



Body Shaming in Prophet Owuor's Misogynistic Ministry

By Damaris Parsitau



While churches in the wealthy democracies are emptying or folding up, those in the global South - Africa, Latin America and the Oceania - are full to capacity. Similarly, Pentecostal and charismatic churches have mushroomed all over the African continent. Alongside the explosion of these spirit-filled churches, the so-called "Men of God" have become doubly influential, not just in the political sphere, but also in the socio-economic sphere, including in women's and gender issues. Few of these churches are engaged in the gospel of social responsibility, such as building hospitals and schools (which the state has neglected); rather, the majority of these churches preach a life of spiritual abundance and prosperity.

These powerful men - and women - of God live a life of abundance and opulence, even as their many followers wallow in abject poverty. Many of these church leaders, who come with many fancy titles, such as overseers pastors, prophets, and more recently, "God's generals", and "the oracles of God", are benignly referred to as "Men of God". They are immensely powerful politically and have perfected the art of preaching about prosperity, otherwise known as the health and wealth gospel. Their preaching and teachings have wide reach that is not limited only to Sunday mornings and mid-week services; their sermons are often broadcast live on national TV and radio to hundreds of thousands of people.

To supplement the TV and radio broadcasts, they also package audio tapes and books - many of them ghost-written - alongside other imported spiritual books, church magazines, websites and social media pages that equally reach a wide range of audiences beyond their congregations. The bulk of their sermons are uploaded on YouTube.

Pentecostal churches on the African continent are male-dominated institutions, especially in leadership, even though thousands of women and youth fill their pews or tents every Sunday.

Self-proclaimed Prophet David Ujji Owuor frequently holds humungous crusades that attract thousands of people. His sermons and healing crusades are often streamed live on TV and uploaded on YouTube. In his thousands of churches (also called “altars” to distinguish them from ordinary churches), not much preaching takes place. Owuor, like many “Men of God”, talks about a patriarchal and masculine God.

My research on the gendered discourses of Pentecostal and evangelical Christianity shows how these Men of God promote a particular brand of “Masculinity Christianity” couched in African and Christian patriarchal forms of dominance. Here, I adopt Akosua Adomako Ampofo’s understandings of masculinity, which refers to a cluster of norms, values and behaviour patterns expressing explicit expectations of how men should act and represent themselves to others.

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And while some types of masculine brands espoused by the Men of God encourage a sort of “soft masculinity” (behavior that can be beneficial to women, such as eschewing violence, advocating monogamy and love and care for the family), many also preach that women are the weaker sex both emotionally and intellectually. As Akosua Ampofo aptly points out when referring to Ghanaian Pentecostal and charismatic churches, “many sometimes emphasise women’s limitations, leading to a devaluing of women, re-inscribing male domination and undermining female autonomy”. Though there are female-founded and female-led Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Kenya, the majority of these outfits are led by men and the dominant voices on the religious sphere are male. Their prominent focus and value judgments are, however, directed at female bodies.

They are also increasingly portraying themselves as experts, not just on spiritual matters, but also on women’s and gender issues, including female sexuality, advising women and youth on how to deal with their intimate and sexual lives, for instance. Their teachings and theologies are not just troubling but are also sexist. Yet, these so-called Men of God remain highly influential voices on gender issues.

The good wife

These preachers have carved a niche for themselves as the go-to specialists for people seeking to improve and renew their relationships, hence reconstructing sexual and intimate citizenships, gender, sexuality and women’s reproductive health rights. In fact, many of their pulpits, which attract thousands of female followers, are spaces where women’s and gender issues are constructed/deconstructed and assigned new meaning.

In many of these churches, a monogamous marriage is portrayed as the ideal achievement that every woman and girl must aspire to. It is a privilege to get married, women and girls are taught. In one sermon at a Pentecostal church in Nakuru and attended by this researcher, the pastor said to an

ecstatic crowd:

"It doesn't matter how beautiful you are, how educated you are, how big your boobs and backside are! If you are not married, if no man has seen you, you are going to stay single and miserable for the rest of your life. And it's not funny being an old spinster! Just ask that bunch of old unmarried women in your neighbourhood! The Bible says, he who finds a wife finds a good thing! Sister, don't be influenced by these crazy feminists who hate men! Without the love of a man, you will grow old and die a miserable spinster! And for those who are married, please understand that you are highly favoured of God. Take care of that man! Please remember that there are more women than men in Kenya according to the latest census."

