

“First Woman to...” Exceptionalism Discourse: Badge of Honour or Badgering Burden?

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

“First women to...” labels define the ways in which women leaders are characterized as “exceptional”. As already pointed out by some feminist scholars, exceptionalism discourse valorizes women’s achievements to the benefit of institutions and their patriarchal culture. While such valorization might enhance gender representation in spaces previously reserved for men, it also commodifies women’s capabilities. This, I argue, calls for resisting the subtle, less visible, often unintentional, and sometimes patronizing forms of discrimination that sustain the patriarchal culture of institutions such as “the church”. Many feminist theologians have repeatedly named “the cultural-political power at work in our world as patriarchy”. Questions about the relationship between patriarchal institutional culture and the legitimate presence of women leaders are central to the argument presented here. The case of South African feminist theologian, Mary-Anne Platjies Van Huffel, is used to illustrate the relentless task women face of having to challenge pervasive gender-bias in the patriarchal institutional culture of the church. I then explore the plausibility of *reflective solidarity* as a theo-ethical concept and its potential to transform the patriarchal institutional culture of the church.

KEYWORDS

exceptionalism discourse, patriarchal institutional culture, reflective solidarity, church, feminist, second-generation gender bias

Introductory remarks

Feminist theologians, in particular the *Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians*, have over many decades explained how the exclusion of women from leadership is justified by male supremacy in colonial, apartheid, and patriarchal contexts in Africa.¹ For example, the democratic values

1 See, for example, Ruth Meena, *Gender in Southern Africa: Conceptual and Theoretical Issues* (Harare: SAPHO Publishing House, 1992); Ofelia Ortega, *Women’s Visions: Theological Reflection, Celebration, Action* (Switzerland: WCC Publications, 1992), 195; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Transforming Power: Women in the Household of God” (Ghana: Sam-Woode Ltd, 1997); Seageng Tsikang and Dinah Lefakane, *Women in South Africa: From the heart – an anthology* (Johannesburg: Seriti sa Sechaba Publishers, 1988); Cheryl Walker, *Women and Gender in Southern Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip

enshrined in the *Constitution of South Africa* resulted in a legislative framework for the “empowerment of women and gender equality”.² However, while this has “allowed” many South African women into leadership positions in the church, the mere presence of women leaders in positions previously reserved for men does not automatically transform the patriarchal institutional culture of “the church”.³

Patriarchal institutional culture, as used here, refers to the essence and course of action shaped and motivated by ideas, beliefs, and practices that justify male privilege, superiority, and dominance. It is within the institutional culture of the church that the “dominant scale of patriarchal values remains” and within which women have to navigate their leadership.⁴ This is particularly the case in “the church” where patriarchal attitudes, beliefs, and practices keep women leaders on a normative, patriarchal, beaten-track. Thus, while the presence of women in “previously” male-dominated spaces should be celebrated, there is also a great need for commiseration. Indeed, questions about the relationship between patriarchal institutional culture and the legitimate presence of women leaders continue to be an important aspect of social justice research. One such question is whether the “first woman to...” badge might also be a badgering burden for women in light of exceptionalism discourse that valorizes women’s capabilities to the benefit

Publishers, 1990); Denise Ackermann, Jonathan Draper and Emma Mashini, *Women Hold up half the sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991); Denise Ackermann, Eliza Getman, Hantie Kotzé, and Judy Tobler, *Claiming our footprints: South African women reflect on context, identity and spirituality* (Stellenbosch: Milano, 2000); Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devakarsham Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar, *Her-stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002).

2 See https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/b50-2013womenempowermentgenderequality06nov2013.pdf, accessed 5 August, 2023). Also see Chapter 2 “Bill of Rights” accessed August 5, 2023, <https://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/constitution/saconstitution-web-eng-02.pdf>.

3 I use “the church” here, with an understanding of the “variety of manifestation of ‘the church’”. See Pillay 2008, 172 Re-visioning stigma: A socio-rhetorical reading of Luke 10:25-37 in the context of HIV and AIDS in South Africa , <https://etd.uwc.ac.za/xmlui/handle/11394/2242>, accessed 1 September 2023.

