

The Spirit calls sons and daughters alike: Lessons from Miriam, Deborah, and Esther for Pentecostal women's leadership

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Abstract

This article examines women's leadership in African Pentecostal churches, focusing on the Assemblies of God – Back to God (BTG) movement. Drawing on qualitative interviews with senior church leaders and biblical exemplars such as Miriam, Deborah, and Esther, it explores the structural, cultural, and theological barriers to women's ordination and participation in governance in African Pentecostal denominations. The findings reveal that patriarchal structures, selective scriptural interpretations, and male self-preservation continue to limit women's agency, implying that supportive male leadership could enable reform. The study highlights the ethical and theological imperative to recognise women's callings, advocating for Pentecostal leadership that prioritises divine guidance over human privilege. The article explores practical insights for leadership formation, governance practices, and fostering inclusivity in Pentecostal contexts.

Keywords

*African Pentecostalism; Women's Leadership; Ordination; Gender Justice;
BTG Churches*

Introduction

Women's leadership in African Pentecostal churches remains contested, despite clear biblical precedent and historical contributions of women in ministry. In the Assemblies of God – Back to God (BTG) movement, as in many African Pentecostal contexts (Poltera 2019), leadership roles are predominantly filled by men, and women frequently encounter structural, cultural, and theological barriers that restrict ordination and participation

in decision-making (Kgatlle 2019:5; Oduyoye 1995; Dube 2003:72). These patterns reinforce patriarchal hierarchies and perpetuate gender inequalities, limiting women's agency despite their demonstrated spiritual gifts and commitment.

A different picture emerges when considering global Pentecostal contexts, where many countries, particularly in Latin America and parts of Asia, have embraced women's ordination for decades, even though some regions, such as the United States, still limit women's access to senior ministerial ranks like ordained bishop due to denominational polity (Alexander & Bowers 2018:9).

The scriptural narratives of Miriam, Deborah, and Esther provide compelling precedents for women in leadership; they demonstrate courage, wisdom, and divinely sanctioned authority (Ex 15:20; Jdg 4–5; Esther 4; Tribble 2022; Frymer-Kensky 2002). Feminist theologians argue that excluding women contradicts the liberative ethos of the gospel and the inclusive nature of the early church (Oduyoye 1995; Dube 2003). The interviews with senior BTG leaders have revealed that male ambivalence and hierarchical governance structures reinforce gender imbalances in positions of power and influence, while progressive male support emerges as a catalyst for reform.

This study explores these dynamics to illuminate the systemic, theological, and cultural barriers that hinder women's leadership, and it will strive to offer practical insights to reimagine Pentecostal governance. By positioning women lived experiences as central to the study, one can reflect on the practical theological approach to leadership formation, inclusivity, and faithful adherence to divine calling, advocating for church structures that reflect both justice and empowerment.

Context of the study

This study examines the marginalisation of women in African Pentecostal churches, focusing on leadership and ordination within the Assemblies of God – Back to God (BTG) movement. It is guided by African Women's Theology, particularly the work of Mercy Oduyoye, whose analysis of patriarchal cultural and ecclesial systems exposes how women's spiritual

agency is often muted. From this perspective, the article adopts a liberationist stance affirming that God calls both sons and daughters, thereby challenging structures that restrict women's leadership in Pentecostal contexts. Although Pentecostal churches emphasise Spiritempowerment for all believers (Acts 2:1–4; Joel 2:28–29), women continue to encounter structural, cultural, and theological barriers that limit participation in governance and ordination. African feminist theology, especially Oduyoye's work, critiques these dynamics and highlights the theological contributions women bring to ecclesial life (Oduyoye 2001).

Biblical narratives provide timeless examples of female leadership that challenge patriarchal constraints. Miriam, Deborah, and Esther demonstrated courage, wisdom, and divinely sanctioned authority during eras when women's public roles were restricted (Ex 2:4–8; 15:20–21; Jdg 4–5; Esther 2:6–10; 4:14–16). Miriam led Israel in worship, Deborah exercised prophetic and judicial authority, and Esther navigated political structures to deliver her people. Collectively, these figures affirm that God equips women to lead strategically, courageously, and faithfully, aligning with Joel's prophecy that both sons and daughters are called to prophesy (Joel 2:28–29).

