

## **The Bible and gender equality in church leadership in Tanzania**

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### **Abstract**

Since the arrival of Christianity in Africa, the Bible has been received well by Africans. It has become the canon in most spheres of life. For women, especially, the Bible was and still is the book of hope and courage. It is the source of hope and courage to whatever situations women experience. Women find the message of Jesus appealing because it provides them equal status with men and new avenues of religious service. They sense that the gospel grants both women and men the opportunity to participate fully in the community of God's new people. Since the Bible carries the good news, it is expected to transform cultures of believers and enhance gender equality in church leadership as well as other spheres of life. Therefore, this paper uses the liberal feminist theory to discuss gender equality in leadership in Tanzania by examining biblical, cultural, social and ecclesiastical perspectives.

### **Keywords**

*Bible; leadership; church, women and gender equality*

## **1. Gender equality in the Bible**

Gender equality has its basis in the Bible as narrated in the creation story. In that narrative we see that female and male were created in the image of God. Genesis 1:27 states, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them". They were given equal tasks of ruling and subduing all creatures (Genesis 1:28). From the fact that Adam and Eve were given a collective responsibility, it is clear that God's intention for gender equality is obvious. Here we see the common humanity and equal value of a woman and a man before God. It is this image which makes man (female and male) God's representative on earth. Wenham (1987:78) states, "The image of God refers to the mental and spiritual faculties that man shares with his [sic!] Creator ... the image

of God resides in man's reason, personality, free will, self-consciousness, or intelligence." It is further evident that "Women and men together share the *imago Dei*, and this divine image is a social reality. We can conclude that considerations such as these suggest that God intends for women and men to serve together in all aspects of church life" (Grenz & Kjesbo 1995: 174). Therefore, gender inequality was not part of the original good creation. Hence, these considerations suggest that God intends for women and men to serve together in all aspects of church life including leadership.

However, Grenz & Kjesbo (1995:37) assert that "The Hebrew Bible is, in many aspects, a man's book. Its authors are arguably all male, and even scholars who point to a few biblical texts that might have been authored by women must admit that these compositions have been transmitted through male scribal communities." This statement indicates that it is not surprising to see the traces of androcentristic aspects within the Bible. Let us focus our discussion in each Testament of the Bible

## 1.1 Women leaders in the Old Testament

In the Bible we have many women who played important roles in leadership. Several women were involved in leadership who were called by God at different times and occasions. At this juncture I will discuss a few examples of women who were leaders in the Old Testament. If God does not desire women to be in leadership then one would think that there would be no valid examples of female leadership in the Bible. However, even in a culture that could be considered hostile to women, we find female leaders who are called and used by God as follows:

### 1.1.1 Deborah the Judge (Judges 4–5)

As a prophetess she led and delivered Israel without even a hint of dishonour from the scripture. Judges 4–5 tells us the story of Deborah the judge of Israel, a prophetess and the only female judge. The bible does not tell us anything about her family except that she was the wife of Lapidoth, Deborah's home on the hill country of Ephraim between Bethel and Ramah. During Deborah's time the situation of her country was not good, the people rejected Yahweh. Her people came to their present position under the leadership of God's guidance, but men had rebelled against Yahweh, whom they owed everything. Deen (1985:44) contends, "The whole period

covered by the book of Judges is fittingly described by three words, relapse, retribution and recovery. They were constantly turning away from God and constantly suffered as a result of their moral failures”. This was not only history covered by the book of Judges but in its measure, it is the history of the race. The story says that Deborah sat on the palm tree and judged Israel, this tree was a landmark known as the “palm tree of Deborah” (Judges 4:5).

Deborah summoned Barak and told him that it was God’s will that he led his forces against the mighty warrior Sisera. Sisera was the commander of army of Jabin King of Canaan who had terrorized Israel for years. Barak accepted the order on the condition that Deborah must accompany him. God was on Israel’s side, just as Deborah told Barak; the result was they won the battle. Deen (1985:58) says, “In all her roles, first that of a counselor to her people, next as a judge in their disputes, and finally as deliverer in the time of war, Deborah exhibited womanly excellence. She was indeed a true leader and a mother of Israel”.

