



## WOMEN AND CHURCH LEADERSHIP IN MUTOKO NORTH, ZIMBABWE: ARE WOMEN REALLY SUPPRESSED?

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### Abstract:

It is a truism that women constitute the bulk of the world's population. In Zimbabwe, women constitute 52% of the population whereas men are 48% (Zimstat, 2016). The number of women is more pronounced in the rural areas. In rural areas, 51% are females and 49% males. Despite these figures which show a high number of females in the population, women continue to be ruled by men. Women are subordinate to men who take control over them. The situation is not only found in the political field where according to 2016 parliament debates 76 out of 280 members of parliament were females. The same experience is the order of the day even in churches. Is it really proper that women should be ruled by men in the church when they command so great a number in the churches? In most churches in Mutoko, there is a trend that very few men attend church services. But alas! The few that come to church have very influential positions in the church. Basically, they are decision makers. This study will explore issues to do with gender and leadership looking at the trends associated thereof and reasons for that trend as well as suggesting the way forward. Some women are now getting positions of leadership in the church using the secular principle of equality and fairness. Is this the way to go? Will this tally with the Biblical regulations?

**Keywords:** church leadership, gender, leadership, patriarch, church

### 1. Introduction

An anomaly seems to be perpetuated in the church. Positions of authority are reserved for males just like in the secular world. This is despite the numbers of women that we have in the churches. As asserted by Walter (1990) more women dominate most churches. In several churches in Mutoko, it has been noted that there are more female

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congregants than male ones. From this background- there should be some kind of gender balance in the manner in which churches are governed, rather than to have a skewed leadership that promotes men into positions of authority in the church. The Constitution of Zimbabwe in Section 17 subsection 1 says that;

*“The State must promote full gender balance in Zimbabwean society, and in particular—  
a) the State must promote the full participation of women in all spheres of Zimbabwean society on the basis of equality with men;”*

Be that as it may, there is a dissonance that is prevailing where women are nowhere to be found in the church leadership roles. They seem to let this noble task to be manned by men. Is this what it should be? Where women created to be ruled? Is it wrong for men to sit down as women address them? These and other questions will be interrogated as this paper progresses.

The roles of women in the church cannot go unnoticed - they do provide the motherhood role in the church. They play a significant role by singing in the choir, cooking in church gatherings, more so, contributing in the church coffers by paying tithes and offerings. Older women also provide counselling to young women as well as to the youths who want to be involved in courtship (Masunungure and Mbwirire, 2016).

Another challenge that has been noted by Chin (2011) is that of communication style. Women tend to have softer, high pitched voices, which may be considered less commanding than a loud, booming male voice. This is reflected in the common observation of their being ignored or not being yielded the floor to speak by others, and becomes a way to disempowering women.

Reliance on the Bible by most churches has been another area of contention. In (Genesis 1-2) when God created human beings, he first created Adam - a man and then Eve thereafter. This has been used as a basis for justifying the dominance of men over women. It is known as the creation order which suggests that men must lead. Adam was given the mandate to name all creation by God. Even Eve was named by Adam. Several references in the Bible do articulate the same argument that women must submit to their husbands. For instance (Ephesians 5:23) says that;

*“For the husband is the **head** of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body and he himself its Saviour.*

Another Biblical example that will suffice here is; ([1 Timothy 2:11-15](#) ESV)

*“Let a woman learn in **silence with all submissiveness**. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet*

*she will be saved through childbearing, if they continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty."*

Such references have been used by men to take charge of church business as they are fully supported by the scriptures. It is, however, interesting to note that when Paul was writing this, he was addressing husbands and wives and not the administration of the church. Unfortunately, these references have been used by the male church members to lead at the expense of the females who are the majority.

## **2. Gender and the law**

The Government of Zimbabwe is committed to the achievement of gender equality and women empowerment. In line with this commitment, the country has ratified a number of gender related international and regional instruments. These include the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), the African Charter on the Rights of Women and the Southern African Development Community Protocol on Gender and Development (Zimstat, 2016)

The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) asserts that;

*"The State must promote full gender balance in Zimbabwean society, and in particular – a) the State must promote the full participation of women in all spheres of Zimbabwean society on the basis of equality with men";*

This shows that the country has elaborate provisions on gender equality and women empowerment. Government has put in place several pieces of legislation and policies to actualise these provisions, for instance, the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZimASSET) and the National Gender Policy (NGP). Zimbabwe continues to engender its laws through the alignment process to the Constitution. Women are confronted with numerous gender related challenges in the political, economic and social sectors which inhibit them from attaining their full potential. On the social side, women are more likely to suffer abuse and violence than men which in the end affects their health and well-being.

