

Breaking Barriers: The Role of Women in Leadership within African Apostolic Indigenous Churches in Enhancing Gender Equality in Southern Africa

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Abstract

This study examines the gendered leadership dynamics of women in African Apostolic Indigenous Churches (AAICs) in Southern Africa, with a specific focus on the Tangwena region. While AAICs assert their empowerment of women through inclusive participation in church activities such as preaching and prophesying, this research critically investigates the paradox of empowerment versus liberation within these organizations. The study addresses three key questions: the discrepancy between the empowerment claimed by AAICs and the lack of female representation in prestigious leadership roles; the lessons that can be derived from these churches regarding gender equity; and the importance of integrating women into leadership positions both within the church and the broader society. Employing qualitative research methods, including interviews and a literature review, this study reveals that, despite their active roles, women in AAICs face significant structural and cultural barriers that hinder their advancement to higher leadership positions. The findings suggest that while women are empowered in certain facets, they remain institutionalized within traditional gender norms, limiting their full liberation. The study advocates for a comprehensive acknowledgment of women's status in AAICs. It urges transformative practices that facilitate their leadership potential, vital for achieving gender equity within the church and the community.

Keywords: *Gender Dynamics, Leadership, Empowerment, Liberation, Aaics, Zimbabwe.*

Introduction

Examining women's roles within African Apostolic Indigenous Churches (AAICs) reveals a multifaceted interplay of empowerment, cultural context, and leadership dynamics. Although women constitute a significant demographic within congregational membership, their representation in leadership positions is significantly limited compared to that of their male counterparts (Mapuranga, 2013). This study critically assesses the paradoxical relationship between empowerment and liberation, focusing on how AAICs ostensibly affirm their commitment to gender equality while concurrently reinforcing traditional gender norms.

Despite promoting women's active participation in liturgical roles, such as preaching, singing, and prophesying, which are often lauded in ecclesiastical settings, the upper echelons of leadership remain predominantly male-dominated, including pastoral and apostolic positions (Kwaramba, 2018). This observation prompts critical inquiries into the underlying reasons for the sustained exclusion of women from prestigious leadership roles within these churches, which are deeply rooted in African cultural practices. Furthermore, it raises questions regarding the structural and doctrinal barriers entrenched within AAICs that inhibit the leadership potential of women. The implications of this gender disparity extend beyond ecclesiastical confines, resonating within the broader societal narrative, where women's representation in leadership roles is crucial for achieving gender equity. Employing qualitative research methodologies, including in-depth interviews and literature analysis, this study seeks to uncover women's lived experiences within AAICs and elucidate the gendered leadership frameworks that characterize these religious institutions.

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By exploring the intersection of cultural norms, religious tenets, and gender dynamics, this research aims to illuminate the critical contributions women could make if liberated from the constraints of entrenched traditions. The study will culminate in recommendations to enhance women's leadership within AAICs, advocating for a paradigm shift toward more inclusive practices that empower women in both nominal and substantive leadership roles. Such changes are crucial for promoting transformative social change within the church and the broader community.

Research Problem and the Rationale for the Study

This research examines the status of women in leadership and influential societal roles. Women are often concentrated in labor-intensive roles rather than leadership positions, despite comprising most of the membership in AAICs. Additionally, women frequently face gender-based violence, poverty, and disparities in the workplace and within their religious communities. This research aims to empower women to realize their full potential by drawing on theories of gender and leadership, as well as the concepts of empowerment versus liberation. These theories advocate for women to rise above societal biases related to race, gender, and sex and call for the complete emancipation of women.

