



Jesus Christ, the Feminist Who Unlocked Women's Potential

By Damaris Parsitau



The face of the Christian church in sub-Saharan Africa is heavily female. A cursory look at hundreds of church services in Kenya and elsewhere suggests that there are more women than men in both mainstream, as well as the Pentecostal, evangelical and charismatic churches. Are women more religious than men in Africa? The jury is still out there. What is not in doubt though is that the church in Africa is profoundly feminine in its rank and outlook, but heavily male in its leadership and ethos.

Sociological research suggests that African women are the backbone of African Christian communities. Despite their numerical strength, women's voices are not only marginal in many churches but their contribution to African Christianity is hardly ever recognised by the church leadership, particularly at the level of decision making and preaching. In many Christian denominations in Kenya and beyond, ordination of women as adjunct leaders and pulpit preachers is still being discussed. Even in the public spheres, people still debate whether women should be allowed to preach, lead and found their own churches.

The Catholic Church, for example, still does not ordain women to ministry, neither can women administer or preside over the Holy Communion. Other churches are gradually ordaining women, while others cannot even discuss or consider women's ordination. In many established Pentecostal

churches, women are still not ordained to leadership positions despite the so-called democratisation of the charisma. Nevertheless, women are moving out to establish their own churches. They then invite their former bishops to ordain them, which is paradoxical.

Except for Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical churches, where women have successfully founded and carved out their own ministries, women in male-founded churches hardly ever rise to leadership positions. In all other churches, and as far as the leadership of spiritual communities are concerned, women's voices remains at the fringes or margins, especially in masculine spiritual spaces - at least at the level of church leadership and decision making.

This is despite studies upon studies suggesting that women are a significant majority and part of the powerhouse of African Christian spirituality. Women not only fill the pews of African churches every Sunday, they also carry out incredible responsibilities for the survival and sustenance of those churches. My ethnographic research suggests that many women spend incredibly long hours in churches, putting in time and money in unpaid hours cleaning, ushering, organising, receiving guests, singing, leading praise and worship, teaching Sunday school, cooking for guests, collecting offerings, prophesying, praying, and offering social and spiritual support to the sick (physically and emotionally).

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In church spheres, they also create and generate tremendous social capital, creating community prayer cells, mobilising resources to form networks for support, fund-raising, forming wedding committees for members, arranging funerals, joining merry-go-rounds, and generally looking out for the welfare of members. Much of this replicates the domestic chores they undertake at home. As such, they are fundamental to the very life and sustainability of their churches. I believe that many churches would not function without the work, time, varied gifts, talents and abilities and the immense social capital that Christian women generate for their church communities.

Why do women do so much for churches that do so little for them? I asked scores of women. What is in it for them that makes them spent so much time in church?

The women I interviewed shared with me some of the reasons why they gravitate towards church and why they give so much of their time to churches that seemingly do little for them. I found out that churches are more than just spiritual spaces; they are also spaces for the creation of community, where social capital is generated, where they fellowship and share sisterhood, a space for emotional and momentarily release, where they cry to God about their many vulnerabilities, a space for spiritual growth and spiritual nourishment.

The women told me they flock to churches in search of healing - physically, emotionally and psychologically. They also go there in search of deliverance from spiritual and earthly demons and from the fear of curses and witchcraft. Many others go to church in search of companionship and love. Others go to church because they have been socialised from childhood to attend church and because "it is the right thing to do". Many others told me that they cannot fail to go to church because it is the Christian thing to do. Many others go there to be away from the home sphere and escape from violence and toxic home spaces. Yet many also go there because they simply love God and want to grow in their Christian faith and in communion with fellow believers.

Yet, churches have treated and continue to treat women badly: they ignore them, objectify them,

abuse them, assault them, oppress them and then attempt to use theological and patriarchal ideas to rationalise their actions. "It is written in the Bible", "the Bible says", "It is our culture and traditions" are common dictums of explanations and justification in the Kenyan social and religious sphere. This is not surprising as both Christianity and African culture have long been used to manipulate and reinforce the sorry treatment of women in Africa. African (male) clergy and men are seen as ideal spiritual leaders, while women are there to submit to men's authority both at home and in church.

