

Tracing Gender Inequality in Church Leadership: A Case of Burundi Evangelical Churches

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Abstract

Gender parity in leadership has been an issue in Burundian society and the church. The study examines attitudes towards women's leadership in evangelical churches in Burundi and how this could influence the spiritual, social, and economic life of the women in the church. A right biblical interpretation is desirable because male church leaders who deny women church leadership roles base their positions on the Bible and Burundi's culture and traditions. This article seeks to redirect and refocus the attention of policymakers of Burundi's evangelical churches to areas not previously explored in church management and leadership, such as participatory church leadership and the moral implications of the Image of God concept. It argues that men and women have equal status, value and dignity before God. Further, this article traces the role of women in the traditional Burundi culture. The critical correlation method was used in this study on the perception of gender leadership in Burundi's evangelical churches. The study showed that some church leaders unsupportive of women's leadership cite social and cultural reasons, claiming that no woman in Burundi culture had participated in the grassroots council; hence women could not lead even in church. Others misinterpret biblical verses and traditional beliefs to suit their cultural interpretations.

Keywords: Burundi, Gender Inequality, Women, Church, Leadership, Culture, Image of God

Introduction

The roles and obligations are divided by gender across Africa. Women are in charge of both productive and reproductive work, whereas men are predominantly in charge of productive work. Additionally, the locations that men and women have authority over differ.¹ Ani affirms

¹ E. Kiptot, *Gender roles, responsibilities, and spaces: Implications for agroforestry research and development*. (International Forestry Review Vol.17, Nairobi Kenya 2015), 11.



that the problem is widespread, “The inequality between men and women, specifically in leadership, is found in traditional African societies, in government offices as well in religious institutions.”² In most African societies, including Burundi, women are not given equal leadership opportunities as men. It also takes a long process for a woman to occupy a leadership position in the Burundi government, which is no different in church leadership circles.

Uchem identifies a reason for the inequality of men and women in an African society: “In African societies, the traditional gender roles are usually maintained by a system of patriarchy which sees men as pre-eminent human beings and women as secondary whose roles are meant to complement those of men. Men are not generally seen as complementing women, and this one-sided notion of complementarity is problematic: women are perceived as existing for men and not really as human beings in their own right.”³ In many of Burundi’s Protestant churches, women are not offered leadership opportunities as men. The persistence of that inequality raises many questions and creates much doubt in the spiritual life of women who wish to serve God at policymaking levels.

According to the cultural gender roles allocated to individuals by society, women in African culture acquire the roles of mothers, wives, sisters, and aunts. Women also play a significant part in African society. After what they do, such as maintaining societal and familial ties, by guiding their families, they uphold social harmony and arguably indirectly lead society. Kategile preferred to call African women householders and society managers.⁴ In African culture, women are charged with providing all needs in the family, like water, food, nutrition, children’s education, family health, and planning, and their place is indispensable.

Gender leadership has been influenced by how Christianity came to Africa. Phiri traces back, “When Christianity came to Africa, it came as male-dominated. Anything that was incompatible with this perspective was crushed. When the Dutch Reformed Church Mission came to Central Malawi, women were excluded from being evangelists, deacons and elders.”⁵

² Ani quoted by Mary L. Kategile, *The Bible and gender equality in church leadership in Tanzania* (Teofilo Kisanji University, Tanzania)

³ Uchem, R., *Gender equality from a Christian perspective*. Enugu: (SNAAP Pres, 2005), 45-46

⁴ Kategile Mary L., *The Bible and gender equality in church leadership in Tanzania* (Teofilo Kisanji University, Tanzania)

⁵ Phiri, I. A., *African women in religion and culture: Chewa women in the Nkhoma Synod of The Church of Central Africa Presbyterian*. Doctoral Thesis: University of Cape Town. 1992, 25



This was accentuated by the way many African cultures were male-dominated. Women as “inferior helpers.”⁶

The roles of women in African families may be related to what Paul writes in 1 Tim 3: 4–5; 5:14. The female head of the house had to have good administrative and management skills. For this reason, Paul emphasises a person’s track record as a family leader as it indicates church leadership potential. Stanley described the early church leadership roles where the patron of a house church was vital. The female head of the house had to have good administration and management skills. The term used for the female head of the household (*oikodespotein* [household, master, or lord], 5:14) is much stronger than the one used for the male (*prostenai* [to lead, guard, protect], 3:5).⁷ This shows that women have leadership skills and what they do in their families can be replicated in their churches. The following section considers gender leadership in pre-colonialism, during colonialism, and in the post-colonialism period. In addition, the paper looks at struggles in gender involvement in leadership in Burundi society and how culture and tradition influence women’s leadership and interpretation of the Bible.

