


Mercy Oduyoye's model of 'partnership between women and men' in African Christian ministry

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Dates:

Received: 02 Apr. 2022

Accepted: 13 Sept. 2022

Published: 07 Dec. 2022

How to cite this article:

Baloyi, G.T., 2022, 'Mercy Oduyoye's model of "partnership between women and men" in African Christian ministry', *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies* 78(2), a7598. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i2.7598>

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Masculinity and manhood ideologies remain a serious theological concern in the context of South Africa and the continent of Africa. The masculinity ideology perceives femaleness as a symbol to be lower than maleness and thereby uses this as a strategy to dominate and oppress women. While the oppression and domination of women is experienced in many parts of African society, such experiences also exist within the church walls. The androcentric culture creates an unbalanced theology which then brings the entire discourse of theologisation into question. As this article grapples with these issues, it employs Mercy Oduyoye's African women theology, particularly the model of 'partnership between women and men' in ministry, to reflect and respond to the issues raised. It further argues that as long as African women are subjected to oppression and domination by ideologies that are *adiaphora*, Oduyoye's liberative hermeneutics remain relevant and necessary for doing inclusive theology in Africa.

Contribution: While the article grapples with African women theologies within a theological terrain, the implications of the outcome are multidisciplinary as they aim to respond to challenges of oppression, masculinity and manhood ideologies that women face in their daily life.

Keywords: African women theology; African culture; domination; gender; masculinity; manhood; oppression; patriarchy.

Introduction

The subject of women remains an important issue for discussion in all areas of human studies. Women continue to face several challenges that undermine the essence of their ontological being in society. While some of the issues are located within the confines of African cultural norms, some exist within the Christian tradition. However, the existence of such gender challenges in the Christian space is sometimes informed by the African cultural norms in a society which tends to exclude and marginalise women on many levels. This legitimises the exclusion of women from participating equally with men in the higher structures of the church. While some churches are making progress in ordaining women and providing them space to lead, others such as the Zion Christian Church (see Landman 2013:171–185), the Shembe Church (see Kumalo & Mujinga 2017:122–153), the Seventh-day Adventist and others have not made progress on the issue. These churches are still trapped in the patriarchal system where women are denied the opportunity to address men through preaching, assume positions of leadership or dress in a way that the patriarchy does not accept.

What would be the reasons for the exclusion of women in the Christian faith, other than ideologies that are informed by the patriarchy and other African cultural norms? Duncan (2019:1) states that some of the issues preventing women from contributing to and leading successfully in the church '... are not of the substance of the faith ...' but rather '... *adiaphora*, inconsequential matters'. If the exclusion of women from leadership roles in the higher structures of the church is not of the substance of the faith, then the existential conditions on the ground creating stumbling blocks for women are indications of toxic masculinities, patriarchy and manhood ideologies through African cultural norms.

While one acknowledges the progress made in dismantling patriarchal hegemonies from different churches, there are still noticeable challenges of androcentric attitudes that exclude women in some churches. Some of these challenges are to do with the issue of women's leadership, preaching in the presence of men, misinformed doctrinal perspectives, culture and societal norms that

Note: Special Collection: Women Theologies, sub-edited by Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale (Midlands State University, Zimbabwe) and Tanya van Wyk (University of Pretoria).

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support both the exclusion and oppression of women in the church. In other instances, sharing liturgical responsibilities with women is still met with resistance, particularly by those who believe in the androcentric approach to religious matters. As this article grapples with these issues, it employs Mercy Oduyoye's 'partnership between women and men' model in Christian ministry as a liberative method and advocacy for equality between women and men in the church. Although she does not deal with pastoral theology as such, her approach and search for liberative methods are pastoral and therapeutic to women who have been dominated by patriarchal fundamentalist ideologies.

This article, firstly, deals with the impact of masculinity in perpetuating sexist and patriarchal norms that exclude and disregard women in the church. Secondly, it reflects on Oduyoye's theological model of 'partnership between women and men' as a necessary tool to use in pursuit of total freedom for women's participation in all structures of the church. Lastly, it argues that because the challenges faced by women in the church are not only patriarchal but a pastoral theological concern, liberative methods that come with healing are necessary for a healthy church.