Pentecostalism, which is rooted in the Azusa Street Revival and shaped by leaders such as William Seymour, emphasises Spirit baptism as a source of empowerment for all believers, regardless of gender (Kgatla 2016; Sande 2017). Yet many African Pentecostal churches continue to show a preference for male authority and cultural norms over Spirit-led mandates (Collins et al. 2015; Gabaitse 2015). The way these churches are governed calls for urgent transformation toward genuine inclusivity.

Through the empowerment of women, the church affirms their God-given value to young girls, while encouraging boys and men to recognise the inherent worth of women, an important step in addressing gender-based violence (Parsitau & Aura 2020). Dames (2022:5) argues that Christian leadership pedagogy must be reoriented to confront societal inequities, shifting from rigid, linear frameworks to dynamic, process-driven models that are aimed at ethical and cultural transformation. The persistent silencing of women within Pentecostal congregations has created significant challenges as Naidoo, building on Patricia Hill Collins,

notes such silencing constitutes epistemic violence, where women's voices and knowledge are systematically devalued (Naidoo 2023:3). Historically, women's insights within theological and gender discourses have been dismissed as inferior, while patriarchal cultural beliefs, as highlighted by Wachania and Ndengwah (2017), continue to obstruct meaningful progress toward women empowerment. This tension between theological empowerment and institutional patriarchy forms the core context for this study.

While BTG is a predominantly Black Pentecostal movement, the barriers women face in leadership cut across age, class, and educational background, making gender the central focus of this study. The BTG movement, which was founded in the 1950s by Reverend Nicholas Bhengu and was formally recognised in 1990, comprises over 8,000 local churches and nearly two million members in South Africa (Resane 2018:42; Jacobs 2021:5). Despite its size and Spirit-centred foundation, the governance remains predominantly male, with limited formal leadership roles for women. This institutional reality illustrates the gap between biblical and Spirit-led models of leadership and emphasises contemporary practices that sustain gendered hierarchies.

Drawing from the qualitative interviews with senior BTG leaders, the study has identified multiple factors that influence women's leadership and ordination: (1) administrative and governance structures reflecting patriarchal norms; (2) male self-preservation rooted in authority, status, and control; and (3) emerging progressive support from men who recognise the biblical and historical legitimacy of women in leadership. These dynamics situate contemporary experiences of marginalisation within a broader framework of Scripture, historical precedent, and the potential for reform.

By exploring these structural, theological, and interpersonal dimensions, this study contributes to practical theological reflection on leadership formation, governance, and inclusivity. It highlights pathways for reform that align church practices with divine calling, fostering empowerment and equity for women in African Pentecostal contexts. The following sections present detailed findings, beginning with structural and governance barriers, followed by male resistance and concluding with progressive support for women's leadership.

Methodology

The study employs a praxis-oriented liberation method rooted in African Women's Theology: biblical interpretation, critical analysis of context, and action-focused recommendations mutually inform one another. Narrative readings of key women in Scripture are brought into dialogue with BTG leaders' testimonies to test and refine conclusions for practice.

Findings

This study has identified multiple factors that shape women's leadership and ordination within BTG churches. These factors can be broadly grouped into three interrelated themes: administrative and governance barriers; male self-preservation and resistance; and progressive support for women's ordination. Each theme reflects structural realities, theological interpretations, and cultural influences within the denomination.

Although some BTG leaders appeal to traditional interpretations such as male headship (1 Tim 2:12; 1 Cor 14:34–35) to justify women's exclusion from ordination, these arguments often rely on cultural and contextual assumptions rather than consistent biblical principles. Critical Pentecostal and feminist theologians argue that such passages must be read within their historical context, noting that the same New Testament canon affirms women such as Phoebe, Junia, Priscilla, and the daughters of Philip as active leaders in the early church. A restrictive reading, therefore, creates a theological inconsistency: it elevates selective texts while overlooking the broader Spirit-empowered mandate in Acts 2:17–18, where both sons and daughters are called to prophesy and minister. This study's findings further reveal that resistance is often driven more by institutional culture and male self-preservation than by coherent theological conviction, demonstrating the need for renewed biblical interpretation that aligns with Pentecostal commitments to Spirit-led empowerment.

1. Administrative and governance barriers

One of the findings within the study indicates that BTG churches maintain administrative and governance structures that systematically restrict women's leadership. Ordination restrictions prevent women from being

formally recognised as pastors, limiting their participation in decision-making bodies and strategic ministry, even when they are active in evangelism and church activities (Smit & Chetty 2018). This mirrors broader patterns in African Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, where patriarchal governance is deeply embedded and reinforced across generations (Jacobs, 2021).

