

Women's Empowerment as a Christian Strategy for Poverty Alleviation in Africa

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Abstract

This article argues that women's empowerment and gender promotion are among the key strategies for poverty alleviation in Africa. This paper uses Rwanda as a case study to demonstrate the role women can play in poverty alleviation. The main argument made is that the church in Africa has embraced and condoned the African patriarchal systems and has taken part in women's oppression which contribute to poverty in African societies. The failure to empower women limits their contribution to leadership and economic transformation in church and society. The methodology used in this paper is a hybrid between Critical correlation and Pastoral circle through consultative meetings, focus group discussions, and structured interviews. The research approach used is qualitative. The findings of the investigation show that the church has some theological principles and practices that mar the image and the dignity of women and hinder their complete emancipation and their full participation in poverty alleviation. The paper advocates for churches' review of its theology and patriarchal church leadership and biblical reading which undermine women and to opt for intentional empowerment of women and gender promotion as strategies for poverty alleviation.

Keywords: *Gender equality, women's empowerment, poverty alleviation, human dignity*

Introduction

The problem of poverty in African families and countries is a reality and contradicts the Gospel of Jesus which promises life in its fullness (John 10:10). Even though the church is growing faster in Africa, Africans remain among the poorest people on the planet. One of the reasons for this rampant poverty is the society and church's attitude undermining women and hinder them to full participate in leadership and economic transformation. Some African traditional beliefs and values undermine women and the church has failed to challenge and to change the cultural oppressive behaviours. Women are undermined through African proverbs and wise sayings while they have very vital role to play in society economic growth and poverty alleviation. There are African cultural beliefs and legal systems that are oppressive to the women and western cultures including some Christians practices contribute significantly to that subjugation. Despite the clear and positive biblical depiction of the woman, a critical analysis proves that some churches continue to make ideological biblical interpretations to formulate anti-women theologies such as the denial of ordaining women to priesthood. The consequences of this oppressive attitude toward women is that their wisdom, power, and ingenuity are not used properly for economic growth and national transformation. If the church

in African needs to contribute effectively to poverty alleviation there need to embark on serious theological reforms based on right biblical interpretation to recognise and affirm the dignity of women and then work on intentional policies and programs which enable women for self-actualisation and full participation in poverty alleviation including easy access to educational, significant integration of women in church leadership, facilitation to access financial services and funds for economic investment. Otherwise, Women's abuse will continue to be a hindrance to family stability and prosperity and a barrier to national transformation (Deepa Narayan in Deryke Belsahaw et al. 2001, 43). This article is divided into different sections which include the dichotomous views of women in Africa, the role of women in poverty alleviation in contemporary African society, the cultural and religious barriers for African women to develop, the influence of Western culture on women's role in African societies, the consequences of undermining women's dignity and potentials on African societies, critical analysis of churches' weaknesses for women's empowerment, the strategies for women's empowerment for poverty alleviation.

The Dichotomous view of the Woman in African-Traditional Society

According to Benoit Girardin "most of human society over history were organized around a patriarchal kind of system" (Girardin, 2013, 11). This kind of societal structure ascribes to men leading roles in the domain of leadership, economic, social, moral and religious responsibilities and playing a key role in production. Women are kept to a position of subordination with the key role of reproduction (Girardin, 2013, 11). In the case of male-female relationships, there is always a kind of stereotyping whereby society depicts any gender in an arbitrary way according to community-dominant narratives. In African traditional societies where communication was mainly oral based on the words of the mouth; poetry, songs, proverbs and wise sayings were proper ways to convey messages and to communicate wisdom from generation to generation.

In relation to the perception of a woman, African societies have two main views toward women. On one hand, a woman is seen as a wise, clever, very powerful, hardworking, loving, caring, beautiful, a good counsellor and most influential. This can be called the positive view of a woman. On the other hand, woman is also considered as weak both physically and intellectually, idle, talkative, envious and deceitful. This is a negative view of a woman.

To illustrate these above views of women in Africa, the use of Rwandan proverbs can be very informative. In Rwanda when people want to undermine a woman they use some proverbs such as '*Uruvuzze umugore ruvuga umuhoro*' (When in home a woman speaks then the machete speaks also. This means that when a woman is given the right to take the lead at home then there will be chaos and bloodshed! '*Nta nkokokazi ibika isake ihari!*' (the hen cannot crow when a rooster is there). This means that a woman cannot talk or take influential decisions when a man is there (Nicole Hogg 2010, 71). This proverb is obviously against logic because it is not always true that a man is right in what he says or does. Some men are senseless and foolish in their words and deeds. To defend male's wrong decisions, another proverb says '*Amafuti y'umugabo nibwo buryo bwe.*' The foolishness of a man becomes his right manner! This means that even if a man does foolishness, it becomes right because this is his way of doing things. This mindset implies that a man is always right in what he says and does. This is normally wrong and is a strategy used by men to defend their failures.

Another saying in relation to sexuality goes like '*Imfizi ntiyimirwa, aho irindirije irimya!*' The bull is never stopped wherever and wherever it needs female-cow it has! This means that a man is never stopped to have sex. Whenever he wants to have sex no one can stop him! This saying

conveys a wrong and oppressive message toward women because it makes some men think that they have the right over every woman or have the full right to do whatever they want with their spouses. This sexual impulse is the root cause of gender-based violence and sexually transmissible infections including HIV/AIDS which ruin African families and the economy. Women are always the most affected since they are denied the full right to decide about their sexual life/ lives. “Research points to the complex inter-linkages between poverty, sexual behaviour, [gender] inequality and the AIDS epidemic” (Shimyaayi Muntamba and C. Mark Blackden 2002, 96).

