

Gender, Church, Society and Us: From Deformation to Affirmation and Reformation

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Can a church deformed by society reform the society? This paper notes that the traditional gender imbalance that characterizes the monolithic structure of church leadership is to a certain extent informed by the sociopolitical structure outside the church. It argues that there can be no true reformation without the church redressing the gender disparity in its leadership structure, and purposefully taking affirmative action in favour of women.

This discussion is divided into four parts:

- a. Gender, Church and Society
- b. Deformed Church Leadership
- c. Affirmation and a New Reformation
- d. Input by participants – and conclusion

a. Gender, Church and Society

The relationship between church and society is a symbiotic one. Whereas the church is influenced to a large extent by the society, trends in the society in turn shape the activities and outlook of the church. However, Jesus, Paul and other New Testament writers made it clear that the relationship between the church and the larger society would be one of conflict because the ideals and values that govern the two differ. Jesus told his disciples that because they were not of the world but were chosen out of the world, it is expected that the world would hate them (John 15:19; 17:15-18). Whereas Paul enjoined the Romans not to conform to the world (Rom 12:2) and John commanded the believers to shun the world and its lusts (1 John 2:15), James explained further that friendship with the world is enmity with God (Jam 4:4).

In another sense, the Scripture clarifies that the relationship between the church and the governing authorities should be one of subjection to the laws of the land on the

part of the church (Rom 13:1-7; Tit 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13-17). At the same time, the church is charged with the responsibility to act as a witness to the society as a whole. The contention here is that this society-church relationship sometimes the church in negative ways and this is the case in the area of church leadership.

Historically, countries which used to be recognized as Christian states especially in Europe and North America based their laws and constitutions primarily on biblical precepts and principles. Their ethics and morals were founded on or guided by biblical ethics and values. For instance, issues of gender relations and the power dynamics between men and women both in public and private spheres were informed largely by patriarchal interpretations of Scriptures and the way women were treated in the church. Women were expected to be silent in the church (based on 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Cor 14:34-35) and to be in subjection to their own husbands (Eph 5:22). In the church, only men held sway and issues of doctrines and biblical interpretation were determined by them while women were largely redundant when it came to issues of power and leadership. At home, a good Christian woman was submissive, reverent and mostly invisible, active only in childcare and housekeeping, while the man, the head of the family, provided for the needs of the household.

This supposedly biblical view of and attitude to women was carried over to the public arena and institutionalized through laws and policies that were made by the ruling male élites. In different contexts including colonized states, male hegemony was the order of the day. Men used the Bible to legitimize their treatment and view of women. It was reckoned that if the woman was created as the weaker and inferior vessel then she should be a second-class citizen in the public space as well. Thus, laws that were abetted by other cultural patriarchal norms were instituted to put women in their place, that is, under men. Later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when women began to be more visible in the public space, the laws continued to undermine them. For instance, in South Africa before the democratic dispensation, women with the same qualification as their male counterparts earned

significantly less on the same job. Most of the criteria used to undercut women were based on the mindset that they were worth less than men in the creation order. Clearly, the influence of the church on society was rather strong.

However, with the emergence of postmodernism, of post-colonialism and subsequently of the secularization of what used to be Christian states, the influence of the church on society waned. It seemed that society had come of age as it began to free itself from the grip of the church and of the Bible. The emergence of the feminist movement also meant that women began to call into question dominant male interpretations of the text which have benefitted men for many generations. On one level, that trend proves to be a positive development as women in the church unite their voices with other women of the society to define new boundaries and roles for themselves as they read the Scripture in a new light and appropriate it to empower one another.

In a subtle turn of events, it appears that society had begun to gradually set the pace not simply for itself but for the church as well. Trends in the society started to creep into the church. Rapid social, political and economic change driven by new waves of industrialization, globalization and westernization manifested also in the church shaking its historical roots and traditions and in many cases overriding its core beliefs and practices. On a different level, the powers of individualism and liberalism made room for various kinds of ideologies, theologies and new age beliefs in the church that water down the efficacy and authority of the Word of God. Freedom of expression meant that in many settings believers choose private rather than communal interpretation of Scripture. The image of the church that is emerging is difficult to define or capture. Could it be that what the Lutherans and the Calvinists described as Reformation is fast turning into deformation?

b. Deformed Church Leadership

A glance at the activities and gains of the feminist movement in the last half century suggests that women have made great strides when it comes to issues of gender equality and gender justice. Women today compete equitably with men in different spheres of human endeavours. Vocations and institutions that are regarded as traditionally male-dominated have become level playing fields where women compete with men without or with minimum fear of harassment and intimidation. Some men have even joined in the crusade for gender justice and equity as policies, laws and norms are being revised to take into account the interests of women and other marginalized groups in the society.