Hermeneutical practices within BTG further reinforce exclusion. Selective readings of Scripture, such as 1 Timothy 2:11–14 and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, are often cited to justify limiting women’s authority, while passages affirming women’s agency – Galatians 3:28, Romans 16, Exodus 15:20, Judges 4–5, and 2 Chronicles 34 are overlooked (de Alminana 2017:1; Wenham 1987:288). Scholars such as Westfall (2016) argue that Paul’s instructions regarding women’s silence must be interpreted within the socio-historical context of the Greco-Roman world, where women were often subdued. These texts, therefore, should not be treated as universal directives but as situational guidance for particular communities at a specific moment in history (Westfall, 2016).

In addition, Dingemans (1996:89) calls for biblical interpretation that amplifies the voices of those who have been marginalised, offering “readings that dismantle entrenched gender hierarchies”. The issue extends beyond literalist interpretations of isolated passages to a broader neglect of contextual and theological coherence. McDill (2014) emphasises that faithful exegesis requires attention to genre, authorial intent, and cultural setting, warning against interpretations shaped by preconceived biases. When these interpretive principles are overlooked, Pentecostal churches risk reinforcing patriarchal systems that exclude women from meaningful leadership.

Biblical exemplars such as Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah demonstrate divinely sanctioned leadership in male-dominated contexts, while Priscilla, Phoebe, Junia, Chloe, and Nympha illustrate women’s authority in early Christian communities (Romans 16:1–7; 1 Corinthians 1:11; Colossians 4:15).

Cultural norms also intersect with ecclesial rules, limiting women from being recognised as pastors and confining their ministry to informal or women-specific roles. One participant shared that:

It must not change; one must operate within the parameters of God's ordained platform. If God calls you, just do what the Lord said you must do (P9, L52).

From a practical theology perspective, these findings highlight the need for churches to evaluate both their governance systems and their interpretive approaches critically. Leadership structures should reflect the Spirit's gifting of all believers rather than being shaped by cultural assumptions or patriarchal control.

2. Male self-preservation and resistance

A second prominent theme is male self-preservation. Persistent assumptions that women must remain submissive and should not be offered leadership opportunities create an environment that stifles and demoralises women, leaving many in positions of weakness and discouragement. Even so, the solidarity women cultivate in these restrictive contexts functions as an “educative praxis” (Tettey and Nel, 2020:5), equipping them with collective resilience and insight that can empower their leadership potential.

According to Young (2022), Knight's preliminary review of LeaderShape's research data suggests that women possess leadership strengths particularly suited to the demands of the twenty-first century, a view echoed by the global study *When Women Thrive*, which highlights the transformative impact of inclusive leadership.

During the interview process, participants reported that some men perceive women's gifts as threatening, fearing that by allowing women into leadership, it could undermine their authority or status. One participant stated that:

One of the reasons is that a man might be scared of being omitted from leadership (P19, L26).

Education, social empowerment, and the growing visibility of women in ministry were cited as additional sources of male anxiety. Another participant noted that:

Some of these challenges are caused by women because now we are becoming equal in the social space (P21, L24).

These dynamics show that resistance is not merely theological but intertwined with economic, social, and personal interests, reflecting historical patterns in which male leaders have safeguarded their authority at the expense of women (Kgatle, 2019; Dube, 2003).

From a practical theological perspective, understanding male self-preservation provides an opportunity to address these fears constructively. Churches can create spaces for dialogue, mentorship, and governance reforms that affirm the calling of women, encourage partnership, and reshape leadership structures to promote equity rather than competition.

3. Progressive support for women's ordination

Despite structural and cultural barriers, the study identified progressive support for women in leadership among some of the male leaders within BTG. Participants highlighted biblical exemplars such as Priscilla, Phoebe, and Junia, as well as historical contributions of women in African Pentecostalism, to justify women's ordination and leadership (Mwihia 2025:2; P5, L14; P20, L25).

Cross-denominational examples, such as the AFM, where approximately 300 of 2,400 pastors are women, reinforce the participants' arguments for inclusion, even if most women do not lead assemblies (Kgatle 2019). One participant articulated the theological principle guiding this support as:

People are born again, and God calls all believers – male and female – for ministry. It is not about privilege; it is about the work of God (P2, L35).

