

The Effects of Gender Disparity on the Ordination of Women

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Abstract-- This study examined the effects of gender disparity on the ordination of women in the Africa Inland Church (AIC) in Machakos Sub-county, Machakos County, Kenya. The study was guided by Radical Feminist Theory, which explains how patriarchal systems shape power relations and influence access to leadership positions. The theory provided a framework for understanding how gender-based inequalities affect women's opportunities for ordination within the church. The findings showed that gender disparity remains a significant challenge to the ordination of women. Long-standing church traditions and prevailing African cultural beliefs were identified as the main factors limiting women's access to ordained ministry. Many respondents indicated that women are generally expected to serve in supportive roles, while leadership positions are largely reserved for men. As a result, women experience unequal opportunities for advancement within the church despite possessing the qualifications and commitment required for ministry. The study further found that cultural perceptions of male leadership continue to shape attitudes toward women's ordination. These perceptions reinforce gender stereotypes that discourage women from pursuing leadership roles and limit their participation in decision-making within the church. Consequently, the church does not fully benefit from the knowledge, skills, and spiritual gifts that women can contribute to ministry. The study concludes that gender disparity has negatively affected women's ordination by restricting leadership opportunities, reducing women's participation in church governance, and perpetuating unequal treatment within the ministry. It recommends that the church review its policies and practices to promote equal opportunities for ordination and leadership based on calling, competence, and service rather than gender. Such changes would strengthen the church by encouraging broader participation, improving leadership diversity, and making better use of the abilities of both women and men in ministry.

Keywords-- Gender disparity; Women ordination; Church leadership; Patriarchy; Africa Inland Church (AIC).

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender disparity remains one of the major challenges affecting the ordination of women in many Christian denominations across the world. Although women increasingly pursue theological education and demonstrate commitment to ministry, they continue to encounter barriers that restrict their access to ordained leadership.

These barriers often arise from institutional traditions, cultural expectations, and patriarchal systems that favour men in church leadership. In the United States, women accounted for only about 10 percent of the ordained clergy in 1990 despite the growing number of women enrolling in seminaries and preparing for pastoral ministry. While some churches created opportunities for women to serve in ministry, many continued to reserve full ordination and senior leadership positions for men. This imbalance limited women's participation in church governance and reduced their opportunities to exercise leadership (Bartkowski & Shah, 2014).

Bartkowski & Shah (2014) further observed that biblical scholarship has not produced conclusive evidence supporting the exclusion of women from ordination. Instead, theological discussions have highlighted the inclusive nature of Jesus' ministry, where women actively participated as followers and witnesses. Nevertheless, many churches have maintained traditions that continue to restrict women's access to ordained ministry. Masci (1987) similarly noted that resistance to women's ordination has largely been sustained by institutional practices rather than by changing social realities. The continuation of these practices has reinforced unequal access to leadership positions and has limited women's participation in important decisions affecting church life.

Studies conducted in Africa reveal similar patterns. In Nigeria, Wiredu (2021) found that women actively participate in theological education and church ministry but continue to experience unequal treatment during the ordination process. Ecclesiastical traditions and doctrinal positions have prevented many qualified women from advancing into ordained leadership, thereby limiting their contribution to the church. Byaruhanga (2010) reported that in Malawi, church leadership structures remain predominantly male, with women expected to serve under systems designed and controlled by men. Although women receive the same divine calling to ministry, patriarchal governance structures restrict their influence in leadership and decision-making.

In South Africa, Parker (2005) argued that gender inequality within the church is reinforced through historical traditions, cultural beliefs, and certain interpretations of biblical texts.



These factors have continued to justify unequal leadership opportunities and have contributed to the underrepresentation of women in ordained ministry. Research from Tanzania also demonstrates the consequences of gender disparity in church leadership. Although women have been ordained in some denominations, they remain underrepresented in positions where major decisions are made. Female representation in leadership structures declines significantly at higher administrative levels, showing that women continue to face obstacles in advancing to senior leadership despite their participation in ministry.

Kemdrim (1995) observed that the exclusion of women from church leadership in the Democratic Republic of Congo limits the church's capacity to respond effectively to social issues affecting women. Greater involvement of women in ordained ministry would strengthen the church's efforts to address challenges such as inheritance rights, widowhood, polygamy, and other practices that disadvantage women. Comparable concerns have been reported in Uganda. Women clergy in the Anglican Church have consistently raised concerns about discrimination and limited opportunities for promotion. According to research, many women serve as chaplains and assistant ministers, yet none have attained the office of bishop. Such unequal representation continues to restrict women's influence in church leadership and governance.

