

Hitting the glass ceiling: Reflections on women in leadership through the lenses of Social Identity

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Received 26 March 2014

Accepted 24 April, 2014

In Africa, we experienced a long history of patriarchal leadership not only in the spheres of politics, economics and culture but specifically also in the sphere of religion. In this regard many women aspiring for religious leadership experience the proverbial “hitting of the glass ceiling”. Many factors are influencing the current state of religious leadership and the accompanying identity formation. The purpose of this article is to do a descriptive-empirical investigation into some of these processes of leadership from feedback of female post-graduate students studying theology at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa. The empirical results will be read through the lenses of Social Identity Theory. This will be done with a keen interest to see if the concepts we are using are still adequate and to search for the possibility of new understandings of religious leadership identities that might emerge and ways in which it can become part of curriculum development.

Key words: Leadership, women in leadership, African leadership, Social Identity Theory, leadership theories.

INTRODUCTION

Desmond Tutu, Beyers Naudé, Alan Boesak, Kwame Bediako, etc are but a few of the names that echo when we think of religious leaders in Africa. Africa is the birthplace of mankind and science traces the first forms of human life back to this continent [1]. Africa has shown its immense talent, not only on the sports field but also in the arenas of literature, art, technology, innovation and also in theology. Over the last few decades, Africa has delivered nine Nobel laureates, six of which were peace prizes [1]. Yet, the absence of women amongst these names is obvious and it becomes even more obvious when you look at the statistics within the religious sphere. Hendriks *et al.* [2], give a summary of the gender representation in church offices and seminaries that all form part of NetAct¹. In the research, they indicated the total number of pastors in the 25 churches with the number of women serving as pastors; the 25 churches have in total 5 835 pastors, of whom 274 are woman, thus 4.7% of the pastors in these churches are women

[2].

Aims of the paper

The first aim of this paper² is to shed some light on religious leadership in Africa in general by investigating the concept and different perspectives that emerge from the literature. Secondly, we look at women in leadership within the African context by investigating some perspectives that emerge from the literature. Thirdly, we look at the use of some of the concepts from Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a contribution within the “relational and constructionist paradigms” towards the discourse on women and religious leadership in Africa. The concepts from SIT are then used to develop some research questions for a group of women doing post graduate studies at the University of Stellenbosch. The

¹NetAct is the Network for African Congregational Theology with 12 seminaries participating in the activities of the network.

²Paper delivered at a One-day Conference on Women and Leadership: Reflections on Gender, Religion and Education, hosted by The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in Partnership with EFSA (Ecumenical Foundation of South Africa), 16 August 2013, UWC Library Auditorium.

data from the semi-structured questionnaires were interpreted through the lenses of leadership constructs and social identity theory to evaluate some of the perspectives on leadership the data produces.

The concept of religious leadership

According to Bolden and Kirk [3], the leadership construct has, and always will be, a contested concept. There exists no clear-cut general agreement on what leadership entails. In Jenkins [4] chapter on 'Religious Leadership' in the new 'Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology', he points to the contested nature of leadership language also within religious discourse for he wrote: "Though leadership has been an essential aspect of religious life from antiquity, its precise role and significance remain contested to this day in the academy and the church" [4]. In his opinion, one of the main reasons lies in the very definition of the term and the fact that the way the concepts and forms are utilized in many churches "bears the marks of secular ages, especially derived from business, social sciences, and political studies".

Bolden and Kirk [3] developed four categories that not only provide a framework for the categorization of different leadership theories but that can also help to clarify some of the conceptual contestation on religious leadership:

- (i) Essentialist theories are positioned in an objectivist paradigm, which focuses on identifying leadership traits and behaviors. Leadership is considered to be situated within the person and identity of the leader.
- (ii) Relational theories state that leadership resides within the relationship between leaders and followers, and not so much within the leaders themselves. Leadership is therefore a group quality. These theories emphasize emergent leadership processes and the distribution of influence and expertise amongst leaders and followers.
- (iii) Critical theories focus on the influence that power and political dynamics have in communities and organizations. This skeptical perspective contends that leadership is the outcome of social and psychological processes. Leadership is used to maintain power and status, rather than empower followers.
- (iv) Constructionist theories evaluate how leadership constructs meaning and helps people to make sense of situations. Leadership therefore resides in narratives and the leader helps the community to reframe its understanding of social problems. These theories emphasize the leader's capacity to solve problems [3].