Historical Background of the Emergence of Aics

AICs are a broader term that refers to churches originating in Africa as a whole, as well as those with no foreign attachment to their day-to-day activities. According to researchers interviewed, these churches do not rely on external funding; instead, their members generate the income needed for the church's day-to-day operations. Matikiti (2014) further describes AICs as churches that are aimed exclusively at African converts, use local traditions more extensively, and have a healing focus on African issues like barrenness and bewitchment. Mapuranga (2013) has written several works on the emergence of AICs. They believe that AAICs emerged as a result of a quest for liberation from the teachings of missionaries. Other scholars with similar perspectives include Ositelu (1998) and Bourdillon (1987), who outlined some factors that led to the emergence of these AICs. Other factors outlined by these scholars include the need for an indigenous church that would liberate Africans from missionary bondage and address the needs of the local people. In summary, Shoko (2014:4) elucidates that “the reasons given for the emergence of AICs in general and AICs in particular, are normally narrowed down to political, social, and economic deprivation and racial discrimination of Africans by the white missionaries and colonialists.”

Based on the literature analysis conducted for this study, it can be argued that spiritual hunger is the leading cause of the emergence of AICs. Mapuranga (2013) explained that the religious needs of healing, divination, prophecy, exorcism, and visionary interpretation are fulfilled by Christian means in AICs. Thus, spiritual experiences in most AICs, such as healing, prophecy, and divination, revolve around the important idea of spiritual possession. Kealotswe (2004:77) highlights that “the most crucial and distinct aspect of these churches is to fulfill what is lacking among missionary churches, which includes providing an African way of worship that meets the fundamental needs for Africans spiritually and emotionally.” Thus, according to one of the informants, one of the most crucial reasons why the AICs claim to have empowered women is by allowing them to sing and prophesy in the church, which resembles the African cultural way of life, where women were always taught to submit and play a subservient role to their male counterparts. In African culture, certain roles, such as leadership, were traditionally reserved for men, where women were not supposed to lead.

Methodology

This study is based on a literature analysis focusing on Gender Justice and liberation theory. The chosen methodology was based on the leadership struggles women face in AAICs. The study aims to identify the impact of AIC's teachings on the liberation and empowerment of women in leadership positions. According to Macmillan and Schumacher (2010), the research design is a plan for generating empirical evidence to answer research questions or address research problems. It addresses four key issues: which questions to study, which data are relevant, what data to collect, and how to analyze the results of the collected data

(Terry et al., 2017, p. 12). This research employed AICs as a case study design to investigate the phenomenon of women's empowerment and liberation in Southern Africa.

Literature Review

Mapuranga (2018: 139) states that while women constitute the majority of members in most religions, the top positions tend to be held by men. Nadar (2012) suggests that if women fail to submit to their husbands or men, it leads to violence, as culturally, there is a belief that men are the heads of the homes, and as a result, violence goes unchallenged, and women remain in abusive relationships. Contrary to this, this study recommends that women should rise and challenge those aspects of the Bible that are oppressive to women and claim those aspects that are liberating to women. (Chitando, Gunda, & Kügler, 2014) and Phiri & Nadar (2012) also share similar views on how men have utilized the Bible to secure their strategic positions within the church. Moreso, Tofa (2013), Tsara (2022), and Vengei (2016:259) highlight that the Johane Marange church argues against the use of contraceptives based on the literal Biblical interpretation that man needs to have many children. About this, Chitando and Chirongoma (2012) acknowledge that religion plays a significant role in promoting male dominance in society. The same interpretation can also be compared to AICs, where women are also forbidden to use modern contraceptives based on the Biblical interpretation. Considering all this, Mapuranga (2013) suggests that gender within the AIC movement in contemporary Zimbabwe requires liberating biblical hermeneutics. She discusses AICs in general, and this research takes it a step further by focusing its discussion on AICs in S.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two interrelated key theoretical perspectives that provide a robust foundation for understanding the complexities of empowerment and liberation within these religious contexts. The theories include Gender and Leadership Theory and Empowerment vs. Liberation Theory. These perspectives collectively explore the intersection of gender, leadership, liberation, and empowerment dynamics within the context of AICs.