4 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993) 6. Also see, Miranda Pillay, “Women, Priests and Patriarchal Ecclesial Spaces in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa: On ‘Interruption’ as a Transformative Rhetorical Strategy”. *HTS Theological Studies*, 76 no 1(2020), a5820. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.5820>.

of patriarchal institutions. This is a question that surfaced for me at the occasion of the *Fourth Mary-Anne Plaatjies Van Huffel Memorial Lecture*, which I delivered at the University of Stellenbosch on 11 August, 2023.⁵

There is no doubt that the pioneering leadership of Plaatjies Van Huffel's many "first woman to..." achievements have paved the way for other women leaders. When using "women" as a category, I do so with an awareness that it does not mean "all women". This would be an exclusionary and discriminatory way of constructing "an alleged universality of women".⁶ And, as Phiri, Govinden and Nadar warn "We certainly need to avoid the danger of homogenizing 'the African woman'".⁷ The fact that "women" as a category does not represent a homogeneous group is particularly true in South African contexts where some women benefit from white privilege, while women of color carry double, sometimes triple, the burden of having to "carve out more and more spaces for themselves and others to come".⁸

It is not my intension to trivialize the exceptional accomplishments of women like Plaatjies Van Huffel as "the first woman to...". On the contrary, she and many women in South Africa are amongst those who "have moved into the academy, assumed religious leadership, and claimed their religious agency and heritage".⁹ However, the reality for many women, particularly South

5 Pillay, 2023. Keynote address, "Trailblazing women – Off the patriarchal beaten track" 2023. This paper contains some of the ideas and arguments made in the keynote address at the Fourth Memorial Lecture to commemorate the life and work of Mary-Anne Plaatjies-van Huffel.

In South Africa, August is celebrated as Women's Month to commemorate the agency of women who marched against the pass laws in apartheid South Africa. The women's march of 9 August 1956 is said to be a remarkable event in the history of the country. But sadly, almost seven decades later, and almost thirty years into democracy, marching continues with placards conveying despair #AmINext; frustration #EnoughIsEnough and hope #IAmNotNext. While the #MeToo placard conveys a message of solidarity, it is also a stark reminder that skewed gender relations remain a reality despite gender-equity policies.

6 Susanne Kappeler, *The Will to Violence: The Politics of Personal Behaviour* (New York: Teachers College Press Columbia University, 1995), 21.

7 *Her-Stories* (2002), 9.

8 Sarojini Nadar and Megan Robertson, "Recognition, Resistance and Rest: Drawing from the Womanist Wells of Katie Geneva Cannon" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 170 (2021) 7-18.

9 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Transforming Vision: Explorations in Feminist The*logy*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2011) 4.

African women of color, is that they have to navigate their leadership and exercise their agency along patriarchal beaten paths, where, albeit somewhat faded, white privilege signposts remain.¹⁰ Thus, I agree with Schüssler Fiorenza who argues that discourses on gender [representation] ought to take into account how discourses like exceptionalism, for example, “have shaped religion and how religion has engendered and authorized prejudices against women”.¹¹

As an “exceptional” woman leader in the church and academia, Plaatjies Van Huffel carried many “first woman to...” badges in her lifetime before passing away on 19 May, 2020. Her leadership is recognized by her colleagues in academia and the church as visionary, participative, and transformative.¹² Thyssen and Davis highlight that Plaatjies Van Huffel was hailed as “the first of firsts”.¹³ Using her-story¹⁴ as a case study, my argument centers around the lived-reality of women who are expected to take up leadership positions in “previously” male-dominated spaces with little, or no effort from the institution to transform its patriarchal culture.¹⁵ This

10 “Women of color” refers to that the South African racial classification, namely Black, Colored, Indian, Asian.

11 Elizabeth Shüssler Fiorenza, “Between Movement and Academy: Feminist Biblical Studies”. In *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement*, ed. Elizabeth Shüssler Fiorenza (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature. 2014) 1-20.

12 For example, in response to her passing, the World Council of Churches states that Plaatjies van Huffel was known as a transformative church leader in sub-Saharan Africa. Her significance was not only rooted in her leadership positions, her many theological publications, and her lecturing status but could also be found in her active participation in processes to transform society (Statement by the World Council of Churches, 21 May 2020). <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-mourns-passing-of-rev-prof-dr-mary-anne-plaatjies-van-huffel>, accessed 31 July 2023. Plaatjies van Huffel served on World Council of Churches as President representing the continent of Africa from 2013 until her death on 19 May 2020.

13 Thyssen, Ashwin and Davis, Sheurl “In Search of the Public Theologian: Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel’s Womanist Public Engagement” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 47/2, 1-17.

14 Her-story is a term I borrow from Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devakarsham Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar, *Her-stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002).

15 See, Miranda Pillay, “Women, Priests and Patriarchal Ecclesial Spaces in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa: On ‘Interruption’ as a Transformative Rhetorical Strategy”. *HTS Theological Studies*, 76 no 1(2020), a5820. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.5820>.

observation is based on the premise that leadership is, historically, constructed around patriarchal normativity and shaped by the ideology of male supremacy.