This basic framework provides a platform for understanding the complexity of religious leadership in the African context. It is a multidimensional concept which has no universal definition or agreed upon content. Different researchers have ascribed different meanings to this Afro-centric leadership approach. When we

specifically look at women in leadership within the African context, different perspectives emerge when the literature is reviewed and therefore confirms that this phenomenon can be studied through different theoretical lenses. Some of these perspectives will consequently be discussed.

Women in leadership

The role of patriarchy

In Castells' [5] second volume on the 'Power of Identity', he gives us a detailed discussion of the way patriarchalism operates as the founding structure of all contemporary societies. Africa has been challenged for centuries by the crises facing this model. Volumes of books have been written on the topic and suffice to say in this regard that Castells roots patriarchy in its more general forms and in its diverse manifestations, in the family. In his opinion, patriarchy is the most pervasive social institution in recorded history and consists of two elements: the dominance of men over women with the family as the institutional core and in which the dominant positions belongs to the *pater familias*. The second element is "compulsory heterosexuality", where the influence of patriarchy extends far beyond the family life and pervades all institutions of life, including religious life. He is, however, convinced that in the new network society, a breakdown of the traditional patriarchal family and the consequent compensations and substitutes for this is taking place. To what degree this is happening in Africa and South Africa is not completely clear and we do find scholars that are of the opinion that patriarchy is still well and alive, at least in some of the African countries [6,7].

Processes of inculturation

Inculturation, according to Bosch [8] takes place because: "The Christian faith never exists except as 'translated' into a culture". With the missionary movements and Western colonialism, it is obvious that the church and its leadership structures have been the bearer of culture. In this regard, cultural and religious perceptions of patriarchy and leadership have become what the churches practice, enact and preach. This silent acceptance of colonial modernity is typical of the entire continent of Africa³ and becomes most visible in the leadership structures of the churches that originated from the missionary movements.

Phiri [7] writes "when Christianity came to Africa, it came as male dominated. Anything that was incompatible with this perspective was crushed. When the Dutch Reformed Church Mission came to Central Malawi,

³Cf the work of Samuel Kobia (2003). *The Courage to Hope: The Roots for a New Vision and the Calling of the Church in Africa*. WCC Publications: Geneva; Kobia, S. 2006. *Called to the One Hope: A New Ecumenical Epoch*. WCC Publications: Geneva.

women were excluded from being evangelists, deacons and elders". In her reflection on the way that the Synodical structures operated, she came to the sad conclusion: "When the Synod denied leadership roles in the church to women, what they were saying to them is that they were not of the right gender to be used by God in that capacity" [7].

The role of Scripture and tradition

Claassens [9 p149], together with many other Biblical scholars, points to the way in which "biblical texts play a key role in forming and sustaining a world-view where the males in society are privileged and thus in power." She goes on to point to the patriarchal world-view in many of the Biblical texts which "contributes to a world-view in contemporary society where the same would be said to be true. In this regard, many women and men have internalized these values and world-view reflected in the biblical text and cannot look at the text (or their world) in any other way."

As part of a course on teaching gender at Stellenbosch University, she helps the students to understand in what ways feminist biblical interpretation serves as tool to deconstruct the power of the text to uphold patriarchal values, helping to understand the equality of male and female so that full humanity may be achieved and also illustrate in what ways a reconstructed reading of the texts "may serve as a powerful source of resistance in the fight for gender justice" [9].

The leadership labyrinth and glass ceiling

The fourth conceptualization of women in leadership within the African context that becomes apparent from the literature is what is known as the "leadership labyrinth" and refers to "the invisible barrier preventing women from ascending into elite leadership positions". According to Northouse [10] research found that even in female-dominated occupations, women face the glass ceiling, whereas men (usually white men) appear to ride the "glass escalator" to the top leadership positions.

