibilities, which can limit their availability and effectiveness in leadership positions (CBE International 2023:204).

The disparate treatment of men and women has been ingrained in civilisations over generations, despite efforts at social and political reform. Munroe (2001:23) asserts that, although the legislation in most nations stipulates gender equality, public perception may not align with this principle. Women in society are progressively experiencing frustration and a sense of manipulation. Hadebe and Chitando (2009:10) assert that culture and religion are crucial in defining and controlling gender relations in many African cultures. The well-being and status of women in Africa can be demonstrated through a cultural framework. The AFM is integral to culture and has assimilated traditional perceptions regarding the roles of men and women, which extends to the roles assigned to women by the church. African cultures embody an African perspective; hence, any type of emancipation in this field must first reconcile with culture (Hadebe & Chitando

2009:10). It is imperative for African individuals to cultivate the ability to interrogate, analyse and critically assess culture. This approach may facilitate the critique of various institutions, including social, religious, economic and political systems, all of which contain elements of injustice.

Culture is a social construct; hence, it is susceptible to social deconstruction. According to Perry and Perry (1991:23), successive generations of humans develop culture for the benefit of their descendants, allowing each generation to augment, delete, alter and adapt components of culture that have become outmoded. This article will take a comprehensive approach to culture to understand how socio-cultural factors influence the implementation of gender-sensitive legislation. This article looks into how morality and gender conceptions are influenced by cultural beliefs, customs, knowledge, penalties and values. With a focus on customs and social legacy, the communitarian ethos, language and discourse are examined historically (Hadebe & Chitando 2009:12). In this sense, culture encompasses social legacy, language, customs, penalties, beliefs, knowledge and values. The link between gender and culture, which affects how gender legislation is implemented, is the main focus of this essay. The AFM has reached a point where male leadership, especially at the top of the hierarchy of this oldest Pentecostal church, must be prepared to share authority with women at the national level.

The AFM has reached a moment when male leadership must be willing to share authority with women at the national level, particularly at the top of the hierarchy of this oldest Pentecostal church. The AFM leadership, from the provincial to the national level, appears unwilling to share power with women who, like males, accept their divine calling to ministry. Male leaders who wield authority restrict women from participating in high-level leadership and policymaking, thereby limiting their unique, innate qualities and contributions. Women who are divinely called should be allowed to serve in the same ministerial roles as men who believe they are also called to ministry and leadership.

Communities' perceptions of women church leaders

The presence of women leaders in Pentecostal churches can also influence community perceptions over time. As women in leadership roles demonstrate their capabilities and contribute positively to church growth and community well-being, perceptions may gradually shift towards greater acceptance and support. Success stories of women-led ministries, where women pastors have successfully managed congregations and initiated impactful community projects, serve as powerful testimonials that challenge prevailing stereotypes and biases (Gabriel 2018:34).

Old Testament perspectives on woman leadership

The religious life of Israel was profoundly shaped by women in the Old Testament, although their responsibilities were often secondary to male authority. Deborah (Jdg 4:4–5), a

prophetess and judge of Israel, is a prominent example. Deborah exemplified that women might attain leadership roles with divine endorsement by guiding Israel to triumph in battle while also wielding spiritual influence. Moses' sister Miriam is another significant figure, identified in Exodus 15:20 as a prophetess who led the Israelites in worship. These cases suggest that women were sometimes granted positions of spiritual authority in ancient Israel.

The Old Testament illustrates a patriarchal system wherein males held dominant positions of authority as kings and priests. The Levitical priesthood was exclusively male, with men occupying the bulk of leadership roles within the religious society. This has prompted some to argue that the patriarchal norms of the Old Testament validate the exclusion of women from leadership roles in the ministry (Grudem 2004). Conversely, some argue that the presence of women such as Deborah and Miriam demonstrates that God allowed women to assume leadership roles, when deemed suitable.

The Pentecostal form of Christianity in Africa has embraced the importance of women from Indigenous culture. Language influences and expresses individuals' lifestyles and ideologies (Muhwati 2017:10). An example is the term 'musikana' (Shona), which denotes a woman as the giver of life. *Musika* signifies 'creator', while *-na* denotes 'together'. A woman cannot conceive a child by herself; she needs to collaborate with a man to do this. This refers to Genesis 2:18, where she is characterised as Adam's 'helper' or 'helpmate' in relation to the Genesis 2:18 narrative regarding the creation, specifically, of a man's consort. Spencer (1985:23–24) examines the phrase 'a helper fitting for him', focussing on the Hebrew interpretation of 'fit for him'. She asserts that the term *kenegdô* comprises three elements: *ke* + *neged* + *ô*, which can be rendered as 'as + before + him' (Piper et al. 2006:103). Spencer (1985:24) reads the term as signifying a 'helper seemingly positioned before him'. She characterises it as 'forward' or 'visible', indicating dominance or parity (Spencer 1985:25).

