


Governance and democracy in the church: The experiences of women in the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe

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The Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (AFMZ) is a Pentecostal church that has grown numerically, and there are more women than men. Though there is a preponderance of female members, men are dominantly the leaders in the AFMZ. Since 1996, the AFMZ has opened the door for pastoral training for women. Of the few female pastors, none has held top-ranking leadership roles. This situation is happening despite Zimbabwe being a signatory to declarations that uphold the inclusion of women in leadership. The Zimbabwean government has taken great strides towards achieving the goals of the declarations by giving women top leadership positions in some government departments, such as the Zimbabwe Electoral Committee. On the contrary, Pentecostal churches, as represented by the AFMZ, which have been hailed as liberal, inclusive and democratic, are not as they seem to be. This was a qualitative study, which used an African feminist missiology to thematically analyse the findings. Previous research records the theological and cultural factors that lead to women being excluded from church governance. The argument of this study is that the AFMZ is also using political reasons, such as manipulating the nomination process, allowing few women to vote, and giving placement powers to overseers, to bar women from leadership. The study concluded that the church, instead of being progressive by embracing equality in leadership, continues to be retrogressive in this aspect.

Contribution: The study concluded that the church, instead of being progressive by embracing equality in leadership, continues to be retrogressive in this aspect.

Keywords: Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe; Pentecostalism; church; democracy; governance; leadership; women.

Introduction

Globally, Pentecostalism has been growing exponentially, and women in many churches are the majority (Stephenson 2024). Women being more in Pentecostal churches could be an indication that they are more committed to spirituality than men are (Mupangwa 2021). The Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe¹ (AFMZ) is one of the Pentecostal churches which has a male-dominated leadership (Kwaramba 2019). The few women who have leadership positions do not sit on decision-making boards, and yet leadership is about decision-making. In addition, women in this church have not held any top-ranking leadership positions, such as being an overseer or the president of the church. This situation is happening in a country that has a constitution and is a signatory of declarations such as the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), which uphold the inclusion of women in leadership (Dziva 2018). The Zimbabwean government has taken strides towards achieving the goals of these declarations by giving women top positions in some government departments, such as the Zimbabwe Electoral Committee (Dziva 2018). Pentecostalism is also hailed by many scholars like Boadi (2005), Mwaura (2008), and Asamoah-Gyadu (2005) as giving space to women, who are the majority. However, this claim has been highly contested by key Pentecostal scholars such as Wariboko (2018), who have argued that Pentecostalism is a unitary system of command: authoritative and authoritarian. More so, many studies in Pentecostalism and women have also shown that women rise to the position of authority now only through replacement and/or succession when their husbands, who were the founders of the churches, die (Mapuranga 2013). Therefore, in key leadership positions, the idea of liberating women in

¹The author is a former member of this church. To manage reflexivity, debriefing to other academic colleagues who critically offered alternative perspectives and challenging questions, was done. More so, member checking in which participants gave feedback on how well their responses were presented was done. This also helped in validating the findings.

Pentecostal churches is also a contested one. According to Mupangwa (2021), even though there are more women than men in the AFMZ, they do not make decisions. Despite Pentecostalism being hailed as democratic and liberating to women and Zimbabwe having signed policies that advocate for gender equality in governance, why is it that women in the AFMZ continue to be marginalised in leadership? This question was answered by conducting interviews and focus group discussions. The findings, which were thematically analysed by using an African feminist missiology, showed that the church is no longer using spiritual and cultural reasons to exclude women in leadership. It has fashioned other ways that are political to push women from leadership.