Gender and Leadership Theory

Gender and leadership theory examines the relationship between gender and leadership roles, with a particular focus on the challenges women face in securing leadership positions. It highlights how societal norms and stereotypes influence perceptions of leadership capability, often favoring men over women (Ridgeway, 2001). The theory suggests that gender stereotypes create status beliefs, leading to a systemic bias that associates greater competence and worthiness with men. This theoretical perspective examines the intersection of gender and leadership, highlighting the barriers that women face in securing leadership positions within religious institutions. It informs the analysis of leadership dynamics in AICs, guiding the investigation into why women are often excluded from key leadership roles despite their active participation in church life. It critiques the structural and cultural factors that contribute to women's exclusion from key leadership roles, and it encourages an examination of effective leadership characteristics while considering how those are influenced by gendered expectations. The importance of gender and leadership theory to this study lies in its ability to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamics and challenges associated with leadership roles across various contexts, particularly in relation to gender.

The theory of gender and leadership critically examines the specific barriers that women encounter in their pursuit of leadership positions, particularly within institutions that have historically favored male leadership paradigms. This analytical framework is crucial for identifying the nuanced strategies required to address these challenges effectively. By providing a lens through which to explore the complex interplay between gender and leadership, the theory facilitates a comprehensive examination of how societal norms and stereotypes influence perceptions of leadership capabilities (Eklund, Barry, & Grunberg, 2017). This understanding is crucial for elucidating the mechanisms that lead to the preferential selection of certain individuals over others in leadership roles.

Furthermore, the theory encourages a rigorous critique of structural and cultural factors that underpin existing leadership models, promoting the development of more inclusive approaches that acknowledge, and value diverse leadership styles influenced by gender. It offers insights into how organizations can cultivate a culture that is more accommodating and empowering for all leaders, regardless of gender. By highlighting the impact of gendered expectations on leadership characteristics, the theory advocates for the establishment of equitable opportunities in leadership, which is fundamental to fostering diversity and inclusion across various fields.

Moreover, the framework emphasizes the need for transformative policy changes and practices that promote the advancement of women's leadership. Its applicability spans multiple sectors, including corporate, educational, and religious institutions, rendering it a versatile tool for diverse scholarly inquiries. Through its comprehensive approach, gender and leadership theory sheds light on the pervasive influence of gender on leadership experiences worldwide. In summary, gender and leadership theory not only elucidates the persistent disparities in leadership roles but also functions as a catalyst for systemic change, advocating for practices that promote gender equity and inclusivity in leadership across all domains.

Empowerment vs. Liberation Theory

This is a theoretical framework that distinguishes empowerment and liberation. Liberation theory is a social and political framework that examines the ways in which oppression operates within societies and seeks to empower individuals and communities to resist and transform unjust systems (Screpanti, 2007). It emphasizes the role of critical consciousness, solidarity, and collective action in creating equitable and inclusive social structures. Liberation Theory challenges dominant ideologies that marginalize people based on race, gender, class, disability, sexuality, and other intersecting identities, promoting liberation through systemic change, grassroots activism, and inclusive practices (Screpanti, 2007). While AICs may empower women to participate in certain church activities, the study seeks to question whether this empowerment translates into true liberation. It will analyze how women's empowerment is often limited by cultural and institutional barriers that prevent them from ascending to leadership positions, highlighting the necessity for systemic change within the church.

Through this theoretical framework, the study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender and religion in Africa, offering insights into how AICs can evolve to embrace a more egalitarian approach that recognizes and uplifts the leadership potential of women. This research seeks to illuminate pathways toward genuine empowerment and liberation for women within these spiritual communities by critically examining the interplay of cultural beliefs, power dynamics, and institutional practices. By employing this multi-faceted theoretical framework, the study will critically assess women's roles in AICs, explore the structural barriers they face, and propose transformative practices that promote their leadership potential. Collectively, these theories will contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics of gender, empowerment, and liberation, ultimately aiding in the pursuit of gender equity within the church and society.