Once again, looking at the statistics provided by Hendriks [2] through the lenses of the leadership labyrinth it becomes even more visible if you look at the scenario concerning gender representation in church offices and seminaries. In some institutions like the CCAP (Church of Central African Presbyterian) Nkhoma Synod in Malawi, Hefsiba in Mozambique, NETS (Namibia Evangelical Theological Seminary) in Namibia and RTS (Reformed Theological Seminary) in Nigeria there are not a single women in the leadership structures of these institutions and supporting churches [2].

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a combination of the

relational, constructionist and critical theories put forward by Bolden and Kirk (see Bolden and Kirk [3]). The origins of SIT are found in the pioneering work of Turner [11]. At the heart of this approach to the study of social groups we find the notion of "social identity", which is "an awareness that one belongs to a particular social group and that this group membership is important and meaningful" [11]. One can determine why social identity is important for this study, by asking the question that leaders of religious groups would want to ask: Why do people become part of a group? In answer to the question Tajfel *et al.* [12] found that human beings become part of a group on a personal level because they really want to; and on a group level, because they believe that it is the right thing to do.

Phases in theory formation: According to Haslam *et al.* [13], theory formation around social identity has developed through two phases. Tajfel *et al.* [12] found that in the initial phase human beings accept a certain group identity as their own in terms of their subjective self-definitions, and that they tend to describe their own group favorably by positively distinguishing it from other groups in terms of their own values. This is called "positive distinctiveness". Many factors come into play with positive distinctiveness. There is always a connection between the nature of the group and the social context, and the meaning of social identity can shift depending on who the group compares itself to. The second phase in the theory forming of social identity is known as the 'self-categorization theory'.

Self-categorization theory: A study by Tajfel *et al.* [12] clearly shows that self-categorization or self-definition plays the biggest role in group attendance. Thus, we participate in group activities to the extent that it is possible for us to think of ourselves as "we" and not just "I". While the social identity theory forms the basis for the action of the group, the self-categorization theory emphasizes the psychological process that underlies the transition of behavior – that is the behavior that is informed by a person's understanding of his or her social identity. This leads to the argument that because definitions about identity have such important social and political consequences, leaders search for ways in which to use these definitions for their own purposes. They often have to work hard to determine a specific version of identity. In this regard images, metaphors, narratives and anecdotes play an important role.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised works with an interpretive perspective in qualitative research with its roots in hermeneutics as the study of the theory and practice of interpretation [14]. The aim of this kind of empirical research is to provide contextually valid descriptions and interpretations of human actions, which are based on an insider's

Table 1. Information of respondents.

Respondents	Information of respondents
Respondent 1	Lay member (serving on Church Board) - Anglican Church - rural area in Northern Kwazulu-Natal (middle aged).
Respondent 2	Youth pastor - Dutch Reformed Church – Rural area in the Overberg area (middle twenties).
Respondent 3	Lay member (chair of the Church Board) - Uniting Reformed Congregation -Cape Flats (Heideveld) (middle aged).
Respondent 4	Lay member – Dutch Reformed Church – Rural area in the Ceres valley (early thirties).
Respondent 5	Youth pastor – United Presbyterian Church in South Africa – rural area in Southern Kwazulu-Natal(middle aged).
Respondent 6	Lay member – Baptist Church – Northern suburbs of Cape Town – (middle aged).
Respondent 7	Lay member – Anglican Church – Southern suburbs of Cape Town – (middle aged).
Respondent 8	Lay member – Anglican Church – Hermanus – (middle aged).
Respondent 9	Youth worker – Dutch Reformed – Stellenbosch – (middle twenties).
Respondent 10	Lay member – Seventh Day Adventist – Cape Flats (Guguletu) – (middle aged).

perspective of people and their world. The research was done by means of a semi-structured interview schedule (eight questions) with a sample of students in faith communities where they exercise different leadership functions. SIT formed the basic theoretical framework for the development of the semi-structured questionnaire. As part of the questions, we asked the interviewees to describe and to tell stories in what Henning [14] calls “someone’s narrative version of her lived experience (as in the phenomenological interview)”. Semi-structured interviews, allowing openness for narrative and lived experience, still need interpretation to make sense of the data.