Regardless of a plethora of legislation that promotes women in the society, it is unfortunate that the laws of the country, though supreme, do not 'fit' into the church. This is because the church operates on its own God-given laws. In as much as the country is vying for equality through the quota system in the parliament and in the senate and other bodies of political administration, the same cannot be applied with ease in the church which has its own basis for instruction. To that end, the church has remained very patriarchal even though we have the greatest number of women in the church. Following the country's legislation that promotes equality between men and women, challenges have been observed in the church with some women trying to

dominate positions of authority and grabbing power at all costs. In Zimbabwe, there are women who have started their own ministries which they do run and make decisions. Although the argument seems to be somehow valid, tensions have been created between men and women in the church.

### **3. Research questions**

This study is framed by these questions

1. Why do females take back benches in issues of administration in the church when they command a lot of people?
2. What can be done to re-dress the prevailing conditions in the church?
3. What is it in men that drive them to be in charge in the church?

#### **3.1 Objectives of the study**

The objectives of the study are to make an exposition of the dangers of women who go into leadership for the sake of leadership without a clear focus of why they are doing that. A thorough analysis of the Bible will be laid out in this paper in as far as leadership is concerned. That is, is it a men or women dominated area. More so, the paper will trigger more debates/discussion on Biblical leadership.

#### **3.2 Statement of the problem**

Greater number of female congregants in the church should not go unnoticed. It has to be reflected also on the number of female leaders that we have in the church rather than having a skewed notion that favours the minority men in leadership at the expense of women.

### **4. Methodology**

This study was framed within a qualitative perspective. According to Tewksbury (2009), the qualitative methodology provides an interpretive paradigm which is usually associated with the tactics that offer the opportunity for the research participants' voice, concerns and practices to be heard. In gathering the data, interviews were mainly used as a data gathering tool. Apart from interviews, observations and document analysis were also used. Church leaders from selected churches were interviewed. More attention was given to female leaders, particularly in the Pentecostal churches where a great number of female participate in leadership. From these interviews, more data kept on coming as the respondents were probed to release more information. Through this qualitative paradigm, the researchers got room to investigate through interviews and conversations with research participants what congregants think about the type of leadership available in their church particularly on the issue of gender. Apart from the interviews, the researchers also used observation method in gathering more data as they noted how those who were married were progressing in life for quite some time.

#### **4.1 Population and sampling**

The population for the study included all the churches in Mutoko. Since it is not possible to study the whole population, a sample of churches was chosen. From all the churches that are available in Mutoko, 10 were chosen for the study. The researchers eventually chose churches for convenience as they were targeting different churches to have a variety of views from them. Of interest, Pentecostal, African Initiated Churches (AICs), orthodox and white garment churches were identified for the study.

Thus, the study sample builds up from one source and enough data was gathered that was useful for this research. According to Sharma (2017), this sampling technique is often used in so as to make generalisations more acceptable.

#### **4.2 Definition of key terms**

The leadership as defined by Gardner (1995) is *“the ability to influence – either directly or indirectly – the behaviour, thoughts, and actions of a significant number of individuals”*. A comprehensive definition of leadership is that of a process in which an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2004).

Leadership has the following tasks that include goal setting, organization, direction, and control; and the relationship dimension involving support, communication, interaction, and active listening (Hersey and Blanchard, 1988).

#### **4.3 Gender**

Whereas sex is biological that is either female or male, gender is a social construction. (Oakeley, 1972 cited in Calas and Smircich, 1994). The same definition is further reinforced by Goktope and Schneier (1988), who echoed that sex is the biological invariant factor and gender is comprised of various social, cultural or historical variable components. Brandser (1996) explained that the sex/gender split meant that scholars could distinguish sex, referring to attributes of men and women created by their biological characteristics and gender, referring to the distinctive qualities of men and women which are created culturally. In all cultures, biological sex is not the only factor to define being male or being female. Societal values and expectations perpetuate gender role stereotypes in a culture, and mandate males to be “masculine” and females to be “feminine” (Littrell & Nkomo, 2005).