Findings and Discussion

The Basis of AAIC's Teachings on Women's Leadership

The teachings regarding women's leadership within African Apostolic Indigenous Churches (AICs) are informed by a blend of cultural context, theological interpretations, and traditional practices. While some AICs encourage women's involvement in church activities, such as preaching and prophesying, their teachings on women's leadership can often be contradictory and complex. Key aspects include reflecting broader African cultural norms and values, which may uphold traditional gender roles. This creates an inherent tension between the active participation of women in church activities and their limited representation in formal leadership positions.

Many AICs promote a vision of empowerment for women, affirming their roles in the church through participation in worship and community activities. However, this empowerment can often be superficial,

failing to translate into genuine opportunities for leadership and decision-making. This creates a paradox of being "empowered but not liberated." The theological perspectives within AICs can vary significantly; some churches adhere to conservative interpretations of Scripture that restrict women's roles in leadership based on traditional readings of biblical texts, while others adopt a more progressive stance, advocating for women's inclusion in leadership roles grounded in egalitarian theological principles.

Institutional frameworks within AICs also perpetuate gender inequalities, establishing barriers for women seeking leadership positions. These barriers can include doctrinal constraints, historical precedents, and established power dynamics that favor men in leadership (Tsara, 2025). Although some AICs boast prominent female leaders who serve as role models for women's leadership, these exceptions do not necessarily lead to systemic changes for all women within the church. Many advocates within AICs are calling for reforms to promote gender equity in leadership. This includes advocating for more inclusive practices, establishing training programs for women, and critically examining existing cultural and religious norms that hinder women's full participation of women in leadership roles.

Theological and Cultural Resistance

Interpretations of passages like 1 Timothy 2:12 are often cited to bar women from participating in leadership positions, but scholars like Chetty (2023) argue that these are influenced by cultural biases rather than scripture's intent, leading to an entrenched patriarchy that resists change. African traditional cultures often perpetuate patriarchal norms that position men as dominant figures in both family and community settings (Oduyoye, 2005). This cultural backdrop influences the leadership structures within AICs, where men frequently occupy prominent roles. In AICs, they still believe that men are the head of the family; hence, all women are entitled to bow down to men as a sign of respect, even if the men are not their husbands. It is a church law. One of the observations about AICs in Zimbabwe is that all women are expected to kneel when speaking to a man as a sign of respect. No woman is allowed to talk to a man standing. This really portrays the cultural influence on how women are treated in AICs. Omitting women from church leadership positions can have several significant impacts, both on the church community and beyond:

Lessons from AICs regarding gender equity and women's leadership

Excluding women from leadership limits the diversity of perspectives and experiences in decision-making processes. This can hinder the church's ability to respond effectively to the needs of its congregation and the wider community. Despite changing cultural standards and increased recognition of the need for diversity and inclusiveness in religious leadership, women still face numerous barriers. The study employs an intersectional approach, recognizing that gender discrimination intersects with other factors, including race, ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status, thereby presenting distinct challenges for women from diverse backgrounds (Van Wyk, 2023). According to Dzubinski & Stasson (2021), the historical contributions of women (e.g., figures like Hilda of Whitby) are often downplayed, perpetuating marginality in male-dominated traditions. The lack of women in leadership reinforces gender inequality and can perpetuate systems that disempower women. Nevertheless, women encounter obstacles to assuming leadership roles due to practices, cultural prejudices, and structural inequities (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Despite comprising half of the world's population, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions across sectors, limiting their impact and opportunities for progress. It sends a message that women are not valued or capable of taking on leadership roles, impacting their self-esteem and participation in church activities.

Excluding women overlooks their God-given leadership abilities, distorting the biblical concept of the "body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12), where all members contribute equally. Scholars like Galgalo (2012) argue that this equates to denying the imago Dei (image of God) in women, as both genders share equal dignity and capacity for leadership, leading to a weakened church that fails to reflect divine wholeness. Similarly, Chami & Youssef (2024) note that patriarchal systems suppress women's contributions, resulting in untapped potential and a less effective ministry. Many capable and talented women are often overlooked for leadership roles, resulting in a loss of valuable insights, skills, and innovations that could enhance the

church's mission and outreach. Women frequently play crucial roles in cultivating community and nurturing relationships within congregations. Their exclusion from leadership positions may weaken these connections and diminish the overall sense of community within the church.

