

Challenging gender norms in an African Pentecostal denomination



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Women's exclusion from leadership positions in African Pentecostal churches is a serious problem that affects the church and society at large. Gender inequality in religious spaces often mirrors societal power dynamics, which, if unaddressed, hinders national progress and the resolution of pressing social issues. This article reports on a study within a South African Pentecostal denomination, where women continue to be denied ordination and are systematically marginalised from senior leadership structures. Findings reveal how literalist interpretations of scripture, patriarchal expressions of African masculinity and historical denominational practices converge to marginalise women in African Pentecostal churches. These interpretations uphold hegemonic gender norms that restrict women's participation in spaces of ecclesial authority and decision-making. This article demonstrates how embedded theological paradigms and inherited church practices continue to reproduce male-dominated leadership models.

Contribution: This article contributes to African Pentecostal feminist theological discourse by exposing the intersection of patriarchal theology and African cultural traditions in shaping gender exclusion. It calls for a reimagining of theology that embraces inclusivity, contextual sensitivity and justice. By advancing conversations around women's leadership development, the study presents a vision for ecclesial transformation in which women's full participation is integral to the mission and vitality of the church.

Keywords: African Pentecostalism; gender exclusion; women in ministry; patriarchal theology; African masculinity; feminist theology; leadership.

Introduction

The exclusion of women from leadership in African Pentecostal churches, particularly those upholding conservative theological and patriarchal institutional structures, reflects entrenched hierarchies that marginalise women and hinder the church's growth. Despite global feminist efforts, including the United Nations (UNs) Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality (Özdemir 2025:5), many African Pentecostals continue to resist gender-inclusive reforms, especially within leadership structures shaped by traditional gender roles, theological interpretations and cultural norms. While Pentecostalism effectively contextualises Christianity within African cultural frameworks, it often reinforces patriarchal systems that exclude women.

Although feminist activism has contributed to global progress on gender justice, significant barriers to women's ecclesial participation remain. Continued feminist theological reflection, grounded in equality, dignity and justice, is urgently needed (Sen 2019:28; Yavorska et al. 2024:20). Women play a central role in church life – through evangelism, community engagement and financial support – but their contributions are rarely recognised in leadership. The legacy of missionary Christianity, which often excluded women from authority, continues to shape Pentecostal structures (Kgatlé 2019:4; Wood 2019:2).

Protestant denominations such as the Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian, Congregationalist and Dutch Reformed churches have ordained women for many decades now and have elevated them to senior leadership. Similarly, some global Pentecostal movements, including the Faith Mission, embrace gender-inclusive leadership. However, most African Pentecostal churches resist these reforms. Connell, cited in Van Klinken (2013:253), critiques religious ideologies for upholding male supremacy through conservative gender ideologies. This is evident in African Pentecostal denominations where leadership is often framed as inherently masculine and divinely sanctioned. As Oduyoye (2001) notes, theology and culture frequently reinforce each other to uphold female subordination.

Although African Pentecostal women are not entirely voiceless, especially in more liberative denominations like the Faith Mission, they are still generally confined to auxiliary ministries. Research on African Pentecostals locally documents the stark under-representation of women in key leadership offices despite their significant congregational participation and contributions (Kgatle 2019). In many African Pentecostal churches, they are permitted to lead only other women, while key leadership roles remain reserved for men. This highlights a dissonance between the majority of African Pentecostal churches and more inclusive global Protestant traditions. The intersection of doctrine, culture and gender norms presents a critical theological challenge.

Research methods and design

This study examines how African Pentecostalism, particularly within classical black Pentecostal traditions, addresses gender equity and women's empowerment while identifying theological, institutional and contextual barriers that perpetuate resistance to change. Marginalisation is understood as both formal and informal expressions of prejudice, including exclusion from recruitment, promotion and daily leadership interactions (Collins et al. 2015:209). Although Pentecostal denominations differ in doctrine and expression, they often share a theological heritage shaped by revivalist and missionary movements steeped in patriarchal norms (Gabaitse 2015). Despite their emphasis on empowerment through the Holy Spirit, a doctrine rooted in the belief that spiritual gifts are poured out on all believers regardless of gender (cf. Ac 2:1–4; J1 2:28), many African Pentecostal churches continue to rely on selective, literalist interpretations of scripture that reinforce male dominance and exclude women from leadership. African Pentecostalism is understood as Pentecostal movements that have emerged within African settings, often shaped by local worldviews, indigenous religious heritage and socio-political realities.