Masculinity as a problem in the church and society

The conscious and unconscious patriarchal mindset influenced by African societal norms on what is believed to be masculine and feminine plays a huge role in how women are seen and understood in society. According to Mshweshwe (2020:2), masculinity is defined as a 'set of values that serves to organise society in gender unequal ways ... unequal access to power, as well as the interplay between men's identity, ideals, and power'. Pyke (1996:531) sees masculinities as sets of '... configurations of social practices produced not only in relation to femininities but also in relation to one another'. Pyke's definition shows that the exercise of masculine power is not only seen against women but that men do exercise power over other men.

In other words, there are those men who want to confirm that they are more powerful than other men and that their sense of masculinity must always be felt. Allen in Mhlahlo (2009:85) defines manhood as '... the state of being a man rather than a woman or child'. This is also in line with Courtenay's (2000:1388) observation that 'men and boys are active agents in constructing and reconstructing dominant norms of masculinity'. As this is observed in society, it is also observed within the church space. The dominant norms that are present in society are derived as expectations of appropriate behaviours in the church. Women become subjected to and defined by these norms. Because of this, anything women do in the church is read and analysed through masculine eyes. Even in the context where women take leadership roles, how they lead is mostly analysed with masculine eyes and a masculine worldview. It leaves one with questions: at what point will women's leadership and participation in the

Christian ministry be seen in terms of leadership without attaching masculinity and femininity to it? While other churches (such as the Methodist Church) in the context of South Africa are elevating women to the highest positions of leadership in the church, there are always masculine critiques, not against women's capabilities, but that their leadership skills are not what men wanted to see.

The roles attached to masculinity and femininity as categories are socially constructed, and the values attached to them are cultural products and not given in any inherent biological nature (see Courtenay 2000:1385–1401). This has a huge impact on the way in which women and men are viewed in society. Courtenay (2000:1387) writes that 'there is very high agreement in our society about what are considered to be typically feminine and typically masculine characteristics'. This promotes the normalisation of the masculine worldview in the church as the only way to understand things. While this may be viewed as an ancient or old problem, particularly in African society, the reality is that it persists even in modernity as a tool of domination over women. This is because many African men live under the perception that for one to be a man, it must be seen in how dominant and masculine one is in his household and society.

Masculinity perceives femaleness as a symbol to be lower than maleness (see Ruether 1993:75), and those perceptions are used to craft rules that define the place of women in all institutions of society. In a context where women have to discharge their leadership, the indoctrinated socially constructed roles always evaluate the performance and success of women through a masculinity mindset. This shows the power of masculinity that is controlling the minds of people and thereby infiltrating social institutions and operating with some diplomacy against women. This stems from societal perceptions of 'incongruity between "being a leader" and "being a woman"' (Poltera & Schreiner 2019:12). Whether one talks about leadership in secular or religious world, incongruity is always used to define a familiar space for women. If a woman becomes a general of the military in her country, it is viewed as odd that a woman has entered a male-dominated space – a space which, in terms of socioconstructs, has been reserved for men.

The problem of masculinity is that it creates a male-dominated space which renders women not only inappropriate but incompetent and unsuitable. At the heart of this kind of thinking exists hegemonic culture that seeks to put men as symbols of control over nature and its 'second-class citizens', which are women (see Ruether 1993). Depending on the society in which men are brought up, there are certain rituals and forms of training that young men go through in order to prove manhood. For many African societies, the role of the initiation schools, other than circumcision, is to teach, among others, '... fearlessness and aggressiveness as qualities of manhood' (Siweya, Sodi & Douglas 2018:12). As Maluleke (2018:38) puts it, 'Circumcision school is but one context in which compulsive masculinity plays out'. This complements how cultural norms have been framed, which places men

above everything, and this creates a huge problem in society. Masculinity, in its nature, has the capacity to institutionalise a culture of abuse, domination and oppression against women. The successfulness of their training plays itself out through masculinities and manhood ideologies in society.