Impact on Church Growth and Engagement

Research indicates that churches with inclusive leadership are more effective at engaging their congregations and reaching out to the community. Incorporating women into leadership roles is essential for achieving a sustainable development path (UN Women, 2020). By empowering women leaders to realize their full potential, societies can tap into a wealth of talent, creativity, and expertise (Awain, Jaboob et al., 2024). Excluding women from leadership positions can stifle growth opportunities and limit the church's ability to attract a diverse membership. Women provide unique spiritual insights and experiences, and by omitting them from leadership roles, the church may forfeit valuable contributions that enhance the spiritual growth and development of all its members.

For example, in Forward in Faith International Ministries (FIFM), women play a central role in leadership, resulting in noticeable growth within the church. Women in FIFM have actively participated in talent development (Tsara, Mudau & Mudimeli, 2025), which has contributed to the church's income to build facilities and address the social and economic needs of underprivileged members. A failure by AICs to include women in leadership and crucial decision-making will ultimately lead to stagnation in the church's growth. The absence of women in leadership can raise questions about the church's credibility and relevance in contemporary society, particularly as gender equality remains a pressing social issue. Omitting women from leadership roles in the church can have far-reaching consequences that impact both the church community and broader society. Embracing gender inclusivity in leadership can enhance the church's vitality and effectiveness in fulfilling its mission.

Religious Interpretation and Gender Roles

Gender equality and women's empowerment are essential for creating an inclusive, just, and sustainable future for humanity. However, progress in advancing women's rights, as outlined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (United Nations, 1995), continues to fall short of targeted goals. One contentious issue in many Christian denominations is the exclusion of women from leadership roles, including those of pastors, elders, and bishops. This debate often revolves around two primary theological perspectives. Complementarians, including scholars like Chettry (2023), argue that the Bible (e.g., 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and Ephesians 5:22-33) prescribes distinct gender roles, assigning authority in the church and the home to men while suggesting that women should contribute in complementary, non-authoritative ways. In African Indigenous Churches (AICs), women are often recognized for their roles in prophecy and singing, but they are frequently placed in subordinate positions within church hierarchies.

In contrast, some missionary churches, such as the Methodist Church, permit broader participation, allowing women to be elected as pastors and lead congregations. A critical examination of the scriptural interpretations that reinforce these gender roles may provide insights into the barriers women face. AICs often cite verses, such as those in Corinthians 13, which instruct women to submit to their husbands and to ask questions at home. By taking these passages literally without considering their broader context, AICs perpetuate the exclusion of women from leadership positions.

Benefits of Including Women in Church Leadership

Women contribute unique life experiences and perspectives that can significantly enrich decision-making processes and improve the overall quality of leadership. Their participation fosters more holistic and inclusive church governance. Furthermore, female leaders serve as role models for other women and girls within the congregation, motivating them to seek leadership roles in their communities and beyond. This visibility encourages increased engagement in church activities and leadership training.

Including women in leadership challenges traditional gender roles and promotes equality within the church. It sends a powerful message about the importance of equity and can help transform cultural attitudes towards women in leadership. Women may employ different leadership styles, such as collaborative and relational approaches, which can balance traditionally hierarchical leadership models. This diversity in leadership styles can foster a more inclusive church environment (Akajo, 2022). When women hold leadership positions, there is often a corresponding increase in women's participation in church activities. This helps create a more engaged and active congregation. This can be observed in FIFM, where female pastors are present, and women are actively involved in leadership and church activities. AICs should also adopt a stance of empowering women and take on higher leadership roles, such as those in pastoral positions, to inspire other women to participate in church activities.

