

Conceptualization of Empowerment of Ordained Women in Leadership in the Wesleyan Tradition as Exhibited in the Methodist Church in Kenya

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Abstract

Mainstreaming and empowering women in leadership is not a challenge only in politics as witnessed in Kenya but also in church and corporate leadership. Gender inequality is prevalent in the Church resulting to women underrepresentation. That is in spite of the fact that ordained women's participation in all levels of leadership is central to the ministerial work of the church. The study set out to examine how Methodist Church of Kenya (MCK) empowers ordained women to participate in leadership of the church and apparently achieve its mission. In addition, the study sought to establish opportunities and challenges facing the ordained women as they struggle to participate in the highest levels of leadership. The study used mixed methods though it was largely qualitative. Purposive sampling was done and out of a total population of eighty-five (85) ordained women ministers, 30% (25 women) were sampled within different levels of leadership in the MCK. Open ended questionnaires and interviews were conducted to collect data. The data was analysed to quantify the participation of ordained women ministers in MCK leadership and also their effectiveness as ministers of the word. Results were then presented in tables and charts. The study found out that women were not actively taking up leadership positions in the church compared to the male colleagues. The study concluded that the church has put in place mechanisms to ensure women ministers are trained and equipped and therefore their need to be more aggressive in utilizing the opportunities.

Key words: *Ordained women, leadership, empowerment, MCK*

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Introduction

Conceptualization of empowerment of ordained women in leadership is about recognizing the pivotal role they play and thus giving them capacity and space to serve competently in all levels of leadership. The Wesleyan tradition has over the years

involved women in leadership in the Church first as lay preachers since the time of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, (Beck, 2018). Methodist Church in Kenya (MCK) is born of the Wesleyan tradition (Deed of Church Order). Before the

Church could accept ordination of women, the British Methodist Church had to send a woman minister for the people to see (Kinoti, 2004). The United Nations Decade in Solidarity with women between 1975 to 1985 raised the women's profile by creation of awareness on women's insubordination and gender inequality. The World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1988 observed the exclusion and discrimination against women in the Methodist Church in Kenya and year of entry, the first woman entered in 1981.

Subsequently, ordination of the first woman minister in the MCK took place in the mid-80s. This was within two decades after the Church became autonomous in 1967. Currently, the Church has ordained over one hundred women. However, conceptualization of empowerment must be unravelled so that it finds its place in retooling the ordained women on a continuous basis. This is because mainstreaming and empowering women to ascend to leadership especially at top levels is not only a challenge in the Church but also in Kenyan politics as witnessed in the Kenyan parliament failing to make a quorum to pass the two-thirds gender rule. Gender inequality in leadership is evidenced by underrepresentation of ordained women not only at the top level but through entire structure. It is envisaged that ordained women's participation in all levels of leadership is central to the leadership and decision making organs of the church. The council declared an ecumenical decade of churches in solidarity with women in 1988-1998 affirming its commitment to work towards conscientization of women to challenge and change exclusive structures and governance systems in the church (Kinoti, 2004)

According to Ken, Collins and Jason (2016), MCK participated in both the UN and WCC concretisation processes. Indeed, according to the current list of Ministers in accomplishment of the mission of the Church in transforming lives for Christ and calling them to social holiness. Its purpose which is to "spread Scriptural Holiness through the land by

the proclamation of the Evangelical Faith and declare its influence in its unflattering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission" (Deed of foundation and Deed of Church Order p.10) can only be fully realized with the empowerment of ordained women to lead in all levels. It seems that empowerment of ordained women in leadership in MCK is conceptualized to mean acceptance of their ordination, access to theological education and stationing to the circuit.

Upgrading ordained women is deemed to contribute greatly to MCK which defines itself as a "communion of believers called and ordained by God to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ holistically in order to transform people's lives in Kenya and throughout the world" (S.O 3, P. 3). This mission is to be achieved through preaching the Good News, Setting at Liberty the afflicted and Equipping Believers for the works of ministry. Fulfilment of this mission cannot be fully achieved without inclusion of ordained women ministers; meaning their calling to the ordained ministry is recognized and affirmed.