Clearly from this story Deborah played multi roles in her time. As we have seen she was a wife of Lapidoth, she was a keeper of the tabernacle lamps, she was a counselor to her people, and she was the judge and deliverer during the time of war. She had multi roles to play like many women today. She played her roles of leadership effectively because she trusted God who called her; she had faith in God and obeyed what God commanded her to do.

### *1.1.2 Esther the queen*

Esther was the queen whose story is written in the book, which named after her. This book is one of the two books in the Old Testament bearing the name of the woman around whom the narrative contains. Esther becomes a notable woman in the bible who lived in outside Palestine though she was of Jewish family. Esther appears to be the centre of this controversial book in Old Testament because the name of God does not appear in it. The book is a controversial due to the fact that the mover behind the victory of Israelites from the hand of Haman was God. However, it is an important book to Jewish history because she saved the lives of her people with her audacity.

Esther was a Jewish orphan brought up by her uncle Mordecai who held an office at Shushan in the palace. After king Ahasuerus divorced his wife

Vashti, he chose Esther among all other women to be the queen of Persia. Being the queen Esther received the news from her uncle concerning the permission of the king to Haman to kill all the Israelites and seize their properties (Esther chapter 3). Then Mordecai urged Esther to try and save her people. Esther did not hesitate she decided to act. She sent the news to all the Jews that they should fast for three days then she would go to the king and present herself even though she was forbidden by the king and which was not lawful according to the law (4:16). For she said, “Then I will go to the king though it is against the law and if I perish, I perish” (4:16d). She received a favour in the sight of the king and the lives of the Jews were spared. The Jews established a yearly feast in memory of their deliverance called “Purim” which is still observed to this day (9:20). Esther as she appears in the bible is that of a woman of deep piety, faith, courage, patriotism and caution combine with resolution. In addition, Esther plays multi roles, such as a queen, a wife, and encourager and a deliverer of her people. She risked her life to serve her people. In doing all this she exhibited qualities of a great leader.

### **1.2 Women leaders in the New Testament**

Massey (2002:15) asserts saying, “In the New Testament we see a significant attitude of Jesus Christ toward women as represented in the Gospels is not that which is perpetuated in the later Christian tradition. Instead, he appears to have suggested in various ways his rejection of the notion of female inferiority, often boldly challenging tradition.” Jesus’ attitude towards women gives credibility to women and their ministry during his time. Furthermore, Freeman (2006:16) says, “The understanding of women in the New Testament shows the impact of God’s action in Christ, through which it recognized that the existence and identity of every human being depend on grace and not societal values”.

In view of the great importance of this apostolic witness to the resurrection, it can hardly be wholly inconsequential that the risen Lord appeared first to women. MacHaffie (2006:63) argued saying “The fact that the risen Lord appeared first to women (Mt 28:9; Jn 20:1ff.) And even commissioned them to tell his brethren (Mt 28:10) cannot be construed as mere coincidence. It was the result of a deliberate choice on his part”. Thus these women became the initial witness to the event that is the basis of all Christian

preaching women acted in various leadership roles, including elders and deacons. “In part, women found the message of Jesus appealing because it gave them equal status with men and new avenues of religious service. They sensed that the gospel granted women, as well as men, the opportunity to participate fully in the community of God’s new people” (MacHaffie 2006: 68).

The Acts of Apostles point out some of the roles played by women. These included: forming of the first congregation (Acts 17:4); holding the office of the evangelists (Acts 18:2–3); being a prophetess (Acts 21:9) and holding other leadership positions. In Philippians 4:2 women laboured and struggled with Paul in his work. Among the persons mentioned in Romans 16, six are women, and they are all said to have participated in the building up of the Christian communities. Phoebe is an example of a woman whom Paul commends to the recipients of the letter. She was a deaconess, minister and a helper in the early Church in Cenchrea (Rom16:1). Phoebe was highly regarded by the Church as a leader and she played a major role in Paul’s ministry. A critical analysis of the New Testament creates a scenario which shows that women were not excluded from fulfilling the Great Commission.

