

## **The *nexus* between church and gender: Understanding headship as servanthood**

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### **Abstract**

Interface between the Bible and ideas about gender and church mission work in Africa is a phenomenon that calls for discussion within theological forums. Despite both men and women being active in church activities, the early church depicts men as being at the forefront while women quietly participated. Concerning the missionary era, men publicly were the leaders as women followed or privately served as the personal assistant or as administrators. In addition, looking now at the contemporary church, in the traditional (orthodox) churches, the so-called historical or mainstream churches, men take the top leadership roles while women deputize them. However, this position is being challenged by the new religious movements and Christian ministries movements where women are usurping the top leadership positions. This paper therefore seeks to paint a seemingly more balanced account of gender roles that would benefit men and women alike by exploring historical and theological leadership roles and gender in the church.

### **Keywords**

*Gender roles; church history; Bible and church; new religious movements*

## **1. Introduction**

In most parts of the world gender differences in various institutions have generated a seemingly unending heated debate. The example of gender involvement in leadership portrays male dominance over women. Worldwide the distribution of leadership positions between men and women is a phenomenon that requires an inquiry to the factors influencing these gender proportions. This phenomenon calls for research on the interface between the Bible and ideas about gender and church mission work in Africa, with the aim to give a more balanced picture of gender and religion that can

benefit men and women alike. From church history, men and women have been active in church ministries. However, women seem to be the forgotten by just having men documented. The early church depicts men as being in the forefront while women seemingly participated in silence. Coming to the missionary era, men publicly were the leaders while women followed or privately served as the personal assistant or as administrators. Looking at the contemporary church, the traditional (orthodox) churches, the so-called historical or mainstream movements, men take top leadership roles while women deputize them. However, this position is being challenged by the new religious movements and Christian ministries movements where women are usurping the top leadership position. Is there a problem within the orthodox movements that deter women from doing what God has called them to do? This paper therefore seeks to explore the nexus between religion and gender in the church. To do this Kamau (2009), drawing a conceptual framework adopted from feminist perspective, is embraced. It tends to illuminate women's experiences, looking carefully at their personal experiences rather than looking for generalizations.

### **Theoretical perspective**

Feminist perspective demands for one to generate words and concepts that spring from gender's actual experiences, uses methods, approaches and theories that allow for the understanding of ways in which women's experiences are structured in a male-dominated world.

Kamau, borrowing from Leonard (2001), contends that feminist research is different from other social science research. This is because feminist research has a participatory role and it challenges the experts while trying to give 'voice' to silenced groups. It also seeks to minimize the hierarchy between the researcher and the researched and to maximize the reciprocity. Feminist research is especially concerned with ethical issues and it is opposed to treating people as research (Kamau 2009:95)

Equality and freedom are popular concepts in today's world, not least among advocates of gender rights. In the twenty-first century we would agree that men and women are puzzled with the controversy on the debate concerning the gender roles especially the place of women. Although the education phenomenon has been to the fore-front in the emancipation of women, not all the learned, let alone the illiterate, have agreed on

how freedom and equity work out in practice, whether in male/female relationships, in given religious societies, or at the work place.

Chafetz (1988 &1999) and Tuchman (1999) argue that there is need for a fundamental transformation that is based on sex-equality over all human relations. Quoting from Hull (1990:14), Keener affirms that the feminist movement is not new nor is its connection with biblical principles. For example, the first U.S. Women's Rights Convention, held in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, was an outgrowth of both the religious revivalist and abolitionist movements. Many of these women had a renewed desire to study scripture and were quick to see the parallels between slavery and female subordination (Keener 1992:9). It is on this agreement I submit that both men and women are one in Christ. Regardless of gender, they are equal before God and God gives the spiritual gifts for His service. Feminist ideology has permeated virtually every segment of our society. The church seems to be doing worse in the issue of gender equality. As a community, she seems to be influenced by the understanding that of sex-division which influences ministry-services based on gender categorisation. Dictated by sexual categories, church roles are strictly defined as per church traditions. Is it because of the patriarchal family system? Is it because of the church stand in support of keeping the church traditions, or is it because of the teaching of the Bible? And if so, are women more obedient and respectful towards the church doctrine? These questions create an interest to the researcher to find out what the answers are by researching on the experiences and the understanding of women on the subject of women and executive leadership in the church. The key issue is whether there is an underlying factor supporting dominance of men over women in religious institutions where all are supposed to be equal before God.