Methodology

The method used in this research was a critical correlation method that privileges Christianity and allows theology to establish a relationship with culture fruitfully.⁸ Through the targeted interviews, the work incorporated views about women in leadership.

The word “leadership” connotes movement, steering an organisation or a portion of it in a new direction, problem-solving, being innovative, starting new initiatives, creating organisational structures, and raising the bar on quality.⁹ The leadership referred to is church leadership, where a leader has to lead people to fulfil God’s purpose for His church. The gender issue in the Burundi Evangelical churches deals with sharing leadership roles in the church. In most Evangelical Churches in Burundi, women rarely make it to church leadership for reasons that this study will explore.

⁶ Ratzinger, J., & Amato, A. *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the collaboration of men and women in the church and in the world*. Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2004

⁷ Stanley N, Gundry. *Two views on women in ministry* (Grand Rapids: Michigan Zondervan, 2005), 54.

⁸ Wessel Stoker and Dirk-Martin Grube, “Tillich’s Method of Correlation Wessel Stoker in discussion with Dirk-Martin Grube,” NTT 74 No 2, (2020): 167-180, Accessed June 1,2023, <http://dx.doi:10.5117/NTT2020.2.006.STOK>

⁹ Eddy, Pamela L. and Van Derlinden, Kim E., "Emerging Definitions of Leadership in Higher Education," *Configurations* 60, (2006):3.



Literature Review

This section discusses gender leadership bias in Burundian society and the church.

Women Leadership in the Pre-colonial Burundi

Leadership dynamics in pre-colonial Africa helps to understand the leadership dynamics at the family level because what happens at the family level is normally projected onto the community. In pre-colonial Africa, women occupied a central place in society. Most African communities were patrilineal, meaning the family consisted mostly of brothers who married and sired children, living together, sharing land, livestock, chores and providing social security to each other. In pre-colonial Africa, women were, in some cases, queen-mothers, queen-sisters, princesses, chiefs and holders of offices and villages, occasional soldiers and in one well-known case, the Loved, the supreme monarchy.¹⁰

In Burundi's pre-colonial patriarchal society, Queen-mothers occupied a central place.¹¹ When a king died before the rightful heir (son) was of age, the Queen-mother (the son's mother) led the country until the son became mature enough to lead. The woman leader was accorded respect and allowed to lead everyone. Equally, in many African communities, women were respected in their communities despite not being given higher leadership positions. They governed the home, a pivotal role with significant power. Because power and privilege were based on age and gender, older women had a voice in many important issues concerning the family and community. Private and public life was blended; hence, women's power and privilege in the home got reflected in public. Women used food production to gain respect, and in turn, they used that respect to dominate the children and influence the men in their lives.¹²

Women in acephalous groups and those in centralised polities exercised considerable power at the local level. They played decisive roles that determined the quality and character of their polities. Evidence proves that women's productive and reproductive labour was at the core of advancements made during the Iron Age in the Nile Valley and the Great Lakes

¹⁰ Niyara Sudarkasa, *The Status of Women in indigenous African Societies*:(Feminist Studies. 1986) 91-103

¹¹ Marie Saiget, *Women in Burundi*, (May 29, 2020), accessed May 25, 2023.<https://doi.org/10.1093/978019>

¹² African Women battle for equality/ Africa Renewal. www.un.org. retrieved 2019-04-28(accessed 15th, January 2023).



region.¹³ Women were respected and occupied positions of power in their communities before the occupation by Europeans.¹⁴ Therefore, the marginalised status of women today gives the false impression that African women have always been oppressed by their male counterparts. Yet, women have exercised a considerable degree of power in the past.¹⁵

Women’s Leadership During the Colonial Era

Between the 19th and 20th centuries, most African communities became colonies of European powers- Belgium, British, France, and Portugal. It was a period of social and cultural transformation. Phiri comments that Christianity came to Africa as male-dominated and that anything incompatible with it was crushed. For instance, when the Dutch Reformed Church Mission came to Central Malawi, women were excluded from being evangelists, deacons and elders.