On a positive note, African societies have ways to admire and recognise the dignity and the role of women in society. For example, there is a Rwandan proverb which says ‘*Ukurusha umugore akurusha urugo*’ A person who has a better wife has also a better home. Furthermore, there are other sayings which demonstrate the value of the wife as someone who unites families through marriage. ‘*Umukobwa ni Nyampinga, ni gahuzamiryango*’ This literally means that a girl is a traveller from one village to another and she unites different families. The girl leaves her parents’ home and family and goes into another family and becomes a bridge through which these two families are united. And in this union each family gains new friends and new strength because in case of troubles or when there need to celebrate the two families come together and join hands to face challenges or to celebrate successes. There is also a saying which shows the unique and irreplaceable role of the woman as a mother; ‘*Akabura ntikaboneke ni nyina w’umuntu,*’ this means that something you lose and you can never find is a mother. This is normally said when a child has lost his or her mother and then she/he is going through hardship, people will use that saying to show the unparalleled role of a mother in the life of children.

These proverbs and sayings are used in different contexts according to the user and the intention behind them. Someone who wants to undermine a woman will refer to those conveying a negative meaning. On the other hand, anyone who wants to appreciate, affirm or gain favours from women will use those with a negative connotation.

The Specific Role of Women for Poverty Alleviation and Economic Growth in Africa

Although their role is sometimes overshadowed by male domination in leadership and decision-making, African women play a vital role in making and sustaining life in Africa. They do contribute through the triple roles played as mothers, wives, and workers. In traditional societies women were mainly linked to domestic jobs which are considered less demanding in physical force such as bearing children, breastfeeding, cooking, cleaning, growing small animals kept at home, small-scale gardening, fetching water and firewood (Girardin, 2013, 12). When women started to work outside their homes in public and private sectors they were also given jobs considered less demanding in terms of physical force but mentally and emotionally very hard. Nowadays women are the majority in serving as secretaries, nursery and primary school teachers, nurses in medical services, and waiters in bars, cultural and artistic performers, restaurants, and hotels. All these jobs require more time, extra attention, and concentration and unfortunately, they are less paid.

Young (1993) showed that in most developing countries, women are responsible for a wide variety of tasks which ensure that their families have adequate food stocks, that raw foods are processed and cooked, and that there is wood and water with which to cook, that children receive medical attention and continuous care when they are infants and so on. Men will rarely take over cooking, and care for infants and children, but may increase their involvement in crop production or fetching wood and water when women cannot cope. In traditional African societies where the average number of children by a woman is around five and even higher,

“women spend most of their adult lives rearing children. Traditionally, homebound, women live lives of back-breaking labour on the farm, endless walking to collect fuel wood, and water, and child-rearing” (Jeffrey Sachs 2005, 36-7).

To some extent, women have been participating in trade, political, and religious activities but at the smallest scale. Even where women seem to have high positions, they were given an indirect sphere of influence. For example, in the Rwandan monarchy, the king was always a male but he was supposed to rule assisted by his mother and his wife as his advisors. But in recent years there have been African women who played vital roles in influencing the politics of their countries. People like Speciose Kandila Kazibwe who served as the Vice-President of Uganda, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf former President of Liberia, Agathe Uwilingiyimana who served respectively as Minister of Education and Prime Minister of Rwanda and was killed on the first day of the Genocide in 1994 as she was vehemently opposed to ethnic hatred and genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, Her Excellence Samia Suluhu Hassan the current President of Tanzania are clear examples of women contribution in African politics. These African brave women do assume the heavy responsibilities of being politicians and public servants, they play also the role of wives and mothers in their homes.

According to the UN statistics, “women perform two-thirds of the world’s work, earn one-tenth of the world’s income, are the two-to-thirds of the world’s illiterate and own less than one-hundredth of the world’s property” (Bryant L. Myers 2019, 113). To this statement and from what we see in our everyday life in Africa, women play a key role in economic growth, national development, and poverty alleviation even though their work may be not recognised, documented and fairly rewarded. In Rwanda, women are always poorer than men. However, they conducted 65–70% of agricultural work across the country, including heavy work such as carrying water and firewood, educating the children, welcoming visitors, managing the household, advising their husbands and maintaining traditions (Nicole Hogg 2010). This is an indication that African women are very powerful and when given an opportunity they can fully contribute to poverty alleviation and national building.

The cultural and legal factors which undermine women’s Dignity and Rights in African

Women constitute the majority of the African population and labour force, particularly in agriculture, but have faced substantial constraints on their participation in the economy and society. Women in Africa suffer from cultural beliefs and practices that undermine their dignity and despise their hard work toward the social and economic well-being of the entire society. Human cultures in many societies have socially constructed norms that take women as completely dependent upon men for their survival and flourishing. “In African traditional society women could not own property, [they] were considered to be part of the household property. If the husband died, his relatives would take over all the property and even inherit the woman” (Alice P. Tuyizere 2007, 127). Women were not allowed to live as independent beings, they were considered weaker people who were always dependent on their fathers, their brothers, their husbands, and their grown-up sons to represent them in public and legal arenas.

Some African societies see women as objects for sexual satisfaction and men tend to claim full rights over women’s bodies. In wartime rape is used as a weapon to humiliate the opponents by dehumanising women. For example, in Rwanda, during the Genocide against the Tutsis in 1994, it is estimated that between three hundred thousand and five hundred thousand women were raped and 60% were left infected with HIV/AIDS (RBA, Radio Rwanda 2024). Women are also considered as meant to serve men and men claim to have full rights over them including beating them. Two proverbs illustrate this. One Rwandan Proverb goes ‘*Inkoni ikubise mukeba*

uyirentza urugo.' This means that a stick your husband uses to beat your co-wife you throw it outside the house! This proverb demonstrates that women are aware that being beaten is part and parcel of life. If you keep the stick in the house, it will be used also to beat you as well. This is similar to a Nigerian proverb that says '*Pashan ta fi na yale, oun be laja fun'yawo*' (The whip that was used to beat the first wife is kept for the second wife). The fundamental assumption of this proverb is that a man has the right to have many wives and that a woman is considered a child and has to be disciplined anytime she errs. "This proverb allows for blatant brainwashing of women, to get them to view themselves as inferior to men" (Oladele Abiodun Balogun 2010).