## **2. Historical survey of the Early Church and gender**

The status of women in regard to church work, and why they are marginalized, remains an active debate in the religious circles let alone the non-religious movements. The distinct gender hierarchies reveal gender bias and sexism worldwide. Surveying the works of church history, one would ask where is the list of women? Does it mean that women were not active when their counterpart were very busy doing God's work in God's

kingdom? The truth is women were there but the reason they are not documented is my interest in this paper. Michael Wiltshire (2016) in his paper, “Women in Church History: Footnoted and Forgotten”, comes to my aid. He examines the role of women in church history, and who were influential in the early church, medieval Christianity, the reformation era, and the Enlightenment era as follows:

## 2.1 Women in the Early Church history

Wiltshire, (2016: n.p.) alludes that in both Jewish and Greco-Roman culture, women did not always have equal access or rights in the public sphere, thus the home was the most socially acceptable and encouraged place for women to speak, teach, and take responsibility. It is within this household context that the church was raised into infancy.

Some house churches, the primary channels for the sustainability of the Early Church, were funded and led by women such as Lydia (Acts 16:11–40), Nympha (Col 4:15) and Mary, the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12). In 1 Thessalonians 5:12, Paul suggests that such house-church leaders had significant authority as he tells his readers to be thankful for those who “have charge of you in the Lord.”

As the church acquired legal status in Roman society, it became increasingly subject to the patriarchal ideology of the dominate culture. No longer raising the church in their homes, women were increasingly marginalized – even banned from church grounds if they happened to be menstruating. As the church adopted more hierachal structures in the 4th century, the positions at the top became only open to men, as female bishops or presbyters would have been antithetical to Roman gender ideology.

No longer commonly recognized as ministry partners (Rom 16; Phil 4:2) apostles, (Rom 16:7) and prophets (Acts 21:9; Rev 2:20), women looked for other roles to fulfil. As MacHaffie (2006: 4–5) notes, historians generally agree that women had a decisive part in the creation of the church and played a more prominent role in the first generation of Christianity than they did in later centuries.

## 2.2 Women in Medieval Christianity

Wiltshire, (2016, n.p.) looking at the medieval period claims that “according to the small handful of literate monks, bishops, and noblemen in the middle ages, the status of women in medieval Christianity was a polarizing issue. In *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition*, Barbara MacHaffie notes that on the one hand women were “denounced in strong terms as wicked and inferior”, leading to witch-hunts throughout the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. Women were also praised and idolized as symbols of the Virgin Mary, an ideal preserved for us in the well-known tales of medieval chivalry (2006:65–68).

In the fifth century, monasticism gave women the freedom to travel, become missionaries, and even get involved politically. Yet, moving into the eleventh and twelfth centuries most women’s monasteries were closed and many women leaders left to join bands of travelling communities such as the Beguines. Another option was to live the ascetic life; which offered communal safety to cross borders, avoidance of the physical dangers of childbearing prevalent in this era, and authority by virtue of holiness and personal piety. Vowing the ascetic life also allowed women (as well as men) access to education and the ability to study scripture in a time when literacy rates were low.

Abbesses (monasteries for women) were an important part of medieval Christianity. Understanding the term “ordination” in its original use (sometimes used to describe the consecration of an abbess) women like St. Paula (357–404 C.E.) the sister of Augustine stands out in history as examples of “ordained women”. Beyond her relationship with Jerome, St. Paula established both a monastery and convent throughout her pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Female mystics are one of the most interesting groups in this period. Between 1100 and 1450, medieval women were a significant part of the Christian mystic tradition. Their work provides us with early writings that make use of bridal imagery for the church, establishing a precedent for men to claim their rightful identity alongside women as the bride of Christ.