Male gender privilege was essential to European shared traits that influenced the colonial settlers and the Christian missionaries. The difference was conspicuous even in seating arrangements among white males and females and black males and females. In a hierarchical format, white males ranked at the top, followed by white females, then black males, and finally, black females at the bottom of the ladder. Nelson Maldonado argues that the coloniality of gender was about destroying indigenous people’s relation to one another and to the land, stating that the basic idea of European colonialism was “that the earth should be raped for the benefit of man.”¹⁶

Considering how leadership was assigned or acquired in society and church, White men and women were privileged, while the colour of their skin disadvantaged both indigenous men and women. The males were privileged by imperial Europe’s leadership system, which was a rigid patriarchal community. This patriarchy was not only traditional but religiously sanctioned through skewed readings of the Bible. This male privilege was central in how leadership was understood and exercised by Europeans and through the colonial state

¹³ Nakanyike B. Musisi. “Women in pre-colonial Africa: East Africa: The palgrave handbook of Africa Women’s, 1-25 ” Palgrave Macmillan (July 2019). Accessed May 26, 2023.

¹⁴ Rachael Hill, Decolonizing women.

¹⁵ Onaiwu W ogbomo, “Women, power and society in pre-colonial Africa” *Lagos Historical Review*, vol.5 (2005), 49-75. Accessed May 26, 2023. <https://doi:10.43/lhr.v5i1.32524>

¹⁶ Yuderksy Espinosa Minoso; Maria Lugones; Nelson Maldonado Torres, Decolonial feminism in Abya Yala: Caribbean, Meso, and South American contributions and challenges. (Langham, 2021), 13.



as well as the church; the impartation of this leadership system was for African men and women.

Furthermore, education played an important role as it became a central vehicle through which African men and women would embrace the new systems, including conceptualising leadership in the family and church, even in the community. Men were privileged as missionary education opened doors to politics, economics, intellectual achievement and social influence, whereas, for women, its impact has been muted at best or tranquillising at worst. Women became more marginalised as the influence of religion and education grew. Women in Africa still experience the greatest discriminatory practices¹⁷ in educational, economic and political representation. It is difficult to rectify the historical inequalities without adequate women's representation.

Educational inequalities between boys and girls were an issue, and it started in primary school and widened throughout the educational levels. Even when Africa registered the highest relative increase in primary education in total enrollment among regions, girls were at lower rates. When women are uneducated, it is difficult for them to be considered in society. Besides this educational inequality, there were challenges, such as child marriage and human trafficking. The colonial-Christian combination worsened African women's situation by reducing them to "child-making machines, whose only significant contribution was bearing children and being the caregivers." In contrast, traditionally, women still performed these roles; they were equal food producers and were not entirely confined to the works of the house only. Bevans argues that Christian missionaries acted as the religious arms of Western imperialist powers.¹⁸

Women's Leadership in the Post-Colonial Period

During this period, women's primary duties have been childbearing and childcare. They have been responsible for household chores in rural regions, including cleaning and food preparation. Women also work in agriculture and do most of the planting. In Burundi, women are almost entirely unrepresented in business and at all levels of government. They are respected, particularly for their power as life bearers. The role of the mother is highly

¹⁷ SIGI Regional Report for Africa. Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development OECD (2022). OCLC 1334106760.

¹⁸ Bevans, Steven. Christian Complicity in colonialism/ Globalism. Retrieved 2010-11-17. Accessed May 27, 2023. <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>



honoured, but in practice, women have little decision-making authority in the family or society. Likewise, fatherhood is considered an important responsibility, and the man oversees the family. Women’s status is a little higher than that of children, and like them, they are expected to defer to the wishes of any adult male.

Women in post-colonial Africa are not always protected from certain abuses because they no longer hold societal or political power. Many scholars believe African women became voiceless, unable to gain economic and educational equality. More African men in general and Burundian men gained an advantage over African women from the rigid application of “Victorian mores” with the view of women as domesticated beings fit for the home and to be followers and not leaders. Women were subordinated to men, with no standing for their own and whose major contribution and joy was having children for their husbands, not becoming opinion influencers and makers of their communities.