### *1.2.1 Junia the apostle*

Another woman leader in the early church is Junia. Paul wishes the saints in Rome to “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles and were in Christ before I was” (Romans 16:7). In some translations the name was translated as Junias, which would refer to a male person, but later scholars have agreed that actually “Junia” is a woman’s name. A possibility exists that most interpreters wanted to present Junia as a man, Junias, because they thought it could not be possible for a woman to be an apostle. Nevertheless, it has been discovered that Junia was a woman and she was an apostle. Epp (2005:21) contends,

During the past few decades Rom 16:7 has been recognized as of pivotal importance in determining what leadership roles women assumed in earliest Christianity. This case is of special interest also because of striking changes over some seventeen centuries in the way this passage has been understood, including for a significant

portion of that time an interpretation that obviously reflects gender bias.

Indeed, for a long time, Bible readers as well as interpreters, have not paid much attention to the fact that Paul recognized her among “prominent” apostles. “She is also called an apostle, and this means that in the early church some women were given that title in addition to the twelve apostles appointed by Jesus. In Acts Paul and Barnabas are called apostles in this wider sense (Acts 14:14). This is a reminder of the place of women in church leadership.

During the early centuries of Christianity there were many women renown in the church whose lives and deeds represent the spirit of freedom and equality evident in the Gospel.

If God does not desire women to be in leadership then one would think that there would be no valid examples of female leadership in the Bible.

### *1.2.2. Priscilla*

In addition, Priscilla in Rome, where she and Aquila were greeted in one of Paul’s letters, Romans 16. This letter has been called the “picture gallery” of New Testament believers, since it lists so many members of the infant Church. The greetings were varied. One third of the names on this roll were women, showing the prominent place women held in the church at that time in Rome.

Priscilla and her husband Aquila were close friends and supporters of Paul and were founding members of the Christian Church. Paul’s letters record their long friendship, from first meeting to the agonizing farewell not long before his execution. Priscilla seems to have been the dominant partner in the marriage, something of a mover and shaker. She was strong-minded, fervent in her love for God and Jesus Christ, and loyal to her husband. She was trusted by Paul to manage the infant church he left behind, and she taught the gospel as Paul had done. Neither of them had met Jesus of Nazareth, but their faith was strong. Without them to teach and organize, the church might not have blossomed as it did. She and Aquila decided to set up a church in their own home. Now they were leaders of the growing Christian community. As such, they became authorities on the teachings of Jesus.

A man from the Jewish community in Alexandria, Apollos, came to Ephesus. He was a scholar, and an eloquent and persuasive speaker. He spoke in the synagogue, and when Priscilla heard him, she realized that, learned as he was, he did not know the full story of Jesus (Acts 18:26). She took him aside and taught him about Jesus – what Jesus did, said, and taught. It was recognized by all that she was the real authority on the teachings of Jesus, and that as such she had a responsibility to pass on her knowledge to others. Aquila is mentioned, but in a secondary capacity. It is clear Priscilla was the one in charge. Eventually she had to let her pupil go, hoping that her teachings would be faithfully passed on. This happened. Apollos was skilled at talking and arguing, and he passed on her teachings to the Jews in the public arena – something she as a woman could not do.

Paul was a pioneer in the recognition of the function of women in Christian service – and the women of the time were ready to respond to the call of Christ. In the roll call of friends mentioned in Romans 16, Paul gave a short description of each one. He mentioned the fact that Priscilla and her husband had risked their lives to help him. We do not know what incident this refers to, but it had certainly impressed Paul.