The situation in Kenya reflects similar challenges. Although women have made considerable contributions to church ministry, their representation in senior ordained leadership remains limited. Kapinde & Higgs (2022) argues that reducing gender inequality requires deliberate institutional reforms rather than relying solely on statistical improvements. Grove & Montgomery (1999) further maintains that changing cultural attitudes towards gender roles is essential for eliminating discrimination in leadership. Doyal (2009) also notes that women have historically experienced exclusion from leadership opportunities, and this pattern continues to affect religious institutions despite efforts aimed at promoting equality. The reviewed literature shows that gender disparity has significant effects on the ordination of women. It limits access to leadership positions, reduces women's participation in church decision-making, weakens their contribution to ministry, and sustains patriarchal systems within religious institutions. Although some churches have made progress toward greater inclusion, many denominations continue to experience challenges in providing equal opportunities for women called to ordained ministry.

II. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Despite the growing number of women who pursue theological education and are called to ministry, gender disparity continues to affect their ordination and access to leadership positions in the Africa Inland Church (AIC). Women often face unequal opportunities for ordination, limiting their participation in church leadership, decision-making, and career advancement. This underrepresentation reinforces gender inequality and prevents the church from fully utilizing women's leadership potential. Despite existing studies on women in church leadership, limited research has specifically examined the effects of gender disparity on the ordination of women in AIC, Machakos Sub-county. Therefore, this study sought to examine these effects and provide evidence to inform more equitable practices in church leadership.

III. EMPIRICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender inequality remains a major challenge affecting women's participation in ordained ministry across different Christian traditions. Globally, women have increasingly pursued theological training and demonstrated commitment to church service, yet many continue to experience limitations when seeking ordination and leadership opportunities. Research indicates that church structures, historical traditions, and perceptions about gender roles continue to influence decisions concerning women's access to pastoral positions. Kambula (2022) observed that some church traditions inherited from missionary systems have contributed to the continued restriction of women from ordained leadership. The exclusion of women from ordination affects their ability to serve fully in ministry and limits the contribution they can make to church growth and leadership.

Within the African context, gender disparity in church leadership is closely connected to cultural beliefs and patriarchal systems that associate authority with men. Chilapula (2023), in a study on women clergy in the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Blantyre Synod in Malawi, found that women experienced challenges in gaining acceptance and accessing influential leadership positions despite having theological qualifications and ministry experience. The study revealed that delayed acceptance of women's ordination contributed to their limited participation in decision-making structures within the church. This indicates that gender disparity affects not only women's entry into ministry but also their ability to progress into positions of authority.



African studies further show that traditional views regarding gender roles continue to influence attitudes toward women's ordination. Kambula (2022) established that historical church practices and social expectations have contributed to the perception that leadership is primarily a male responsibility. Consequently, women who seek ordained ministry often encounter resistance from communities that maintain traditional understandings of leadership and authority. Such practices reduce women's visibility in ministry and limit the diversity of leadership within churches.

In Kenya, gender disparity continues to affect women's advancement within church leadership structures. Githinji (2013), who examined gender disparities in leadership within the Anglican Church of Kenya, Diocese of Nairobi, found that women clergy faced challenges in progressing to higher leadership positions. The study identified patriarchal attitudes and societal expectations as major factors contributing to the unequal representation of women in church leadership. The limited presence of women in senior positions reduces their participation in decision-making and restricts their influence on church policies.

Njoroge (2023) examined the relationship between culture and women's ordination in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), Kenya. The study found that cultural perceptions of male authority continue to shape views regarding women's suitability for ordained ministry. Although women may have the required theological education and commitment to serve, cultural expectations often create barriers that affect their recognition and acceptance as church leaders. The study demonstrates that gender disparity influences both the process of ordination and the opportunities available to women after entering ministry.

Julius (2021) investigated gender equality practices in selected churches in Nairobi and established that women remain underrepresented in senior church leadership despite efforts to promote equality. The study noted that organizational traditions and leadership systems continue to limit women's involvement in key decision-making roles. As a result, women's voices and experiences are often less represented in matters concerning church governance and ministry development. Bukachi (2008) explored the experiences of women clergy in selected churches in Nairobi and found that female ministers encountered challenges related to acceptance, recognition, and career advancement. The study showed that limited representation of women in pastoral leadership reduces their visibility and affects the availability of role models for women aspiring to join ministry.