Other participants framed the matter as one of justice:

Personally, it is not a matter of feeling ... it is a matter of right (P20, L25).

Practical implications of this support include the potential for mentorship, structural reform, and the development of inclusive leadership pathways. By integrating theological grounding, historical precedent, and contemporary advocacy, progressive voices within the church serve as catalysts for reimagining governance structures that align with divine calling rather than cultural or patriarchal privilege.

Collectively, these findings illustrate a complex interplay between administrative governance, male resistance, and emerging progressive support in shaping women's leadership within BTG churches. While structural and cultural barriers continue to constrain women from being ordained, the presence of progressive advocacy demonstrates that reform is both possible and desirable. By linking empirical evidence with biblical, historical, and theological frameworks, these findings provide a foundation for practical theological reflection on governance, leadership formation, and the equitable participation of all believers in Pentecostal ministry.

Findings and discussion

The study revealed that multiple factors shape women's leadership and ordination within BTG churches. These factors can be broadly grouped into three interrelated themes: administrative and governance barriers; male self-preservation and progressive support for women being ordained. Each theme reflects both structural realities and theological interpretations within the denomination, which are discussed in dialogue with biblical exemplars and historical precedents.

1. Administrative and governance barriers

The study revealed that BTG churches maintain administrative and governance structures that systematically restrict women's leadership. Pentecostals frequently wrestle with the inclusive implications of the "daughters' prophecy" (Tackett 2017:85) rooted in a radically eschatological gospel of equality. These governance obstacles are less theological than the dynamics of power. Carter (2009:186) recalls Abraham Lincoln's insight that "adversity tests most men, but power reveals character", using this to highlight how leadership can expose the misuse of authority, even within church settings. Greenfield's analysis, as cited by Matshobane and Masango (2018:1), reinforces this view by showing that Pentecostal churches often lack cohesive structures, leading to leadership conflicts. Such disputes arise from diverse pressures, including disagreements over mission priorities, financial constraints, moral shortcomings, doctrinal disputes, and even tensions rooted in personal rivalries or unrealistic expectations between congregants and leaders. Women are frequently denied ordination,

restricting their participation in pastoral roles and decision-making bodies even when they serve actively in ministry. As one participant explained:

Pentecostalism is governed by the Bible; it must not go beyond the principles of the Bible. It does not matter if you are highly spiritual – keep the principles of the Bible (Participant 1, L17).

This strict literalism often functions as a tool for patriarchy, with certain passages being utilised selectively to justify exclusion. Verses such as 1 Timothy 2:11–14 and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 are frequently cited, yet Mancini (2019:83) argues that:

A proper exposition of 1 Timothy 2:11–15, given the first-century church customs, yields the correct understanding of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 as a cultural mandate. God does not place gender restrictions on teaching His Word. This is an important issue because women who are qualified to teach men are being treated unfairly by not being allowed to teach. Moreover, the church suffers due to the restriction placed upon the gospel going forth, solely based on gender.

Mancini (2019:85) argues that the phrase “I do not permit” should not be seen as a “universally binding” command, but rather as a “cultural mandate” specific to its time. He further explains that Scripture is a “progressive revelation, which possesses a redemptive spirit that moves contemporary interpretation beyond the text’s original cultural setting,” allowing for more inclusive and contextually relevant theological understandings.

Similarly, Ponga (2021) notes that Corinth, a diverse Roman city known for its immorality and religious pluralism, shaped Paul’s concerns in 1 Corinthians. Paul’s epistle, written around AD 53–54, was aimed at addressing specific behaviours that threatened the unity of the church rather than a goal to impose permanent gender restrictions. By contrast, Galatians 3:28 affirms the radical equality of all believers, “neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”. Vorster (2019:3, 6) interprets this as a “foundational text for human relationships under Christ’s reign”, reflecting the heart of the new covenant and the equality of all people before God.

Despite such biblical principles, women leaders like Deborah, Huldah, and Priscilla are often overlooked (de Alminana 2017; Wenham 1987). As one participant reflected:

To this day, since 1985, when pastor Bhengu passed on, it has been over 40 years now, and the role of women remains subservient and disregarded. Even those women who get called to the ministry are given very menial assignments. I still have to see a church in the Back to God, in particular, which is fully pastored by a woman. For now, it's either that a woman is an organiser for women in most cases or for girls (Participant 2, L2).