Although the standing order is open to equal leadership opportunities for both ordained men and women, the Church which is structured with the conference at the top, then synods and circuits at the bottom has exclusively left out ordained women at the top level leadership since its inception. Underrepresentation of women is equally evident at the synod and circuit leadership levels. This gap raised the concern on how Wesleyan pragmatic theology that prioritizes orthopraxy is practiced in terms of empowering the ordained women to participate in all levels of leadership in the Church. It was also evident that a gap exists in the church archives on the documentation of experiences of ordained women in leadership.

Objectives of the study included to examine challenges and opportunities faced by the ordained women in ascending to leadership positions and how they are empowered. Outcomes of this study are

significant in helping the women to understand the process of empowerment, recommending to the church the best practices in retooling the ordained women and also creating a repository of knowledge for reference by the Church as well as theologians.

Materials and Methods

Being a narrative study, qualitative study method was adopted with multiple sources of data. Questionnaires and interview guides were used for primary data collection. The questionnaire was open ended to enable the researcher to gather as much information as possible as well as the interview guide.

Population & Sampling

The study applied random sampling procedures to obtain the respondents for questionnaires. The sample frame of the study includes the entire list of all ordained women ministers in the MCK. According to Borg and Gall (2003), at least 30% of the total population is representative. Thus, 30% of the total accessible population formed the sample size.

A sample size of 26 was used. The 26 respondents were purposively selected based on the fact that they had key information for the study. The selected women were full time serving ministers who have been fully received into the connexion. The women were sampled as the primary key target since they are directly affected and their experiential realities were critical for the study.

Results and Discussions

Although 45% felt that generally Ordained women are not empowered, the study revealed that Wesleyan women in MCK are actually empowered as evidenced by the positions of leadership that they occupy such as office of synod bishop, Connexional Deputy Director of Missions, Deputy Vice Chancellor and Connexional women Coordinator as well as superintendent ministers. Women excelled in pastoral care, and prayer. However, a serious gap on skills and competency for leadership at top level positions was identified.

Mistrust between women clergy and lack of fellowships for social support, peer mentorship and cushioning each other affected them negatively. Inability to plan/balance between effectively culturally ascribed roles and ministry affected their performance and their ability to stand out. Patriarchal attitudes and male domination in the profession undermined women since it is the question of numbers especially on electoral positions. Although women and men had equal chances for education, ordination and career progression, 83% revealed that largest majority of women were unable to prioritize career progression due to family demands which definitely affects their upward professional mobility.

Respondent Profiles

There were 26 respondents in total and all of them were active ordained women ministers. Below is a summary of respondents’ bio-profiles.

Table 1: Respondents’ bio-profiles

	Age in years				Marital Status		
	<30	30-40	40-50	>50	M	S	W
No	3	7	14	2	23	2	1
% age	10	27	56	7	88	8	4

Current church leadership

In general, at the conference level, the Church is headed by the Presiding Bishop and assisted by the Conference Secretary. Both are men. In the next level, which is the Synod Bishops heading Synod and Circuit Superintendent minister heading the Circuit and local churches. There are only two women bishops and twenty three

women ministers in those levels respectively. The two women synod bishops constitute 15% and the twenty-three constitute 16% of 144 superintendent ministers. Below is a graphic presentation of how women are lacking in the MCK hierarchy of leadership as observed by this study. It shows number of women against number of men in leadership across all levels of the MCK structure.