Many more girl-children today have access to formal education more than any other time in history. Access to better healthcare and equal wages, the freedom to vote and to choose their own ways as well as greater financial freedom also means that many more women are able to compete for leadership positions at different levels of society and to participate freely in decision making in the public sphere. Women occupy leadership positions in politics, business, industry, and etcetera. And in very few countries including the United Kingdom, Israel, Argentina and Germany, the highest political office of president or prime minister has been attained at some point by a woman or two. Remarkably, only eight female presidents five of which served merely as acting or interim presidents are reported in the history of African states.¹ Besides the few exceptions, the highest political offices have been occupied predominantly by men who also constitute the majority in senates and parliaments all over the world. Most of the countries of the world do not have a single female president recorded in their history. These include notably the United States which in its over two centuries of democracy has no female president.

In the last United States presidential election, former secretary of state, Hilary Clinton contested against Donald Trump, a self-confessed chauvinist and female abuser.

¹ These are Mauritius, Burundi, Gabon, South Africa, Central African Republic, Liberia, and Malawi. <https://ynaija.com/a-history-of-female-presidents-in-africa/>

Hilary campaigned vigorously for America to change the *status quo* by dismantling the male hegemonic hold on leadership. She appealed to fellow women to help shatter what she called “the glass ceiling” against women regarding the highest office in the land. But to her regret, she lost the election again as she did to Barak Obama eight years earlier. As in many other nations of the world, there seems to be an invisible barrier against women in leadership. The unspoken rule is, “Thus far you can go, and no farther”.

Even in what can be regarded as mundane institutions and organizations, women continue to operate in the shadows and their views hardly count. I used to have a female friend who together with her husband belonged to a particular sports club which was burgled almost on a weekly basis by street urchins and tramps even though it is located on a fairly busy road and has CCTV cameras. She would relate most of the incidents to me and one day I asked her if the club had thought of employing a security guard to man the premises when no member was around. I found her response interesting. She said, “Oh no! In the club, it is the men who make all the decisions and they don’t listen”, that is, to women’s suggestions.

In the church, the situation is not much different from the political arena. The struggle for women’s ordination has been won in many denominations which traditionally denounced the ordination of women while some denominations remain adamant about not ordaining women. In Africa, some churches which have agreed in principle to allow women’s ordination and participation in board membership have only one or two females in their leadership cadre. A 2012 report by Jurgens Hendriks of the gender statistics in twelve churches and seminaries under the NetACT network shows that gender representation in church offices and seminaries in those churches continue to be significantly in favour of men.² In many churches where there are

² H. Jurgens Hendriks. “Churches, Seminaries and Gender Statistics”, in *Men in the Pulpit, Women in the Pew? Addressing Gender Inequality in Africa* (ed. H Jurgens Hendriks, Elna Mouton, Len Hansen and Elisabet le Roux; EFSA, Institute for Theological & Interdisciplinary Research; Stellenbosch: SUN

updated policies on the role and treatment of women, the official position differs remarkably from the reality on the ground. The percentage of women that are found in synod meetings is often negligible compared to that of men. Women continue to be sidelined in decision making in many denominations. Of course, this is not to deny that some changes are noticeable in some denominations such as the Uniting Reformed Church which presently has a woman at the helm of its affairs.

One of the reasons why women are marginalized in church leadership in Africa, specifically in South Africa, according to Sekano and Mesango (2012),³ is that many men including clerics who serve under the leadership of women claim to have negative experience and feel degraded and traumatized by the encounter because their cultural norms and practices conflict with such leadership patterns. Taking orders from women in their view not only contradicts culture, it also violates the scriptural injunction that it is improper for women to speak in the church. How can women who are supposed to be silent in church even contemplate leading men?

So we discover that the same trend that forbids women from attaining offices in the highest echelons of society is replicated in the church. The same glass ceiling that could not be shattered by women in the United States election is firmly in place in the church. The attitude is, “If women want to stop serving coffee and tea in church, and desire to be ordained, we have no problem with it. They can attend synod meetings; they can be pastors and deaconesses. But we will still call the shots”! The gender imbalance in church hierarchy is in a way shaped by and reflects the gender imbalance in society’s leadership.

Although many societies and churches are adopting non-sexist approaches to

Press, 2012), 25-32.