The study examines how a Pentecostal denomination negotiates shifting gender dynamics amid broader social transformation and rising feminist awareness (Lone & Zargar 2017). The aim of the study lies in its critical engagement with the contradictions between Pentecostal doctrinal affirmations of gender equality and the lived realities of women in church leadership. By using the Back to God (BTG) denomination as a case study, it shows how African Pentecostal traditions reflect and reinforce wider patterns of gender marginalisation, challenging the church to re-examine its theology and practice in light of gender justice and ecclesial integrity. The research is informed by the work of Mercy Oduyoye, a foundational voice in African Women's Theology, who critiques patriarchal readings of scripture and insists on the inclusion of women's voices in theological discourse. Drawing on Joan Scott, Oduyoye highlights that 'gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power' (Boham 2023:86). Through the founding of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in 1989, she foregrounded theological education

and gender justice as essential for dismantling exclusionary church systems (Boham 2023:85–86).

In South Africa, the classical Pentecostal landscape includes major denominations such as the Full Gospel Church of God, the Apostolic Faith Mission and the Assemblies of God denomination (Jacobs 2021:5). This study is located in the latter denomination, the Assemblies of God (AOGSA). Within this denomination, there are further divisions, mostly based on race. As noted by Resane (2018:42), the AOGSA comprises the Assemblies of God Association (AOGA), serving primarily Coloured and Indian communities; the Assemblies of God Group (AOGG), linked historically to white churches under John Bond; and the Assemblies of God Movement (AOGM), also known as BTG, founded by Nicholas Bhengu through his revivalist 'Back to God Crusade' in the 1950s, which was formalised as a full denomination in 1990. These remain the three divisions of this church, and this study was conducted among the African division known as Back to God (AOG-BTG or BTG). This division of the church has approximately two million members and more than 8000 local churches nationally. The BTG group can be identified as an African Pentecostal denomination because it is rooted in the experiences, contexts and cultural expressions of black communities in Africa. This contextually rootedness situates BTG within the broader framework of African Pentecostalism.

The interpretive research paradigm was used for this study, with a qualitative, phenomenological approach. The practical theology methodology of Osmer's (2008:4) descriptive and interpretive tasks informed the study's framework. In an earlier study, female members were interviewed on their experience of the church to reveal that they felt marginalised through a lack of leadership opportunities, through negative perceptions from male counterparts, imposed submission, emotional hurt, intimidation and being silenced (Jacobs 2021); hence they were not interviewed in this study. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 24 senior male leaders in the BTG denomination. The sample selection criteria involved male leaders who held various national portfolios, with more than 15 years of church membership and over 10 years in leadership. Their familiarity with BTG's constitution, history and theological ethos made them well suited to provide insight (Flick 2022:165). Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns related to theological perspectives, institutional structures and leadership dynamics.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of South Africa, College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee on 02 November 2023 (NHREC Registration #: Rec-240816-052; CREC Reference #: 32232977_CREC_CHS_2023).

Results

This study identifies three themes contributing to the marginalisation of women's leadership in an African

Pentecostal denomination: namely literalist interpretations of scripture, patriarchal expressions of African masculinity and historical denominational practices of exclusion. These findings will be highlighted in a summary fashion.

Literalist scriptural interpretations

The theological dimensions of gender marginalisation within some African Pentecostalism are deeply rooted in the interpretation of scripture. This study reveals that many African Pentecostal communities rely on literalist and culturally conditioned readings of the Bible, which reinforce rigid gender hierarchies and limit women's roles in church leadership. As Juma (2024:118) observes, scripture is 'a two-edged sword', capable of both liberation and oppression, depending on the hermeneutical lens applied. The current reliance on selective exegesis reflects what Dube (2000: 129) terms 'hermeneutical captivity', where the liberative message of scripture is bound by patriarchal cultural interpretations that deny the full humanity and leadership potential of women.