With this in play, it becomes impossible for women to play their leadership roles in society, families, religious and secular institutions. It becomes odd for a woman to lead her house in the presence of her husband in many parts of African society. This is a challenge of sociological gender constructs which have been established and employed as frameworks to evaluate the leadership and roles played by women, and in contrast to that of men, subjectively. In other words, the discussions about the suitability and performance of leaders tend to be reduced through masculinities and manhood ideologies.

Within an African setting, these masculinities are informed by cultural norms that have been made to glorify men over women. If a man defines a woman from his male point of view and then regards her womanhood as perfect for producing cooked food and clothes for men, then that attitude borders on the lines of masculinities. This attitude is also observed and correctly captured by Poltera and Schreiner (2019:12) in that 'women's leadership are underpinned by the assumption that there are salient gendered differences between men and women which influence leadership styles and values'. What makes the salient difference is the fact that society has already created and defined spaces for women. The oppression of women is an abiding reality in all spheres of life: economic, political, social, cultural, sexual and religious. It is a reality that does not leave any institution unaffected by those masculinity ideologies. The church as institution of Christian faith, which ought to promote oneness and equality in the eyes of God, is affected by this.

Androcentrism – African church

While the oppression and domination against women is experienced in many parts of African society, such experiences also exist within the church walls. The use of certain biblical verses and letters against women is direct act of oppression against women. The most difficult and painful reality is that this experience of oppression is established in the church. Ruether (1993:37) states, 'all the categories of classical theology in its major traditions – Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant – have been distorted by androcentrism'. The one-sided theology from some of these churches fails to realise that the exclusion of women from any form of authority is in effect equivalent to exclusion from reflecting the image of God (cf. Dreyer 2007:1497). The androcentric culture creates an unbalanced theological problem which then brings the entire discourse of theology into question.

It makes a one-sided theology which Oduyoye (Oduyoye & Kanyoro [1990] 2001:43) calls a 'one-winged bird that cannot fly properly'. How does a one-winged theology take off from the ground to the sky? She brings this to the African church,

that for it to balance, it must fly with two wings. Oduyoye argues against the androcentric views which disregard the fact that women are fully created in the image of God with rights to participate in God's service. She points out that the androcentric theology is actually a theology that perpetuates the dehumanisation of African women and the denial of full spiritual justice.

Within the context of South Africa, this culture of androcentrism has been embraced by some of the African independent churches, like the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), the Shembe and others that firmly maintain the androcentric culture (Mashabela 2017:7). The Presbyterian Church (a Reformed tradition) is also trapped in the patriarchal system. According to Duncan (2019):

Despite the advances made in recognition of the role of women in leadership in the South African Presbyterian tradition, there was still resistance to the recognition and promotion of women within the new uniting denomination. (p. 6)

This shows the stubborn persistence of lines of authority that exists in the church and how this excludes women from leading in high positions within the church. This encourages promotion of uncomplimentary gender roles in the church based on a thin and one-sided theological conviction. While the scripture remains as a vital document in the life of the church and the spiritual aspects of individuals, it is taken as an authority given to us to follow as is without interrogating it. Many African women theologians through the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians have challenged this problem of androcentrism as an unjust structure that seeks to dominate and oppress women. In this Circle, women theologians '... interrogate why worldwide women have been treated as "outsiders" in the church' (Mupangwa & Chirongoma 2020:3). As Duncan stated, those issues making men treat women as outsiders are '... *adiaphora* ...' (2019:1) and not connected to matters of faith in God.

In the process of this theologisation, there exist African cultural norms which also influence the behaviour of masculinities and manhood in the church. Kanyoro (1995) writes that:

Our concern with the biblical text is not just to condemn the culture but to seek tools to analyse culture in order to reach out to women who are in bondage to it. (p. 22)

This is a search for suitable hermeneutics which aim to bring balance between men and women in all spheres of society.

