

Gender Politics and Social Change: The Status of Women Leaders in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana

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Abstract

Women leaders in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG) encounter some major challenges based on religious, socio-cultural and political considerations despite the social change in the society. The study examines the theory of feminism as a theoretical frame using historical analysis. The existing structures within both the church and society are patriarchal and the structures turn to focus more on men than on women in the various sectors of life. Though women leaders in the church are performing their roles; there are some political, socio-cultural and religious perceptions that keep them from fully performing their leadership roles. Women leaders especially the ordained do not get access to occupy some of the top hierarchical positions like the clerk of the General Assembly or the Moderator of the General Assembly. In effect, women leaders in the PCG do not have access to the decision making positions because of some political, socio-cultural and religious perceptions. It is discovered that gender politics and patriarchy shape PCG hierarchical mobility. We should not forget the fact that industrial revolution and scientific advancement have pushed African women into new roles in the secular society. African women are now Presidents, Medical officers, Military women, Speakers of Parliament, Chief Justice, Judges, Lawyers, Parliamentarians, Ministers of Education, Lecturers and Professors of the Universities, Ordained Ministers among other professions.

Key words: Presbyterian; Women; Patriarchy; Gender politics; Social Change; Hierarchical

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, women have taken leadership positions in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG) such as presbyters, deaconesses, catechists, lay preachers and ministers. They embark on developmental projects in the church, and generally, participate fully in almost all aspects of the church's activities. Even though, women leaders in the church are performing their roles; there are some religious, socio-cultural and political perceptions that keep them from fully performing their duties. The ordained women for example, do not get access to occupy some of the top hierarchical positions in the PCG. It is discovered that gender politics and patriarchy shape PCG hierarchical mobility despite the social change in the society. Social change refers to an alteration in the social order of an institution/society like the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. Women in the PCG are playing contemporary roles other than performing only the traditional roles that society prescribed to them.

The Presbyterian Church of Ghana has a mission which all her members aspire to achieve. It is the overall perception of the church in which women are seen to be part. What the mission statement of the PCG seeks to do is that women, who are more than men, contribute directly or indirectly to the holistic ministry, growth and evangelistic activity which increase the membership of the church.

The PCG's Mission calls on the church to involve women in the social, economic, and political aspects of life. The PCG Mission statement has this fundamental goal: "to uphold the Centrality of the Word of God and

through the enablement of the Holy Spirit; pursue a holistic ministry so as to bring all of creation to glorify God". It continues with the following:

- *Mobilizing the entire Church for Prayer*
- *Improving Growth through Evangelism and Nurture*
- *Attaining Self-Sufficiency through Effective Resource Mobilization*

Mobilization

- *Promoting Socio-Economic Development through Advocacy and Effective Delivery of Social Services.*

The mainstay of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana in terms of numbers and contributions to its growth and achieving the mission statement is women. D. A. Koranteng claims that whenever men and women have been allowed religious freedom to practice on equal basis the latter have been found to be more religious than the former and numerically much more as worshippers (Koranteng, 1993). Even though the PCG preaches an all-inclusive Gospel she finds it difficult to link the same with women's leadership roles and there seem to be gender politics which socially affect the status of women in leadership.

Women leaders in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG) encounter some major religious, political and social challenges. Women had to struggle before being ordained as ministers. There were several debates on whether women should be ordained in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG) or not. However, the church eventually ordained women into the clergy and assigned to them roles as district ministers, administrators, presbytery clerks, presbytery chairpersons, chaplains and they have been congregational leaders. In performing their various roles as leaders due to the social change in the society, women are entangled in gender politics, which are based on religious, socio-cultural and political considerations. This research investigates the gender politics and social change in the PCG and the factors that prevent women leaders from occupying the topmost decision making positions such as the Moderator and the Clerk of the General Assembly in the PCG.