In church services, sermons about male headship and female submission are common. This has resulted in the smothering of women's gifts of pastoral leadership and ministry. Women are further excluded from leadership roles and their gifts, talents and wisdom have been often dismissed. Pentecostal Christians leaders have perverted the gospel in favour of the gospel of money and fake miracles and the control and objectification of women's bodies and sexuality. In her article titled, *The Neck That Turns the Head*, Brandon Ambrosia talks about this and speaks about the power of the good Christian woman as one that is submissive to her husband. I have heard Pentecostal pastors teach about men as the head and women as the neck that supports the head, instead of speaking about companionship.

The church continuously thinks of women as the weaker sex, even when women have shown that they can be presidents, astronauts, doctors, engineers and people who manage millions of dysfunctional homes every day. In fact, Christian women are everywhere except at church pulpits.

Besides, many churches, just like Kenyan and African society still frown on female religious leadership. That is true for the Catholic Church that is heavily male and gerontocratic, and also misogynistic. Pentecostal and evangelical churches are led by men who serve with their wives as co-pastors, mostly leading women's wings of the ministry. These wives are known as "First Ladies" to entrench the important place they occupy in their husbands' ministries. A case in point is the *Women Without Limit Ministries* led by the flashy Rev Kathy Kiuna and many other small women-led ministries within their husbands' churches. Women's wings within the larger church polity are meant to leverage the large numbers of female patrons in such churches, as well as provide a pseudo-empowerment fellowship for scores of women.

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Yet this move is a smart way to keep female worshipers in church both for respectability of the church - and in particular, for the pastors' wives prestige - and to look like they are catering to women's needs. And while many such women's wings are said to empower women in spiritual spaces using spiritual resources, such ministries rarely ever scratch the surface to tackle the myriad of social and structural challenges facing women in Kenya and beyond. These challenges include domestic violence, family break-ups, poverty, sexism, and patriarchy.

Instead, they gloss over real and tangible issues that affect women and create a sort of motivational speak, the kind of feel-good sermons about building self-esteem and confidence without ever thinking of delving into the reasons why many women feel inadequate, lack proper education and struggle financially. The kind of preaching that goes on here is that of overcoming the demons of poverty, adultery, needs and wants, and of miraculously getting miracle visas to the United States and Europe and many other mundane wants. Much of the preaching revolves around the power of

the praying wife, partner, and mother.

In nearly a decade and a half of research on Pentecostal churches, I have never come across a single message condemning violence and the many layers of discrimination holding women back from attaining their full potential. Nor are there sermons that tackle the social and structural issues that many women grapple with, such as gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, lack of decision making roles and women rights. What we see is a gospel where every imaginable challenge, including serious ailments such as cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure, malaria, and other communicable ailments and global epidemics, are all viewed through spiritual lenses.

The church's deafening silence on women's issues

Yet, the status and roles of women in churches mirrors that of the general status of women in the larger Kenyan society. The biggest purpose and most important role of the church is to preach the good news to the laity and set captives free. How is it that the church does not speak when women and girls continue to be subjected to sexual abuse? Why is the church silent when scores of women and young girls are brutally murdered almost weekly or when little girls are raped by their fathers or guardians? Why is the church silent in the face of tremendous corruption that is killing the future of Kenyan women, youth and children?

Kenya is a heavily patriarchal society where women and girls, in particular, grapple with multiple layers of discrimination, marginalisation and stereotypes. Patriarchal, cultural and religious ideals and beliefs, as well as deeply entrenched gendered social norms, continue to portray women as inferior to men.

The Kenyan Parliament, for example, totally disregards the constitutional two-thirds majority rule that would have seen an increase in the number of women serving in Parliament and public life. While some progress has been achieved in Kenya in the last couple of years, Parliament is still debating the roles of women in the legislature, a decade after the passage of a liberal constitution with an excellent Bill of Rights. This blatant disregard for the constitution is not only suggestive of the condescending attitude of male leaders towards female leadership, but also shows how Kenyan society still struggles with the idea of women leaders in a largely male-dominated legislature. Interestingly, the church has not raised its voice about this, which is hardly unsurprising given that the Kenyan church leadership largely mirrors our political leadership, if not worse.