There is also unequal division of labour between Boys and girls in the family (girls are involved in every house work which leads to absences and even dropouts from schools). Early marriage was encouraged or even forced for girls before they could develop their potential. And some harmful practices were applied to girls' bodies to prepare them to meet their husbands' sexual desires. These practices include the *gukuna* (Manipulation of external genital organs to enrage them so that in adult ages the lady will give much pleasure to her partner) in Rwanda and female circumcision in some other African countries. For example, "Masai women are viewed as the property of their husbands [and] are subjected to backbreaking work, female genital mutilation, polygamy, and low levels of education" (Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert 2012, 236-7).

Concerning legal matters, the discriminatory laws and practices in education, employment, inheritance, and finance have marginalized women. Traditional legal systems did not allow women to own properties. Without access to productive assets such as land and capital, there is no way women could independently grow economically. It is for this reason that the majority of African women particularly those in Rwanda remain poor, vulnerable, and powerless (Rwanda Development Indicators, Ministry of Finance and Planning, 1999 in L. Muthoni Wanyeki, 2003). In countries where a majority of people depend on agriculture, the land is the most important asset. Therefore, the denial of free access to and possession of land to women is one of the greatest hindrances form women's economic growth and flourishing. In Rwandan traditional customs women's rights to own land were guaranteed by men because "they [we]re dependent upon the men in their families; they [we]re 'managed' but also protected by their fathers, then their husbands and finally by their male children. In general, the land was inherited patrilineally from father to sons" (Gasasira 1995). This practice has been applied in Rwanda both in the pre-, during, and post-colonial periods.

Neither colonial statutory law nor post-colonial statutory law specifically protected women's rights to land. In virtually all instances, it was assumed that the men associated with women, whether fathers, brothers, or husbands [or sons], would protect their rights. In many instances, statutory law specifically limited women's rights (Wanyeki, 2003, 188).

Bishop Aloys Bigirumwami, a very influential Rwandan Christian leader and writer has argued that Rwandan women were not permitted to own land. If a male head of household died, property rights passed to male heirs or the man's brothers. In the case of divorce or the husband's death, a woman had no claim over the family property if she had not borne children; she would quietly return to her family of origin or marry into another family. Women with children were required to marry a brother of the deceased to retain their status as members of their marital family (Birumwami, 2003).

There were also other laws regulating trade and commerce that prohibited women from having a personal licence to own a business without the husband's approval. For example, in Rwanda,

article number 4 of Law No. 2/08/1913, did not allow women to engage in commercial activities paid labour or enter into a contract without the express consent of their spouses. It was until 1998, with some modifications and law Number 42/1998 allowed women to open a bank account without their husbands' permission but women still did not have the right to enter into contractual agreements or work without their husbands' approval (Wanyeki 2003,188). in this regard Amartya Sen says that "freedom for women to seek employment outside the family is a major issue in many third world countries. This freedom is systematically denied ...and is a serious violation of women's liberty and gender equity" (Amartya Sen 1999, 115). This practice hinders women from using their potential, to earn an income and contributing to increased household revenues. It keeps women economically dependent on their husbands and or their brothers which is a real contributing factor to poverty both at family and national levels.

To understand African women's struggles in terms of work division, it is necessary to look at it from a gender perspective. According to Moser (1993), gender can be defined as "The differences between women and men within the same household and within and between cultures that are socially and culturally constructed and change over time." These differences are clustered in roles, responsibilities, access to resources, constraints, opportunities, needs, perceptions, and views, held by both women and men. Contrarily to widespread misunderstandings, gender is not a synonym for women since it is concerned by both men and women as they act and interact in mutually reciprocal relationships.

Concerning gender division of labour, Lungaho (2001) claims that gender division of labour is a way of giving differential treatment to individuals based on their gender. The division of labour in gender gives rise not only to exploitation at work but also to different types of inequalities. Gender inequality leads to unequal division of labour between men and women where each sex is culturally and socially given one set of gender roles. Unequal gender division of labour refers to a gender division of labour where there is an unequal gender division of reward. Discrimination against women in this sense means that women get most of the burden of labour, and most of the unpaid labour, but men collect most of the income and rewards resulting from the labour. Very unfortunately the types of work societies ascribe to women are always cumbersome. They are backbreaking often not recognised and certainly not remunerated (Amartya Sen 1999,115).

In addition to these actions undermining the dignity of the women, there is also some inaction done which put women's lives and rights in jeopardy, especially those related to their biological and physiological status. When a girl or a woman is on her period she may feel unwell and be hindered from performing her duties properly. And if society is not willing to understand her and facilitate her to go through that period smoothly this can lead to failure when compared to men. A woman who is pregnant or is breastfeeding or nursing a young child is in a unique situation that none else can handle. If society turns a blind eye to such particular situations which are living then women can unjustly suffer. Some African societies are still characterized by, a lack of proper policies for gender equality in education whereby boys are privileged to attend schools (paying school fees for a girl is considered a waste of resources as she will go to another family). This gender preference based on sex bias leads to the use of family income disproportionately and keeps part of family members especially girls and women in poverty and frustration (Sen 1999, 88-9).