Women leaders are effectively performing their roles but some of the negative perceptions that were used earlier to keep them from the leadership positions in the church still persist. In some cases the women leaders are prevented from fully performing their roles. This is because some members (especially older men) in the PCG continue to have cultural perceptions on the roles of women as assigned mainly to the domestic domain. Some members also find it difficult to work with the women leaders as congregational leaders because they are women.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This study examines the theory of feminism as a theoretical frame using historical analysis. The existing

structures within both the church and society are patriarchal and the structures turn to focus more on men than on women in the various sectors of life.

Oduyoye (1986, p.121) argues that feminism "has become the shorthand for the proclamation that women's experience should become an integral part of what goes into the definition of being human". She further explains that feminism is not the word for the female but as a part of the whole movement geared toward liberating the human community from entrenched attitudes and structures that can only operate if dichotomies and hierarchies are maintained. By this she argues that both men and women should be given equal opportunity to work together as partners in order to liberate the human community from entrenched attitudinal structures (Oduyoye, p.121).

Some scholars argue that within the African socio-cultural context patriarchal system is men centred thus, Labeodan argues that:

The patriarchal system is held in high esteem in most African Societies. As a result of this, women... are to be seen and not heard... there is so much suppression and oppression of women by men who are supported by the cultures and religions. They used certain facts about the physiology of man and woman as the basis for constituting a set of identities that work to empower men and disempower women (Kumbi, 2007, p.113).

She explains that the roles assigned to women are very much related to the cultural, gender and historical traditions that try to place women in the domestic domain that they are supposed to be home makers and nurturers of the family including husband and children. E. Martey for example, interprets this, the fact that women's roles are basically restricted to the home as a type of injustice and restriction against women in religion and society (Martey, 1998, p.38). This socio-cultural role assigned to women within the African traditional communities is reflected on how the PCG assign roles to women. This reaffirms how the socio-cultural perception on women forms part of the debate on the ordination of women to be leaders in the PCG.

Grace Adeoti, like Labeodan, also holds a similar view that

In many societies be it Africa or elsewhere, a woman is seen as the burden bearer with no rights whatsoever to equality with man. She is even seen as an irrational being not capable of reasoning; therefore, she is to be seen and not to be head... The ancient world was predominantly a man's world (Adeoti, 1998, p.107).

Industrial revolution and scientific advancement have pushed women into new roles and they contribute to a new view of the part that women could play in the work of the church and society. The church is not only to proclaim the gospel but it is to help people to interpret the gospel in the context of their life situations. The new roles that women play in the society affect church work particularly among women. Some women need to acquire certain skills which could enable them to do their work effectively.

2. WOMEN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN THE CHURCH

The first group of Basel missionaries to come to Ghana landed at Osu on 18th December, 1828 but readers do not hear about women's inclusion. This, by no means, implies that women were not included in the leadership roles in the church. Rather, they were assigned roles such as household chores that were insignificant to Christian ministry. This reflects the general attitude towards women and their roles in the PCGs.

B. Sackey, in her *New Directions in Gender and Religion*, examines the new dimension in gender relations in African independent churches as concerns women in leadership positions in the church. She dwells on how women have managed to make a breakthrough or what she termed a "reclaim" which is not new to the Ghanaian/African.

According to B. Sackey (2006, p.vii), women are not new when it comes to leadership positions in West Africa. Citing examples from Akan women in Ghana, and Igbo and Yoruba, women in Nigeria, Sackey recounted that women have, over the years, enjoyed a high status of authority in socio-political, economic, and particularly religious realms; (in the PCG, women have been presbyters, deaconesses, catechists, lay preachers, children's service teachers, etc).

According to Sackey, women particularly in African Independent Churches for example, have been involved in issues affecting the nation which have brought them into "the high echelons of decision-making bodies". Today, there is a social change in role performance. Some women members, she observed, are directly involved in political decision-making in their capacity as members of parliament, negating the common ideas that women are generally apolitical. In spite of all these achievements, the statuses of women leaders in the church have been challenged. B. Sackey observed that this is particularly so because of the perception in relation to the male-oriented mission churches. She thinks in the mission churches, even though women feature prominently, they have not been accorded the significant status they deserve (Sackey, p.vii). M. Oduyoye in her book, *Hearing and Knowing*, thinks women have done a lot for the church but the church seems unconcerned about their contribution (Oduoyoye, p.124). She discusses issues that relate to the gospel in the African context especially matters that border on feminism. Her view seeks to synthesize the situation of African women in the church within the religious, socio-cultural and political context.