The church in Kenya treats women even worse than the state. Church spaces are no longer safe for women seeking spiritual sustenance and refuge. Women are physically and sexually abused in church; their bodies are used as porn for the healing and miracle industry. The voluntary work they put in brings no immediate value to them outside of their spiritual life. At the same time, church spaces are masculine spheres in terms of leadership, but heavily female in respect of congregational composition. The church's restriction and control of women's leadership and decision making should be questioned.

Churches are also becoming increasingly violent spaces for women, in terms of violent theologies of women's bodies and spaces where women have been physically and sexually abused. Churches are not just violent masculine spaces, but also patriarchal and dangerous spaces. This is not surprising, given that the Bible itself is a patriarchal document interpreted through patriarchal lenses. At the same time, churches treat women the way the Kenyan communities treats them: they frown on single women, widows, divorced mothers, unmarried mothers and their children.

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Given this scenario, how can we foreground a church that is on the side of women and one that can move the middle to treat women as God's children? How can we unlock the power of women in churches? What lessons can we borrow from Jesus's extraordinary treatment of women? How did Jesus model behaviour that could guide the church and society on how to treat women better? How can the life of Jesus model for us a women-centric theology of human flourishing where women are treated the way he treated them? How can the church become a progressive space that puts women's welfare at the centre of a theology of care, one that respects them, includes them and allows them to use all their mental resources and abilities to build the kingdom of God as well as the earthly kingdom?

Unlocking the power of women, as Jesus did

There is a need for the church in Africa to rethink and unpack a theology of women flourishing, one that unlocks the power of women in Africa and one that would bring about a transformation in the lives of African women. Here, I would like to propose a new imagination that would unlock the power of women, a new narrative, new conversations about the role of women that allows them to flourish at home, church and society.

The Bible and the life of Jesus Christ allows us to foreground such a possibility. It gives us the tools to recreate a new future, another world for African Christian women. The Bible, which occupies a central role in the lives of millions of African Christians, fomented many examples of female biblical heroines who did exemplary works that are recorded by the Bible's narrators. The Bible itself is full of instances in which women rose to leadership positions that could be modelled to create a theology of women leadership that helps women shift the needle in spiritual leadership. Queen Esther saved the Israelites from their enemies, Deborah was a judge who ruled Israel, just to cite a few.

The Jesus of the Bible suggests that women are much more than the weaker sex. Women are messengers of God and the gospel and prophetesses of the resurrection story. Women were the first to declare that Jesus has risen, women were the deacons who supported and led the early Christian church. The church, as well as theologians, must begin to reimagine a women-centred theology of human flourishing that lifts off the heavy burdens placed on women by both church and society.

Jesus Christ modelled for us a theology that is women-centric, a theology of solidarity and affirmation for women. Jesus refused to normalise the treatment of women as inferior, as insignificant voiceless people. Instead he treated them with respect and dignity, frequently stopping to listen to their cries and concerns, affirming their voices and right to be heard in a way to suggest that their voices and opinions mattered to him.

The narrators of the Bible portray Jesus as a man who was at home in the company of all women - mothers, widows, prostitutes, bleeding and menstruating women, daughters, sisters, grandmothers. He, for example, stepped forward in a crowd of mourners to speak with the widow at Nain and called her son back to life in Luke 7: 11-17. He healed a woman who had been crippled for 18 years, laying his hands on her in the temple saying, "Woman, you are free". And he did that without drama. He left her feminine dignity intact. There was no reeling on the ground, no fainting, no melodrama, no violent slapping. It was just a kind gentle touch that restored her health and dignity. He told her to go. That she was free from the burden of disease and disability. He set her free from crippling disease and restored her dignity, taking away her stigma and burden. He did not violently push her

to the ground in the manner of Pentecostal clergy who stage-manage deliverance services, creating migraine-inducing headaches and a lot of noisy drama as they outdo each other trying to demonstrate manufactured spiritual power to hapless followers.

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Contrast that with Jesus's gentle and respectful touch, a total departure from Apostle James Ng'ang'a, whose deliverance theologies leave many women stripped of their personal and bodily integrity. Jesus's touch was a touch of love, respect and recognition of a female humanity, where women are children of God, worthy of a life of health, dignity and flourishing. Jesus, a friend of women, was also a respecter of women.