### **2.3 Women in the Reformation era**

According to Wiltshire,(2016:n.p.), the status of women throughout the Protestant Reformation is best understood through the teachings of Martin Luther and John Calvin. With these Protestant champions pushing back on Catholicism's teachings on marriage, celibacy, and the priesthood, the Reformation's impact on the domestic life of women was substantial.

Women of the Reformation era exercised their leadership both enclosed by, and breaking through, the walls of patriarchy. For example, according to Luther, as women are the ones responsible for sin entering the world, they are—in their very being—the lesser gender. Calvin, on the other hand, believed in the subordination of women stemmed not from sin, but by original creation. On a more positive note, Luther's (and later Calvin's) stress on the Priesthood of all Believers did allow for Protestantism to deconstruct some of the hierarchy between lay Christians and “professionalized” clergy, allowing for a more socially egalitarian church.

As monasticism was deemphasized, Catholic women increasingly served in the new orders of the Catholic Church, leading through the roles of nurses, educators, and caretakers for the poor. Again, the pattern surfaces: when women are not allowed leadership in the parish, they move outward into the mission field (e.g., women moving from house church leaders to writers in Rome and moving from Abbesses to wandering mystics in the Middle Ages). In the early days of the Reformation, Protestant women took on the tasks of preaching and writing; even publishing and distributing books containing reformed doctrine. Yet, as Protestantism flourished and became more institutionalized such roles became increasingly unavailable to women.

### **2.4 Women in the Enlightenment era**

Wiltshire, (2016:n.p.) observes at the dawn of American colonization, Puritanism was a dominant religious force and the political and moral standard for American cultural development. The moral vision of the Puritans was so influential that Mark Noll (1992:12) suggests almost all Americans until the 19th century can be seen as reacting to this religious body.

While other Christian movements emerged from 17th century America—the Quakers, Baptists, Presbyterians, Anglicans – it is through the literary tradition of the Puritans that most of our knowledge of American women in church leadership survives. As the Puritans placed more emphasis on the elements of love, trust, and mutuality, the historical memories of women as evil and easily inclined to sin began to fade. Though women would still be regarded as the “weaker sex”, notices that “Colonial clergymen also began to replace the image of women as inherently evil with the idea that men and women … possess equal opportunities for redemption”(MacHaffie 2006:141). With the First Great Awakening of American religion (1730s–1740s) as impetus, women in American Christianity were driven by the experience of conversion to transcend prescribed roles and self-understandings. Though church policy remains hierarchical, women in the earliest days of America stand as impressive examples that the Spirit works through the marginalized to bring liberation to all.

Women have come a long way, and as a part of the body of Christ have served diligently. This calls on the church to revisit the understanding of headship. Given that naturally, women naturally are endowed with unique sense of servanthood and thus in whatever capacity they find themselves they wholeheartedly serve.

### **3. Gender and missionary work**

In this section I want to highlight on women’s contribution as compared to that of men. Since men have a good record of their works, taking time on digging out what women have done is worth noting. Ruth Tucker, quoting from Patricia Hill (1985:5–8), observes that from the very beginning of the modern missionary movement women played an active role—either in home-front support efforts or by working alongside their husbands in overseas ministries. As the nineteenth century progressed, their involvement deepened, in part because of the perception, widely held in society at large, that women were the guardians of religion. They were expected to keep the home fires of faith burning and in so doing they instilled a missionary impulse in their children and became the guardians of the Great Commission. By the decades of the twentieth century, women outnumbered men on the mission field by a ratio of more than two to