This viewpoint prompts the inquiry of whether the assistance formed after Adam can be deemed superior to Adam himself; however, in accordance with the sequence of creation, Adam was created first, which undoubtedly influenced the cultural hierarchy.

Muhwati (2017) asserts that women occupied a distinctive role as religious functionaries owing to their association with the essence of life. Women begin ascending to prominence as Pentecostal Christian leaders in Zimbabwe, particularly circa two thousand. Nonetheless, the AFM encountered difficulties in integrating its female pastors. Lagerwerf (1990:34) asserts that, notwithstanding the intimidation, resistance and challenges encountered by most African women pastors, women persist in leading successful churches in Zimbabwe.

The conventional roles of men and women in African nations resemble those of the Hebrew communities in the Bible, characterised by a prevailing patriarchal structure and

perspective. Men assume leading positions in political, religious and social spheres, while women are relegated to supportive roles and home responsibilities. The kitchen is the sole area in the home where women can exercise autonomy and make decisions impacting the entire household, without male interference or veto. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, an African theologian, designates this phenomenon as 'kitchen power' (1995:1). Women pursue this form of power because of constraints in other domains. Chinweizu (1990:14) asserts that this 'kitchen power' must be incorporated into discussions regarding African women, as it is an essential aspect of their identity.

Mapuranga (2013:180) asserts that religion significantly influences gender roles and restricts women's access to certain places and activities. Chitando (2004:123) contends that women occupy a significant position in African-initiated churches (AICs) and garner considerable attention. This stands in stark contrast to the restricted opportunities available to women in the AFM. Chinweizu (1990:14) maintains that women possess the ability to bear children and oversee domestic responsibilities, whereas men display psychological immaturity in this situation.

When an African woman achieved any significant accomplishment or excelled in ethical, religious or intellectual domains, she was seldom lauded as a virtuous individual; instead, she was perceived as having adopted masculine traits (Chinweizu 1990:13). The roles of women in the Bible parallel those in traditional African civilisations. The Bible is highly esteemed in African Christianity; however, there are discrepancies in the interpretation and application of the Bible. Some adherents of African Christianity integrate traditional practices with Christian concepts. African Pentecostalism fluctuates between adherence to perceived biblical doctrine and deviation from it for specific cultural issues, thereby making culture to transcend scriptural authority. The Bible embodies a confluence of cultures. Individuals residing for almost 430 years in a foreign locale, with its distinct cultural values and institutions, would undoubtedly have been influenced by those civilisations. It would be very limiting to overlook culture and its influence while examining the Bible and its significance in subsequent eras. The status and functions of women differ across civilisations, for within the African continent civilisations exhibit both similarities and substantial differences. Certain males perceive women via a cultural lens; however, in certain instances, these individuals forsake their culture when confronted with demands that conflict with their cultural norms. Male AFM leaders in Thulamela frequently endorse a certain culture when it aligns with their convictions. Male AFM leaders in Thulamela, a municipality in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, South Africa, frequently endorse a certain culture when it aligns with their convictions.

The subjugation of women is not exclusive to the African Christian tradition; it is also present in Islamic culture, for instance. Most predominant religions advocate for cultural

patriarchy. Certain biblical verses substantiate the Judeo-Christian faith, for instance, Genesis 16:2–4; 41:45; Numbers 12:1–2; and 27:1–11. In these cultures, women were wed to much older men at an early age, typically between 12 and 13, akin to practices in Ancient Greece and Rome. A woman's husband was referred to as her 'Baal' or lord (Gur-Klein 2014:149). Throughout her life, a woman was anticipated to be subordinate to a man, initially her father, followed by her spouse or other close male relatives. 1 Peter 3:6 articulates, 'As Sarah surrendered to Abraham, calling him Lord, you are her daughters if you act righteously and are unperturbed by fear.....' The Abrahamic narrative illustrates total male dominance, for Abraham could even conceal his intention to sacrifice their long-anticipated son, Isaac, from Sarah (Gn 22; Van Seters 2014:166). This verse indicates that the wife had no knowledge about the sacrifice. Sarah's treatment of her slave, Hagar, was severe and disagreeable, notwithstanding her counsel for Abraham to conceive a child with the slave woman (Gn 16; McKeown 2008:114).

New Testament perspectives on women leadership

The New Testament provides a more nuanced perspective of women's involvement in ministry, particularly within the early Christian church environment. Jesus often created unconventional relationships with women in the Gospels. He diverged from contemporary traditions by openly conversing with women, healing them and incorporating them into His ministry. Mary Magdalene, frequently designated as 'the apostle to the apostles', was entrusted with informing the apostles of Jesus' resurrection after being the first to witness Him alive in John 20:18. Certain scholars have construed this as evidence that women were entrusted with substantial spiritual duties in the early church (Cunningham & Hamilton 2000:567).

Many scholars, however, argue that these passages must be understood within their historical and cultural contexts. Some contend that instead of instituting a blanket prohibition on women in ministry, Paul's directive for the women of the Corinthian church to be silent may have been aimed at specific disturbances during worship (Fee 1987:3457). The assertion 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gl 3:28) is regarded by many as a foundational principle of equality within the body of Christ, encompassing ministry (Witherington 1998).