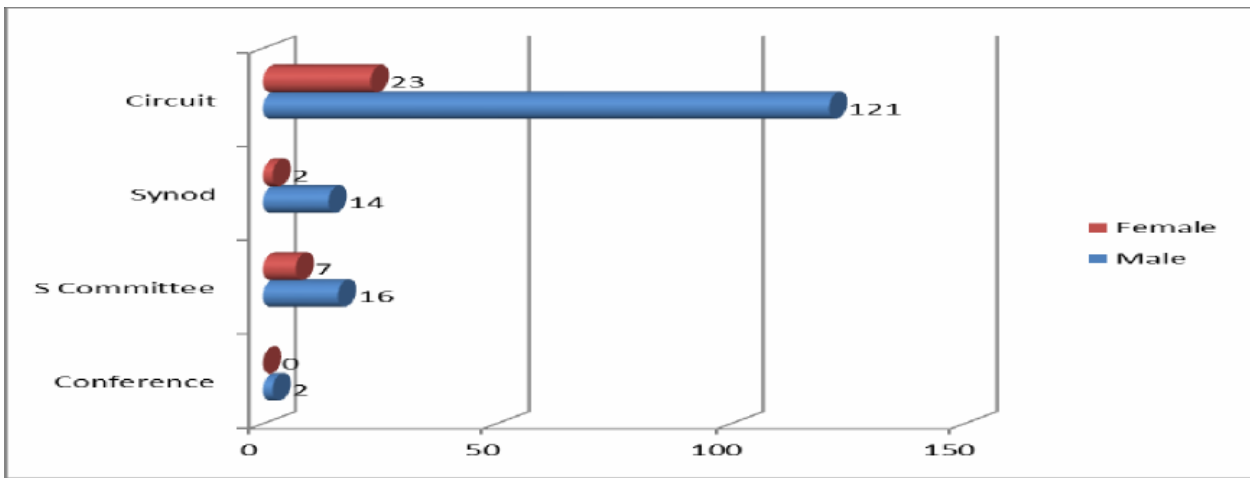


Figure 1: Women in MCK Leadership

The above graph clearly shows that leadership at all levels is male dominated. However, women are concentrated at the bottom serving as church ministers or circuit ministers without significant leadership functions in terms of decision making. This study was keen to establish challenges facing ordained women ministers and hampering their participation in leadership.

Challenges facing women in the ordained ministry

From the narratives of the respondents ninety-three percent (93%) of the women indicated that they have not received any professional capacity building skills besides theological training. To navigate the landscape of Church leadership and politics, the women need negotiation skills, leadership and management skills beyond the lecture room. Seventy-four percent (74%) lack economic capacity. Wilson

(2011) in her study on women in leadership emphasizes the need for women to have forums to envision one another. As evidenced by hundred percent (100%) of the respondents, MCK lacks forums for the ordained women in the church where they can enhance growth and accountability among themselves. They lack space to engage on shared vision, build interpersonal relationships, build trust, share personal stories, experiences and strategies. This space would provide channels for building right attitudes, practices and cultivate good qualities.

Attempts to bring the women together were misconstrued to mean rebellion and sabotaged through divide and rule tactic by their male counterparts. Janerose (not her true name) said “*when women come together to encourage and support one another, men make sure they break the fellowship by sowing*

seeds of discord among women". The FGDs helped women to construct their one empowerment models borrowing from the lessons of their colleagues. As evidenced by Veneranda (2007), Sixty-seven percent (67%) of the respondents in this study narrated the opposition they faced from male clergy when it came to leadership positions. They were rated low, threatened, ridiculed, intimidated and lacked moral support. Male chauvinism was identified as a key challenge. Ideally, the Church has an open door practice for both men and women to ascend into power within the church hierarchy. Despite the fact that policy wise there is hindrance towards women, majority of the respondents cited belief among the male colleagues as well as church members that women are not as intelligent as men.

The confession was that women are inferior in terms of skills and leadership abilities. They are therefore supposed to be led by men thus using complementarian theology to undermine women as observed by (Perry et al., 2016). This belief has negatively affected ordained women who seek to rise into leadership positions. Regarding the elective leadership positions such as those of bishops, again women expressed the shame they have to go through when they disclose to the colleagues their aspirations. One respondent said "it takes huge effort to convince males who are majority in the decision making of the church to vote a woman simply because they have no trust that a woman can perform as a leader.