Several respondents articulated a hermeneutical approach that relies on a literal reading of scripture, especially regarding church leadership:

'Even though the Bible doesn't explicitly say women should not be ordained, we follow patterns. Kings, prophets, priests, they were all men. Christ chose 12 male disciples. Leadership texts always speak of "men of one wife" ... So, I would struggle to find a scripture that supports ordaining women.' (Participant 9, male, pastor)

This approach reflects a broader Pentecostal trend where literalism reinforces existing gender hierarchies (Resane 2021). It assumes that biblical models must be repeated uncritically, without attending to cultural or theological nuance. Respondents often equated scriptural authority with male leadership, framing women's exclusion not as a contemporary church decision, but as a divine mandate. However, this reading neglects the broader biblical witness that affirms women's spiritual agency (cf. Rm 16; Gl 3:28).

The persistence of selective literalism is evident in the way texts like 1 Timothy 2:12 – 'I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man' are applied rigidly, while more inclusive texts are ignored. As several scholars have noted, including Payne (2009) and Keener (2014), 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 may not reflect Paul's teaching but rather a quotation or response to a Corinthian position that he refutes. This reading helps reconcile the apparent contradiction with 1 Corinthians 11:5, where women are permitted to pray and prophesy in public worship.

Within African Pentecostalism, the Bible is not seen as a distant ancient text but as a living source of authority. This view should empower adaptive theological reflection. Yet, in practice, the emphasis on doctrinal preservation often overrides the need for contextual re-evaluation:

'Pentecostalism is governed by the Bible; it must not go beyond the principles of the Bible. It does not matter if you are highly spiritual; keep the principles of the Bible.' (Participant 1, male, pastor)

'It is a question of biblical doctrine. Does the Bible evolve? No, it is the same yesterday, today, and forever. His Word stands the same; it is not subject to evolving according to different generations.' (Participant 9, male, pastor)

While the above respondent affirms the immutability of scripture, asserting that 'the Bible does not evolve', this view requires a more nuanced hermeneutical approach. Fee and Stuart (2014:34) remind us that although scripture is God's Word, it was communicated through specific human authors in particular historical contexts. Therefore, interpreting scripture faithfully involves understanding both its divine message and its contextual framework. Hermeneutics does not aim to change the Bible but to discern its meaning across generations (Klein, Blomberg & Hubbard 2017:154). Such quotations (above) reflect an absolutist reading of scripture that resists reinterpretation, even when contextual realities demand it. As Robbins (2007:20) reminds us, Christianity is inherently dynamic and called to engage thoughtfully with changing societal needs. The refusal to re-examine theological assumptions risks entrenching inequality under the guise of orthodoxy.

Moreover, by aligning biblical texts with traditional African cultural norms of male headship (Okafor et al. 2022), many churches reinforce gender exclusion as though it were divinely sanctioned. As a result, women are frequently confined to non-decision-making roles, such as choir leaders or ushers, without access to ordination or preaching. This theological posture not only curtails women's agency but also contradicts the Pentecostal message of Spirit-empowered inclusion and transformation.

Patriarchal expressions of African masculinity

Understanding masculinity within African Pentecostalism is essential for interrogating the structural and theological forces that shape gender exclusion. As Nyhagen (2021), drawing on Bridges and Pascoe, observes, Christian masculinities often blend spiritual authority, protective strength and biblical models of headship into a hybrid ideal, affirming traditional male roles while incorporating traits such as compassion and humility. Although such hybrid expressions appear progressive, they often leave the patriarchal foundations of church leadership unchallenged, preserving male dominance under the guise of moral responsibility.