The pastor then mocked young girls who did not know how to cook ugali, a popular staple food in East Africa and beyond.

"If you are here and you can only cook spaghetti, shame on you! Your husbands will return you back to your mother to teach you how to cook and look after a man! Don't feed your husband with rubbish. Sister, go back and learn how to cook proper food from your mum. And when you have learned how to cook, also learn to how to serve him like a king! Treat him well otherwise you will lose him to someone who can cook and treat him better! Am I talking to somebody here? Please shout halleluiah!"

Such messages are replicated in many Pentecostal churches where I have carried out research, as well as in public and private discourses. These messages reinforce women's position in society as subordinate domestic workers. In many Christian churches, marital violence is considered un-Christian behaviour yet scores of women I spoke with told me that they have endured violence and were badly treated by their Christian spouses. One woman told me that her being "saved" or "born again" has not insulated her from intimate partner violence, which has reached alarming proportions in Kenya and globally, according to recent data from the United Nations, which suggests that the home is emerging as the most dangerous place for women and girls.

Yet, such religious messages can further reinforce violence against women. In his book, *Till Death Do Us Part*, Bishop Charles Agyin-Asare, the founder of one of Ghana's mega churches, had this to say about abuse in marriage:

"You are not the first woman to be beaten by your husband and you will not be the last...Rise up with the word of God and use your spiritual weapons...Keep going to church, listen to tapes, pray, notice the blessings around you, and keep your vows."

Many pastors in Pentecostal churches preach that God hates divorce. They encourage women who seek advice about what to do when they experience domestic violence to keep praying and keep waiting for God to change the man. Some women I interviewed told me that their pastors advised them to change and become good wives - a message that suggests that women are abused by their spouses because they are not behaving like good wives.

This idea is embedded in Proverbs 31 Woman, a biblical verse that embodies the qualities expected of every good Christian woman/wife. A lot of discourse on Proverbs 31 focuses on marriage, and preparing women to be good wives, good mothers, and pure girls. The Proverbs 31 woman rises early to fend for and feed her family. Such teachings and discourses on women's domestic roles are repeatedly replicated in many church pulpits, suggesting that women have no value outside of marriage and family life. And they also have no value within it beyond providing domestic services.

Kenyan women, like all other women in Africa and in other parts of the developing world, carry

incredible responsibilities for keeping their marriages and families intact, even if it means sacrificing their own personal well-being and safety. Scores of women I interviewed appeared to have internalised the teachings of these churches and many blamed themselves for the violence they endured in their homes.

Sexual sin and the purity culture

However, it is the sexualised view of women's bodies and the purity culture espoused by Prophet David Owuor and his Ministry of Repentance and Holiness (MRH) that I find most disturbing. Prophet Owuor, whose key messages are centred around repentance and holiness, as reflected in his ministry's name, seems to be mainly concerned about sexual purity, morality and immorality. These teachings occupy much of the teachings in MRH, which border on obsession. Prophet Owuor squarely places women's bodies at the centre of an erotic economy.

The sexual purity gospel espoused by Owuor is akin to the evangelical purity culture popularised in evangelical circles in the USA in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. In this purity culture, men and boys are viewed as sexually weak and women and girls are seen as the upholders of sexual purity. Women are also responsible if men fail to observe sexual purity and for the sexual thoughts and feelings of boys and grown men. Followers are taught that men and boys are visually-oriented and are thus easily aroused by the sight of women's flesh. Women must, therefore, keep male sexual desires in check by covering up lest they provoke men who can't control their sexual urges. For the same reasons, Owuor has prescribed a dress code for his female followers that explicitly forbids the wearing of sleeveless tops, hemlines at or above the knee, slit skirts that expose the knees and thighs, open shoes, bare legs and make up. In his church, women dress in heavy curtain-like materials that flow from the neck to the tips of the toes. Every part of the women's bodies is covered except for the face.