The history of the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe

The AFMZ is arguably the biggest Pentecostal church in Zimbabwe (Sande & Maforo 2021). AFMZ has celebrated more than 100 anniversaries in the country. It was established by Zimbabwean migrant workers from South Africa, who had been exposed to the preaching of John G. Lake and had started the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa (Sande & Maforo 2021). The AFM South Africa sent Paul Kruger to lead and oversee the growth and registration of the church in Zimbabwe, who eventually handed it over to the male Zimbabwean leadership (Madziyire & Risinamhodzi 2015). According to Kwaramba (2019), since its establishment, the church began to ordain women only in 1996. The presidents and the respective years in which they took over are: Kupara, 1983; Jefries Mvenge, 1987; Steven Mutemererwa, 1996; Enos Manyika, 2000; and Asapher Madziyire, 2003 (Madziyire & Risinamhodzi 2015; Mupangwa 2021). The current president is Reverend AD Madawo, who took over from Madziyire. In 2018, according to the church's national records, in the AFMZ, the total number of women who were pastors was '26 out of a total of 742 pastors throughout Zimbabwe' (Mupangwa 2021). Among those 26 women, none of them was or had been an overseer or president of the church.

Zimbabwean law and women in leadership

Zimbabwe replaced the Lancaster House constitution with the 2013 constitution, which addresses the needs of women and issues of gender equality in a democratic way (Zanhi 2013). The adoption of Zimbabwe's 2013 Constitution places an obligation on the state to promote and support women's inclusion in leadership positions (Dziva 2018:27). Moreover, the Zimbabwean government signed international and regional protocols on gender and development such as the United Nations CEDAW, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), and the Southern African Development Community Protocol on Gender and Development (SADC Gender Protocol) (Dziva 2018). All these protocols call for gender equality in leadership. Notwithstanding such efforts by the Zimbabwean

government, the AFMZ is still orchestrating ways to exclude women from leadership.

Pentecostalism and gender perspectives

Pentecostal churches are growing and spreading in Africa (Gifford 2024). Scholars have conflicting views about Pentecostalism. Ogbu Kalu (2008) and Mwaura (2008) are of the view that Pentecostal churches are liberative and democratic and thus allow women to lead. On the other hand, Gabaitse (2012:15) warns that while Pentecostal churches appear to grant women some freedom, this should not be overly celebrated, particularly in contexts in which literal interpretations of scripture persist. Kaunda (2024) draws attention to the Pentecostal paradox in which women are allowed to participate in specific religious functions, such as leading praise and worship, while broader leadership remains restricted.

Several explanations have been advanced to account for the marginalisation of women in Pentecostal leadership. According to Musvota (2021), religious factors, such as the Bible stating that women should submit to men and cultural factors such as patriarchy, which uphold the notion of men being leaders, are the greatest culprits in making the inclusion of women in decision-making difficult. This article will bring to the fore the political reasons that the AFMZ is using to marginalise women from decision-making.

The governance ideology of African feminist missiology

African feminist missiology constitutes a call for justice, inclusion and equality that African women theologians argue is their responsibility to advocate for within the mission and life of the church and society. In African feminist missiology, the conviction is that women are capable leaders and, therefore, can sit in any governance position (Oduyoye 2001). Women's capacity is affirmed by the theological conviction that they are created in the image of God (Amoah 1995:2). For this reason, African feminist theologians critique patriarchy and the way it creates hierarchy and domination of the vulnerable in society (Mupangwa 2026). Their argument is that the female folk have been considered secondary citizens in religious institutions. For African feminist missiology, from the very beginning, God wanted men and women to reign as equals (Sprong 2011). Resultantly, African feminist theologians call for transformative governance that is not exclusionary to women (Njoroge 2009:5).

Political reasons for the marginalisation of women in the Apostolic Faith Mission

Women in the general assembly are not allowed to vote

The few female pastors are the only women who are allowed to vote when the church is electing leaders (Mupangwa 2021).