Cultural norms further reinforce these structures. Male leadership is often framed as divinely sanctioned, reflecting broader African societal expectations:

Even culturally speaking, there is an issue that must be handled by men; women cannot handle it. If you give them the responsibility, they will not be able to. So, if the church now turns a blind eye to gender issues, then that is a big problem (Participant 9, L24).

The combination of administrative rules and cultural attitudes maintains a patriarchal order that diminishes women's agency even when they are theologically trained and Spirit-gifted. As one participant observed:

There are ethnic groups in South Africa [that] hold the belief that a woman cannot lead men, and when it comes to women's ordination, you will notice that women are given the right to study, to go to theological school like Henley on Klip, but when they come back they are not regarded as pastors (Participant 21, L12).

This tension between Spirit-led empowerment and institutional restriction highlights the gap between Pentecostal theology and practice, underscoring the urgent need to re-examine governance structures considering Scripture's liberating trajectory and biblical exemplars of women in leadership.

2. Male self-preservation and the persistence of patriarchy

Another key finding is that male self-preservation underpins resistance to women's leadership. Participants reported that men often perceive the

growing competence of women as a threat to their authority, echoing historical patriarchal patterns. One participant explained:

I think the focus now is on evangelising, and as men, we now, in our day and age, believe that it can only be done successfully by men (Participant 4, L6).

Participant 9 expands this perspective by indicating that patriarchal resistance is not only about authority but also about protecting access to money and material resources.

It is about what I get, money, wealth, material things. We do not have people who are still hungry for God's anointing, who are saying that I will preach the gospel and I am leaving everything (Participant 9, L44)

Education, social empowerment, and spiritual gifting among women were also noted as sources of male anxiety.

African men are shy to be outshone by a woman. You take a woman, and you put her on the pulpit, she moves, and the whole church moves in the Spirit; then the following week you take one of the elders or deacons, you put them in the pulpit, and the work is dull (Participant 8, L22).

This self-protective attitude mirrors biblical precedents, such as Abraham's deception of Sarah and Mordecai's strategic positioning of Esther, where male authority mediates women's agency (Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987). In the BTG, this manifests in selective scriptural interpretation and restrictive governance, ensuring that women remain peripheral despite demonstrated capability (Kgatlé 2019). Participant 10 described how political dynamics affect the recognition of spiritual insight:

Once more, there is a component of church politics getting penetrated within our church. We first look at who is raising a point. Stated differently, we reject information from others; we will not trust anyone claiming to have heard from the Holy Spirit (Participant 10, L13).

However, the study highlights that women can navigate these patriarchal structures strategically, using verbal and spiritual agency. As Mițariu

(2022:183) notes, women like Miriam, Deborah, and Esther leveraged words, song, and prayer to enact transformative change. Miriam sang after the Red Sea crossing; Deborah issued prophetic and judicial directives following military victory; and Esther prayed and fasted to protect her people (Ex 15:20–21; Jdg 4–5; Esther 4:14–16). These examples illustrate that leadership in the face of male dominance requires courage, wisdom, and persistence.

3. Progressive support as a pathway for reform

Despite structural and cultural barriers, the study identified progressive male support as a catalyst for reform. Participants recognised that women's leadership aligns with biblical precedent and the historical contributions of African Pentecostal women. Participants framed ordination not as a privilege but as a divine calling, as one participant stated:

As men, we tend to believe that God exclusively employs men and that God only uses women to a limited extent. It is something that is in us; we have convinced ourselves. (Participant 10, L10).

Supportive participants emphasised the importance of education, training, and theological clarity to shift church culture:

I think a lot of teaching is needed for the church at large. Women should also study the Scriptures, be encouraged to take short and even leadership courses, and be empowered to gain confidence (Participant 18, L20).

The church needs to be taught and must ask questions. Seminars are crucial in this case. You should mature the church. Discussions (Participant 8, L24)

Such statements affirm that leadership should reflect “God’s priorities” rather than male self-interest (Phiri & Nadar 2006:13–14). By acknowledging and enabling the calling of women, Pentecostal churches can align governance structures with both Scripture and Spirit-led empowerment.

4. Integrating findings with Biblical exemplars

Across all three themes, a clear pattern emerges: while administrative barriers and male self-preservation constrain women, both Scripture and progressive leaders point toward reform. Biblical exemplars such as Miriam, Deborah, and Esther demonstrate that God equips women to lead, protect, and deliver even within male-dominated contexts. These models resonate with Acts 2:17–18, affirming that the Spirit empowers all believers for ministry, regardless of gender.