If the theology being introduced by African women theologians is not fully embraced, patriarchal fundamentalist views will remain a serious challenge and obstacle towards the realisation of women's freedom. A church that fails to embrace women as humans with rights and dignity accelerates androcentrism and the culture of masculinity into its own space. It creates pain in the lives of women, which also makes this a serious concern to the meaning of the church as a body of believers united in Christ.

Mercy Oduyoye's theology

Mercy Ambo Oduyoye, one of Africa's leading womanist theologians and a founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, plays a significant role in bringing a theology which empowers and liberates women from shackles of patriarchal domination. Without any doubt, Oduyoye's theology transmits incredible influence on many women and men in sociopolitical, academic and church or religious life in the world. Oduyoye's concern for justice for women makes her theologisation relevant and contextual in search of justice in a context that is hostile and unjust to women in Africa. Her African women theology reveals profound visions of hope and transformation, partnership and cooperation for the entire faith community (see Oduyoye 1990:1–2).

This is born out of the struggles for freedom by many African women in the church and African society. According to Gathogo (2010:5), 'Oduyoye has been the leading African women pursuing feminist theologies that are distinctly African, without using the phrase African Women's Theology(ies)'. While Oduyoye is the leading founder and mother of African women theology, there are many African women theologians (such as Isabel Phiri, Musimbi Kanyoro, Denise Ackermann, Elizabeth Amoah, Nyambura Njoronge, Teresa Hinga and Musa Dube, to mention a few) who helped in championing its formation and training across the continent of Africa and the world. The African women theology interrogates the deliberate exclusion of women from participating freely and equally with men in the church and also in academia. It interrogates the African cultural norms that have enslaved women, while men remain unaffected as 'superior' to women and nature.

Oduyoye's model of 'partnership between women and men'

Oduyoye (2001) introduces a vision of 'partnership between women and men in ministry', which is born out of her understanding of hermeneutic of liberation for African women. This is a project she developed in her book, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (2001). In other words, this concept of 'partnership of women and men' is understood as an operating framework for her hermeneutic of liberation. According to Oduyoye, this vision is not just a vision but one that defines Christian ministry for African women and as an inclusive ministry of Jesus Christ. Christian ministry as a 'partnership of both men and women' was sparked by some of the challenges faced by women, as stated above. Oduyoye (2001:86) argues, 'Partnership of women and men, ordained or not, is the true image of the Church of Christ'. This is reflective of the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ on Earth, which was inclusive and redemptive – inclusive in a sense of creating space for women to participate freely as capable disciples of Christ, without necessarily looking at their biological makeup.

In her theologisation, Oduyoye creates a concept of 'cultural hermeneutics' in order to reflect on a different range of

issues affecting African women both in the church and in society. According to Oduyoye, 'Any interpretation of the Bible is unacceptable if it does harm to women, the vulnerable, and the voiceless' (2001:12; cf. Oduyoye 1996:11–33). Oduyoye places emphasis on the need for African women to be liberated from any form of male patriarchy and dominance. She believes that women have a vital role to play in ensuring that their rights, dignity and liberation are visible in the church and society. Her point of departure is strongly placed on the fact that all those who have been baptised are duly called into the Christian ministry as partners in the service of Christ. But in the process, these hermeneutics must take in to account the fact that those male patriarchs need education in order for partnership to take place. Oduyoye tries to show the male patriarchs that women are not a threat to their maleness but partners in pursuit of the true gospel of Christ.

According to Oduyoye (2001:85), the Christian ministry is understood more clearly from a Greek concept *koinonia*, which means 'community of believers constituting a communion'. She takes the meaning of *koinonia* as her point of departure and key in the model of Christian ministry as partnership between women and men. This is not exclusive but inclusive in its nature. The ministry of Jesus Christ is a community of all believers, irrespective of gender. She states, '... one discovers Jesus as a man who related to women as human beings, to be respected and to be trusted' (Oduyoye 1970:83). The relationship that Jesus Christ had with women was indicative of the true meaning of his ministry on Earth. It was a ministry of partnership with women. Oduyoye further argues that 'Jesus believed in women sufficiently to reveal himself to them' (1970:83), and this serves to demonstrate the kind of trust and inclusiveness in his ministry. It is for this reason that Oduyoye argues strongly for the Christian ministry which acknowledges partnership between women and men as vital for the church.