The leadership systems and gender perspectives of Christian missionaries and colonial had similarities with the traditional African beliefs. Men were regarded as breadwinners, while African women were seen as caregivers. Missionary churches incorporated African men into leadership positions. However, the Africans Institutional churches present a more complex leadership approach. Sundkler and Steed observe the ambivalent role the church has played in being a catalyst for women’s liberation and her complicity in their subordination.¹⁹ They note that the church had opened up new opportunities for women through education for girls and roles of leadership. At the same time, “there operated in and through the churches, discriminating practices upheld by divine authority.”²⁰ They attribute this to the fact that “the missions, whether Catholic or Protestant originating in the nineteenth century, were largely expressions of a patriarchal society, and this attitude seemed to fit with an African society in its patriarchal and matriarchal form.”²¹

In Burundi, the churches denied women leadership positions while citing bad examples of women in the Bible, like the wife of Potiphar, Delilah, Bathsheba and Jezebel, to show that women were responsible for bringing sin into the world and they were seductresses,

¹⁹ Bengt Sundkler & Christopher Steed, *A history of the church in Africa*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 566.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 566.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 566.



using their sexuality to mislead men. They ignored many other women that played an important role in the Bible and have been used by God as leaders to accomplish great things.

Gender Inclusivity in Leadership As a Struggle in Burundi Society

Burundi is a patriarchal society. However, due to human rights and women’s associations’ struggles for women, Burundi governance allowed women to be part of the country’s leadership. Nzoyisenga, in Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, described the introduction of Gender quotas and their impact on Women’s Political Influence. Gender quotas came at the right time in 2005 in Burundi when women were still suffering from discriminatory laws, harmful gender norms, and patriarchal practices.²² The 2005 constitution of the Republic of Burundi introduced a requirement that women hold a minimum of 30% of parliamentary seats in the National Assembly, the Senate, and the Executive branch. This measure addressed Burundian women’s historical underrepresentation in public life since the country’s independence in 1962.²³ Archives had shown that even when this law was applied, the number of women in the cabinet (2 out of 23) and members of the single-chamber parliament National Assembly (8 out of 81) was still inferior.

Gender quotas on Women’s Political Influence had an impact, especially in the 2005 general elections, where women representation jumped from 12% to 36.8 in the Executive branch, from 19% to 31%, in the National Assembly (upper chamber) and from 18.8% to 34.6 in the Senate. Women took over the positions of Speaker of the National Assembly and 2nd Vice-President of the Republic. The same trend progressively continued until Burundi embraced the importance of women’s inclusion in-country leadership.²⁴

The suppressed role of women in church leadership in contemporary Burundi raises some theological questions. Grenz highlights the importance of both males and females for an adequate picture of God, which has important ramifications for the church.²⁵ There is a need for the full participation of both men and women in God’s ministry so that we may understand and represent what God is like.

²² Fikiri Nzoyisenga, *GIWPS (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security) Accessed January 17, 2023, <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/15-years-of-gender-quotas-in-burundi-whats-the-impact> August 26, 2020.*

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Stanley J. Grenz and Denise Murir Kjesbo. *Women in the church: A biblical theology of women in ministry.* (Downers Grove, Illinois, Inter Varsity Press, 1995). 150.



In many churches, “women’s roles in the church are very limited according to how people interpret the Bible, but in the Old Testament, there was an example of women leaders like Deborah and Huldah,”²⁶ especially where women can make decisions. Cultural concepts of gender leadership influence their roles. Sheryl shows that in her culture, “from a very early age, boys are encouraged to take charge and offer their opinions, and even teachers interact more with boys than girls”²⁷ In any way, these patterns persist even when the girls are growing up, they continue to feel their inferiority to men in decision making.

Cultural and Traditional Influence on Women Leadership in the Church

There is no single model of gender roles in Africa; “The continent’s diverse cultures have many different ideas about male and female roles, although in general women have been subordinate to men in both public and family life.”²⁸ Historically, Burundi is a patriarchal country where men lead, and women have less say in leadership. Except for the queen-mother who temporarily led the nation before the male heir to the throne came of age. This traditional culture and colonial emphasis on male leadership continues to influence the greatest number of churches where women are not even allowed to be ministers of the gospel.