This situation confirms what Rakoczy (2023) observes that 'The ordination of women in specific churches does not end women's oppression since they are confronted with a parallel male hierarchy which holds the real power'. Rakoczy's argument suggests that becoming a pastor for women does not automatically mean that they are free from domination in the church. This state is because patriarchy still exists in the church, which places all power in the hands of men. This insight is significant because it explains why all the assembly boards in AFMZ, as Mupangwa (2021) observes, are constituted by men even though the pastor is a woman. As she will be outnumbered by men, her voice is usually drowned out and pushed to the periphery during meetings. Biri (2023) states that 'patriarchal structures have stifled the leadership of women'. The men in the AFMZ are going to this extent because the 'ideology of patriarchy seeks to reserve the concept of leadership to the male gender' and condemns women to 'perpetual followership' (Phiri & Chitando 2023). This attitude means that men will not give up easily on oppressing women, which serves as a warning to women so that they strategise for equality to exist in the church. Phiri and Chitando (2023) record 'Women have led, effectively, in the past, lead now and, we anticipate, in bigger numbers, in future' despite the fact that men are trying to exclude women in leadership. Their argument shows that men are aware that women can lead, even though they continue to marginalise them from leading. This knowledge should give hope to women in the AFMZ and to open their eyes to the fact that they are not being excluded because they are incapable. Within African feminist missiology, this statement aligns with the insistence that women are already agents of God's mission. It reinforces the theological claim that women's leadership is not a concession but an expression of divine calling and gifting.

Mupangwa (2021) observes how the AFMZ is still lagging in promoting the voting rights of women, considering that even governments allow women to vote. She argues that without voting rights, the chances of women rising to top leadership positions are not even conceivable. However, Mupangwa's opinion may be deficient because increased numbers may result in women just having nominal positions while men continue to make decisions. Therefore, for transformation to take place, there is a need for working towards policy and mindset change for women to contribute to decision-making and have real power. More so, all women's participation in the voting process does not guarantee that female pastors will win the elections. Women themselves need to be empowered to know the importance of having a woman in leadership for the election of a woman to be guaranteed.

The fact that women are not voting in the AFMZ implies that there is a possibility that women may not be happy with the leadership that is there (Mupangwa 2021). Mupangwa (2021) accentuates that those in governance in the AFMZ are a representation of the wishes of men. Mupangwa's argument reveals how voting rights function as a gatekeeping mechanism that sustains male dominance in church

leadership. This insight is significant for understanding why women's leadership in AFMZ remains structurally constrained. Oduyoye (2001) demands fair treatment for all people in the church. Fair treatment is in allowing women to vote as well during church elections. This demand is significant because Oduyoye's idea is calling for accountability on the part of the church. If the church continues to run without being held accountable for the way it treats women, the subjugation and marginalisation of women will be perpetuated. Watson (2002) asserts that women are the church and that they should be able to call themselves as such through voting as well. This perception from Watson suggests that men and women are equal and that they need each other in everything. Involving everyone, even in the voting process, brings a sense of belonging to every member of the church.

Voting is one way in which a person expresses their view and perspective. What is happening in AFMZ affirms Biri's (2020) observation that Pentecostalism 'has a patriarchal hierarchy. Although it accepts the services of women, it does not listen to their voices and welcome their initiatives'. The practice of not allowing women to vote resists and contradicts the idea of an empowered and liberated woman and keeps women in a subordinate position, making equality and equity an unachievable goal. However, this restriction does not mean that women within the constraints can still not exercise agency.

Leadership in Pentecostal churches has financial benefits, and this may explain why men exclude women (Kwaramba 2019). Naicker (2025) views this as a form of economic oppression, which is because of male hegemony. Financial freedom is not meant for men only. This exclusion may be a sign of greediness on the part of men. Greediness can lead to corruption, which Mupangwa (2021) observes that pastors in AFMZ pay overseers for them not to be posted to rural assemblies. Leadership is a spiritual responsibility as well, as it is one way of serving God. Hence, women should access it just like any other activity that Pentecostals consider spiritual.