Women leaders are often more attuned to social justice issues, such as gender-based violence, poverty, and inequality. Their leadership can inspire the church to confront these critical challenges within the congregation and the wider community. By empowering women in leadership roles, AICs can foster sustainable change within the church and broader society (UN, 2020, p. 5). This inclusion cultivates a culture of inclusivity that has the potential to create lasting impacts for future generations. In many congregations, women represent a significant portion of the membership. Their presence in leadership ensures that the church's leadership reflects the demographic makeup of its congregation, promoting a sense of belonging and representation. Ultimately, incorporating women into church leadership enriches the church community and advances the broader movement toward gender equality and empowerment in society.

Implications of the Study for the Liberation and Empowerment of Women

This research endeavors to elucidate the complex interplay between empowerment and liberation for women within African Initiated Churches (AICs) in Southern Africa. It offers a nuanced analysis that distinguishes between mere participation in church activities and the substantive attainment of leadership roles. By critically examining these dimensions, the study deepens the discourse surrounding gender equity, challenging reductive narratives that overlook the structural barriers influencing women's agency. Furthermore, it offers a context-specific examination of gendered leadership within a distinct cultural and religious framework. This localized focus addresses a notable gap in the existing literature by investigating how African cultural conventions and religious doctrines intersect to shape leadership opportunities available to women. The research identifies and articulates both structural and cultural impediments that obstruct women's progression to leadership positions, thereby enriching the understanding of the multifaceted factors that influence women's roles within AICs.

The findings reveal a significant discrepancy between the proclaimed ideals of gender empowerment and the stark reality of male-dominated leadership hierarchies. This paradox not only highlights the need for critical reflection within AICs regarding their gender equity claims but also underscores the broader implications for societal gender disparities. The active engagement of women in worship and community life should be recognized as a vital component of their potential to influence change, yet this potential remains unrealized in many pivotal leadership aspects. Moving forward, AICs must embrace transformative practices that challenge traditional gender norms and enhance women's leadership roles. Such practices could involve implementing training programs, creating mentorship opportunities, and fostering an inclusive church culture that genuinely values women's contributions. By doing so, AICs can not only improve gender equity within their congregations but also positively impact the wider community, paving the way for a more equitable society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has elucidated the complex interplay between empowerment and liberation for women in African Indigenous Churches (AICs) in Southern Africa. Through a nuanced examination of the leadership dynamics and cultural contexts inherent within these religious institutions, it has become evident that while women are granted opportunities for participation in various church activities such as preaching, singing, and prophesying, they are simultaneously constrained by longstanding structural and cultural barriers that

inhibit their ascendance to leadership roles. The findings of this study establish that the journey towards empowerment and liberation for women in AICs requires a concerted effort to dismantle the barriers within religious leadership structures. This study advocates for ongoing dialogue and action that empower women to fulfill their leadership potential, thereby fostering a more inclusive and transformative environment in both the church and society.

AICs need to formalize the inclusion of women in leadership roles beyond traditional settings. This can be accomplished by creating pathways for women to assume positions such as pastors and church secretaries, thereby establishing a more equitable leadership structure that reflects the demographics of the membership. AAICs should implement leadership development programs specifically tailored for women. These programs can provide theological education, enhance leadership skills, and foster personal empowerment, equipping women to take on significant roles within the church and the broader community. The leadership within AAICs should reassess existing policies and doctrines that limit women's participation in the organization. By updating these policies to foster inclusivity, the church can align itself with its claims of empowerment and create a more supportive environment for women. Women must be actively engaged in decision-making processes within the church. Establishing committees or task forces that include female members can ensure women's voices are heard and considered when formulating church policies and initiatives.

Finally, organizing gender sensitization workshops and seminars for both men and women within the church can promote understanding and support for gender equality, dismantle stereotypes, and empower all members to advocate for women's leadership. Creating networks or support groups for women within the church can also provide platforms for sharing experiences, addressing challenges, and developing strategies to overcome barriers to leadership. It could also encompass mentorship programs that connect aspiring female leaders with experienced mentors. Ongoing research into the gender dynamics within AAICs is vital. Conducting studies that monitor changes over time can help identify progress and highlight areas needing further attention, ultimately promoting a more equitable church environment.

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