Teenage undesired pregnancies affect mainly girls because they are the ones who are biologically made to bear pregnancy the act of intercourse is done by both boys and girls, but the girls are the ones to suffer the consequences including being kicked out from schools and

families, risking their lives and bearing the responsibilities of raising the child alone. In Rwandan traditional society when a girl was pregnant was thrown away from the community and taken to an isolated Island in Lake Kivu to die they or to be taken by foreigners from Congo and make them wives and were never to see their families again. This practice was known as *Kuroha!* This means throwing away undesirable people! The discrimination, beliefs, and practices that undermine the dignity of women are real in African societies and the church does not have clear strategies to address them liberate women from all oppression, and allow them to fully participate in poverty alleviation which is highly needed for African people to live a dignified life.

The influence of Western culture in Africa: A Reason for Resistance to African Women's empowerment

Women's empowerment cannot be successful if it is taken out of the family context. A woman is a spouse to a man, she is a sister to some men, she is a mother to some people, and she is a daughter of someone. A woman is not an island, the reason why it is necessary to look at her from broader family context. Among the challenges African women are facing today include the consequences of external interference. In this regard, Western cultures and Christianity are to be taken seriously. The concepts of gender, gender promotion and feminism which are always associated with women's empowerment and emancipation are mainly considered as exotic by some African societies.

Some anti-women behaviours displayed by some African communities are on one hand ingrained in African traditional beliefs and practices, but some of them result from a negative reaction as Africans feel invaded by external challenging cultural influences. "African traditional values are threatened by a new global ethics which aggressively seeks to persuade African governments and communities to accept new and different meanings of the concept of family, marriage and human sexuality" (Nkansah-Obrempong 2013, 313). Western cultures here can be understood in two ways. On one hand, Western cultures are the ones that were spread in Africa during colonial and missionary times which were characterised by coherence, centrality, and some biblical values. On the other hand, there is contemporary Western culture that emerged after the Enlightenment and especially in Post-Modern times which is defined by secularism, excessive individualism human individual pleasure, and unbridled freedom (Nkansah-Obrempong 2013, 313).

These Western cultures which are portrayed as the best and seek to be universalised are associated with policies, values, and behaviours which are opposed to African traditional values. Since many of the external cultural practices are forcibly brought into Africa, some communities and especially leaders in Africa do resist them even those having a positive impact such as gender promotion and women's empowerment. Western cultures may hinder African women's emancipation in two ways. On one hand, Judaeo-Christian culture brought to Africa during the colonial and missionary era was also patriarchal, "marked by a clear hierarchy that is cemented in legal, marital, political and economic subordination of women" (Girardin, 2013, 29). In this regard, western culture did not make any difference from African traditional culture in promoting gender equality because it was also patriarchal and since it was considered a civilised one, it even contributed to legitimate and reinforced male dominance in African societies. The overwhelming majority of colonial rules and missionaries in Africa were male, and the shaping of African societies in modern time continued to be male dominated.

When western cultures changed and started to reject old values which were centralized and biblically influenced, they opted for cultures characterised by relativism, individualism, human

liberty and secularism. Some of results of this new narrative include some good things such increased human liberty, freedom of speech, gender equality, but they also brought a number of negative elements such as the undermining of marriage institutions, too much liberty for children and youth, pleasure, and consumerism, the illusory rejection of hierarchy and centralised authority, etc. Since African societies were not prepared for the radical and abrupt changes that have happened in the West and because the West tends to think that whatever comes from the global north is the best, African societies and leaders mainly resist those changes considered as imperialistic. This may even be the reason why gender promotion and women's empowerment though they are very beneficial for the common good in Africa were also resisted in some societies. The contemporary narrative to legalise homosexual marriage in the West with the support of mainline churches accompanied by the threat to cut aid for anyone who will resist this policy is an example of Western cultural element which can cause resistance in Africa.

Both colonial rulers and Christian missionaries in Africa portrayed a hierarchical and patriarchal approaches which could not help African societies to address gender inequalities and women discrimination which existed in African traditional societies. According to Reeves and Baden (2000: 8–9), gender discrimination refers to the “systematic, unfavourable treatment of individuals based on their gender, which denies them rights, opportunities or resources”. Vyas-Doorgapersad (2018:13) is of the opinion that,

Women's differential access to power and control of resources is central to this discrimination in all institutional spheres, i.e. the household, community, market, and state. In the labour market, unequal pay, occupational exclusion, or segregation into low-skill and low-paid work limit women's earnings in comparison to those of men of similar education levels.

In a situation of suspicion and mutual distrust between Western cultures and African people, even the positive aspects of western civilisations and Christian values could not be easily welcomed; they are being brought in African without considering the African positive, well-established beliefs and cultural values. The introduction of gender equality and women's empowerment in the last three decades did not prepare African men to understand the reasons behind these policies, and some African women have taken gender promotion as a way to revenge against men for all kinds of discrimination and violence they have suffered. This attitude have led some men to extreme resistance to change and refuse to welcome gender promotion and women's empowerment despite all the benefits it can bring for family holistic well-being. The lack of contextualisation and inculturation of gender equality in the African context provokes some local resistance including rejection or relentlessness in accepting gender promotion and women's empowerment.