### **5. Findings**

#### **5.1 Men are naturally leaders**

It was gathered that most church congregants were of the idea that males were created to be leaders. It was quite surprising that several women who were interviewed in the different churches echoed the same sentiments that men were supposed to rule in all sectors of life beginning from homes, community, and even up to the national level where males do call the shots. One female congregant argued that;

*“Are you not aware that, in the Bible, God created a man first and then a woman at the end? This shows that there is no way a woman can go before man in leadership posts. It must be done by men.”*

This response augurs well with Mpofu’s (2008) assertion that girls were overlooked, as it was considered taboo for a woman to rule over men. This culture has been accepted by women that is why they find it easy for males to rule over them. However, this is despite the fact that in most churches women dominate males in terms of population. The table below is a summary of what the researchers gathered in terms of church congregants. These statistics were taken from church registers as availed by the church leaders. The figures are excluding children who are less than 12 years.

**Table 1: Male and female distribution**

Church	Males	Females	Total
A	17	60	78
B	15	43	58
C	08	34	42
D	28	80	108
E	20	55	75
F	12	22	33
Church	Males	Females	Total
G	06	23	29
H	12	15	27
I	12	25	37
J	14	34	48
<b>Total</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>535</b>

From the table above, it can be concluded that the number of female congregants is greater than that of males. Therefore, it is improper to have men who take up the leadership roles in the church being dominated by women. But alas! Most women find comfort from the fact that they are very free because leadership is associated with headaches. One put it this way;

*“When I was a cell group leader, I faced a lot of challenges in controlling the group as there were issues that were too sensitive that came from men. As a woman, I did not see it fit to continue handling the issues therefore I quitted the post.”*

What this means is very simple - women are not used to that are discussed in churches, particularly in board meetings.

This resonates with Appelbaum, Audet and Miller (2003) who note a decline in the number of women in managerial positions in different types of businesses. This is despite the fact that women have joined with full force. In as much as importance is given to feminine management, women are still rare in the highest positions of large

business organizations. Moreover, in several newspaper adverts are strongly encouraged to apply but unfortunately, very few take up the offers.

It was also observed that in some churches, women are not ordained as pastors, elders and deacons. The main argument for this was taken from the book of Timothy in the bible,

*"...If any one aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a noble task. Now a bishop must be above reproach, **the husband of one wife**, temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable...**let deacons be the husband of one wife**, and let them manage their children and their households well..." (1 Timothy 3:1-13 ESV)*

From the reference given above, the main argument is that church leaders should be men - **husbands** of single wives, and not the opposite, and Paul is adamant on that one. Therefore, there is no way one can talk about women taking leadership posts in the church as this was seen as a violation of the word of God.

Another woman opined that;

*"Check your history very well. There is no where you have ever heard of a female pope in the Roman Catholic Church. Check with United Methodist Church (UMC) in Zimbabwe, the bishops of the church from the time of Abel Muzorewa were men. Even some Pentecostal churches like Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) in Zimbabwe, the bishops have been men since we were born. With this list of churches that I have given you, as women we have no chance in the administration of church business. **Ibasa ravarume iri** (this is men's business). After all, in our African Initiated Churches (AICs) like Johane Masowe – the founder was a man. He could not allow a foreign system were women are given a platform before men. They should adhere to our culture."*

This definitely gives precedence of authority and dominion to men, with women taking orders from the few men available in the church. It tallies with what Paul admonishes to the Corinthian church that;

*"The women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church." ([1 Corinthians 14:34-35](#) ESV).*

Another reference that supports this is from the book of Timothy;

*"Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a*

*transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing - if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control." (1 Timothy 2:11-15 ESV)*

Paul warns women to be inaudible in the churches. At the same time, he advocates for total submission of women as they must abide by rule given as their punishment after the fall and let men rule over women as the Lord God passed judgement on Eve, "...he shall rule over you." (Genesis 3:16 RSV).