The central theological premise of Oduyoye emphasises liberation of African women and the need for creating a balanced and healthy relationship between men and women in a way that reflects the true ministry of Christ. This demonstrates Oduyoye's commitment for total liberation of African women. But this goes beyond the commitment of liberation to communal education or mentoring. According to Oduyoye (2001):

In the community of women none is treated as an object. Women all recognize mutual dependence, support and correction. They see themselves as having embarked on a joint search for relevance. Convinced that one head does not constitute a council, they consult together so that their chances of arriving at reliable sources and construction may be heightened. They act together hoping that in so doing they might improve their chances of coming closer to the realities of their lives and hopefully closer to the truth that will set them free, creating a community in which the image of God in women will be honoured. (p. 29)

What Oduyoye does is praxis in action. For African women to understand the need to partner with men in the ministry,

she emphasises the significance of togetherness in search of the true image of God in them (see Kanyoro 2001:36–56).

Apart from the partnership of women and men for the true meaning of *koinonia*, the other liberative aspect of this hermeneutical approach will enable women to read the text from their own understanding and not that of men. An African woman will be able to use this knowledge or understanding and challenge all other aspects of African culture that are oppressive to women. Kanyoro (1995:22) states that ‘... when dealing with cultural matters, there is a need for collective solidarity’. Indeed, the partnership that Oduyoye talks about in her framework suggests a form of such solidarity that Kanyoro talks about. Cultural oppression cannot be addressed in the singular because the custodians of it are those who have been indoctrinated with manhood ideologies. Men should be invited to take part in this exercise.

As a woman theologian from an African context, Oduyoye’s methodological approach is necessary as it crafts a new vision for all women in Africa. Most of the challenges against women found in the church are based on sociological constructs on gender roles. This creates a gap where women’s participation is strongly denounced by patriarchal oppressive dogmas.

The problem of gender disparity in church leadership and pastoral work continues to promote the patriarchal household code, which advocates for the subordination of women in society and the church in terms of a God–male–female hierarchy. This framework of partnership between women and men forces a conversation between men and women in order to have a balanced ministry as described in Oduyoye’s analogy of a two-winged ministry. Isabel Phiri (1997:73) states that ‘African cultures do not allow women to lead men’, because the church exists in a society that is dominated by cultural norms. However, the thoughts of the two-winged ministry and partnership between women and men in ministry are to create relationships that will eventually have androcentric ideologies destroyed. If a church is to reflect the Christ-centred approach in its ministry, collaboration between women and men remains a viable and proper way of doing ministry that is pastoral and inclusive. This is necessary for the church of Jesus everywhere in the world. Elizabeth Amoah (1995) reminds us that:

The church as an institution cannot escape criticism when its action goes against this fundamental law of enhancing and preserving the equality and integrity of all creatures. In other words, both the church’s activities and its structural organization should evince this principle of essential unity and equality. (p. 2)

In agreement with Amoah, the church (men and women) is responsible for creating an institution that lives up to its own Christian values – Christian values that promote faith in God and Jesus Christ and not those of ‘... *adiaphora*, inconsequential matters’. The Christian ministry of partnership serves as a step towards understanding the need to eradicate androcentrism that creates hardship for women in the church. This connects with Oduyoye’s reason for Christian

ministry as a ‘partnership between both men and women’ in that dealing with the oppression and marginalisation of women within and outside the church requires a deeper understanding of matters of faith and a hermeneutic of liberation. Oduyoye (2001:41) maintains that the moment any kind of action is named ‘liberative’ for humanity, it must indeed be a voice that gives a sound theological perspective and direction to total freedom.