Critical Analysis of the Church's Attitude Toward Women's Empowerment and Gender Promotion

According to Benoit Girardin the Bible which is the basic document to define Church doctrine and ethics can contribute to women's subjugation. He has rightly observed that “key biblical players: judges, prophets, priests [kings and apostles] are predominantly male [and] women are a small minority and it can be stated that the Old Testament [by extension the entire Bible] is impregnated, moulded by patriarchal culture” (Girardin 2013, 30). On the other hand, Millard Erickson claims that “the biblical world was one in which women had few rights, or at least far fewer than men” (Millard J. Erickson 1998, 563). In human civilisations and also in the biblical and church contexts women have been regarded as, at best, second-class members of the human race. They were denied the right to vote or to own personal property, instead, wives were

considered the property of their husbands (Erickson 1998, 563). For example, some church teachers and preachers do misinterpret the second creation story in Genesis 2:19-25 to mean that “the woman was created from the man’s rib, therefore she is his property and should be dominated by man” (Tuyizere 2007, 143). Also, the pronouncement in Genesis 3:16 is another point of contention used in some societies to oppress women to woman he said, “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labour you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Gen 3:16 NIV). The ambiguous interpretation of this verse truly undermines the dignity of the women and puts them under male domination and all kinds of oppression. By denying women the right to teach or to speak in public Christian gatherings, Paul wrote to Timothy that “Adam was created first and that Eve and not Eve was deceived by Satan and she became a transgressor” (Tuyizere 2007, 142). In 2018 on Radio Amazing Grace founded by an American Pastor called Greeg Brian Schoof, Pastor Nicholas Niyibikora used these verses to publically undermine the dignity of women accusing them of being the source of all kind evil to humanity. This Radio has been officially closed and stopped from operating in Rwanda on 7th October 2019 after that incident (BBC News Gahuza, 2019; Jean Pierre Tuyisenge, 2018).

Furthermore, the New Testament has some verses which are often interpreted outside of their contexts and give a reason for males dominating females which hinders women’s empowerment and promotion of gender equality. In reference to the Epistle of Paul to Ephesians 5:22, “hierarchy in the church and the authority of Christ as the head of the church was [is] used to justify by analogy another authority, that of husband over wife” (Robert Chambers 1997, 58). There are other New Testament verses that are often quoted literally out of their contexts and are used to marginalise women. For example, 1 Cor 14:34-35, is used to deny women to be preachers or church leaders or even to speak publically in the church. Also, in the Second Epistle of Paul to Timothy 2: 11-22, women are not allowed to teach or to have authority over men but they are to be quiet. Today we still have churches both at national and international levels that cannot ordain women for any official church leadership positions such as deacons, pastors, or bishops. Nowadays in Rwanda, mainline denominations such as Roman Catholic, Baptist, and *Associations des Eglises de Pentecote au Rwanda*, never ordain women for ecclesiastic positions. These positions are associated with powers and privileges, denying women to access them undermines their dignity and thwarts their potential.

The Anglican and the Presbyterian Churches of Rwanda do ordain women for all positions of church leadership, but it is still rare to see women in higher positions of church leadership especially in the Anglican Church of Rwanda. From the time it gained its autonomy from British leadership in 1965, there has never been a woman bishop in the Anglican Church of Rwanda even though the constitution of this Church does allow it. Even among the pastors, women are still very few and there is no strategy to encourage and facilitate them to study. In 2024 the number of Anglican pastors is 700 only 57 are women and men are 643. The rate of women's presence is only 8 percent (Anglican Church of Rwanda, General Secretariat 2024). Church cultural settings do not favour women to emerge and to stand for higher positions in Church leadership. Good policies are well elaborated but there is no clear strategy to give a conducive environment to help women to grow, to get exposed in order acquire necessary opportunity to enter higher leadership. On the contrary civil society and especially the Rwandan Government have really encouraged women’s participation in leadership and decision-making processes, by providing quotas.

The enabling environment created by the Government has led to unprecedented changes and now Rwanda is among the few countries of the world with a higher number of women in the

most influential organs of the country. Since 2019 in Rwanda, we have 61,3% in the low chamber of parliament, 39% in the high chamber, 53,3% cabinet members, 49,7% judges and clerks, and 45,2% members of district councils (Visit Rwanda 2022). Even though there is a critic is not necessarily achieved by women's own merit but politically planned at least it is accompanied by other positive changes in favour of women such as increased access to land and higher education. Currently land ownership in Rwanda is presented in this way 24% only by women, 14% only by men, and 58,3% owned by married couples. This is very contributing to women's empowerment and poverty alleviation.

The land is the main asset for production and investment. Land ownership has been very instrumental in contributing to women's access to finance. Women's access to land tremendously contributed to their control over productive resources and access to loans using land titles as collateral. For example, land contributed to 38% of women's access to credit (Republic of Rwanda, Gender Monitoring Office 2019, 16).

Furthermore, Pope John Paul II has observed that culture and religion have served as obstacles to programmes aimed at developing women worldwide. Women's dignity has been often unacknowledged and their prerogatives misinterpreted. Women have been often relegated to margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented them from truly realising themselves and has resulted in the spiritual [and economic] imprisonment of humanity (Pope John Paul II, 1995). Despite this positive comment, the Pope did not provide a sufficient answer to the reason why women are not ordained for sacerdotal ministries in the Roman Catholic Church. He only argued that it is following Jesus's model since he did call only Twelve Apostles who were men and who participated in the Eucharist. Only those who were with Jesus at the Last Supper are the ones who received the Holy Spirit and also the sacramental charge. Although he recognised the intrinsic dignity women share with men as all bearers of the image of God from creation, John Paul II argues that "Jesus was stressing the vocation of women and their dignity which is outside the priesthood" (John Paul II in Tuyizere 2007, 145).

Some evangelical theologians do not believe in women's ordination and all cases, they try to find biblical reasons and this attitude can give rise to partisan biblical interpretations. For example, on the question, whether women should be pastors or elders in churches Wayne Grudem says "My conclusion on this issue is that the Bible does not permit women to function in the role of pastor or elder within a church" (Wayne Grudem 1994, 937). Grudem grounds his arguments on some biblical texts which seem to be clearly against women's leadership in the church (1 Tim 2:11-14; 1 Cor 14:33b-36; 1 Tim 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9).