Many students from a rich variety of backgrounds and contexts enroll annually for the Post Graduate Diploma in Theology at the University of Stellenbosch. The diversity of contexts of these students includes countries (culture and language), denominations, social locations, leadership positions, gender etc. The two basic research questions the researcher addressed are: (1) What do we learn about religious leadership from these students that are unique to their communities and (2) what are the most important images on leadership they use?⁴ The researcher took the intake of students during 2012 and 2013 as his unit of analysis. The population of students is 20 female students, but the researcher only made use of the responses of 10 students, making sure that they do come from different denominational, age and social backgrounds. The respondents are shown in Table 1.

One of the assumptions the researcher worked with was that most of the data would represent “essentialist theories” in the light of the fact that most of the literature on leadership in Africa concentrate on trait and style

theories of leadership. The researcher did not pay attention to all the answers of the questions and only to concentrate on the answers to two of the eight questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Coding of the data

Inductive content analysis was utilized for analysing the data. The coding process started with an initial reading of the text and then dividing it into segments and identifying codes, and then reducing or combining codes into themes [15].

Question 1: You are in conversation with a group of friends. Someone starts to speak about his/her congregation. Describe how you would define to them ‘what makes your congregation unique’ and in what way does it differ from other congregations in your vicinity? The following are the three most prominent codes that emerged from the analysis of the data with some examples:

Code 1: The Church as place open to all (lay involvement and hospitable): Many of the respondents saw their churches as places where they experience “openness” and the opportunity for lay involvement. Some of the responses are:

The Church Board consists of members of the congregation fulfilling leadership positions and the meetings are open for anyone. In that way the whole congregation do have access to decisions taken with every voice counting (Respondent 2). The uniqueness of our congregation can be ascribed to a number of factors. These include our involvement in the community, our

⁴The two questions are part of a questionnaire of eight questions exploring different aspects of leadership from a Social Identity perspective. I only looked at the responses to questions 1 and 6.

openness to change, the fact that the members are very hospitable and our “warm worship services” on a Sunday (Respondent 3). In my congregation we like to speak about ‘disciples’ rather than merely the ‘Church-goers.’ Such recognition thus brings the ministry focused on the laity, so that every congregation member, both the offices and laity, proactively joins in various church ministries according to their spiritual gifts (Respondent 6).

Code 2: The Church as promoter of care, health and well-being: Some of the respondents pointed to the church’s involvement in promoting health and well-being as seen below:

My congregation values culture and taking care of the environment. One of my congregation’s projects is Take Care. It takes care of the elderly and the disabled. The biggest challenge for my congregation is HIV/AIDS and poverty. It therefore has plans to expand Take Care project to include issues of combating HIV/AIDS. My congregation has integrated some of the cultural practices into the church. These are: rituals concerning burials, birth, wedding and the virginity test. This is done with the aim of preventing HIV/AIDS and helping our youth from immoral practice (Respondent 5). The lifestyle promoted in my faith community is different. We are encouraged to live as vegetarians. For those who still eat meat is an exception. One of our major tasks is to spread the health message to the entire world (Respondent 10).

Code 3: The Church as identity bearer: Two of the respondents pointed to the important role of the church in identity formation, although both formulated it in negative ways.

I experience that the congregation is going through an identity crisis at the moment. The formal vision of the congregation is missional, but in practice there is not real participation in the life of the Triune God through the body of Christ for the sake of the world. The focus in the congregation is not on the discernment of God’s will for the current situation of the congregation, but on maintenance and rehabilitation (Respondent 4). Our style of worship is rather conservative compared to other communities of faith; even the singing is from hymnals with notes, while other Churches mainly sing choruses (Respondent 10).

Question 6: When you think about the minister(s) and or the Church Board, what would you say is the “image” of them in the community? Can you record an incident or experience to illustrate your thoughts? The following are the four most prominent codes that emerged from the analysis of the data with some examples.