3. STATUS OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN RELIGION

Women are prevented from occupying certain ecclesiastical positions because of their sex. In her book

Beads and Strands, Oduyoye reflects on the position of the African woman and Christianity. According to her, "the position of women in Africa today within the wider society and religion is normally prescribed by what is deemed to be beneficial to the welfare of the whole community of women and men" (Oduyoye, 2002, p.78). According to Oduyoye (2002, p.79), issues of equality cannot be adequately spoken of in terms of African culture. The culture, she said, is replete of gender equality and fairness. This is particularly so because, according to her, role differentiations in Africa are clear and are not meant to be valued hierarchically. She mentions that even though the African Culture from its very beginning, unlike its Christian counterpart has allowed women to be in charge of shrines and cultic centres, it is also observable that there are more women in the secondary roles of mediums and cultic dancers, than there are women who serve as high priestesses of shrines or as healers. What is even more noisome, she observes, is that there are more women who serve as clients of the divinities of the cults (Oduyoye, 2002, p.79). Such cultural or traditional notions of women's "religious responsibility" are canned into the church. Women, notwithstanding their equal or transcendent potentials and spiritual gifts are also made to play second to men. Women who rise up and challenge or take up the challenge are resisted not only by men but even by their own colleague women because of the dominant socio-cultural sexual differentiations.

Women's roles in the church have improved owing to the social change in the society. Now PCG women leaders especially women ministers are playing roles such as chaplaincy, congregational leadership, administration of lay centres and management of schools. Other roles are women ministers as presbytery chairperson and clerks and finally women ministers as missionaries. In these areas, we see the ordained women ministers actively involved in activities such as proclamation and preaching of the gospel, healing ministry, youth ministry, evangelization, organization of seminars and workshops that equip members of the church especially women for acquiring skills that are needed for economic, social, spiritual and political activities. Some of these women have served the PCG for over forty years and they have been involved in a wide range of programmes and activities of the church both in Ghana and abroad.

4. GENDER POLITICS AND SOCIAL CHANGE: THE STATUS OF WOMEN LEADERS

One of the major problems of the PCG women leaders is getting access to decision making positions such as the Moderator and the Clerk of General Assembly as well as Presbytery Chairpersons and Clerks. From the field work, it was discovered that women so far have not occupied

some of these positions since 1979 that they took up leadership roles in the PCG. (Appendix A) It is realized that in the PCG it takes fifteen years to qualify to contest for such positions as an ordained minister. From the PCG statistics book presented to the 12th General Assembly in 2012 for example, there are about 666 ordained male ministers and about 75 ordained women ministers. It is discovered that in the PCG only one ordained woman since 1979 has been a Presbytery Chairperson out of the 17 Presbyteries and only two ordained women have been Presbytery Clerks while the third woman only acted for 25 months and lost to a male opponent when there was an election. The PCG for example has 245 Districts and only four ordained women ministers as at 2010 had been District Ministers. All things being equal, when it comes to voting, with the cultural mindset and the gender politics in the PCG the male contestants will win. Among the Asante's of Ghana in West Africa for example, when the seat of a king becomes vacant and there are elderly women, a young man will be nominated instead.

In the PCG, the women in leadership are in the minority at all levels. Over the years PCG has been ordaining men until 1979 when women were ordained. The ordained women ministers aspire to occupy leadership positions in the PCG but they have not been successful in winning elections. Table 1 shows some of the leadership positions women aspire to occupy in the PCG.

Table 1
Leadership Positions Women Ministers Aspire to Occupy

Position	Number	Percentage
1. Moderator of the General Assembly	27	23.9
2. Clerk of the General Assembly	5	4.4
3. Presbytery Clerk	26	23.0
4. Presbytery Chairperson	33	29.2
5. District Minister	15	13.3
6. Others	7	6.2
Total	113	100.0

Source: Field data 2011.