By supporting participants' testimonies with these exemplars, the study underscores a critical theological insight: leadership is a divine calling, not a cultural privilege or male prerogative. Reform in the BTG movement, therefore, requires both structural adjustment and a shift in male attitudes, combining theological reflection, educational investment, and strategic advocacy to realise gender-inclusive ministry.

Implications for Pentecostal leadership

The findings of this study hold significant implications for African Pentecostal leadership, particularly within the Assemblies of God – Back to God (BTG) movement, and more broadly for Pentecostal churches grappling with gendered leadership norms. Three interrelated areas emerge: theological reorientation, structural reform, and mutual empowerment.

1. Theological reorientation

Pentecostal churches are called to critically reassess theological interpretations that have historically marginalised women. The study highlights how selective readings of Scripture, such as 1 Timothy 2:11–14 and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, have been used to justify limiting women's leadership, while passages affirming women's agency, including Galatians 3:28, Romans 16, and the leadership of biblical figures such as Miriam, Deborah, and Esther, are often overlooked. Participants reflected this tension, noting that:

Wrong interpretation of scriptures. Scriptures are taken out of context.

Also, we have dragged culture to interpret scriptures instead of doing

this thing the other way around. Culturally, a man is a man, and a woman must follow. A woman must be quiet, a woman must listen, and this is how the culture pushes the whole thing (Participant 2, L9).

and

We come to Christ in the same way, but when it comes to gender, there are specific roles that the Bible gives, that a woman can do, and that man can do ... the way I am created is different to the way my wife is created and the things she is supposed to be doing. (Participant 9, L42).

Re-engaging Scripture holistically allows Pentecostal churches to affirm that God's Spirit equips both men and women for leadership, challenging patriarchal interpretations that elevate male authority above divine calling. Biblical exemplars provide compelling models: Miriam's prophetic leadership and public praise after the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex 15:20–21); Deborah's judicial and military guidance as "mother in Israel" (Jdg 4–5); and Esther's political courage to protect her people (Esther 4:14–16) demonstrate that effective leadership does not require conformity to male norms but operates through courage, discernment, and divine empowerment (Tung 2022; Mițariu 2022; and Sorrow 2024).

2. Structural and administrative reform

Findings indicate that BTG churches, like many African Pentecostal denominations, maintain governance and administrative structures that systematically restrict women's leadership. Ordination policies, hierarchical decision-making, and cultural assumptions about male authority have been repeatedly cited as barriers. One participant observed that,

To this day, since 1985, when pastor Bhengu passed on, it is over 40 years now, the role of women remains subservient and disregarded, even those women who get called to the ministry are given very menial assignments (Participant 2, L2).

Another noted,

The attitude that men have toward women is the main issue that I

observe (Participant 15, L12)

Men suffer from masculinity; they do not want to share the church leadership positions (Participant 15, L23).

Addressing these structural barriers requires reforming policies to ensure equitable access to leadership and ordination. This entails formal recognition of women's spiritual calling, alongside practical measures such as leadership training, theological education, and mentorship programmes for both women and men. Participants emphasised the importance of education and capacity building, with one noting that,

It needs an overhaul ... Train women to assert themselves. Train men to accept that women are people. They are children of God, like any other person. It needs a lot of training and a lot of mind shift, which is what the church is suffering from now (Participant 19, L23).

Structural reform also requires confronting entrenched cultural assumptions about gender. Many African Pentecostal contexts blend religious and traditional norms, reinforcing male-dominated leadership. One participant's testimony highlighted this challenge:

Misinterpretation of the Bible, culture, how people interpret things based on how they understand culture... that is a stumbling block (Participant 19, L16).

Reform must therefore include awareness and critical engagement with both scripture and cultural norms, aiming for leadership models that reflect divine, rather than human priorities.

3. Mutual empowerment and collaborative ministry

A key implication of the study is the need for mutual empowerment between men and women in ministry, as exemplified in Scripture. The cooperative leadership of Miriam with her brothers (Ex 15:20–21), Deborah and Barak (Jdg 4–5), and Esther with Mordecai (Esther 4–9) demonstrates that God's purposes are often fulfilled through partnership rather than competition. The presence of progressive support among male leaders today offers a pathway for theological and structural reform. Participants acknowledged the potential of inclusive leadership by stating that:

Individuals must instigate. Change does not come from the top. The change will never come from an individual who is humble and high out there ... Even if sometimes they become sidelined (Participant 2, L31)

and

I think the church needs to confront this issue head-on... Where do we stand? (Participant 11, L24).