Furthermore, this notion reflects Oduyoye’s own belief that both men and women have been called by God to serve with their different charisma. It calls for humanity, irrespective of colour, age, sexuality and class, to participate freely. Oduyoye believes that through the sacrament of baptism, all persons are recognised and accepted as part of the body of Christ. ‘Partnership between women and men, ordained or not, is the true image of the Church of Christ’ (Oduyoye 2001:86). In Oduyoye’s earlier work, she talks about the notion of solidarity, which aims at bringing men and women together for the Christian ministry. According to Oduyoye (1990:43), the concept of solidarity is understood as ‘... walking hand in hand, and developing strength through unity so that common interests are protected, and common aims are achieved’. There is mutuality and reciprocity in the notion of defining the Christian ministry she envisages. For Oduyoye (2001:85), ‘... mutuality and partnership are cardinal marks of the *koinonia* of the church’.

Oduyoye’s understanding of solidarity connects with her notion of the partnership of women and men. This confirms one idea about the Christian ministry, that it cannot and will not be the body of Christ without its women, something which Musimbi Kanyoro (1995) also appreciates in her cultural hermeneutics approach. Kanyoro (1995:22) writes, ‘... when dealing with cultural matters, there is a need for collective solidarity ...’ between men and women. She argues that the oppression of women cannot be addressed without men; it must be a collective take-off. This is so because the church without women is not complete. To be in solidarity, the church must take into account that women and men need to learn to rely on each other in bringing about true communion within the body of Christ (Oduyoye 1990:49).

Women as leaders in the Christian church

The existence of leadership is as old as human evolution (Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar 2018:179). While leadership is acknowledged to be as old as human civilisation, it remains a challenge, especially when women are appointed to lead in an environment that is male-dominated, such as the Christian ministry. Women, as made in the image of God, are called to serve in various positions in the church (see ed. Dube 2001). The work of Oduyoye and other African women theologians in the Circle is in agreement that for the Christian ministry to reflect God, it must accept and acknowledge the existence of women as fully human in the image of God (Oduyoye 2004). In accepting this, the notions of ‘discipleship of equals’ and ‘partnership between women and men’ will then help the

church craft ways for women to take positions of leadership. The main concern of these two theologians is to liberate women from the patriarchal anthropology by removing the patriarchal attitude that church leadership is reserved for men in terms of male–female hierarchy.

Without any doubt, the text shows how freedom from sexism and slavery is important for the Apostle Paul's Christian life and the church. This understanding is helpful as it deals with theology that creates hardship for women in the church. However, providing space for women through partnership between women and men does not mean folding of hands by men in order to test whether women will succeed. It means to participate in their leadership fully and collectively as partners in the Christian ministry. In most cases, the church is trapped in the African patriarchal belief that women have no right to lead men. This way of thinking is pushed in the Christian ministry. Paul's declaration in Galatians 3:28c should also serve as a basis for new solidarity, partnership in the discipleship of Christ.

Conclusion

Mercy Oduyoye's African women theology recognises countless challenges faced by women in the church and the need to liberate them by moving forward in solidarity with men. Amoah (1995:2) states, 'If our theology is eventually to remove all the things that create hardship, it should be for the good of all'. This should become a fundamental emphasis in the process of theologising. This process will give birth to the ideas of Oduyoye's partnership between women and men in terms of modelling a church which is characterised by inclusiveness.

Within the context of Christian ministry, women need encouragement to take on leadership roles in the church. This should not just be an encouragement to women because of the dialogue about the need for equality in Christian ministry, but it must be a genuine liberation that aims for total freedom. It must be one that comes with support, characterised by 'discipleship of equals' and 'partnership between women and men'.

Understanding that our theology is to remove things which create hardship means dealing with those aspects of it that are 'adiaphora' and promoting those that balance faith and Christian ethos. In this way, there will be no marginalisation, especially of the leadership by women from the local church to the highest office of authority in the church. Oduyoye's theological methodologies are concerned with practices within the context of Christian ministries that mirror similar practices with cultural norms in many African societies, where women are treated as 'second-class' citizens on the basis of cultural traditions, affiliation and role expectations within social institutions. As long as African women still face domination, oppression and masculinity ideologies, Oduyoye's African women theologies remain relevant in our quest for justice.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

G.T.B. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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