These barriers demonstrate how gender disparity affects women's confidence, professional growth, and participation in church leadership. Kinoti (2019) examined the empowerment of ordained women in leadership within the Methodist Church in Kenya and found that women clergy continued to experience limitations in accessing higher administrative positions. Although some denominations have accepted women's ordination, institutional practices and leadership structures continue to restrict women's full participation in church governance. This reduces the ability of churches to benefit from the skills, experiences, and perspectives of women leaders.

The reviewed studies indicate that gender disparity affects women's ordination through cultural restrictions, institutional barriers, and unequal leadership practices. The available literature demonstrates that women's limited access to ordained positions reduces their participation in decision-making, restricts their leadership opportunities, and prevents churches from fully utilizing their abilities. However, limited research has focused specifically on how gender disparity affects women's ordination within the Africa Inland Church, particularly in Machakos Sub-county. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by examining the effects of gender disparity on the ordination of women in AIC, Machakos Sub-county, Machakos County, Kenya.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by Radical Feminism Theory, developed by Kate Millett and advanced by the Redstockings movement (Redstockings, 1979). The theory argues that patriarchy is a social system that gives men greater power and privileges while limiting women's opportunities in different spheres of society. It holds that gender inequality is maintained through social and institutional structures that reinforce male dominance. In the context of this study, the theory explains how patriarchal beliefs and practices within Kenyan society and church leadership contribute to gender disparity by restricting women's access to ordination and leadership positions (Redstockings, 1979).

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative approach and descriptive research design to investigate the effects of gender disparity on the ordination of women in the Africa Inland Church (AIC), Machakos Sub-county, and Machakos County, Kenya. The study was anchored on Radical Feminism Theory, which helped explain how gender-based inequalities and patriarchal structures influence women's participation in ordained ministry.

The descriptive design was suitable because it enabled the researcher to examine existing practices, perceptions, and experiences among church members without altering the study variables (Khan et al., 2006; Mugenda & Mugenda, 2000). The study involved a target population of 1,785 participants drawn from 105 AIC churches, including pastors, female ministers, church leaders, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, and battalion leaders. A sample of 35 churches was selected through random sampling, while purposive sampling was applied in identifying respondents with relevant information. Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions. The validity of the research instruments was confirmed through expert evaluation and recommendations from supervisors, while reliability was established through the test-retest method, producing acceptable correlation results above 0.70 (Mugenda & Mugenda, 1999; Orodho, 2002). The collected data were analysed using SPSS. Quantitative findings were presented through tables, bar graphs, and pie charts, while qualitative responses were analysed thematically based on the research objectives (Kombo & Tromp, 2006; Muji, 2004).

VI. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that gender disparity continues to influence women ordination in several ways. Respondents observed that the exclusion of women from ordained ministry limits the church's ability to benefit from the gifts, skills, and leadership potential of all its members. They explained that when leadership opportunities are reserved mainly for men, the church misses the contributions that qualified women could make to ministry and church development. Some respondents further noted that this practice may eventually contribute to a shortage of ministers, as women who are willing and capable of serving are denied the opportunity to do so.

Respondents also indicated that gender disparity contributes to a leadership structure dominated by men, where decision-making authority is concentrated in the hands of male leaders. According to the respondents, this limits the participation of women in important church decisions and reduces the diversity of ideas and experiences represented in leadership. They further stated that women often encounter unequal treatment, bias, and fewer opportunities to progress into leadership positions despite having similar qualifications and a genuine calling to ministry. Such experiences were reported to lower motivation and create frustration among women who aspire to ordained ministry.

The findings further showed that institutional traditions and policies continue to reinforce gender inequality in many churches. Respondents explained that leadership positions such as bishops, priests, and pastors have traditionally been occupied by men, making it difficult for women to gain acceptance as ordained ministers. These long-established practices were perceived as major obstacles to efforts aimed at expanding women's participation in church leadership. The study also found that interpretations of Scripture contribute to the continuation of gender disparity. Respondents pointed out that passages relating to the creation account, the male priesthood in the Old Testament, and the teachings of the Apostle Paul are frequently used to justify male-only ordination. They noted that these interpretations have influenced church policies and slowed discussions on alternative theological perspectives that support the ordination of women.