Institutionally, women are largely excluded from positions of high ecclesial authority, with their leadership confined to gender-specific ministries considered auxiliary or supportive (Frimpong 2022:270; Ojong 2017:126). Respondents in this study echoed these cultural expectations, reinforcing the idea that some responsibilities:

"... must be handled by men," and that women's primary function is within the domestic sphere.' (Participant 9, male, pastor)

Masculinity, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) conceptualise, exists in multiple forms: hegemonic, complicit, marginalised, subordinate, inclusive, hybrid and protest, each structured concerning power and legitimacy. Hegemonic masculinity operates as the culturally dominant and socially rewarded ideal marked by heterosexuality, control and leadership (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:832). Even men who do not embody this ideal (complicit masculinity) benefit from it by participating in systems that uphold male power (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:839). In African Pentecostalism, this hegemonic ideal is reinforced through theology and institutional design, which closely align leadership, authority and divine favour with male identity (Carrigan et al. in Kaunda 2020:69).

This entrenchment of hegemonic masculinity within African Pentecostal contexts reflects broader patriarchal values. As Kaunda (2020:69) notes, Pentecostal notions of masculinity rarely interrogate gender injustice; instead, they sanctify it, reinforcing gender roles that sexualise, subjugate and exclude women. Religious rhetoric and moral instruction reinforce the idea that men should be the breadwinners and spiritual leaders, while women should take care of and be subservient. Leadership is thus not merely about calling or gifting but is deeply gendered, rooted in both theological interpretations and socio-cultural traditions.

These views not only reflect present attitudes but are the legacy of missionary-era church foundations shaped by Western patriarchal models (Masengwe & Dube 2021). Yet while men continue to dominate ecclesial leadership, it is worth questioning whether this model has truly served the mission of the church or the needs of society. In African contexts where gender-based violence remains widespread, the silence or ineffectiveness of male-led leadership structures calls for ethical scrutiny. When power is hoarded rather than shared and when women's voices are marginalised, the church risks failing both its prophetic witness and its pastoral responsibility.

As Resane (2021) highlights, biblical interpretations passed down through these traditions often exclude women from inheritance and leadership, legitimising male authority as divinely sanctioned. Theologically, the persistent portrayal of God as Father (Modise & Wood 2016:286), Christ as male saviour and church leadership as a male vocation further solidify gender hierarchy in both language and symbol (Van Klinken 2017). These theological constructs, though often claimed as scriptural, are embedded in cultural and historical biases that marginalise women and resist egalitarian alternatives. Consequently, the exclusion of women from meaningful leadership is not simply a cultural residue but a deeply theological issue.

Reverend Bhengu's historical vision for women's empowerment

This study examined Reverend Nicholas Bhengu's historical vision regarding women's empowerment within the BTG

movement. Three dominant sub-themes emerged: Bhengu's affirmation of women, the tension between his progressive vision and current church practices and the enduring influence of patriarchal ideologies. Although Reverend Bhengu actively involved women in evangelism and entrusted them with significant leadership responsibilities, these efforts were often informal and faced resistance within the broader church structure. Bhengu, for instance, referred to women leaders as 'workers' rather than pastors, in part because of socio-cultural pressures. Nonetheless, his actions reflected a deep trust in women's spiritual gifts:

'History tells us that pastor Bhengu had no qualms with the gender. He worked with women, he used them in revivals, and some started preaching while they were still schoolgirls. Yet many female workers came out of his hands; they were not called pastors, but the word worker was used. So, this means that, positionally, these girls were workers; they went to work full time, they did revivals, and some planted churches with the revivals that they ran. So, that shows that Baba Bhengu used everybody, as long as they were gifted.' (Participant 12, male, pastor)

'There are churches ... planted and led by unmarried women, but Reverend Bhengu ... called them female workers ... by interpretation, you will find out that these were pastors.' (Participant 4, male, pastor)

'He then chose four mothers, and he trained them on how to do the work, and the mothers started doing handwork, sewing, and selling, and money was collected – it was then deposited in our bank, and when the revival was to start, the money would be withdrawn.' (Participant 1, male, pastor)

Participants in this study recounted incidents that reflect the structural marginalisation of women within the African Pentecostal churches. In one case, hostility towards the women leader made it untenable for her to function effectively in her role, leading her to step down and withdraw from leadership entirely. Others recalled repeated mistreatment of women leaders. These accounts reflect how deeply institutionalised patriarchy continues to override both spiritual gifting and faithful service, erasing women's contributions and reinforcing male exclusivity in leadership. Even when women meet or exceed the standards expected of male leaders, their legitimacy is undermined by unwritten theological and cultural norms that restrict leadership to men.