Some males also have egos that do not allow them to figure out a woman holding a higher leadership position than them. Others find it a challenge to work under women. This could unfortunately happen even with their husbands." Seventy-three percent (73 %) cited multiple responsibilities as a big obstacle that undermines the efforts of women to ascend in leadership. From the African cultural perspective, the woman is first and foremost the home maker, carer, and belongs to private sphere with a myriad nurturing roles as reflected

in proverbs 31. The women shared experiences that revealed although they are ministers and mothers and wives in Christian homes, the culturally ascribed roles had to be performed first before the ministerial duties. Their spouses are unwilling to share responsibilities at home and therefore both the home and church demands on the woman minister become overbearing thus alluding to chronic fatigue and stress. (United Nations Women, 2010).

A respondent who is a superintendent indicated that her Sunday begins at 4am and by the time she is preaching at 11am she is already physically worn out. However, despite the long demanding hours of her duties in the church and family, she remains a celebrated African woman who will pick the thermos from thirty centimeters away from her husband and serve him a cup of tea because it is her duty. Apparently, these cultural demands and responsibilities must be fulfilled for the woman to enjoy her work out there. Of critical concern is the unfortunate instances of spouses who were said to be undermining their wives who are ministers thus compounding the challenges for those individual women.

In the process of candidature for the ministry and in the course of their women undergo water tight scrutiny as opposed to their male colleagues. This means that the church and societal expectation is very high on the women. Naturally mistakes occur either out of negligence or indulgence. The women expressed concern that their mistakes or weaknesses are magnified and blown out of proportion to depict them as inefficient or unfit for the ministry. They expressed that this is not the case with their male counterparts. Men would obviously escape with many mistakes unlike women.

Eighty-seven percent (87%) of the respondents cited lack of support from their women colleagues. Women undermine one another. They present unnecessary competition or engage in spreading rumours to downgrade their

very one. This can be associated with socialization and cultural beliefs. One woman minister in a significant position indicated that *“women colleagues are the worst critics of fellow women leaders and their criticism could easily discourage women who have not learnt to swim against the currents”*

Disturbing revelation from 56% of the respondents indicated that women lack self-worth and a deep sense of purpose. They indicated that women are not assertive and very reluctant to seek leadership positions for fear of losing, being criticized, being deeply scrutinized by the public, and lack of self-confidence. Leadership involves very hard work and commitment which at times women do not portray as they concentrate on other responsibilities and demands of being women. There is also a tendency of complaining and blaming their woes to the fact that they are women. They are not ready to compete with the men.

Women are facing challenges in their families where their husbands may not support their leadership ambitions including furtherance of their education. Some men demand that their wives must be at home all the time when ministry many times require them to be away. Husbands feel threatened by an empowered woman so they try hard to retain their wives at submissive/vulnerable level for easier manipulation. Strained family relationships hinder women from advancing in their call to a very demanding service. Challenges of women hesitating to take up positions because they wonder what people would say when they travel so much, are out of the home a lot etc.

Overly women expressed need for their value, contributions and self-worth to be recognized, other felt that personal risks and security in the work stations are not adequately addressed. Lack of mentorship because this field does not have many successful women and those who have succeeded continue to suffer persecution and resistance from jealous

men and women colleagues. This instils fear to those with such ambitions. Chronic fatigue, stress, overwork and unresolved traumas affect their productivity. 60% of the respondents cited incidences of resistance from the community itself. The challenges enumerated reveal that MCK is an inequitable institution.

Opportunities available for women in Ministry leadership

Methodist Church in Kenya, being the first mainline church to accept women into ordained ministry has achieved immense strides towards empowering women ministry in the church. It may have been difficult in the initial years as the few pioneer women struggled to affirm themselves in the male-dominated culture and church. However, with time the opportunity to join ordained ministry opened up avenues of the lady-ministers to attempt to change the cultural and religious landscape. All the respondents recognized the opportunity to go through theological education. This is an equal opportunity for women to equip themselves academically.