When the leaders of the synagogue questioned why Jesus had healed a woman on the Sabbath, Jesus answered in a way that affirmed the woman even further. He called her a daughter of Abraham (Luke 13:16). Here is another example of a theology of affirmation, dignity and flourishing. In Jewish culture, as well as in many patriarchal cultures in Africa, girls are not very much valued. Hence, by calling this woman a daughter of Abraham (the patriarch of the Abrahamic faiths), Jesus affirmed the place of girls in the family and society. Women had never been called daughters of Abraham before.

There are many other scores of instances in which Jesus helped forge new spaces and thinking for women, engaging them, listening to their stories and needs, giving them not just a listening ear, but also voice and agency. In many of these instances, he was telling the women: I hear you, I see you, I feel you, you are important, your story is important and valid, and you deserve to live a life of dignity, health and well-being. Your humanity as a daughter of Abraham is valid and your voice matters and must be heard by all, including, the Pharisees and Sadducees and the clergy-bishops, prophets, pastors, apostles, archbishops, and that they have a space and voice in that arrangement. Jesus held affirming dialogues with women.

Consider the story of Jesus holding affirming dialogues with a Samaritan woman. In the Jewish traditions, just like in many African cultures, women's testimonies in Jewish religious thought was not trustworthy. They were also counted alongside children because no one considered their contribution, including witness contribution, as valid or even of substance. In many Kenyan cultures, such as the Maasai and Kalenjin cultures, women were counted and equated to children and the property of her husband. But Jesus modelled a different perception of women as people who are worthy. He held respectful dialogues with women, affirming and entrenching their space in society as valid witnesses.

In all these and many other examples of how he treated women, Jesus modelled a different trajectory and narrative: a trajectory of compassion, respect, value, voice, agency and dignity. He viewed women in their totality as human beings, not as unclean and unworthy witnesses. Menstruating women were considered ritually unclean in Jewish society. Such women were not allowed to participate in rituals because they were considered unclean. Jesus affirmed their biological and bodily integrity, affirming their natural menstruating bodies as clean and worthy.

More importantly, Jesus held a moment of dialogue with such women. Women prostitutes were friends of Jesus. One oiled Jesus's feet with expensive perfume and used her hair to wipe his feet. Women were the first people to witness the resurrected Jesus and were the last at the grave where he was buried.

Jesus helped unlock the power of women both in church and society. Can the Kenyan church, broadly conceptualised, unlock the power of women in church and society and create affirming conversations, alternative theologies of women's dignity and flourishing? How can Kenyan Christian women use these theological conversations to create spiritual resources to reclaim respect and space and contest theological discrimination? The Bible paints a picture of Jesus Christ who was not just pro-women, but who included and recognised women's full potential and humanity.

While we live in a heavily patriarchal culture and church polity, there are excellent lessons from Jesus's examples to borrow from. Many women I spoke to feel invisible, unheard, objectified, disrespected, excluded. Many told me the Church no longer speaks the language of Jesus, a language of inclusion, empowerment, human flourishing, respect, dignity and voice. Jesus did not only recognize the power of women, but viewed them wholesomely and designed for them to prosper and flourish. The Church should not only include women, but must also recognise their inclusion, voice, gifts and creativity.

How can the African Church become a progressive inclusive church that puts women at the centre of a theology of care and respect? A theology that sees women's bodies as sites of the Holy Spirit and not homes to demons? What lessons can African Christian men draw from the extraordinary life of Jesus and his relationship with women? The African Church could do better with women followers by simply listening to them and creating women-centric theologies.

The women I spoke to deeply love Jesus and as their father, brother, husband, father to their children, provider and companion. Many painted a man who would be saddened by violent husbands, deadbeat irresponsible fathers, fading partners, discriminative bosses and rogue clergy. Many believe that Jesus deeply loves them and they love him back and they want to live a life of dignity as Jesus desired for them.

Why does the church exclude women in its leadership, despite the pivotal role they play in the very life and sustenance of churches? Why is it silent in the face of so much suffering, pain and violence? Why is it not ordaining women? How can the church become progressive and radical in its thoughts and put the welfare of women and children at the centre of its theologising?

In the words of Dorothy Sayers, perhaps it is no wonder that women were first at the cradle and last at the cross. They had never known a man like Jesus - a prophet and teacher who never nagged them, never flattered them, never dismissed their voices and talents, never patronised or cat-called them. For the Christian woman, Jesus is not just the ideal friend and companion, he is also the one who has their backs.

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