After Bhengu's death, the AOG-BTG leadership structures reverted to male-dominated norms. Bhengu's theological vision was never formally codified within denominational structures, leaving it vulnerable to erosion. As a result, this denomination has struggled to uphold this legacy, a pattern consistent with broader trends in African Pentecostalism.

Though women continue to serve in supportive roles within women's ministries, formal ordination remains elusive. Patriarchal views persist, reinforcing gender hierarchies that contradict Bhengu's legacy. As one respondent observed:

'It is maleness ... that mentality that some things are not suitable for women. Reverend Bhengu saw it and tried to fix it, but we still do it.' (Participant 1, male, pastor)

A key barrier to realising Bhengu's vision is the entrenched denominational culture that has institutionalised male-dominated leadership and sidelined women. This culture shapes both theological interpretations and church governance. This cultural entanglement has led to a model of tokenistic inclusion rather than genuine empowerment. As feminist cultural hermeneutics suggest, transformative change requires theological reflection that centres African women's lived experiences and reclaims the inclusive impulses of early Pentecostalism (Adamo in Juma 2024:119). The continued exclusion of women from formal leadership structures not only reflects a failure of policy but reveals a theological inconsistency, undermining the Pentecostal claim to being led by the Spirit of God, who gifts all believers equally.

Implications for African Pentecostals

The findings in this study underscore that literalist scripture interpretations, the dominance of hegemonic masculinity and entrenched historical practices work together to marginalise women in many African Pentecostal churches. These findings are unique to the case study of the AOG BTG denomination, but it is commonly found in many African Pentecostal churches that generally do not ordain women.

The perceived differences between men and women largely stem from socialisation processes in which boys are raised to take charge and exercise authority, while girls are encouraged to be quiet, compliant and modest (Ampofo 2001:29). These deeply entrenched gender norms often go unquestioned within church contexts, and women themselves may internalise these prescribed roles. Consequently, pursuing gender transformation within Pentecostal communities remains a complex and challenging endeavour (Kanyoro 2002:80). A major point of this study is the extent to which African cultural values, particularly those rooted in patriarchal traditions, have fused with Pentecostal theology to legitimise gender inequality. Although Christian doctrine affirms the equal worth of all human beings, cultural biases have distorted the understanding of God's intentions for human relationships. Theological constructs that portray male leadership as divinely mandated have frequently been employed to silence women, deny them ordination and limit their participation in church governance and decision-making. A conscious theological and practical shift affirming women's dignity, calling and leadership potential is imperative if Pentecostal churches are to authentically embody a gospel of freedom and transformation (Jacobs 2021).

To break this cycle, a decolonial and feminist hermeneutic is essential, one that recovers the liberative threads of scripture and re-centres women's lived experiences. Dube (2000) calls for an interrogation of both the text and the reading

community, recognising how culture and power intersect in the act of interpretation. By engaging scripture critically and contextually, some African Pentecostalism can begin to reflect more faithfully the inclusive ethos of the gospel (Gabaitse 2015). Therefore, the persistent marginalisation of women in African Pentecostal churches is not primarily a biblical mandate but a hermeneutical choice (Gabaitse 2015), one that privileges male-dominated culture over the radical inclusivity of Christ. A transformative theological approach must move beyond mere citation of texts to an intentional re-reading that honours both the Spirit's gifting of all believers and the dignity of women as full participants in the life and leadership of the church.

Scriptural examples affirming women's leadership, such as Deborah, the prophetess and judge who exercised both spiritual and political authority over Israel (Jdg 4-5), provide compelling biblical evidence that God calls and empowers women to lead, even within patriarchal contexts. Yet such texts are often marginalised or neglected in theological discourse (Pierce 2018:153). Although African Pentecostalism is marked by vibrant spirituality, women who excel in ministry are frequently regarded as exceptions rather than representatives of divine calling. Meaningful change requires committed theological education that encourages critical and contextually informed engagement with scripture, including a re-examination of dominant masculinities and a renewed vision of the church as a community embodying justice, inclusion and the equal worth of all believers (Kaunda 2014:2).