Women leaders do not succeed in occupying such positions even when they apply for. One woman for example, was the first ordained woman to act as a Presbytery Clerk for 25 months from 2003 to 2005, at the Northern Presbytery when the position was vacant. In spite of her immense contribution, she contested for the substantive post and lost by only two votes to a male opponent. Such a development illustrates how gender politics and patriarchy shape PCG hierarchical mobility. Another woman, after serving as a Presbytery Chairperson from 2001-2006 contested for the Moderatorial position and lost to Rev. Dr. Frempong Manso in 2007.

One wonders why women are not contesting in the various presbyteries. Women leaders do not succeed when they apply for the leadership positions. Besides

the fact that they are in the minority and thus do not have a strong voting power, some factors ranging from religious, socio-cultural and political militate against women holding leadership positions. Religious traditions, according to Ayuba A. Ndute (1998, pp.99-104), continue to advance the discussion on the subjugation of women in contemporary society and the researcher sees this attitude in the PCG congregational members towards the female leaders. Ndute comments, like J. Kiamba (August, 2012) on the ideologies of feminist theologians with regard to patriarchy which has permeated into the Christian Church.¹ In the view of Parinder, Christian Gaba (1971), thinks that "psychic abilities of women are more pronounced in African religion than in Christianity".

When women are nominated for the decision making positions some men make noise. When a PCG woman minister for example, was contesting for the Moderatorial position, some men called (outside the PCG) the General Assembly Clerk and remarked "so you men of the PCG what will you do if the woman is voted for the Moderatorial position?" Thus, Kyei Anti Alice explained in an interview that even men of other denominations have the same perceptions as the PCG members (A. A. Kyei, June 10, 2008). And this confirms what S. Morgan states that an important dimension that confronts religion has, throughout history, been historical perpetuation of unjust, exclusion practices that have legitimized male superiority in the very social domain (Morgan, 2004, p.42). It is then clear that women have been unjustly discriminated against based on their sex (Morgan, 2004, p.42). Such discrimination has always (or rather mostly) been purported to be supported by scriptural texts which are used to legitimize this. Women, who tried to resist this institutionalized subordination as stated in the feminist theory, were in one form or the other shut up or counter resisted.

Clearly PCG women leaders are not given equal opportunities as their male counterparts in the PCG. There is gender politics despite the social change; Women ministers for example, often play supplementary roles, most of them remaining second ministers. The patriarchal system is held in high esteem in most African societies.

Data gathered from the field reveals that approximately 80% of the ordained male ministers led congregations than their female counterparts. (From the 2011 statistics presented at the 12th General Assembly in August 2012 ordained male ministers were approximately 657 whilst ordained women ministers were approximately 75.) Also the top-level administrative positions in the church

¹ Some Churches barred women from priesthood with the argument that it is impossible for women to represent God or Christ whose incarnation as a male is taken very seriously as proof that there is something more divine in the masculine than in the feminine forgetting that Christianity changed the dynamics because African women in African traditional religions were leaders.

hierarchy are currently held by men. Nevertheless, respondents comment that there is nothing in their constitution prohibiting a female from holding the highest post in the church, but they go on further to lament that if a woman should become the Moderator of the PCG it would indicate that “the church was in a weakened state, as was Israel when Deborah assumed leadership and restored order to the land” (Oyeronke, p.24). This ambiguous explanation suggests two possible interpretations, the first patronizing, and the second flattering. In the first case a woman ascends to the primacy only when the state of affairs is anomalous and deviant. In the second, only a woman could set such a situation right. In the Church of the Lord Aladura, for example, women were not allowed to interpret scripture with the reason that only Christ himself and his disciples did this and they were all men (Oyeronke, p.24).