## **5.2 Women on the rise**

Although we have said that men are naturally leaders, it is not always the case in all churches included in this study. Some churches are actually going the way of the secular world by encouraging more women to take up positions of authority in the church. These churches are mostly Pentecostal which has recently emerged. Some men interviewed argued that;

*"This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century where women have their rights. It is no longer a restrictive society where women are confined to the round house. They should also experience how to lead in the church. There is nothing wrong with that."*

From other churches then, it was clearly evident that they were liberal. In one church committee inquired, there were four women and three men. The chairperson of that committee was a woman who could make decisions after deliberation of church business. The whole church would religiously follow the chairperson's decisions without reservations. This church women leadership concurs with esteemed women from both the old and new testaments. Examples of such women who were very influential in the Bible included Deborah in (Judges 4) who led all Israel to defeat the enemy. Another one is Esther who saved the whole race from massacre that was planned by Haman. After all, the Bible has a whole lot of women who were quite significant during their times for instance; Rachel, Rebekah, Sarah, Ruth, Leah, Jochebed (the mother of Moses), Miriam, Deborah, Esther, Rachab, Huldah (2 Kings 22:8- and 23:1-25), Sheerah (1 Chronicles 7:24), In the New Testament, there is Mary (John 20:17-18), Elizabeth, Martha, and Mary of Bethany among others.

This paradigm shift has been echoed by Mpofu (2008) who argued that Zimbabwe appears to be making positive strides in terms of gender equality. In mainstream society, women now occupy several positions previously considered to be the domain of men. Some notable examples include the Zimbabwe former vice-president Joice Mujuru, Zimbabwe president of the Senate Edna Madzongwe, Zimbabwe Election Commission chairperson Priscilla Chigumba and the late Zimbabwe Open University Vice Chancellor Primrose Kurasha among others. This argument has been positively taken by this church. A woman Mrs B in the top hierarchy argued that:



*“There is nothing that can hinder us from controlling particularly in the church because of our numbers. We dominate in this church, therefore it will be unfair for males to rule over us. Remember what Deborah did in Judges- she led Israel to defeat their enemies. Even though men were there (Judges 4). So what can hinder us from leading in the church? More over God is not a respecter of persons, because “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28).*

A thorough interview with Mrs B unveiled that she had learned up to a degree level as the researchers discovered that she had a degree in Sociology from the Zimbabwe Open University. She was influenced by feminist theories which have a strong bias towards women. Thus, her arguments were more secular than spiritual. Thus, her dominance in this church was more of exploring what she had learned from the college.

Mapuranga (2013) asserts that women have taken the nation by surprise within the Pentecostal churches with notable examples including Apostle Eunor Guti, Apostle Petunia Chiriseri, and Dr. Faith Wutawunashe among others. However, these women are married to charismatic founders of Pentecostal ministries. Be that as it may, their influence in controlling their denominations has been quite significant. For instance Apostle Eunor Guti is now an archbishop in ZAOGA FIF Ministries. Mapuranga (2013) further contends that these women must be accepted as leaders in their own right. They are leaders of specific ministries and are not mere appendages of their husbands. However, the idea of women who are married to founders of ministries should be traded with caution. It has generated a moderate position on feminist issues within the Pentecostal movement.

### **5.3 Feminism and the church**

Church leadership is an area which is feared by most patriarchal males in the church as they feel that women are there to grab their authority. The Cambridge English Dictionary (2018) defines feminism as the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way or the set of activities intended to achieve this state.

As forwarded by Hannah (2017), feminism is a theory of women’s subordination and a political movement. This theory is meant to bring enlightenment to women in regards to their position in the society. It has roots in the 18<sup>th</sup> century enlightenment project promotion of universal liberty and equality. If both sexes have the power of reason then liberty should apply to women also.

It must be important to note that the main feature of feminism is equality. Feminism means wanting things to be equal for both men and women. Therefore, there is nothing wrong with women taking positions of authority in the church too. Why is it that women feel safe and comfortable to be ruled by men who are a minority in the church? Such questions will find satisfactory responses in the distant future. Of course,

as does most everything, people take it too far. Feminism does not hate men. Feminism is not declaring women are superior to men. Often people are against feminism due to the extremists. Feminism simply means wanting equality, no matter your gender (Hannah, 2017).

In this discussion, the researchers are not going to look at other types of feminism such as radical, Marxist as well as post structuralist feminism. The main focus was on Liberal feminism. These feminists are concerned with human and civil rights and freedoms. It means progress towards equal rights. Liberal feminists are optimistic and think change will come through education, laws and role models.