Many African Pentecostal communities often struggle to balance spiritual vitality with formal theological training. Theological education has historically been resisted for being too academic and distant from Pentecostal experience (Quampah & Naidoo 2020:301). Yet Bible school instruction alone is insufficient; pastors now require deeper theological engagement and critical reflection, best supported by university-level training. As Quampah and Naidoo (2020:301) argue, this hesitancy underscores a deeper need for theological programmes that engage pressing concerns, particularly those related to women's empowerment.

Expanding access to quality theological education not only addresses internal church issues but also supports broader continental goals, aligning with Agenda 2063's call for inclusive and transformative education (Naidoo 2024:221). For theological education to remain relevant in contemporary Africa, it must move beyond narrow denominational boundaries and engage with the wider political, social and economic realities on the continent. Such education plays a crucial role in shaping leaders who are grounded in their communities and equipped to address real-world challenges (Naidoo 2010:347). Given women's longstanding contributions to church life and mission, theological education must affirm the full participation of all believers, regardless of gender, in both proclamation and public witness (Schroeder 2018).

Hegemonic masculinity in church leadership mirrors broader patterns of power preservation. Deconstructing hegemonic masculinity in African Pentecostalism requires more than superficial reform; it calls for a reimagining of leadership, theological anthropology and power through a gender justice lens. This begins with theological education that challenges patriarchal readings of scripture and promotes inclusive hermeneutics. Leaders must embody alternative masculinities rooted in humility and mutuality, while institutional structures must be reshaped to affirm women's equal spiritual authority. Only by addressing both theological and systemic barriers can churches create space for women's full participation in ministry.

However, it also presents an opportunity to reimagine the church as a space where men and women lead collaboratively, interpreting scripture through a justice-oriented lens and embracing liberation as a divine mandate (Magezi 2019:8). Churches that fail to affirm women's leadership risk undermining their prophetic witness and missional relevance. Thus, theological education and leadership development must prioritise gender inclusivity, fostering environments where the gifts of all believers are recognised, nurtured and deployed for the flourishing of both church and society (Juma 2024:115; Kanyoro 2002:85).

Both women and men bear responsibility in this transformative project. Women must continue to challenge patriarchal systems through theological education and advocacy, while men need to become intentional allies advancing gender justice. Shared leadership, grounded in principles of mutuality and inclusion, is not simply a corrective measure but is essential to the survival, credibility and missional vitality of African Pentecostalism today (Kaunda 2014:2).

And finally, recovering Bhengu's vision demands a re-theologising of leadership, gender and calling, rooted in both biblical faithfulness and contextual justice. Although his vision was notably inclusive and countercultural, the institutional inertia and patriarchal reinterpretation that followed have significantly hindered its realisation. The gap between the founder's intent and the church's current practice presents a serious challenge to the theological and ecclesial integrity of AOG-BTG, especially in the context of women's roles.

Conclusion

This study has examined the persistent marginalisation of women in African Pentecostal churches, focusing particularly on their exclusion from leadership roles. Despite some gradual progress, many denominations continue to grapple with entrenched challenges, including limited access to theological education, deeply rooted cultural gender norms and ecclesial practices that

reinforce male authority (Matshobane & Masango 2018; Wariboko 2017:6). These realities obscure the biblical principles of justice and equality and constrain the transformative potential of Pentecostal spirituality.

This article advocates for a critical and contextual reading of the Scriptures frequently invoked to justify women's marginalisation. It calls for a reimagining of Pentecostal theology, one that is intellectually rigorous, contextually grounded and committed to fostering an inclusive ecclesial practice that empowers women and challenges enduring gender disparities. By doing so, the study contributes meaningfully to African feminist theological discourse, illuminating the paradox within Pentecostalism: a Spirit-led tradition that proclaims liberation, yet it often perpetuates systems of exclusion.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

Phumeza C.N. Jacobs conducted the research and wrote the original draft. Marilyn Naidoo supervised the study and reviewed and edited the article.

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Data availability

The authors declare that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.

Disclaimer

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