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Women are further urged to adopt certain mannerisms and practices that are deemed appropriate for a religious holy life. Speaking about women's bodies and dressing, Owuor often quotes biblical verses, such as Hebrews 12:14: "Make efforts to be holy, for without holiness, no one will see the Lord!", and 1 Corinthians 6:19, "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?"

Applying these verses to his female followers while speaking at a prayer rally, Owuor said: "When you cover your body, you are saying: I respect and honour my body which is the temple of the Lord. So make sure you do not defile the house of the Holy Spirit by dressing indecently."

In a series of sermons titled "Purity in the Church and How God Looks at Sexual Sin", as well as in numerous interviews with his followers and non-followers, Owuor frequently depicts women as prostitutes and temptresses, and as the chief cause of "men's sexual sins" and "lack of sexual control". He often evokes biblical narrative and paraphrases, some like the book of Proverbs, Chapter 6: 24-26: "Keep yourself away from the immoral woman and from the smooth tongue of the wayward wife. Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes. For the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread and the adulteress preys upon your very life."

According to Owuor, "The Bible says that based on the way a woman is dressed, she can be called a

prostitute.” (There is no such verse in the Bible.) “This is how God looks at sexual sin,” he adds. “Look, men are affected by what they see. Some women dress to get the attention of the pastor.”

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Owuor’s preaching makes fluent transitions from biblical texts to the contemporary context and back again, reinforcing negative images of women as adulterers and prostitutes and as dangerous and potentially fatal sources of temptation. I have even heard prophet Owour telling women not to use good old Vaseline on their bodies. (This is preposterous. Vaseline is a popular balm for cracked lips and is also used to moisturise legs and hands.)

The purity culture espoused by Owuor is about how a woman needs to be a good Christian by protecting men from the threat of women. This message suggests that women’s bodies and sexuality are a threat to Christendom and men. Therefore, it is women’s and girls’ responsibility to dress right, and in an acceptable manner. They must also sit right, talk right and not reveal themselves so as not to tempt men. If they don’t, then they risk being called prostitutes and impure harlots. Women are responsible not only for their own sexual purity, but that of men too. As such, gender and sexuality are deeply intertwined in MRH.

In MRH, women’s bodies are depicted as locus of impurity, lust, sin, and temptation. The burden of proof of holiness appears to lie primarily with women. Of course, from a gender or feminist perspective, it is easy to see in MRH’s teachings the workings of patriarchy, with women’s bodies being made sites of surveillance, regulation, control, and power. Indeed, Owuor’s project of moral regeneration echoes wider patterns in colonial and post-colonial Africa, in which women’s bodies, in particular, have become symbolic sites of contestation over authenticity, decency and purity. As South African feminist scholar Desiree Lewis points out: “The centrality of patriarchy in the control of women’s bodies is evident in the policing of women’s gender roles in many African countries requires a highly visible and explicit performance of prescribed gendered behaviour.” Owuor’s sermons on women bodies are not just disturbing but they are also sexist and aim to control women’s intimate lives.

Ironically, Prophet Owuor’s ministry has been embroiled in sex scandals. Even his personal life has been the subject of controversy, including rape and domestic violence allegations against him raised in the United States. On his own admission, he has also fathered a child in Israel and abandoned both the mother and son in unclear circumstances.

Recently, one of his close associates was expelled from his ministry and the altar was burned down because he sexually molested three female followers who he used to invite to his house for “prayer and anointing with oil”. Apparently, he did more than just “anoint” the women. Three of these women gave harrowing testimonies of sexual abuse at the hands of a pastor of a church where the majority of sermons are about sexual sin.

These insidious pastors preach a dangerous and sexualized view of women’s bodies, as if women do not exist outside of their reproductive roles. In many of his rambling sermons that are also uploaded on YouTube, Prophet Owuor promotes an extreme form of purity culture and sexualisation of women bodies that is ultimately harmful to women and girls. According to Galia Sabar, a distinguished Professor of African Studies and the President of the Ruppin Academy Centre in Tel Aviv, Israel, Prophet Owuor’s sexualised view of women’s bodies might have been influenced by an extreme form

of ultra-Jewish orthodoxy in Israel that polices and requires women to keep off from everything and anything when menstruating, including being checked by an old woman to determine if there are any blood stains in their vaginas after menstruation. Only when it is determined that they are no longer menstruating are they allowed to touch anything and get intimate with their spouses.