In addition, respondents reported that cultural beliefs continue to shape attitudes towards women in church leadership. They explained that in many communities, leadership is traditionally associated with men, while women are expected to perform supportive roles. These cultural expectations influence the attitudes of church members, making it more difficult for women to be accepted as pastors, priests, or other ordained leaders. Respondents further noted that stereotypes questioning women's leadership abilities discourage some women from pursuing ordination and reduce support for female leadership within congregations.

The findings also revealed that the limited number of women serving in senior church leadership reduces opportunities for mentorship. Respondents explained that young women who feel called to ministry have few female role models to encourage and guide them towards ordination. As a result, many women may hesitate to pursue leadership positions within the church. Another issue raised by respondents was the limited involvement of women in church governance. They observed that when decision-making bodies are dominated by men, women's perspectives are less likely to influence discussions and policies concerning ordination and church leadership. This imbalance was viewed as one of the factors slowing progress towards greater gender equality in ordained ministry.

Despite these challenges, respondents acknowledged that gender disparity has encouraged greater discussion about women's ordination. They noted that growing awareness of gender equality, together with renewed theological reflection, has increased support for women's inclusion in ordained ministry.

However, they also observed that some church leaders and members continue to oppose these changes because they believe that maintaining male leadership is consistent with long-standing church traditions and doctrines. In conclusion, the findings suggest that gender disparity affects women ordination through institutional practices, theological interpretations, cultural expectations, and leadership structures that restrict women's access to ordained ministry. At the same time, the challenges associated with gender inequality have encouraged continued dialogue and advocacy for greater participation of women in church leadership.

VII. SUMMARY

The study explored how gender disparity affects the ordination of women in the Africa Inland Church (AIC), Machakos Sub-county. Guided by Radical Feminist Theory, the research used a qualitative approach to examine the experiences and views of pastors and church leaders regarding women's participation in ordained ministry. The findings indicated that gender inequality continues to influence women's access to church leadership positions and limits their opportunities for ordination. The study revealed that AIC traditions inherited from its founders remain the strongest factor affecting women's ordination, with 73.3% of respondents identifying church tradition as a major influence. African cultural practices that promote male dominance and associate leadership with men were also identified by 60% of respondents as contributing to the exclusion of women from ordained roles. Other factors included church leadership structures, perceptions of women's responsibilities, the church constitution, and concerns about changing established practices. The findings demonstrate that gender disparity has resulted in limited representation of women in ordained positions, reduced involvement in church decision-making, and restricted opportunities for women to exercise their leadership abilities. Although biblical interpretation was mentioned as a contributing factor, it was considered less influential compared to cultural and institutional factors. The study concluded that women's limited access to ordination in AIC is mainly shaped by patriarchal traditions and church practices that continue to favor male leadership.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The study established that gender disparity continues to influence women's ordination in the Africa Inland Church (AIC). The findings indicate that long-standing church traditions and cultural beliefs about gender roles have created barriers that limit women's access to ordained positions.

These inequalities have affected women's involvement in church leadership, reduced their participation in decision-making processes, and restricted opportunities for ministry growth. The study further found that the challenge is largely associated with institutional practices and leadership structures rather than direct biblical requirements. The continued application of a complementarian view of ministry has contributed to the perception that women should play supportive roles instead of occupying equal positions of authority. Addressing these challenges requires the church to reconsider practices that disadvantage women, promote their inclusion in leadership structures, and provide equal opportunities for qualified women to serve in ordained ministry.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations to the Church

The study recommends that the Africa Inland Church review its policies, traditions, and practices that contribute to gender disparity in women's ordination. The church should promote equal opportunities for ordination and leadership based on calling, competence, and service rather than gender. It should also create an environment that supports the meaningful participation of qualified women in ministry by ensuring fair recognition, equal opportunities for leadership development and advancement, and equitable treatment in all aspects of church service. Implementing these measures would strengthen the church by broadening leadership participation, enhancing diversity in decision-making, and making full use of the gifts and abilities of both women and men in ministry.

Recommendations For Future Research

Further studies should be conducted in other AIC regions to examine gender disparity in women's ordination from different cultural and social perspectives. Future research should include views from church members, female pastors, and church leaders to provide a wider understanding of the issue.

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