This brings to mind B. Sackey’s observation that colonialism came to offset the equilibrium in the socio-cultural set up of some African societies. Patriarchal religions of the West came in the cloak of colonialism. Christianity had unwittingly initiated what was tantamount to the destruction of African spiritual and cultural values. Many ponder and ask “what good is colonised, unfertilized passive, silent smothered laity of men and women” (Bateye, 2008, p.115). Empowerment is multifaceted and it was discovered that the same religion that preached liberation could also be an agent and instrument of subordination especially by re-enacting inherited western Christian values of separation and inequality.

The Bible was used authoritatively by the western orthodox churches to silence women and prevent them from assuming administrative pastoral roles in the church hierarchy. There was therefore ambivalence in the stance of western Christian mission pertaining to women. On the one hand they claimed to liberate and empower women while on the other hand there was a rigid rejection of women from taking up leadership roles in the church and in some cases even the larger secular western society.

CONCLUSION

The status of women leaders in the PCG is woefully under represented and it seems evident that the strong wave of transformation that has evolved in the church will continue till things are normalized. In the aspiration for innovation or modernization recourse to the converse seems to have taken place and aspects of tradition have been retained through their very rejection. The women leaders discussed have demonstrated that the enterprising capabilities of the women leaders in the PCG extend beyond the

acknowledged physical boundaries of the PCG. They have penetrated profoundly into the spiritual domain and challenged the prejudices of the arguments against their leadership, testified that there lies an inherent dynamism in women which, when given the appropriate recognition, would rekindle and be employed for the benefit of mankind in other dimensions. The accomplishments of the PCG women leaders should be lauded. They should be honoured as having preserved a valuable women heritage. This study has so far demonstrated that the gender politics that face women leaders centre on religion, socio-cultural and members have forgotten about the social change and contemporary roles of women.

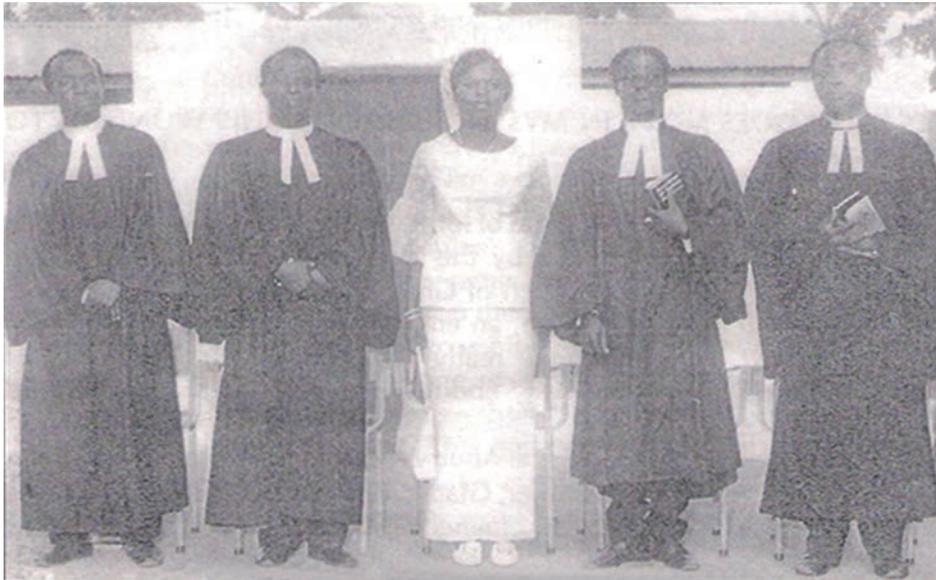
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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Ordination in 1979 with Male Colleagues



The woman minister is not in a gown. The attire for her ordination as the first ordained woman in the PCG is Kaba and Sleet. One wonders why she was not given the ordination gown or does it mean that the decision to ordain her came in too late for the church to sew a gown for her? To me this shows gender discrimination in the church. However On this occasion, she preached

the sermon on behalf of those ordained. Her exhortation was based on “who is on the Lord’s side?” At the end of it she raised both arms high up and affirmed, “we are on the Lord’s side.” This was a historic event. Source: Programme of Burial and Thanksging Service for the Late Rev. Gladys Emelia MakuNyako, May 2008.