The family spring is considered to be men, and male children are privileged in matters of family heritage. Some expressions used, such as: “Ntankokokazi ibika isake ihari” which means a woman has nothing to argue in the presence of a man, “umukobwa s’umwana n’akarago k’abaraye” which means “a girl is under boys’ service.” Indeed, in the Burundian system of leadership and justice called “Urwego rw’Abashingantahe,” (a council or group of worthy men), there was and still is no single woman in the group. All of them are men. In other words, women are deemed unqualified to lead.²⁹

Burundian culture towards women is like the Jewish culture towards women before and during Jesus’ period, where women and children were not counted as persons.³⁰ Even

²⁶ T. D. Jakes, *Women’s roles in the church according to the Bible*. Accessed May 28, 2023.

²⁷ Sheryl Sandberg and Nell Scovell, *Learn in women, work, and the will to lead*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 20.

²⁸ Gama Vasco da, *Gender roles and sexuality*. Accessed January 6, 2023, <https://geography.name/gender-roles-and-sexuality>.

²⁹ Angelique Kanyange, *Gender access to leadership position in Union of Baptist Churches of Burundi* (Burundi, Hope Africa University: 2018), 82.

³⁰ Mark 6: 44



when women and men sinned together, the punishment unfairly targeted the woman.³¹ For instance, when the Scribes and Pharisees brought unfaithful woman to Jesus. They confront Jesus by citing that Moses prescribed stoning for such a woman. Jesus knew all truth and pronounced the woman guilty and free by saying, “If anyone of you is without sin, let him be the first to cast a stone at her.” By implication, “This probably means without serious sin in the matter at hand. The Jewish leaders, who were supposed to be moral examples to the people, knew what Jesus was implying about them, and thus one by one, beginning with the elders, they silently slipped away.”³² Some cultures mistreat women, and many churches today follow this bad behaviour in denying women roles in church leadership. Culture has played a big role in decision-making, and it is not easier to change the mindset of people.

Even though the situation is so, the crucial issue is to know how Christ relates to our cultures and how he works and reaches us within our cultures. By considering the thoughts of Richard Niebuhr about five categories (opposition, agreement, Christ above culture, tension and reformation) of Christ relating to culture.³³ Even though women were considered less valuable within Jewish society, Jesus accepted them and involved them in his ministry. He even involved women in evangelism when he sent the Samaritan woman to return to her village and announce and call the neighbours to meet the Messiah. He did not discriminate against her because of her culture as Samaritan; even though there existed a cultural tension between Samaritans and Jews, he engaged her in a cordial conversation about salvation (John 4:7–30).

But the other cases show that Jesus reacted as a fully patriotic by defending his culture, whereby he refused to help the Canaanite woman whose child was suffering from demon possession “...he answered, I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel, ...it is not right to take the children’ bread and toss it to their dogs” (Matt 15:24–26, ESV). The Jewish culture demeaned those from other cultures, but though Jesus cites this cultural position, he reacts differently and graciously, showing that he first understood the culture. Considering the five categories by Richard Niebuhr, Jesus transforms culture, removing what is wrong and evil and affirming what is right and good.

³¹ John 8:4

³² Ben Witherington III, *Women in the ministry of Jesus: A study of Jesus’ attitudes to women and their roles as reflected in His earthly life*. (Cambridge: University press, 1998), 23.

³³ Richard H. Niebuhr, *Jesus and Culture: An overview of Christian classic* February 25, 2015, accessed: January 20, 2023 <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/christ-and-culture-an-overview>



Gender Leadership Perspective in Old Testament

God had the same plan for men and women from the beginning. God’s blessings in Genesis 1:28 encompass both man and woman and highlight their intimate personal relationships: “God blessed them, and God said to them, be fruitful and multiply, and have to fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth”³⁴ (NRSV). The surrounding pagan creation myths say nothing about God granting men and women authority over the earth and creatures. This blessing in Genesis gives no hint that God gave man more authority than a woman or that God subjected the woman to man. God’s granting authority to man and woman without differentiation supports that they are equally created in his image. In Genesis 1:29, God grants man and woman together all plants for food. Nothing in the first chapter of Genesis gives man priority in status or authority over woman.³⁵