Some commentators on these passages suggest that Paul did not prescribe this prohibition as universal and permanent but restricted to the church situation in relation to Ephesian women who were not enough educated and wanted to use newly acquired Christian liberty and seek to dominate public gathering of their early Church. Paul did not intend to forbid women to speak altogether, what he is forbidding is disorderly speaking in relation to tongues (Kenneth L. Barker 1985, 1797 & 1875). on the other hand, it is believed that Christian women who were emancipated and given freedom in the church after an experience oppression in Greco-Roman and Judaic cultures had started to enjoy too much freedom in their dressing, hairstyle, and public speaking in church which could bring about chaos and disorder in the church considering the surrounding cultures (G.J. Wenham et.al. 1994, 1298).

Regarding the criticism against the church for her reluctance to women's empowerment and gender promotion Sicily Mbura Muriithi has rightly made a vehement remark that,

From the historical overview of the experiences, place, and status of women in the church and society, it has been quite evident that the images of women from the Hebrew text have had great impacts on how women are portrayed in contemporary Christianity. This background has shaped and directed the structural formation of African Christianity. The patriarchal systems of these churches condone the exclusion and marginalisation of women in the society which is seen to reinforce the patriarchal African cultures. This tendency continues to [keep]women in obscurity in relation to the roles they play in the church and society (Sicily Mbura Muriithi 2000, 92).

This criticism needs to be taken into serious consideration to make the church a relevant place to promote women's dignity as equal beings to men as they are all created in the image of God with intrinsic dignity. In Rwanda particularly where the government has taken tremendous measures for women's empowerment and gender promotion, if the church is reluctant to change it will remain in the margin and become irrelevant. There is need to make necessary adjustments in relation to women's empowerment based on right biblical teachings available to the church.

The consequences of undermining women's dignity and potential

Despite the commendable efforts governments can make to economically develop countries, cultural and religious neglect of the dignity and role of women can be a stumbling block to community transformation and poverty alleviation. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP 2015), "Gender equality, centred in human rights is recognised both as an essential development goal on its own and as vital to accelerating sustainable development" Ignoring the women means leaving behind half of the population out of economic growth and social flourishing. And even though women slightly represent more than 50% of the world's population, they "perform two-thirds of the world's work" (Myers 2019, 113). Denying women's rights and access to education means that women will remain at home where most of their time will be used for reproduction and raising children. Without access to quality education, women have less knowledge to nurture children, they have fewer options in the labour force, they lack basic economic security and legal rights, and when they are widowed even their situation worsens. They are left utterly impoverished without hope for improvement. As the saying goes 'Educating a woman is educating the entire nation.' In this context, it is worth saying that empowering a woman is empowering the entire household which will necessarily lead to national transformation and poverty eradication. Undermining women's dignity, and denying them their rights and education is destroying society's well-being and national prosperity (Sachs 2005, 60).

The ongoing oppression of women, undermining their dignity leads them to resign, and to take their predicament as a norm, they become more vulnerable, powerless, and lack self-confidence (Chambers 1983, 112). Some develop a spirit of bitterness, and frustration and consider men a permanent threat. In such a situation working together between two sexes for holistic development which leads to poverty eradication is not possible. On the contrary, every member of the society suffers greatly. Women suffer from oppression and have to depend always on their husbands, men suffer since they are considered as the only breadwinners who are to bear the economic burden of the society, and children suffer as well since they are raised under the care of women who are weak and powerless and who can not help them to grow up and attain self-fulfillment in their adulthood. This scenario will then keep society in an endless circle of poverty and misery.

Biblical and Theological bases for Women's empowerment and Poverty Alleviation

Despite all the criticisms that can be made against the church, Christianity is a religion that has brought a revolution in relation to human rights and dignity, especially for women. From the first creation account in Genesis 1:27-28, it is made clear that man and woman were both equally created in the image of God with equal intrinsic dignity. In this verse, the ‘man’ who was created is both male and female and both bear the image of God (Millard J. Erickson, 1998, 563). According to this story, men and women are all bearers of God’s image and are meant to be God’s representative on earth with equal rights, responsibilities and privileges (G.J. Wenham et.al. 1994, 1298). Additionally, to this theological truth, Erickson has even challenged the common reading of the second creation story which portrays the woman as being created to be the helper for her husband. The creation of the woman out of the man’s rib does not mean inferiority or at least subordination of the woman to the man. In some contexts, the Hebrew word used for helper is *neged* which means ‘corresponding or equal to him’, and then the term can be thought of as co-worker or enabler (Millard J. Erickson, 1998, 564).

There are many other biblical references that demonstrate the picture of the woman given in Scripture is not one of insignificance or abject subservience since even God is depicted in feminine imagery and in the Book of Deuteronomy He is referred to as the ‘Mother’ of Israel (Deut 32:18). In addition to her unquestionable dignity, women are also described in the Bible as productive workers who can contribute to poverty alleviation and national building. In Proverbs 31, the virtuous woman extolled, that she is very active and ingenious, fully involved in doing business to promote the welfare of her family and she is not confined in the vicinity of her household but engaged in trading and business affairs. She has the freedom to reason, to plan, to buy and sell, and to manage things in her household and she contributes to making her husband great (Millard J. Erickson, 1998, 564).

Contrarily to what people can think of Paul as an anti-feminine writer when he wrote to the Galatians, he demonstrated the uniqueness of Christianity compared to other societies (Gal 3:28). In Christ we are all one, men and women are one, and in Christ no longer any distinction nor any discrimination. This verse helps in dealing with the destructive power of prejudice whether based on ethnic identity, social standing, or gender we should both rejoice in this gospel that countenances no spiritual preferences and learn to conduct ourselves in a way that sets forth that truth before a confused world (Wenham et.al. 1994, 1215).