The prolific biblical writer, Paul, likewise portrays women in positions of leadership and ministry inside his epistles. Paul commends Phoebe for her contributions and identifies her as a deacon of the church in Cenchreae (Rm 16:1–2). Priscilla and her husband Aquila, for instance, are referenced with Paul as associates; Priscilla is often cited first, suggesting she may have held a more prominent position (Ac 18:26). These narratives demonstrate that women, in conjunction with males, participated in ministry and had leadership roles in the early church; nevertheless, certain Pauline passages have been interpreted as restricting women's roles in church

leadership. Paul asserts, 'I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a male; rather, she is to remain silent', as exemplified in 1 Timothy 2:12. Likewise, ladies are instructed to remain silent in churches according to 1 Corinthians 14:34–35. Proponents of the view that the Bible prohibits women from occupying pastoral or leadership roles within the church often reference these scriptures (Piper & Grudem 1991). Hannah's distress regarding her childlessness is powerfully depicted, with her husband's enduring affection for her, despite this circumstance. Upon bearing a child, she exhibits autonomy and consecrates her exceptional son to the worship of God at the Shiloh temple. She, rather than her husband, recited the profoundly spiritual and revolutionary hymn (1 Sm 2:1–10) that subsequently served as the template for Mary's Magnificat (Lk 1:46–54). In Judges, 3:3–22, Manoah's nameless wife exhibits greater religious sensitivity than her husband (Le Roux 2016:246). Abigail's intellect and prudence are starkly juxtaposed with her husband's uncouth demeanour (1 Sm 25:3, 23–25, 33). Ruth, a Moabite, exemplifies loyalty and faithfulness in the eponymous book. The *Book of Esther* vividly exemplifies the bravery and resilience of the queen, whose valour is annually celebrated during the Jewish festival of Purim (Edwards 1989:31). Miriam, in the well-known narrative of Exodus 2, employs her ingenuity to save Moses; following the exodus from Egypt, she grasps a timbrel and leads the ladies in dance, singing the Song of the Sea (Ex 15:21). She is characterised as a prophetess (Ex 15:20) and collaborates with her brother Aaron in admonishing Moses when they perceived his conduct as being imprudent; however, she has leprosy as a retribution, but Aaron stays unharmed (Nm 12). This is perceived by many as a message to women – they may prophesy but should refrain from judging the words and works of men. They ought to submit to males as Miriam was expected to submit to Moses' leadership and not to question him. The prophet Micah, nonetheless, venerates her as divinely sent, alongside Moses and Aaron, to serve as a national leader (Mi 6:4).

Like Miriam, Deborah, a married woman, and mother who demonstrated civic, religious and military leadership, was likewise designated as a prophetess (Jdg 4:4). She was one of the judges of Israel, alongside the men. She proactively called upon Barak in the name of the Lord to assemble forces against Sisera, and her might and valour starkly contrast with the ineffectiveness of this male commander of Israel. Their valour, together with that of Jael, who assassinated Sisera, is commemorated in the illustrious Song of Deborah (Jdg 5). Additional female prophets include Isaiah's spouse (Is 8:3) and Noadiah (Neh 6:14).

Conclusion

This article presents a detailed theoretical framework and literature analysis that lays the groundwork for understanding women-led ministry in Pentecostal churches. The theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity theory provides a critical perspective for investigating patterns of male dominance and gender inequity in ecclesiastical environments. The literature

research indicates a diverse environment of difficulties and opportunities for female Pentecostal leaders. Key findings show that, despite women's historical prominence in the early Pentecostal movement, particularly at Azusa Street, their leadership roles have gradually declined over time. Contemporary female leaders confront numerous challenges, including theological constraints based on conventional biblical readings, patriarchal church institutions, cultural norms that prioritise male headship and limited access to formal theology study.

The review shows that feminist theology and African theological anthropology offer alternative interpretive frameworks for challenging limiting gender roles and advocating for more diversity in church leadership. Biblical opinions on women in ministry are divided, with some verses promoting full engagement in ministry and others understood to limit their duties. This interpretive tension continues to shape modern arguments concerning women's ordination and leadership in Pentecostal congregations. Cultural and cultural influences, notably traditional African perceptions of women and patriarchal systems, have a considerable impact on women's access and effectiveness in leadership roles. However, current statistical development patterns indicate that women-led churches are enjoying growth trends, implying that they have the capacity for ministry and community engagement.

The literature also emphasises the significance of initiative-taking change within religious communities, emphasising the need to challenge patriarchal norms and embrace more inclusive practices. The concept of interruption as a transformative approach provides a means to challenge dominant macho norms inside religious institutions.

This comprehensive review provides the theoretical and contextual framework for investigating the specific experiences, problems and effects of women-led ministry in Pentecostal congregations.

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CRedit authorship contribution

Hundzukani P. khosa-Nkatini: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Disclaimer

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