one. Consequently, the women's missionary movement itself had become the largest women's movement in the country – larger than Women's Temperance Movement – with more than three million dues-paying members in America alone (Tucker 1988:10). The implication here is that women are capable of any leadership roles given the support. The times of women sitting at home and waiting for men to decide for them ended with the twentieth century. The religious movements should acknowledge that women's hour for recognition and leadership has come. Tucker continues to observe that, despite women's active involvement in missions, they have been largely forgotten by the missions' historians. In her research on women in missions, Patricia Hill discovers, and she elucidates, saying, "As so frequently happens in the writing of history, the women have simply disappeared" (1988:10). Women often played crucial roles in pioneering new regions or in developing new programmes such as administrators of schools, hospitals, homes, and women organizations but they were granted little credit either by the time or by posterity. They were involved in missions in large numbers, but it is important to point out that the numbers do not necessarily reflect their actual contribution to the cause. The married women, who constituted more than thirty percent of the missionary force, were often consumed with domestic duties and had less time than men for outreach ministries. Likewise, women rarely had leadership roles, and, as is true in any field of history, the leaders are the ones who draw the attention of researchers. But the accomplishments of married women in ministry should not be overlooked or minimized. Despite their heavy domestic responsibilities, they made significant contributions to the missionary enterprise.

Robert (1996:xvii) observes that historical evidence gives lie to the truism that women missionaries were and are doers but not thinkers, reactive secondary figures rather than proactive primary ones. The first women missionaries to serve as foreign missionaries in 1812 were among the best educated women of their time. Early-nineteenth-century women seldom wrote theologies of mission, but they wrote letters and kept journals that reveal a rich thought-world and set of assumptions about women's roles in the missionary task. The activities of missionary wives were not random: they were part of a mission strategy that gave women a particular role in the advancement of God's Kingdom. While opportunities for women

in the meaningful ministry were often very limited on the home front, precisely the opposite was true on the mission field. Practically every area of ministry imaginable was wide open to them. There was criticism when they overstepped the bounds of what was considered to be the “woman’s sphere”, but the criticism was muffled by the overwhelming needs of the missionary enterprise as well as by the fact that women on the mission field quickly proved to be more than equal to the tasks before them. This was the position of J.S. Woodside, a missionary to India for some sixty years, who wrote to the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions in 1881 to defend the active ministry of women:

... my honest opinion is that many of the ladies I have known have been superior to many of our male workers in what goes to constituting the true missionary. Their intense earnestness, their love for the people, their zeal, their untiring energy, and their long-suffering patience has been far greater than in the men ... (Tucker 1988:61).

Dana Lee Robert observes that by the late nineteenth century women’s mission theory had developed to the point of being codified in the slogan “Woman’s Work for Woman”. Popular magazines produced by various denominational women’s missionary societies promoted “Woman’s Work for Woman” among church constituencies. The hard work of the “woman’s missionary movement” staffed by single women missionaries increased the numbers of female converts in emerging indigenous churches. Women became the majority among the mission force. Their commitment to the social and charitable side of mission transformed the face of world missions (Robert, 1996 p. xvii).

Tucker (1988:61–62), adds on that even before women went abroad in missionary service, they found tremendous opportunities to be involved in support efforts at home. Mary Webb inspired a generation and more of women to save their “mites” for missions, and Mary Lyon dedicated her talent as an educator for preparing women for foreign missionary service. Anne Marie Javouhey and Eliza Davis George founded and directed their own mission societies. Mary Slessor and Mildred Cable were among the many who gave their lives to exploration and pioneer work. Church planting and preaching were options as testified to by Sue McBeth,

Eleanor Macomber, and Malla Moe. Women like Annie Armstrong and Helen Barret Montgomery tirelessly mobilized lay women to support them. Women, like men, often tended to specialize in ministry overseas. Adele Fielde and Margaret King were very successful in this speciality. The needs of children also captured the hearts of women missionaries, as seen in the lives of Amy Carmichael and Lillian Trasher. The stories of Eleanor Chestnut, Ida Scudder, and Lillian Hammer are stories of sacrifice and love. Bible translation during the twentieth century was embraced by women such as Eunice Pike and Marianna Slocum who made remarkable contribution in this field.

The woman's missionary movement reached its ideological peak in 1910, the year women from around the United States celebrated the fifty-year jubilee of the founding of separate women's mission boards. By 1920s, women's mission theory was part of mainstream protestant missiology, emphasizing under the concept of "world Friends" such themes as ecumenism, peace education, higher education for women and partnership and cooperation between first and third-world churches. By 1930s, the eve of the Second World War, having largely outgrown the gender-based cultural separatism of the nineteenth century, women's mission movement was merging into the male-dominated denominational structures according to Tucker (1988:61–62).