Furthermore, on a special note, the church has Jesus as the role model for women’s treatment. In the patriarchal and hierarchical cultures of his time, Jesus went against all odds and treated women in a very positive and affirming manner and challenged all kinds of discrimination in his contemporary society. Matthew 15:21-28 Jesus is involved in a debate with a non-Jewish woman about whether Jesus’ ministry is for Jews only. He at first refuses to help her, in a way discriminating against her. But Jesus is convinced by her arguments and does as she asks. The fact that he has a theological debate with a woman, or speaks in public with a woman at all (in a society where a man was seen to degrade himself if he did that) shows that he was not afraid to break social norms if they undermined someone’s dignity. “Jesus restored the dignity of women and he became a promoter of women's dignity and vocation, which often scandalized people and caused them to wonder” (Tuyizere 2007, 143).

Jesus provided opportunities for women for example in the Gospel of John 20:14-18 Mary Magdalene was the first-person Jesus appeared to follow his resurrection and she was the first evangelist sent to spread the Good News of Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus provided justice to the woman caught in adultery. He deliberately challenged the traditional way of doing justice which is characterised by unfairness and women’s oppression. John 8:3-11. The law of Moses

prescribed the death penalty to both man and woman caught in adultery but here the Jews wanted to stone the woman only as if she was the sole to break the law. Jesus had a very positive and empowering attitude toward women. He used the example of the widow, admiring her offering in teaching the meaning of genuine offertory (Luke 21:1-4). He commended the women with a hemorrhage who touched the edges of his garments to explain strong faith (Matt, 9:20-22). Mary and Martha were among the closest friends of Jesus (Matt 26:6-13). Donald Shaner has summarised well Jesus' relationship with women by saying, "...Jesus did not treat women as women but as persons. He took them seriously, asked them questions, encouraged their potential and lifted them to the dignity that they deserved" (Donald W. Shaner 1980, 221).

The overall biblical narrative shows that women have played a significant role in advancing the kingdom of God. Although in a minority, at all times of biblical history, there have been women who occupy positions of leadership and influence. Miriam assisted Moses (Exodus 15:20-21), Deborah was a judge of Israel and Jael slew Sisera (Judges 4:17-22), Esther saved the people of Israel from Haman's plot. In the New Testament stories of faithful women who accompanied and assisted Jesus up to the cross when all the disciples had run away are striking (Millard J. Erickson, 1998, 564).

From these biblical facts, and considering the practical work women do both in society and in the church providing excellent services in informal business sectors, in early childhood education, in Sunday school teaching in nursing services in hospitals, in caring for basic needs at family level, there is no ground to undermine women's dignity and no room to underestimate their role in poverty alleviation and economic growth. In this regard, churches in Africa which are among key stakeholders for holistic transformation are called upon to strive for women's empowerment and gender equality promotion knowing that any investment made to empower women benefits the entire family of human beings.

The strategies for women's empowerment for poverty alleviation

For any society to grow and prosper, its members must have basic freedoms to enjoy. These include but are not limited to freedom: to own property, to buy and sell, to travel freely and relocate anywhere within the country, to start businesses, to work in any job, to be protected from any form of oppression and violence, to be rewarded for one's work, to be educated, to be wealthy by legal means, to choose and to practice one's religion. "If a nation truly wants to move from poverty toward greater prosperity it must ensure that all these freedoms are [equally] available to women as well as men" (Wayne Grudem & Barry Asmus 2013, 292).

Among these freedoms which must be made available to women, education is one of the most important. As Myers says, "Female literacy is a positive predictor of many good things; lower fertility, lower child mortality, and successful micro-enterprise development" (Myers 2019, 113). The provision of education is not limited to school buildings and equipment appointing teachers and vote the policy of education for all. There should be other strategies that aim to remove all barriers that hinder girls and women from benefiting from the available education opportunities.

In this regard, tough measures against women's early marriages and sexual harassment, assisting the victims of child and teen unwanted pregnancies to come back to school, and providing a conducive environment at school for girls to feel more comfortable are among the prerequisites for successful women's education programs. For example, in Rwanda, the policy of setting up what is known as 'the menstrual room for the girl at school' (*Icyumba cy'umukobwa*), is a helpful strategy to help girls when they are unwell with their menstruation have a place for rest. The room is supposed to be equipped with sanitary pads, towels,

painkillers, a bed, water, and soap among other hygiene tools to help girls have the necessary comfort at school and continue to study. Teachers and girls who benefited from that room testify that “before this room was set up, absenteeism and dropouts among girls was such a big issue” (Germain Nsanzimana 2023).

In addition to providing quality education, there is to remove all laws and policies that hinder women from fully enjoying their rights as men. Women have to be included in decision-making organs both in public, private and ecclesiastical institutions. Even though leaders are supposed to represent common interests for the common good. Those making policies, laws, and leadership decisions are certainly influenced by their own experiences their needs, and expectations. To include women in decision-making organs allows them to take into consideration the needs for families, children, early childhood education, and informal businesses as they are the key stakeholders in those vital domains of life. For example, the Rwandan constitution of 2003 revised in 2015 in its article 10 (4) stipulates that in all decision-making organs starting from parliament, government, cities, and districts women must have at least 30% of the seats (Ninette Umurerwa, 2022). Rwanda has also banned the law which denied women’s inheritance from their parents. The law regarding land use in Rwanda gives equal rights to both wives and husbands when they have chosen for common management of their patrimony. These policies have been applied and certainly, the Rwandan quick recovery from the Genocide aftermath and steady socioeconomic growth have been influenced by women’s empowerment and participation. Because of their tender hearts and commitment to children’s well-being, the majority of African women use properly their income for family development, and in this way, they play a key role in poverty alleviation and national development.