³ G.H. Sekano and M.J. Masango 2012. “In Support of Female Leadership in the Church: Grappling with the Perspective of Setswana Men – Shepherding as Solution Offered”. *Verbum et Ecclesia* 33(1), Art. #433, 8 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v33i1.433>.

administration, the reality is that at the top echelon, the traditional hegemonic paradigms are still firmly in place. In many congregations, men continue to make unilateral decisions that are informed by patriarchy and androcentrism and that do not take into account the needs and views of women. Such congregations have a long way to go. In some instances when women are permitted to air their views, such views are not taken seriously and are reduced to what men call “women’s talk” which they believe is coloured by sentiments and emotions and is not based on logic and facts. And in democratic church settings, final decisions often rest on the church council or board which is solely or predominantly constituted by men. The outcomes of their deliberations then reflect essentially male views. As long then as the most important the decisions in the church are made mostly by men, the leadership structure can only be regarded as deformed. It is lacking in gender representation and equality, and relegating women to playing minor leadership roles is a sign of structural deformity. How then can we move from this point?

c. Affirmation and a New Reformation

The New Testament teaches that the church is not a static and fixed entity but a dynamic body or building that is undergoing a process of growth. Ephesians 4:12-16 shows that the body of Christ is still being built up. Ephesians 2:21 states that in Christ, “the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord”. If the church is still undergoing formation and it is not yet fully formed, the question is, what structure do we have on the ground right now? Is it a deformed or malformed one, and how can we ensure its reformation even after over 500 years of the Reformation? How can we reformulate the doctrinal and policy documents that are presently couched in sexist language?

As a female pastor myself in a denomination that overtly embraces female leadership, I still sometimes encounter gender discrimination and omission in subtle ways. For instance, until recently, I could get a message from a male (or even a female) colleague that is addressed to all pastors in our Zone that begins with “Dear Sirs”. Of

course, I do not acknowledge such mails and when asked later about the content of the mail, I point out that it was not addressed to me! Such gender indiscretion and oversight certainly do not come from the church policy but from men and women who are simply and intuitively following the norms and patterns of the society in which they were nurtured. They have been socialized to defer to men in a leadership paradigm that traditionally excluded women. We must admit that the church cannot be completely free of the influence of society since it operates in society. Jesus himself prayed saying, "I do not ask you to take them out of the world" (John 17:15) and when Paul warned the Corinthians against the kind of company they keep, he noted that it is not possible for them to go out of the world (1 Cor 5:10). How then can church leadership become more sensitive to and expunge itself of the negative influence of the gender discrimination that characterizes society's political leadership?

It is not in doubt that a deformed leadership structure does not embody the kind of church in which there is "neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female" (Gal 3:28). In concrete terms, what can be done to redress gender injustice in church leadership across denominational frameworks?

Historically, for example in the United States or in South Africa, disadvantaged groups in terms of race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, and so forth, have often been compensated through what is commonly known as affirmative action. The action is a way of ensuring fair representation and equal opportunities in education, workplace, access to resources, etcetera. South Africa is said to be the only country in the world where affirmative action benefits the majority! Affirmative action is not a wish but a conscious deliberative move by an existing leadership team to redress a particular imbalance in its structure within a projected time frame. This means that the action is not just a discussion or a tacit assent on the part of the leaders. It is not a mental recognition or verbal agreement as in, "Yea, I agree that women need to be more visible in leadership". Rather, affirmative action is a policy document that is

implemented actively and strategically at all levels of the organizational structure.

In my view therefore, what the church needs as a matter of urgency is a new reformation that would employ affirmative action to revise and redress the gender imbalance and male domination in its leadership structure. On a micro level, each denomination and each congregation must insist on a gender balanced leadership. Evidently, that goal cannot be attained overnight because personnel need to be trained, many things need to be changed, and so forth. But a good starting point is to have a written document that would project that within a particular time frame, the leadership cadre would have reflected a given percentage of women which increases by instalments until gender balance is achieved.

We cannot claim to have a Reformed church if there is no gender reformation. We cannot claim to have a Reformed policy document, a reformed dogma, a reformed creed, if it is devoid of gender reformulation. So, until we have a female archbishop in Canterbury and a Pope Francisca at the Vatican, we cannot claim to have arrived as church.

Final anecdote:

Perhaps you have heard the story in which, “There were 11 people hanging on to a rope that came down from a helicopter. Ten were men and one woman.

They all decided that one person should get off because if they didn't, the rope would break and everyone would die. No one could decide who should go. Finally the woman gave a really touching speech on how she would give up her life to save the others, because women were used to giving up things for their husbands and children and giving in to men.

All of the men started clapping”!⁴

⁴ [http://jokes.christiansunite.com/Men vs. Women/The Power of Women.shtml](http://jokes.christiansunite.com/Men_vs._Women/The_Power_of_Women.shtml)

Women are not as stupid as some believe...

One way we can begin the new reformation is by having honest conversations with ourselves. At this point, I'd like us to engage in a group activity.

Group activity

Share personal experiences of or encounters with gender exclusion in church leadership and administration.

Explain how in your view other ways that the church leadership is deformed by society.

What would you consider true or new reformation in your local church?

What form should gender affirmation in church take? And what would you as a church leader do to promote gender justice and equity in your congregation?

Conclusion

Each of us must ask ourselves: After this conference, what can I do differently to ensure that gender justice is realized in pews and pulpits and more importantly, in our church leadership hierarchies and structures? Then, go ahead and do it!