Appointment as Superintendent Ministers in circuits

In the recent past we have seen a good number of women appointed to lead circuits and this is a good opportunity to use their gifts and let them be seen and appreciated. However, these women feel overwhelmed as they have not learnt to balance between cultural expectations and the office demands. Sometimes they will be seen carrying their babies into the business meetings simply because it is their duty. Ideally the children get tired of long meetings, fake patience and may eventually have a wrong attitude to church ministry when they come of age. 59% recognized involvement in other leadership positions in the church such as women coordinators. Opportunities to assume positions of fellowship patrons were also recognized. 19% recognized sponsorship to pursue higher levels of studies. On the surface the women felt that the church has provided a level playing ground for both males and

females in the ordained ministry but recognized that unspoken expectations favour men more.

The elective positions are implied to be competitive, with the church not “seen” to hinder anyone from seeking elective leadership positions. Overly, the women revealed that church congregations recognize the key strengths of women ministers such as best practices in pastoral care, commitment to duty, stewardship of resources, and creation of more prayerful fellowships. One respondent said “ the congregation I served, trusted and supported me so much that it was in my tenure that they raised Kes.10million at a single sitting to build a church. She narrated that the congregation had less than 300 members then. It was revealed that ordained women are also known for better skills in dealing with youth and children.

Rev Ann (real name withheld) had the following to say “*in the last fifteen years of my service in the ministry, I have seen the lord expand my boundaries. I achieved my dream of getting a master’s degree from an overseas university The liberty and exposure has set me free to evangelize the gospel without any fear across the world.*”. This clearly indicates that leadership in ministry actually provides an opportunity for liberty, freedom and networking that make women ministers more effective and impactful in their work. This has ignited 5% of the women ministers that were interview with vision of running programmes to support girls’ education and mobilize more women into ministry.

Conclusion

This study concluded that although the MCK in the Wesleyan spirit has done exemplary well in the ordination of women and giving them equal opportunity as their male counterparts in both education and employment, ordained women remained un-empowered to ascend to top level leadership. Compared to other mainstream churches, MCK is on the top by the virtue that it has women bishops although a very insignificant percentage. Further, MCK has not recognized

special professional growth needs of the ordained women based on their gender and dictates of patriarchal culture. The Church has failed to conceptualize empowerment as tooling designed to specifically grow ordained women towards leadership. It has not embraced social justice leadership which is inclusive and transformational. The study observes the trend of the recurrence of the challenges enumerated. The researcher had carried out a similar study in 2004 that enumerated nearly the same challenges.

The question on what the transformative action the church has undertaken to address those challenges remains unanswered. The study concludes that ordained women lack mentors and coaches to help them to learn the ropes. From the analysis of the respondents’ self-analysis, it was concluded that women do not pursue their aspirations aggressively and a sizeable number, 48%, suffered lack of a clear vision for themselves intertwined with lack of /or poor sense of self-worth and confidence. Ironically, largest majority expect to be given positions without positioning themselves.

Recommendations

It is recommended that empowerment model that prioritizes and provides resources as well as enhances capacities in terms of skill development for women to be embraced by the church. The Church needs to come up with a long term plan of leadership and managerial skill development among the women and to facilitate women through funding workshops, seminars and basically creating space for the ordained women to connect alone for the purpose of prayer, fellowship, experience sharing, building relationships and trust, sharpening one another and creating genealogies of leadership through mentorship. The Church may consider enforcement of 3rd gender rule to mainstream ordained women in leadership once they are skilled.

Deliberate plan for mentorship and coaching to equip the women with practical/competence based skills for transformational leadership needs to be put in place. Women need to

address the oppressive structures that undermine them and to be proactive in leadership diplomatically and proactively. Women being homemakers and family care givers should be given special consideration so that their families are taken into account when it comes to stationing and pursuing education. Women whether ordained or not are the glue that holds the family together and therefore their God given mandate should not be sacrificed at the altar of the ministry. There is need for a deliberate action to encourage women to think positively and improve their

self-esteem. They need to believe in themselves and stop complaining and exploit the opportunities available. The church needs to identify and train women ministers including taking higher degrees. Their families need church support during these times of study. There is need for a program to support women ministers with young families to enable them dispense their roles without excessive strain on the minister. Nursing mothers need support to attend meetings with their babies so that one does not have to miss key church meetings because they have a small baby

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