Manipulating the nomination process

The few women who have access to contesting for top leadership are also facing challenges and marginalisation through the nomination process. Mupangwa (2021) observes that the national executive leadership of the AFMZ deliberately excludes the names of women for nominations. As some of the female pastors are now eligible to contest for top leadership positions, they should be nominated for the positions.

The AFMZ is pushing spiritual women to the periphery of leadership to their own detriment. Reporting on how Malawi was transformed through women's leadership, Madimbo (2016) states that spirituality gives resilience, hope and endurance to Christian women. Madimbo's observation suggests that the ability to lead is divine and not human. If the power to lead is divine, then women should not be excluded from leadership. This is a significant observation

because patriarchy considers men natural leaders and hence does not need divine enablement. The understanding that leadership capability is divine calls for total dependence on God. AFMZ eventually split in 2018 because of leadership wrangles, which may be evidence that the male-dominated leadership is depending on its own strength to lead the church (Sande & Maforo 2021).

The call to champion the leadership of women is coming when Zimbabwe is facing challenges that require transformative leadership, which the women in the AFMZ can provide, considering their spirituality. For sustainable development to take place, the inclusion of women in leadership must be taken seriously. According to the UNESCAP (2019:3), 'Women's transformative leadership moves beyond business as usual to help realise the potential of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to bring about systemic change'. From the observation of the United Nations, one can deduce that it has been proven that the leadership of women produces positive results that are perpetual and bring development. In contrast, Phiri and Chitando (2023) aver that 'Influenced by patriarchy and aggressive masculinities, many male leaders have failed to guide their nations, organisations, and communities to prosperity'. More so, Phiri and Chitando (2023) are of the opinion that 'Male leaders at different levels have not succeeded in taking Africa forward'. They went further to state that men 'concentrated on accumulating wealth at the expense of advancing their nations. Instead of promoting "power with", they have prioritised "power over".' The observations made by Phiri and Chitando suggest that the leadership of men has not produced much positive change, mainly because they are self-centred. Instead of serving people, they concentrate on self-aggrandisement. Such an observation is critical because it brings to the fore the argument of African feminist missiology that men need to collaborate with women so that there will be a balance and the advancement of nations. Hence, Mupangwa and Chirongoma (2020) aver that there is a 'need for women to be included in leadership so that' they complement where men are failing. That is why the African women's theology advocates for 'relationships that embrace reciprocity, mutuality, partnership and denounce hierarchies that promote power relations between men and women' (Maseno 2021). This is an acknowledgement that men and women need each other. Together, they can achieve more.

Gender dynamics within an institution are influenced by many factors. According to Mupangwa (2021), 'an organisation's electoral system' influences how men and women are treated and the fairness of the election process. The electoral system can lead to factionalism, leading to women being pushed to the periphery. While women are put at the forefront in leading praise and worship, the church is also stifling and taking away the democracy women should also enjoy by participating in the nomination process and by being nominated. The ambivalence that Kaunda (2024) observed becomes really evident. One concurs with

Soothill (2010) that to counteract the Pentecostal paradox, Pentecostal churches should try to make spiritual empowerment match what is expected in the real world to avoid idealising the spiritual world.

According to Chitando, Chirongoma and Manyonganise (eds. 2023), in the creation story in Genesis 1, verses 26–28, God expected all human beings to dominate together. This story means that God's intention was not for anyone to oppress another person but to treat them as an equal and complement each other. This is significant because when women are included, it does not mean that they are coming in to dominate men, but they are coming to complement them. The fact that they are different genders means that they will serve different purposes in the growth of the church. This context is where complementing each other becomes critical. It should be appreciated that although human beings are created in the likeness of God, it does not nullify the differences which are there between men and women, both emotionally and physically. However, the differences do not mean that one gender is less important or less human than the other. African missiology then argues that gender inequalities should never be tolerated because every gender has something significant to contribute, which the other gender may not be able to. Instead of continuing as mere recipients of leadership, Pentecostals must push women into the limelight of church leadership for their worth to be recognised and utilised fully (Mupangwa 2026).