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This influence is not far-fetched considering that Owour spent a considerable amount of time in Israel for his post-graduate studies and by his own admission nearly converted to Judaism and had a child with a Jewish woman. Influences of Judaism are evident in his ministry: he obsesses about kosher food and the state of Israel.

Like Catherine Woodiwiis, who grapples with many questions in her article, "In the Image of God: Sex, Power and 'Masculine Christianity'", I also ask myself many questions around these teachings. Why are women so devalued in Kenyan society? Why do women subject themselves to this kind of control? How can young men learn to respect women when their popular and influential pastors consistently preach about women as the weaker sex whose value is only reproductive and domestic? How can boys and girls think positively about female leadership when women are said to be unfit to lead a church or preach in public? How can young men support women's aspirations to serve in public offices when they have been bombarded with messages of women's place as being in the kitchen? How can young men learn not to abuse women when they are simultaneously modelled on the behaviour that leads to it? How can young men become leaders of integrity when the likes of Nganga and Owour are celebrities? Why have women, both young and old, internalised and normalised abuse not just in the home sphere but also in church spheres? Do Christian clergy even rethink their sermons and the impact that their teachings have on women? More fundamentally, is the notion of women's bodies, religious authority and how the so-called "Men of God" control, regulate, construct, and deconstruct women's bodies being challenged?

Body shaming

In many Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa, the female body is portrayed as the site of demonic attacks, immorality, sexual sin, tension and violations and one that is trapped in secrecy and shame. It is a locus for sexual sin, impurity and uncleanness. The purity culture advocated by Owour not only body shames women but is unhelpful and damaging in a country where gender-based violence is rampant. The purity culture does not celebrate women as human beings who are deserving of dignity, respect, protection, love and care. The church and the purity culture dictate how a woman ought to be. Yet, the policing and the objectification of women's bodies must be understood within the context of not just a patriarchal Kenyan society, but also within a particular masculine brand of Christianity in which "Men of God" continue to perpetuate and espouse behaviour and theologies that are disadvantageous to girls and women.

The purity culture shames women and in countries like the US, it has fuelled an exodus of young women from evangelical churches. It aims to sexually control women's bodies and creates deep and long-lasting shame among women who internalise such teachings. Many young women (university students) I interviewed who left Pentecostal churches have narrated to me how the purity culture has created deep shame in how they view their bodies and has made them suffer sexual anxieties in their current relationships. Linda Kay, author of *Pure: Inside the Movement that Shamed a*

Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free, shows how damaging this purity culture is for women and young girls. It is paramount that the clergy rethinks the impact of such toxic theologies, even as they seek to reconstruct society and hopefully help create a better country in which women are respected not shamed.

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After all, sex is not the biggest sin in Kenya. The country is riddled with massive corruption, poor governance, greed, poisonous food, poverty, food insecurity, and poor social services. In a country where women experience tremendous discrimination and violence, I have never heard Oduor condemn any form of violence against women, including forced prostitution of women, sex trafficking or even sex tourism. Neither have I heard him speak up against any social injustices rampant in Kenyan society that deny women their humanity and justice.

Often Kenyan women and girls have been publicly stripped, even sexually abused, because they wore tight jeans/skirts, dresses. And a section of the public has justified this by saying that the women asked for it because they were skimpily dressed. Yet my experience working with women who have suffered years of sexual abuse and violence suggests that dressing is not the cause of sexual and gender-based violence. In fact, it is a lazy and weak explanation that is not backed by any scientific evidence but has however been used to justify violence against women. This is unacceptable especially in a country where one out of every three women has experienced sexual and gender-based violence. Sexual and gender-based violence is about fear of losing control. More importantly, it is about power.

It is also a symptom of a crisis of masculinity and social and religious control of women. Thankfully, the ongoing global media coverage of clerical abuse of children and nuns in the Catholic church has helped to shift the narrative to the perpetrators.

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