So that we may understand and portray what God is like, Aida Besancon capsules the situation and says: If we want people to mature in God’s image, it is imperative that we have women and men model all aspects of God’s nature. He adds that men and women must participate at every level of theological practice and discussion so that God’s full counsel can become apparent.³⁶ Phyllis demonstrates that the sort of patriarchal exegetical comes from the traditional commentators who infer the inferiority of women due to Eve being created last, and, in response, she appropriates the biblical and literary device that the last may be first. She submits that the literary device used in the Yahwist Genesis account suggests an interpretation of equality between man and woman. She continues and says: “Genesis 2 evinces this structure. The creation of man first and woman last constitutes a ring composition that parallels the two creatures. In no way does the order disparage women”³⁷ Some protestant churches harbour this false idea to impede women from church leadership.

Others used the term ‘helper’ to show that Eve was weak. As Frances explained from the Hebrew word, *ishshah* (woman) is not a name but a word that indicates gender. Gender, here, is a matter of differentiation, but it is a differentiation concomitant with greater unity. A

³⁴ Gen 1:28 (NRSV)

³⁵ Philip B. Payne, *Man and woman, one in Christ: An exegetical and theological study of Paul’s Letters* 9 Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2009), 29.

³⁶ Aida Besancon cited by Stanley J. Grenz, *Women in the church: A biblical theology of women in ministry* (Illinois, Inter Varsity Press 1995) 152.

³⁷ Phyllis Tribble, Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread, in Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaistow, eds, *Woman spirit Rising: A feminist reader in religion*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 74-78.



woman's birth corresponds to the birth of men but does not copy it. Helper in Hebrew word is *ezer* used in creation to designate Eve as a helper fit for Adam. The term, interestingly, is not exclusive to Eve but is also used by God to characterise Him as the Helper of Israel.³⁸ To show that a woman's work as a helper is powerful, George Knight expresses it by coordinating what Apostle Paul said in 1 Timothy 2, related to Genesis 2: 18–28, to show why the woman was created to be a helper. He said, "Man was not created for (*dia*) the woman's sake, but woman for (*dia*) the man's sake."³⁹ He established and defined the divine-determined role relationship. God is our Helper. This is a response for those who gave women second place based on the word helper. Miriam and Deborah were great women leaders (Judges 4:1–12; Micah 6:4).

Woman's Religious Roles in Judaism in the Ancient World

During the Intertestamental period, a woman from Palestine was more limited than a Hellenistic woman. Partly, this was because the formal education of Jewish girls stopped at the marriageable age of twelve when Jewish boys began to pursue serious theological training and education. It also has to do with the fact that it was in the domestic, rather than the public, realm that Jewish women were expected to excel. Synagogue records, burial markers, inscriptions, and workers of art show that a surprising number of Jewish women played significant roles in their local congregation.⁴⁰ Linda reveals that Jewish women were donors. They took an active financial interest in their local synagogue. Juliana paved her synagogue, and Anatolia donated a day's wages for the honour of her synagogue in Hammat Gader, Palestine. They served as the heads of synagogues, for instance, Rufina of Smyrna in Asia Minor and Peristeria of Thebes in Thessal (Greece).

Jewish women served as elders, a title designating age and leadership capacity. The Jewish community valued the wisdom and leadership skills of its elderly. In biblical materials, the title elder typically appears plural and designates a group within the Jewish community with leadership functions. Individually, they represented their tribe and acted on its behalf

³⁸ Mary Frances McKenna, *Innovation within tradition: Joseph Ratzinger and reading the women of Scripture* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2015), 142.

³⁹ George W. Knight III, *The New Testament teaching on the role relationship of men and women* (United States of America, Baker Book House, 1977), 34.

⁴⁰ Linda L. Belleville, Women leaders and the church, *Tree Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2000), 20-21.