Such statements underscore the importance of shared responsibility in cultivating an environment where women can exercise their calling fully.

Mutual empowerment involves both recognition and enabling. Women must be supported to gain confidence, theological literacy, and leadership experience (Participant 18, L20; Participant 11, L9), while men must be prepared to cede authority, challenge patriarchal assumptions, and foster participatory decision-making. This approach aligns with Pentecostal theology, which emphasises that spiritual gifts are distributed according to God's purposes (Acts 2:17–18) and not social hierarchies. Collaborative ministry also encourages a balance between spiritual authority and cultural sensitivity, enabling churches to honour the contributions of all members while advancing inclusive governance.

Together, these implications point toward a Pentecostal leadership paradigm that is theologically sound, structurally equitable, and relationally collaborative. Churches that embrace holistic scriptural interpretation, reform governance structures, and foster mutual empowerment are better positioned to reflect the Spirit's equitable distribution of gifts, encourage the full participation of women, and cultivate leadership practices that are both just and sustainable. This approach not only addresses historical marginalisation but also affirms that divine calling transcends gender, ultimately strengthening the witness and vitality of African Pentecostal communities.

4. Practical pathways for bridging policy and practice

To bridge the gap between policy and practice, Pentecostal communities can begin by establishing clear, written guidelines that affirm women's eligibility for leadership and ordination, ensuring these policies are

communicated consistently at all levels of church governance. Practical implementation requires intentional leadership development programs that mentor and train women for pastoral and administrative roles, supported by senior male leaders who model inclusive practice. Churches can also introduce accountability structures, such as annual gender audits or review committees, to monitor progress and identify persistent barriers. Congregational education, through teaching, workshops, and preaching, can help shift cultural attitudes and normalise women's leadership as biblically grounded and Spirit-led. Together, these steps offer actionable pathways for transforming theological conviction into lived ecclesial practice.

Conclusion

This study has examined the marginalisation of women in leadership and ordination within the Assemblies of God – Back to God (BTG) movement, situating these experiences within broader African Pentecostal contexts. The findings reveal a complex interplay between structural, cultural, and theological factors that continue to constrain women's leadership, and these include patriarchal governance, selective scriptural interpretation, and male self-preservation. At the same time, the study highlights the emergence of progressive support among some male leaders, reflecting the potential for reform and inclusive practices.

Biblical exemplars, Miriam, Deborah, and Esther, provide timeless models of female leadership, demonstrating courage, wisdom, and divine empowerment within male-dominated contexts. These narratives affirm that God's calling transcends gender and that effective leadership encompasses diverse expressions of spiritual authority, strategic action, and moral courage. The study underscores that contemporary Pentecostal churches can draw upon these examples to challenge patriarchal norms and embrace a more holistic and Spirit-led approach to leadership.

Theologically, the research reinforces the principle that spiritual gifts and divine calling are distributed equitably among all believers (Acts 2). Practically, it calls for structural reforms in governance, ordination policies, and leadership training, alongside fostering mutual empowerment

and collaborative ministry between men and women. By centring the lived experiences of women within BTG, the study contributes to Pentecostal feminist theology and encourages a reimagining of church leadership that aligns with divine intent rather than human privilege.

Building on these insights, Pentecostal churches and theological institutions can take concrete steps to bridge the gap between conviction and practice. These include revising ordination policies to explicitly affirm women's eligibility, establishing leadership development pathways that mentor women for pastoral and administrative roles, and equipping ministers through theological training that integrates genderinclusive hermeneutics. Accountability structures such as periodic reviews of leadership composition or gender equity audits can help ensure that policy commitments translate into measurable change. Such steps create practical avenues for embodying Spirit-led inclusivity within church governance and ministerial formation.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that transforming women's leadership in African Pentecostal churches is both necessary and possible. It requires a sustained commitment to theological reflection, structural reform, and cultural engagement, ensuring that women's gifts are recognised, nurtured, and deployed in the service of God's mission. The implications extend beyond BTG, offering insights for Pentecostal denominations across Africa seeking to foster inclusive, Spirit-empowered leadership that honours both Scripture and the lived realities of all believers.

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