As Christianity spread, it became unusual for women to be recognized in public worship places mainly because of cultural factors, fears of sexual impurity caused by biological factors, or interaction between sexes. This condition has persisted until the late twenty first century. Today, women have become increasingly involved in the church, though men and women generally worship separately and if together sit separately. Most Christians explain this by citing the need to avoid "touching" the opposite sex (1 Cor 7:1), becoming unclean due to specific times in the month (Leviticus 15:19–33), claiming such may cause distraction during prayer. Separation between sexes ranges from men and women on opposite sides of an aisle, to men in front of women when participating in various church rituals, to women taking ministries that only women attend for they cannot stand before men.

#### **4. Understanding the current church leadership and gender**

When it comes to the religious movements where women are the majority, citing examples of women in key top leadership position is rare yet this is where we expect equity in terms of distribution of church leadership position by gender. Among the many top church leadership, we can cite a few women who are overseers such as Bishop Carolyn Tanner Irish the 10th bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Utah and the first woman to lead a major denomination in Utah (ENS/ACNS 2012: n.p.).

There are many examples of contemporary women who have excelled in their involvement in the church work but have not been recognised to take up decision making offices. Economically, it is men who accrue the benefits. A good example is in the area of church development where women labour hard, but end products are left in the hands of men to enjoy and determine what share can go to which project. It is believed men are the intelligent species and thus think tanks and women should stay at home and manage households as they follow quietly the decisions made by men. As a result, more women remain dependent on men since the formal sector is widely dominated by men.

In most present societies, the domestic and the familial are the world of women. Good women are portrayed in their stereotypical roles as mothers and wives. According to Olson and DeFrain (1997:258–289), Karl Marx viewed marriage as a means of enforcing male power and control over females. The division of domestic and public spheres of activity is particularly constraining to the women and advantageous to the men. This is because the highly valued resources are limited to women due to their limited association with the public. On the other hand, men are assured control of the highly valued resources because of their public association.

Eitzen (1996:271) observes that in workplaces, inequality operate in such a way that the jobs held by most women tend to be associated with shorter chains of opportunity. This is called the “glass-ceiling” of the white-collar work force, an invisible barrier that limits women’s mobility despite their motivation and capacity for positions of power and prestige. Man’s dread of woman is manifested in his reluctance to have her join him as a peer in the world of work. The possibility that men envy women their ability to create life itself has often been cited to explain male genius in the arts and

sciences and female lack of such genius. As long as women create babies and men create everything else, our world, if not perfect, appears to be balanced. However, when women decide that they would like to exercise their abilities in a variety of ways, the system of compensation is altered, and men feel threatened. Women should stick to their own realm and give birth. It is simply not fair that they should want to compete with men as well. Men do not attempt to compete with women as mothers, why should women be permitted to compete with men as artists and writers (Hewitt and Hiatt 1975:42).

Hewitt and Hiatt acknowledge that fact, contemporary society is coming to recognize that talent and ability are not sex-linked. Large families, rather than being desperately needed as in past ages, are beginning to be viewed as an ecological liability. The logic of all these factors is that women should be free to share the tasks and joys of all kinds of work. However, women who aspire to use their talents in pursuits other than motherhood run into masculine resentment. It is not fair that women can function in two realms, motherhood and work, and men cannot. In addition, woman's encroachment on man's territory infringes on his first defence against sexual impotence-his failure in sex is minimized as long as he remains superior to a woman in other realms (1975:42). Therefore, theorizing on what headship means is the nexus between the church and gender where we are called to submit to one another emulating the example of Jesus Christ (Eph 5:21, Philippians 2:1–8).

## **5. The Bible and gender**

Dealing with the church perspective concerning any topic, one should have a clear distinction between the normative teachings of scriptures and the diverse cultural practices among Christians, which may or may not be consistent with them. Keener (1992:5) observes:

Many people today claim to follow the Bible yet prejudice their interpretation to the Bible by merely using it to legitimize their own prior agendas. On the other hand, many other people claim to follow the Bible, and yet fail to apply its principles to our own situations today. While Christians should not read their agendas into the Bible, we should ask how the Bible relates to the culture in which we live.