The first step is to recognise that people do live in a society which discriminates against women. While they do live in a society which is dominated by men, the system called patriarchy affects men. Most men who were interviewed expressed mixed feelings towards feminism in the church. One man echoed that;

*“It is pointless to discuss the topic of feminism in the church. This is bringing the devil in the church. How on earth can we allow such a system that violates God’s order to continue? When God created humanity, he began by creating Adam, whom he gave all the authority to name everything. Including his wife Eve who came from his rib. (Genesis 1-2). So there is no way women can rule over men in the church. They should just submit to men. Are you not aware of ([Colossians 3:18](#)) which says that; “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.”*

However, the verse was taken out of context as Paul was trying to sort out the challenge of women particularly at that church. This must not be inferred to mean that all women have the same problem world over. This has been noted as the greatest weakness of case studies by Creswell (2009) who asserted that it is not possible to generalise findings from a single case study.

#### **5.4 Patriarchy in the church**

It has been observed that Christians take the Bible as the absolute text. (2 Timothy 3:16) says that all scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. Women take the Bible as it is and accept male dominance in the church regardless of their numbers arguing from the text. For instance ([1 Timothy 2:11-12](#))

*“Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.” (1 Timothy 2:11-12 ESV)*

Another reference is ([1 Timothy 2:12](#))

*"I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent."  
(1 Timothy 2:12 RSV)*

These references alluded to are nothing other than a reinforcement of male patriarchal ideology as there is command and authority in the tone of the voice that instruct women to be submissive to men. There is no strong /valid claim that men must rule. Patriarchy argues that males should dominate in the society and call all the shots. Moreover, some even claim that God is a male that is why humankind call him father as Jesus's taught the disciples to pray, *"Father, hallowed be thy name"* (Luke 11:2). This is besides the fact that there is no scientific proof that God is male or female. What if God is a female? Are we going to see a change in the way how control and governance is done on the earth? Will the male species be spared by females who think that they had been oppressed for quite a long time?

For example, when Aaron and Miriam complained about Moses marrying a Cushite woman, it was only Miriam who was punished because there was a belief that males are always correct. Men do not err. However, this argument can be explained on the basis that out of the 66 books of the Bible, only two were written by women, that is, Esther and Ruth. Does this really mean that God cannot speak or inspire his word to women? Why is it that God chose 64 men to write the holy book? In the New Testament when Jesus selected the disciples, he never considered women to be part of the twelve. With this background then - women have humbly submitted to the will of men who control them both from the home as well as in the church.

### **5.5 Culture and the church**

There is no way of separating the Zimbabwean individual and his /her culture. Zimbabwe is dominated by African Indigenous Religion and Christianity. Those who belong to the AIR are the same people who were converted to Christianity. Mbiti (1969) asserts that Africans are notoriously religious. Religion permeates into all departments of life so fully that it is impossible to isolate. Religion is a reality which calls for academic scrutiny and must be reckoned within modern fields of life like economics, politics and education. To ignore the traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices can only lead to lack of understanding. Mbiti (1969) in this case refers to the culture of the Africans.

This background cannot be easily erased because if someone becomes a Christian, he/she still maintains his/her culture. That is why women give men the autonomy to lead in the church, despite population that favours women in positions of authority. One cannot be wrong to assume that Zimbabwean Christians are taking their culture into the church as alluded to by one lady who thundered that:

*"Ruling is meant for men. Our culture does not allow women to take authority over men. Look at me carefully. I am putting on a skirt- is it proper for me to stand before men and*

*address them? Absolutely not! Women who rule over men vanhu vakasvinukisa (very ambitious). Let men rule both at home as well as in the churches.*

The researchers can therefore point out that culture has made an indelible ink in the hearts and minds of many both in men and women. It explains why men are always on those positions of authority in the church and women on the receiving end.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The reliance on the Bible by most churches has been an area of contention when it comes to church leadership. Upon analysis of the data obtained for women congregants and church leadership, it was observed that it was considered taboo for a woman to rule over men and Christians take the Bible as the absolute text which make women accept male dominance in the church regardless of their numbers arguing from the text. This definitely gives precedence of authority and dominion to men, with women taking orders from the few men available in the church.

Among the five bones of contention, patriarchy in church gave the superlative perception that males should dominate in the church and society so they should call all the shots. Nevertheless, with women on the rise in the church, the 21<sup>st</sup> century ideology brings with it a paradigm shift and should be well-matched with Zimbabwe's positive strides in terms of gender equality. At the same time, church women leadership concurs with esteemed women from both the Old and New Testaments.

It is recommended to evaluate the efficacy of religion and the bible as tools of oppressing women in both the society and in church. That related research be made utilising other cultures other than African Indigenous Religion in order to produce an equally effective or even more effective evaluation of church women leadership.

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