(Deut 31:28; 1 Sam 30:26; 2 Kgs 23:1). In New Testament times, elders formed a group in the Sanhedrin, the highest judicial and legislative body in Israel (Matt 16:21; Mark 8:31;14:53). According to (tomb inscription of Sophia of Gortyn) related to the memory of the righteous one, God is with the holy and the righteous one. Women gained the status of the elder like men did through maturity, proven leadership ability, and known piety.⁴¹

Women served as priestesses. Three Jewish inscriptions from Rome, Egypt, and Galilee mention a woman priestess. Female priestesses were not at all unusual; in fact, they were commonplace in Egyptian, Greek, and Roman religious circles. Mosaic law, however, limited the Jewish priestly line to males and males in the line of Aaron. At a minimum, these women were named priestesses to recognise their privileged status as a wife or daughters of a priest. When they were married outside the priestly line, the daughters missed the right to eat the priestly sacrifice, but when they returned to their father's house, they could once again claim their due (Lev 22:12–13). 1 Samuel 2:22 refers to the women who ministered at the door of the tent of the meeting. Also, after the death of her husband, Anna committed her remaining years to ministry in the temple (Luke 2: 36–37). Although none of these women is specifically called priestesses, their connection to the Jewish cultus raises intriguing possibilities. These women may also be singled out because of their liturgical contributions.⁴²

Gender Leadership Perspective in New Testament

Jesus prepared women for His ministry; He taught and allowed them to follow Him. This reveals how He differed from other rabbis in His treatment of women. The gospel writers, especially Luke and the fourth evangelist, include a considerable amount of material revealing women's new freedom and equality in the presence of Jesus and amid His community (Luke 4: 38–39; 2:38; 13:10–13). Mary Magdalene was the first person the resurrected Christ sought out and commissioned to announce the gospel of his resurrection and his coming ascension to the Father. Since apostle means sent one, it is appropriate to say Christ appointed her an apostle to the apostles (John 20: 16–18).⁴³

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Andrea Lorenzo Molinari, *Bible women, biblical word studies, historical women- Church*. Vol 28, No 2 (Spring 2014)



There is an issue of how some church leaders interpret Bible passages like Ephesians 5:22–24. Some claim that women have to follow and respect their husbands in matters related to church leadership. Wayne and Rainey emphasise the meaning of biblical leadership that a man has to grasp all that God expects of him and empowers him to perform as head of his wife.⁴⁴ To them, women cannot lead a church as in the family; they are not the head of the family. They forget that Phoebe was merely a servant (Rom 16:1 KJV, NIV), not a deacon who holds office. She was a good friend (Rom 16:2), not a benefactor. Syntyche and Euodia were a help (Phil 4:2–3) to Paul in the evangelistic labours, not clamorers, in the gospel. Junia was a leader in the early church. Paul wishes the saints in Rome to greet Andronicus and Junia, precise that they are their relatives, and they were in prison with him (Rom 16:7). In some translations, the name was translated as Junias, which would refer to a male person. The possibility exists that most interpreters wanted to present Junia as a man, Junias, because they thought it impossible for a woman to be an apostle. Nevertheless, it has been discovered that Junis was a woman and she was an apostle.⁴⁵ Apart from Syntyche and Euodia, Paul, in Rom 16:1–16, identified ten people as his colleagues in Christian ministry, and seven of them were women, including Phoebe (deacon and leader); Junia (apostle); Prisca; Mary; Tryphaena, and Persis (hard workers and co-workers to Paul).

Towards Gender Leadership Perspective in Evangelical Churches in Burundi

Some churches in Burundi accept women in their church leadership. Still, others like Baptist Union churches, Emmanuel Church, and Pentecost Church deny them to be part of church leadership. Only women can lead a choir and Sunday school; they are not allowed to preach and teach in Emmanuel Church. Even though women are allowed to teach and preach in Baptist Union Church, they cannot be ordained, and this impedes leadership as all church leadership is based on pastoral ministry, where church leaders have to be pastors; only one woman occupies the counsellor position in the executive committee. She has to be a pastor's wife, and her position is unchangeable. The women's department leader and vice have to pastor's wives even in the local church.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Wayne Grudem, Rainey Dennis. *Pastoral leadership for manhood and womanhood*. (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2002), 200.

⁴⁵ EPP, E., J., Junia the first woman apostle (Minneapolis, Mn. Fortress. Press 2005), 21.

⁴⁶ Baptist Union of Burundi's constitution February 23, 2023. p. 26.