Taking a gender perspective, the Bible affirms the ministry of women. According to Thomas Finley (2001), there were two basic institutions of leadership in ancient Israel. These two were the priesthood and the monarchy. It is a well-known fact that women were excluded from the priesthood in Israel. Even though a woman could not serve as a priest, it was possible for her to serve in a special capacity at the tabernacle. The tabernacle constructed by Bezalel, the bronze basin and its stand were made, “from the mirrors of the serving women who served at the doorway of the tent of meeting” (Exodus 38:8), thus women have many opportunities to serve in the household of God including the top leadership.

There are many examples of women in ministry: Deborah was a ruler of her country as well as a prophetess (Jdgs 4: 1–23) and Esther was a leading diplomat who was able to save her people from extinction (Esther 2–5). Lydia was an important trade master (Acts 16:14) who supported Paul and his team in ministry especially by taking a bold stand to house them after they came from prison. Abigail is regarded as a woman of wisdom as a result of her husband’s foolishness (Sam 25: 32–34). Patricia Hill adding to this write:

Anna, the prophetess, spoke of the child of Bethlehem to all them that dwelt in Jerusalem, that Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Susanna and many other women, abandoning their homes, followed the weary of our master ... and that to the women who laboured with Paul in the gospel many of the tenderest of his messages ... were addressed. More strangely is that almost the only acts of great self-sacrifice narrated by the evangelists were performed by women; that no man cast all his living into the temple treasury, but a woman and she a widow; only a woman anointed the saviour with precious ointment, while men disapproved this expression of grateful love; only a woman washed His feet with tears; women were the last at the cross and earliest at the sepulchre (1985:74).

The above is explicit that women were very active in various ministries. The customs, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours that discriminate against women seem to be enhanced in religion. For example, examining the Judeo-Christian heritage, the male supremacy was established in the Old Testament in a number of ways. First, God is believed to be a male. Secondly,

a man was created first and then a woman from his rib. Third, only male descendants are listed in the genealogies. Fourth, according to Jewish wisdom, women are incapable of learning (Barclay and Lees 1998:125,149).

In the New Testament, the tradition of male dominance continues. Jesus as a man was the Son of the Heavenly Father. The disciples chosen and commissioned by Jesus were men. The great Apostle Paul in the early church is perceived especially to be adamant in arguing for male supremacy over women. Josephus, a Jewish historian and a contemporary of Paul wrote, “the woman is inferior to the man in all ways” (Olson and Degrain 1997:257).

Belleville (2000:15) notes the same when he writes, “Thank God that I am not a woman, slave, or a pagan”. So, said second-century Rabbi Judah ben Ilai (b.Menah.y3b; 4. Ber.91; t Ber.7 (6).18). Yes, the contemporary religious thought reflects this heritage, whereby some conservative denominations limit or even forbid women from any important decision making, though in some women are allowed to vote and participate in worship as long as leadership participation is functional and not office oriented. The Bible mentions examples of women who faithfully did God’s work well such as Junia, Phoebe, Priscilla (Rom 16: 1–7), whom Paul affirms in their ministries and leadership roles.

The gender story begins in creation account found in Genesis 1. The man and woman were created in God’s image. According to Conner (2003:19) they were shareholders together; they were heirs of grace of life, joint rulers as king and queen over the creation of God on this earth. The creation account does not describe the subordination of any gender. Any idea of subordination that might be in the creation account is a post-fall development which is not God’s ideal for men and women. Some people argue that as man’s helper, woman is created to play a subordinate role in the world. But the Hebrew word used here for “helper” (*ezer*) does not imply a lower status. In fact, in the OT it is often used about God as Israel’s helper. For example, Ps 121:1–2 says, “My help comes from the Lord” (Black, 2009:8). Believers have grown up hearing creation myths separating the origin of man from woman. Creation account in Genesis 2 is ever preached to emphasise the creation of woman as second-class material. The same

account which says the man shall leave is not upheld; instead, the woman is instructed to leave her parents.