In addition to law reform and easy access to education, African women need to be facilitated for easy access to capital, financial services, and necessary technologies so that they are empowered for economic investment. Access to land and education will help women to have collateral to get loans from financial institutions and education does help in handling required technologies as now many services are being done online using the internet (Shimwaayi Muntembe and C. Mark Blackden 2001, 92-3). However, on the issue of loans from banks and microfinance institutions, the interest rate which is between 17 and 22% is also a big barrier to people with small projects and limited knowledge in income-generating activities. There is a need to find a solution for the high interest rate in Rwanda.

Churches’ Specific Role for Women’s Empowerment for Poverty Alleviation

In to contribute effectively to women’s empowerment and gender promotion, the church needs to provide relevant biblical and contextualised interpretations of the contagious biblical texts used to undermine women’s dignity. These texts which present women as weak, sinful, cunning, and maneuvering include Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit (Gen 2;18-25; 3:1-20), Potiphar’s wife plotting Joseph’s imprisonment (Gen 39), Rebekah maneuvering her Son Jacob to deceive his Father to steal his brother’s birthright (Gen 27), Delilah enticing Samson and causing his death with the hands of Philistines (Judges 16:1-31), the stories of Jezebel the wife of Ahab who promoted Baal worship in Israel, killed the prophets, persecuted Elijah, manipulated her husband to kill Naboth (1 Kings 16-21), Paul’s admonition against women’s teaching in public (1Tim 2:13-14; 1 Cor 14;34-35). In relation to these passages Sicily Mbura Muriithi has lamented that:

The Bible has been used as a tool to bar and also restrict women in many areas. For instance, there is a tendency by some churches, under cultural influence to selectively adopt Biblical

passages, as support texts for keeping women at the margins of church structures when it comes to matters of authority (Sicily Mbura Murrithi 2000, 28).

On the cultural side, “the struggle for women’s empowerment and development may not come to fruition unless urgent attention is paid to a deconstruction and reconstruction of African proverbs to restore African women’s dignity and empower them to overcome contemporary challenges” (Oladele Abiodun Balogun 2010). The church’s teachings and transformative role have to address these issues by challenging these proverbs that undermine the dignity of women and promoting those that give them value and defend their dignity. The church as a strong stakeholder in education has to use the opportunities it has to access children from an early age when they come attend Sunday, nursery, primary, and secondary schools to inculcate positive and women and girls’ valuing beliefs and practices to develop responsible boys and men who pay to women due respect. In the same domain of education, the church has to set up policies regulating the distribution of scholarship considering the needs and the necessity to empower women.

The church in Africa is also an investor and provides opportunities for human self-actualization, in this way the church has to initiate and strengthen existing schemes aiming at economic empowerment for women. This can be done by facilitating them to constitute seed funds to have easy and fair access to financial capital for investments. The church has to provide a safe space for counseling teen mothers and widows. It is common in African churches when a girl or a widow becomes pregnant, the fact and accusation are that the person has committed adultery or fornication which is a sin. In many cases, these people are rejected by churches, stigmatized, and traumatized. As an alternative to a harsh and judgmental attitude, there is a need to set up a mechanism for counseling and rehabilitation that helps the person to recognise her sin and weaknesses but also to give a chance to repent and to be reintegrated into the church and the society.

Instead of running away or turning a blind eye to the contemporary changes brought by globalization, secularism, feminism, and political upheavals, the church is called upon to stand firm and formulate a relevant theology that considers the unchanging truth of God in his special revelation, the African cultural heritage and the new realities of our changing world. The church has to advocate for women’s capacity building not only for family and church responsibilities but also for public and political domains. There is a need for the church to Facilitate more women to study theology at a higher level so that many of them are sufficiently qualified for high church leadership positions, and to encourage the creation of Christian women networks from different churches and church umbrellas so that they can work together for common good. Other recommended actions include striving for mindset change of both men and women about how women are viewed and their responsibilities and believing in women that they can reason with men.

Sensitizing people who misinterpret the Bible to support discrimination of women in churches and communities. Women to expose themselves and compete confidently with men in different actives in the community.

Conclusion

This article discusses contemporary challenges facing the church in Africa as far as women’s empowerment and gender promotion are concerned. The rampant poverty in Africa where the church is growing faster is partly a result of the lack of effective women’s empowerment within the church while it is among the leading agents of change and positive transformation in Africa.

The findings indicate that the church has not been able to change the negative view of women in African as expressed through some proverbs and traditional wise sayings. Instead, the church has embraced and condoned the African patriarchal system which puts men at the center and tends to undermine women despite their role in all aspects of life especially in backbreaking household work which is often not recognised and rewarded. It has been made clear that the church in African has not been able to address cultural barriers based on patriarchal principles undermining the dignity of women and the negative effects of this attitude toward household and community well-being.

Using the example of Rwanda, this article demonstrated how the church is far behind in promoting gender equality in comparison to what secular organisations are doing. The number of women in a high leadership positions and decision-making organs is still very low in the church and the Bible is used as a tool to formulate anti-women theologies based on wrong biblical interpretations. However, there are clear biblical bases that show the divine given women's dignity as equally created by God in his image and that Jesus as the Lord and role model for the church has affirmed women and treated women with high respect.

The key strategies that help women's empowerment include providing a non-discriminatory legal framework, access to quality education, adequate technologies, and easy access to capital for economic investment. The church in Africa as one of the leading agents of transformation has to address the issue of anti-women biblical interpretation based on some biblical passages which portray a negative image of women. To be effective in this endeavour the church needs to review and revise its theology so that women's dignity is recognised and emphasized and necessary practical measures are intentionally taken for women's empowerment. Empowered women have a vital role to play in human flourishing since they have irreplaceable responsibilities, especially at the household level where they are central in child bearing in early ages. The church needs to be listening to women's voices both from inside the church and even from secular world since whatever happens in the secular world does influence the life of the church. Well-empowered women are key stakeholders in community transformation, poverty alleviation, and community holistic well-being.

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