In the interview, the current president of Baptist Union churches of Burundi/Union des Eglises Baptistes du Burundi (UEBB) noted that God had created men and women to be complemented and designed different responsibilities for everyone in the family and the church.⁴⁷ The respondent supports his view with 1 Tim 3: 2b passage where Paul said that a church leader must have one wife, not, say, a wife with one husband. In addition, he noted that Jesus chose no woman among the twelve apostles.⁴⁸ As Beck said, traditionalists typically argue that certain leadership qualifications exclude women (1 Tim 3:2) is only problematic for those who would say that women in the early church were forbidden from teaching men; “The husband of one wife” (KJV, NKJV, NJB, RSV, NASB, British NIV, ESV) as qualification for overseers (2), deacons (12), and elders (Titus1:6) needs a closer look to know if Paul includes such a qualification to envision women serving in these capacities.

The Greek city, like Ephesus, sheds important light; Greek married women were not disposed to multiple marriages or illicit unions, while Greek men were. Extramarital affairs were for the Greek male but not tolerated for Greek women (because of the concern for legitimate sons). The fact that Paul includes this qualification for male deacons (1 Tim 3:12) and omits it for female deacons (v11) is what one would expect. Anything else would be surprising; Paul had the widow in view. The widow was inclined to remarry (1 Cor 7:8–9). He included the wife of one husband (1 Tim 5:9).⁴⁹ Church leaders, where there is no problem with women’s inclusion in their leadership, follow biblical examples of women in leadership. The interview administered to one of the district’s Superintendents shows that they accept women in the church leadership as women have been involved in church leadership from the Old Testament to the New Testament. For instance, in Old Testament, Deborah in the book of Judges 4—5, roles as described by Deen, that first “she is a counsellor to her people, next as a judge in their dispute, and finally as a deliverer in the time of war, Deborah exhibited womanly excellence. She was indeed a true leader and a mother of Israel.”⁵⁰ God chose Mirriam to be one of the three leaders of Israel from Egypt to Canaan (Micah 6:4). The superintendent of the Free Methodist Church, the church that accepts women in church leadership, interviewed by the author, stated that women were the first witness of Jesus’s

⁴⁷ The current president of Baptist Union Churches of Burundi interviewed by Angelique Kanyange. Bujumbura, February 12, 2023.

⁴⁸ Audace Baraduhama interviewed by Angelique Kanyange Bujumbura, February 12, 2023.

⁴⁹ James R. Beck, *Two views on women in ministry* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2005), 59.

⁵⁰ Deen, E. *All of the women in the Bible*. (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1985), 85.



resurrection and the risen Lord appeared first to women (Matt 28: 9; Jn 20:1). Jesus commissioned women to tell the good news to their brethren (Matt 28:10), other women like Junia, Priscilla, and Phoebe served as leaders and played a major role in Paul’s ministry. From these biblical examples, the Free Methodist Church allow women to participate in church leadership.⁵¹ It is also good to consider God’s grace to all believers that there is no discrimination (Gal 3:28).

Conclusion

Gender inequality in Burundi Evangelical Church leadership is an issue that deserves a multifaceted investigation. It has several dimensions, such as Burundi’s cultural beliefs and traditions, colonial history, and interpretation of the Bible by some Evangelical Church leadership in Burundi.

Women were hardly presented or considered in Africa and Burundi leadership; their places were almost neglected in societies, especially when it came to taking a decision. In the pre-colonialism period, women participated in leadership; however, in limited situations and periods when they were queen-mother, they could help their heir sons to lead in case the king died before the heir was mature to lead the country. In the colonial era, woman’s leadership involvement became very minimal. The influence of religion and education marginalised them, favouring boys over girls. The discrimination spread to the economic and political representation. The situation did not improve much in the post-colonial era because women remained unprotected from many forms of abuse. However, some churches opened up new opportunities for women through education for girls and leadership roles. It is still an ongoing struggle because many churches in the Evangelical circles still have reservations about women’s leadership. Burundi’s contemporary society still struggles with gender inclusion in parliamentary seats but has continued to appreciate the critical role of women in national leadership. A skewed understanding of Burundi’s traditional culture and faulty interpretation of some biblical passages hinder the realisation of gender inclusivity in leadership. The misleading Bible interpretations must be confronted with the exemplary women leaders like

⁵¹ Superintendent of Free Methodist Church, Interviewed by author. Bujumbura March 15, 2023.



Deborah, Huldah and Miriam (in the OT) and Junia and Phoebe (in the NT). The image of God in both genders should be affirmed as part and parcel of God’s plan for humanity.

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