Stephanie Black (2009:3) reflecting on the fall of man observed that Eve's involvement in the fall does not limit women's role in the church. The Bible makes it clear that the Adamic sin which includes Eve's sin and all mankind plus all the curses that accompanied such are dealt with by Jesus death on the cross. The size of the cross is the same for all. There is no small cross for women and a big cross for men. The cross is same for all. Many evangelicals believe that part of God's curse on Adam and Eve includes the woman's subordination to her husband (Gen 3:16). Some do not and instead see this as a prediction of the ongoing struggle between men and women in the fallen world. If the woman's subordination is part of God's curse after the fall, then it is a bad thing, to be regretted by Christians, not a good thing to be reinforced by the church.

Feminist conceptions of domination must be continually refined in light of the ever-changing social, cultural, and historical circumstances that the concept aims to illuminate. At present, there is a need to refine our understanding of domination to make it more applicable to the concerns raised by recent discussions of globalization. With respect to empowerment, the challenge is for feminists to rethink this concept in ways that are not reliant on arguably essentialist conceptions of femininity, that is, conceptions that presuppose a universal essence of the feminine. More work also remains to be done to clarify the relationship between the individual and the structural, with respect to both domination and empowerment.

## 6. Conclusion

Using gender sensitive perspective, this study traces the involvement of women in Christian churches. The Bible affirms that there are no differences between men's and women's relationship to God; they receive identical rewards and punishments for their conduct. According to the Bible, men and women have the same spiritual human nature (Gen 1:26–27). Both are recipients of the "Divine Breath" since they are created with the same likeness of God (human and spiritual nature). They are dignified and are trustees of God's resources on earth (Gen 1:28–30).

Some mistakenly translate “headship” or responsibility for the family as superiority. The Bible makes it clear that the sole basis for superiority of any person over another is piety and righteousness not gender, colour, or nationality (Eph 5:22–23, Gal 3:26–28). The absence of women as prophets in prophetic history is due to the demands and physical suffering associated with the role of the prophets and not because of any spiritual inferiority. The Bible is affirmative. It gives stories of women who strongly and positively participated both in their social and religious fields during their times (Jdgs 4:9, 2 Kngs 22:14, Lk 2:36–37). Coming from a patriarchal society, their male counterparts took the fame of writing their stories and most likely highlighting what they wanted, leaving out the genuine experiential part of these women.

As Wiltshire puts it, women have always played a crucial role in the establishment of the Christian church though their contributions are often footnoted and forgotten. When we read philosophy and theology addressing the roles of pastor, apostle, disciple, missionary, etc., we subtly assume a masculine context unless women are specifically brought up. Failing to recognize the essential role of women in history of the church is to wrongly conclude that we should interpret our story through the broken lens of “he shall rule over her” (Gen 3:16) rather than humanity’s original commission for partnership (Gen 2:18). It is my hope that rediscovering and reflecting on these contributions of women in church history will help us correct the misconception that the church was built only on the backs of men (Wiltshire 2016)

The key issue is whether there is an underlying factor supporting dominance of men over women in religious institutions when all are supposed to be equal before God. Is this what God intended for women? Are the custodians of church traditions interpreting the scriptures correctly? Do men tend to express dominance as a biological phenomenon? What is the theological view on gender?

The significance of this paper is to underscore the need to redefine the meaning of headship. If we looked at headship as the model of Jesus, we would consider each as children of God, created in his Image and commissioned to take care of the earth. We would contribute to religious scholars’ literature, to gender studies and policy makers in addressing the

issue of gender roles premised on the observation that God invites all, both men and women to serve in His kingdom, without categorising which roles men are to play and which one's women should play.

The paper has pedagogical implications, given for the church to note. There is need to educate Church custodians, and her top leadership, if men and women are to serve well. Knowledge deficit or ignorance has no defence. If one thinks becoming enlightened is costly then let such try ignorance. Knowing gender rights and the truth in regard to what the Bible says in one way or the other is supporting the work of God. From the creation story, the core message is all are equal.

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