Code 1: The minister as “respected, servant and comforter”: It is interesting to see how many of the

respondents referred to essentialist and relational notions like respect, service and comforting when reflecting on the leadership:

We have a new and young minister at our church – has only been in the community for just over a year, but I would say that he has a positive image in the community. He has been a wonderful source of comfort to many un-churched families in times of grief/death, which has resulted in many new members of the church. The traditional denominational churches are still being used for funerals, weddings and baptisms by many nominal Christians, and he has been very good at using these services as a way of drawing new congregants (Respondent 1). The one word that pops up is “respected”. Pertaining to our particular situation we have decided to be transparent in everything we do. Between me as chairperson and the scribe, we try to keep the members informed and up to date so that they hear it first-hand. There is also a sense of unity amongst the board and that counts in our favor (Respondent 3). When I look at the minister as individual there is another image coming to the forth. This is the image of a man with big hands on his knees in front of the congregation, amongst the children to bring a message to them, stretching out his hands over them and blessing them, greeting them with the hand on Saturdays in town. It is the image of compassion and approachability; it is the image of Jesus is amongst his people (Respondent 4). Minister is a God servant in that sense he/she presents God to the community as the servant, not a king, but the one who should serve the community because minister’s duty is to render service to the community. In order for the community to see God, the minister should serve the congregation and also the community (Respondent 5). Ministers are people that are put aside by God for his work (Respondent 10).

Code 2: The minister as “shepherd and prophet”: As one could have expected, some Biblical images also appear in the data, again pointing to essentialist, but also critical perspectives:

For a minister, two images are overlapped in my mind: Shepherd and Prophet. While the former represents the dimension of loving care, saying, ‘one flock under the one shepherd’, the latter signifies the perspective of justice, urging, ‘repentance and the reorientation of life.’ The congregation, however, needs both images. One sense, the congregation wants to become ‘sheep’ under the peaceful protection of the shepherd. The other sense, they also long for the prophetic minister who is able to lead them until they become ‘soldiers’ of Christ (Respondent 6).

Code 3: The Church Board as “working behind the scene”: Some of the respondents referred to the work of

the Church Board as not so obviously visible to the wider community, but working together, stressing relational notions of leadership:

I would have to say that the image of our Parish Council in the community would probably be non-existent! In our church itself, many of the congregants would battle to name any of the Council members. Historically, an Anglican Parish Council is in charge of overseeing the finances and administration of the local church – this role it probably does, but in a very quiet, behind the scenes manner. We do however, have committed Churchwardens, who meet weekly with the minister and who are probably more well-known in the community – a banker, an agricultural engineer and a DA ward councilor and have a wider influence within the community than the Parish Council itself (Respondent 1). Our vision group is currently planning our congregational missional goals, participating worship services, meaningful small groups and pastoral care (Respondent 2). There is also a sense of unity amongst the board and that counts in our favor (Respondent 3). Members of the congregation and the board of management are from the community; they are there to serve the church and also represent they community. They know what is going on in the community; that can help a minister work together with them to serve the community and communicate with them (Respondent 5).

Code 4: The leadership as “hierarchical, naïve and out of touch”: Some of the respondents described the Church Board as distant, hierarchical, naïve and out of touch:

The image of the elders and deacons in our church, sitting in their black and white clothes in isolation in front of the church, speaks of an old, conventional, unapproachable, hierarchical system in the church (Respondent 4). I would say that they are generally considered to be godly and hard-working people. However, in complete frankness, I believe that in the faith community, as well as the community outside the church, they are often considered to be naïve and out of touch with culture (Respondent 7). Since our new rector arrived just over a year ago, great changes have taken place. The church council had consisted of people from the “main” church who had held the position for many years and they “ruled.” The communities in the “township churches” were largely ignored or at best treated somewhat paternalistically. Under his leadership the composition of the parish council has changed to give equal representation to all three congregations. He is striving to unify the church (Respondent 8).

Interpretation of the data

The interpretation of the analyzed data has a direct

relation with the research questions [16]. The two research questions that directed the research in this article were: (1) With regard to religious leadership, what do we learn from these female students that are ‘unique’ to their communities and (2) what are the ‘most important images’ on leadership they use? The different aspects pertaining to the uniqueness of faith communities and images of leadership became categories in the analysis of the interview data.

Different perspectives on the uniqueness of faith communities

The findings presented in this article in relation to “what makes your congregation unique” clearly support the notion that some interesting perspectives could be found in the “self-categorization” (Social Identity Theory) of the respondents. It is clear that the faith communities, to which these students belong, play a very important role in terms of promoting care, health and well-being. If you further link this role with the important emphasis on community development, one understand why authors like Swart *et al.* [17] points to the enormous role that Faith Based Organizations (FBO’s) play in social and community development. The social capital generated through communities of faith cannot be underestimated.