Whatever the incident was, it seems to be well-known to “all the churches”. He took for granted that all these churches were united with him in his heartfelt expression of gratitude. Again, Priscilla’s name preceded her husband’s. The church in their house that Paul mentions refers to the fact that in the early church there were few church buildings. Therefore, groups of Christians met in houses of prominent believers or in other available rooms. From a biblical point of view, we can see that women were called and accepted by God to be leaders in different places and times.

## **2. Women leadership in Africa**

Ani (2013:67) argued that “in Africa the inequality between men and women specifically in leadership is found in traditional African societies, in government offices as well as in religious institutions”. Since inequality is found everywhere in the society there is a need to address it at all levels in the African Christian Church and the society at large if we are to recognize the capacity of women in leadership.

In African culture women's traditional role have been those of mothers, wives, sisters and aunts according to the cultural gender roles that are assigned to them by the society. In this sense women are wives, sisters, daughters, aunts, sister in laws to name but a few. Furthermore, women play big roles in the society, such as keeping family and societal connections; by leading their families they maintain peace in the society, and it can as well be said that they lead the society indirectly. In any African society, women are respected as such. African women, as it is everywhere in the world, are guardians of their children's welfare and have explicit responsibility to provide for them materially. I prefer calling African women as household and society managers, since they provide food, nutrition, water, health, education, and family planning. They also maintain peace in society.

Phiri (1997:16–27) notes saying, “When Christianity came to Africa, and it came as a male dominated religion, which was a contradiction to the African Traditional Religion. However, in African Traditional Religion practices women played a major role in three areas, mythology, proverbs and prayers”. It is from this development that missionary Christianity introduced to Africa a new concept of priesthood. This priesthood was contrary to the African traditional religious cultures in which priesthood was shared by both men and women. Furthermore, Oduyoye (1995:88) points out that religion is regarded as one aspect of culture in Africa. Women are valuable in the sight of the society in African Traditional Religion. In the traditional African life, women played a significant role in the religious activities as they offered prayers for their families in particular and their communities in general. There were women priestesses almost everywhere in Africa, women mediums, women seers, women ritual elders, and women rain makers.

### **3. Theoretical perspective on gender inequality**

Inequality and oppression in society have been explained using different theories. According to Mawere, *et al* (2011), there are several theories that explain gender inequalities in the society: these include the Liberal Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Psychoanalytic Feminism, Radical Feminism and Socialist Feminism. These different theories have been used to explain gender inequality. All the theories are based on the rationale that



the organisation of society has contributed to inequality between women and men, and such inequality has contributed to women and girls having less access to power, economic empowerment, lower social status and generally limited opportunities than men and boys.

However, this paper uses a Liberal feminist theory in order to guide its argument. Giddens (2001:692) defines liberal theory as a “feminist theory that believes gender inequality is produced by reduced access for women and girls to civil rights and allocation of social resources such as education and employment”. Therefore, civil rights and social resources are key elements to determine the level of inequality in society.

Liberal Feminist Theory can further be explained as an individualistic form which concentrates on women having their equality through being responsible for their actions and choices (Brookes 2008). From those definitions it can be noted that the Liberal Feminist theory acknowledges the existence of disparities in society that are gender related, but the obligation is on the individuals affected to improve their situation. Liberal feminists are also concerned with equal rights and freedom of the individual. According to Haralambos and Holborn (2008:203), Liberal feminism is for gradual reforms through advocacy for equal rights for all, and laws and policies that promote equality. Hence, these aspects make the theory to be suitable for advocacy on gender equality in Church leadership in Tanzania.

#### **4. Towards the participation of both genders in church leadership in Tanzania**

The current situation of leadership in the church today in Tanzania is a man's world. This situation is seen in many denominations in Tanzania that the top executive committee positions are held by men. Women have been reckoned as backbone of society as well as of the church in Africa. In affirming this concept on the place of women in the Church, Pobee (1993:24) says, “It is a truism worth repeating that women represent more than half of the church, and further, constitutes a kind of backbone of the church.” It is right to say that the commitment of many women to the life of the Church is what makes the church alive and visible in the society in Africa and specifically in Tanzania. In general, we can say the presence

of women and their contributions to the livelihood of the church is seen and felt. Unfortunately, despite the fact that women are the majority numerically, and that their offerings of talents, time and treasure help the church to stand, these women often are seen not heard. This is because they are underrepresented in major decision-making bodies and church leadership in general.