Overseer authority on the placement of pastors

In the AFMZ, the overseers are the ones who recruit pastors to manage and lead assemblies. Those who are conservative do not recruit female pastors in their provinces. Those who accept female pastors expect them to show gratitude by not contesting against them during elections, even if they qualify. Mupangwa (2021) records that the provincial leaders require the female pastors to submit to them in exchange for the favour of being recruited as a pastor in their province. When recruited, she must continue to submit by not contesting against the overseer during elections. If a female pastor contests against the overseer, it would be considered rebellion. She can consider applying for the position only if he is no longer an overseer. If a female pastor submits an intention to run for the provincial leader position, she is punished for doing so (Mupangwa 2021). The overseer makes an example of that pastor to all the other female pastors by removing her, for example, from an urban assembly and stationing her in the rural areas. The intention is to instil fear.

The overseers, by threatening the female pastors, are silencing the voices of female pastors. African feminist missiology emphasises the fact that women are the church too. This view means that women are not outsiders. They belong to the church and have every right to all the benefits of being the church. If women are not going to rise up to the occasion, they will continue to be treated as outsiders. According to Phiri and Chitando (2023), the church, as represented by the AFMZ, has embodied and expressed oppressive forms of power and

leadership that have been exercised by many male leaders on the continent. African women theologians are calling for a new form of leadership that 'recognises the rights and dignity of all', hence placing 'emphasis on leadership as facilitation' and collective responsibility (Phiri & Chitando 2023). This call highlights the fact that leadership is about serving and doing it with others, in this case, doing it with women as well.

Women have the equal right to contest because they were created in the image of God, just like men, and are the church too (Amoah 1995). The government of Zimbabwe has taken very positive steps in amending the constitution and becoming a signatory of both regional and international protocols to cater for gender equality. It has realised that being women does not mean that they have fewer rights than men. Hence, it is encouraging and not blocking the inclusion of women even in parliament. The church, which is supposed to be a beacon of light, is falling short and is lagging in this aspect. The norm in the Bible was that politics was influenced and shaped by religion in a great way. The current situation in AFMZ is reversing the expected order. Instead of learning from the church, the government and political arena are teaching the church on the importance of including women in leadership. This situation can be reversed if the church acknowledges the full humanity of women.

The battle to defy subordination is pertinent for Pentecostal women today. If they are not going to take up the responsibility to emancipate themselves, the struggle of oppression and exclusion in leadership will not end (Kgatle 2019). This view resonates well with African feminist missiology, which encourages women to participate in the process of their liberation. This approach means that women should not expect men to liberate them because oppression does not negatively affect the perpetrator. However, this expectation does not mean that men cannot also assist in making the inclusion of women possible. Oduyoye (2001) calls for men and women to work together for the betterment of both church and society. This call is significant because women should know that they need men in life. Nevertheless, this necessity does not mean that if there are no men who commit to partner with them, they should not fight exclusion.

Conclusion

The church, for a long time, has been using cultural and theological reasons to exclude women from leadership. This study is important in that it has brought in a different reason that Pentecostal churches, as reflected by what AFMZ are using to marginalise and push women to the periphery when it comes to leadership. It was observed that AFMZ, besides theological and cultural reasons, is now using political reasons too to exclude women from leadership. Although women are the majority in this church, their contribution to leadership is still being undermined, which could be the reason why the leadership is fashioning political strategies to exclude women from leadership. The AFMZ is doing this despite the efforts by the government to democratise leadership in both the private and public sectors of the

country. The church can only be a healthy environment when both genders are being included in all activities in the church, including decision-making and leadership.

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The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

CRedit authorship contribution

Terence Mupangwa: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available due to reasons of sensitivity and are available from the corresponding author, Terence Mupangwa, upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research.

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