Most of the respondents described their faith communities as a place that is open to all and that the opportunity is there for all to participate in the activities, as well as leadership roles. Words like “warm worship services, involvement in the community, hospitable members, disciples, spiritual gifts” all emphasizes essentialist and relational notions of leadership. In line with the previous comment, some of the respondents also pointed to the church as promoter of care, health and well-being demonstrated in the way that they looked after the elderly and disabled. The problem and challenge of HIV/AIDS was also addressed.

One respondent sees her congregation as a place where they are struggling with their identity. She experiences something of a discrepancy between what is projected as the vision of the congregation and the real praxis of the faith community. She finds that the focus is more on maintenance than on trying to discern the work of the Triune God. This is a good example of more constructionist and critical notions towards identity and leadership, but is the only example of these notions amongst the respondents.

Tensions of multiple leadership images

The researcher worked with the assumption that he is going to find in the data related to the “image of the leader” quite a number of references to the traits and behaviors related to the person and identity of the leader, named “essentialist theories”. Although references to concepts of power and authority (hierarchy) did appear, it

was surprising to see that concepts related to “relational theories” were much more frequent in the data. It was specifically with images of the leader as “comforter and servant” that it was interesting to see how the image of leadership in service of the community was emphasized. Concepts related to “constructionist theories” and “critical theories” did not really feature in the data.

Constructing (new) identities for women in positions of leadership

The following common themes can be identified as part of constructing new identities for women who aspire to participate in religious leadership:

- **Leadership and respect:** The data shows convincingly that the “calling” of the leader and being respected for that is an important aspect of taking up the leadership role in these communities.
- **Leadership and relations:** The importance in the data of fellowship, experience of “belonging”, taking care for each other, especially the elderly and the disabled, all point to the central importance of relations.
- **Leadership and service:** The realization that leadership is not in the first place self-serving, but in service of others (the community) was very prominent in the data. Theories on “servant leadership” can be of great help to further explore identity construction in this regard, although there are also reservations and even resistance to use this concept amongst some people.
- **Leadership and gender-studies in the curriculum of the Postgraduate Diploma:** The fact that only two respondents referred to aspects of hierarchy, naivety and being out of touch with culture, can be interpreted in different ways:

o The role of the lecturer/researchers: It might be that the way the questions were put, did not evoke any reference to power, patriarchy and hierarchy. It might be that they anticipated what the lecturer were looking for and what would please him to pass the examination.

o The material read in preparation for the examination: It might be that the prescribed word [18] did not refer to the specific problem of patriarchy. He does however refer to the problem of hierarchy and clericalism.

o The lack of critical thinking capacities of the students: It might be that the students have not yet been trained in critical thinking skills, accepting the material prescribed by the lecturers as the “truth” and try to memorize the content to pass the examination.

Although one or more of these arguments might help to understand some of the responses of the students, the absence of any references to gender inequalities (patriarchy), the leadership labyrinth and inculturation, tells one that a lot still needs to be done concerning more critical and constructive thinking with regard to the curriculum of this specific program.

A good example of the way in which it could be done, albeit on a lower level of complexity (HQF – level 8), is the way that first Denise Ackermann and for the past three years, Julie Claassens, developed a module on “Gender, Culture and Scripture” as part of the Masters of Divinity in the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University. Claassens [2] wrote a chapter ‘Teaching gender at Stellenbosch University’ in the book ‘Men in the pulpit, Women in the pew? Addressing gender inequality in Africa’ in which she gives a detailed description of the way that she goes about teaching the course.

Conclusion

Women aspiring to become religious leaders within the African context remain a complex phenomenon. Although different perspectives of religious leadership in Africa were identified, concepts on religious leadership in Africa still need more clarification. Some unique features were however discovered. Bolden and Kirkis [3] of the opinion that greater attention should be given to understanding the leadership discourse that shape African identities and move African people to action. With the help of categories of leadership theories, different leadership perspectives, Social Identity Theory and some (more) empirical work, I hope to contribute to the discourse on women in religious leadership in African contexts, specifically in the way it might help to underline the desperate need for the transformation of women leadership identities that have to take place in the African context.

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