In Tanzania, there are several churches that have accepted women as pastors and are doing well. However, in many churches women are underrepresented in leadership. Many denominations can attest to this. Let us take an example the Moravian Church in Tanzania: it has seven provinces and three mission areas. “According the Moravian Church structures the administrative the highest organ of leadership is the unity synod which comprises all provinces in the world. This is followed by provincial synods and the provincial boards.”<sup>1</sup> In all provinces in executive committee there is no woman. Since the coming of Christianity in Tanzania the Church leadership has been predominantly of men. As James and James (1995:65) noted, women who are the cornerstone and foundation of all societies are generally underrepresented and devalued.

The results of research conducted on women representation in the Moravian Church in Tanzania shows that women are underrepresented in all decision-making bodies in all levels. In congregations leaders are elected by congregation members. At this level, the women’s representation in the boards of elders ranges from 36% to 40%. While at a higher level of leadership, at the district and the regional level, women’s representation can go down to 5%. On the average, in all decision-making bodies within the Moravian Church in Tanzania, female representation is fourteen percent (14%), while male representation is eighty six percent (86%). (MCT Statistics, A Pilot Project 2018).

Therefore, based on the above statistics, it is fair to say that since women are underrepresented in decision making bodies we can conclude as well that their views, suggestions, wishes and inputs for the development and furtherance of the proclamation of good news of our Lord Jesus Christ is minimal. I agree with Kemdrim (1995:73) when he asserts,

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1 Church Order of the Unitas Fratrum (Moravian Church 2016: 15–21).

The greater involvement of women in Church life arguably has far-reaching implications both for women and for the African Christian Churches. For one, the participation of women in the mainstream of the Churches' ministry and administration would mean unequivocally that the womenfolk would be adequately conscientized about the demands of Justice especially as it pertains to such customary norms as inheritance, dowry, betrothal, polygamy, widowhood, etc. which painfully affect the status of women in Africa today.

The above statement highlights the importance of the involvement of women in church life, and how beneficial it would be for women to participate in the Church's ministry and administration. The majority of women in Tanzania are still faced by many cultural and social challenges that put them down, but also discriminate their humanity. Women can only be empowered through their full participation in Church life. The Church is the only institution that can reach women at the grassroots and hence, she can empower them through accepting them, and allowing them to unleash their abilities and potentials of leadership.

From the biblical point of view, we have examples of women leaders that have been cited above. It is evident that they are able to be leaders and play most of their roles effectively. As I recapitulate this paper, I would like to suggest some ideas which men and women can use in order to enhance gender equality in church leadership. First, the task of gender mainstreaming needs cooperation from all church stakeholders. Thus, the Church needs to launch special educational programmes to teach both men and women the importance of participation of both genders in leadership.

Second, there is an issue of policies. To a greater extent, Church policies have been suppressive to women in the sense that they favour men indirectly. They should be formulated with deliberate strategies with a purpose of bringing about gender equality in Church leadership. Wasike (1992:42) says, "Therefore, for men to be what they have to be, women must be allowed to actualize the potential and freely participate in all ministerial roles. This is the way in which humanity could be restored to wholeness."

Third, women should be willing to be educated and encouraged to learn new ways of serving God and the people.

Women have expanded their leadership roles in other spheres of life; following the above suggestions, we need to empower them to understand the need to expand their roles in church leadership. Men who do not accept women in church leadership need to be educated on God's purpose for creating male and female equally. Therefore, theologians need to suggest strategies in order to bring the change of mindset in including women in church leadership.

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