The main argument made in this paper is that exceptionalism discourse inherent in “first woman to...” badge of honor rhetoric must come under scrutiny considering the dominant scale of patriarchal values. This, I argue, is because exceptionalism discourse camouflages second-generation gender bias and upholds patriarchal normativity. To this end, after describing what being intentional about resisting second-generation gender bias might entail, I explore the *virtue of unctuousness* as a countercultural virtue in the patriarchal institutional culture of “the church”. In the final section of the paper, I explore the idea of reflective solidarity and consider its potential as a conceptual tool to transform patriarchal institutional cultures. But first, I turn to the experiences of Plaatjies Van Huffel as a case study.

“First woman to...”: Plaatjies Van Huffel – A case in point

As previously mentioned, Plaatjies Van Huffel is one of many South African women to carry a “first woman to...” badge.¹⁶ Her research, teaching, and community engagements are grounded in her lived experiences as a woman of color born, raised, and educated during the height of apartheid.¹⁷ Much of her research is framed within the social, economic and political realities of apartheid and its complex ramifications in a democratic South African society.¹⁸ Plaatjies Van Huffel’s lived experiences, as a woman of color in

16 See for example Christina Landman, “Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel: “A First Voice on Gender Equity in South Africa” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 47 no 2 (2021) <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358024456>, accessed August 5, 2023; Reggie W. Nel, 2021. “A Woman of Voice: Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel (15 December 1959–19 May 2020)” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 47 no 2 (2021) <https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/article/view/9824>, accessed August 5, 2023.

17 Selaelo Thias Kgatla, “Born into a World of Hostility and Contradiction: The Role of Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel in URCSA”. 2021 <https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/article/view/8296/4708>, accessed August 4, 2023.

18 See for example Mary-Anne Plaatjies Van Huffel and Dino Seloana, “About the empowerment of women in the church in post-apartheid South Africa: a post-structural approach” In *From Our Side: Emerging Perspectives on Development and Ethics* Steve De Gruchy, . Nico Koopman and Sytse Strijbos eds. (Unisa Press, 2008); Mary-Anne Plaatjies Van Huffel “The institutionalisation of Christian women’s organisations: from

patriarchal normative contexts, reveal that confronting racial and gender biases is a relentlessly ongoing task. This is especially the case where women are expected – if not required – to stay on the androcentric paths dictated by the church’s institutional culture of patriarchy.

Plaatjies Van Huffel’s trailblazing journey through the ecclesial ranks of the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA)¹⁹ is recorded by, amongst others, Charles Flaendorp in 2014 and by Selaelo Kgatla and Willie Zeze respectively, in 2021.²⁰ Flaendorp, who wrote about Plaatjies Van Huffel before her death in May 2020, concludes that her ecclesial advancement was one of merit and not “tokenism”. While the obvious intension is to illuminate Plaatjies Van Huffel’s leadership capabilities it may also, in my view at least, be seen as an attempt to defend the credibility of the institutions concerned.²¹ In a more recent publication, *Thin space: tussen hemel en harde grond*, compiled by Elna Mouton, Frederick Marais also recounts some of Plaatjies Van Huffel’s “first woman to...” achievements noting that, “she was the first female pastor to be ordained in the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA)”.²² In his account of events, Kgatla also registers the frustration and despair Plaatjies Van Huffel encountered as a woman leader in the church, much of which Plaatjies Van

docile recipients to agents of change” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 37 no 1 (2011a) 105-119 9; Control, secede, vested rights and ecclesiastical property (2011b) *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 37 no 2 (2011b) 173-188; “Patriarchy as empire: a theological reflection” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 37 – Supplement, (2011c) 259-270; “Toward a Theology of Hospitality: Statelessness as Gender Discrimination as a Challenge to Just Hospitality” *The Ecumenical Review* 71 no 4 (2019) 516-529.

- 19 On 14 April 1994, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) was established through the union of the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (Zeze 2021:1).
- 20 Charles Flaendorp “The life and times of professor Mary-Anne Plaatjies Van Huffel: a transformative church leader in Sub-Saharan Africa” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 40, Supplement (2014) 53-63.
Selaelo Thias Kgatla, Born into a World of Hostility and Contradiction: The Role of Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel in URCSA. (2021) accessed August 4, 2023. <https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/article/view/8296/4708>.
- 21 Though, I also agree with Thyssen and Davis (2021:2) who see the value of Flaendorp’s contribution in drawing “together various foci present in Plaatjies-Van Huffel’s work” which range from her” role as minister and church leader to being an iconic figure in the ecumenical world” (2021:2).
- 22 See Elna Mouton, ed. *Tussen hemel en harde grond*. (Wellington, South Africa: Clairvaux Writer’s House, 2023) 134.

Huffel herself boldly declares almost a decade earlier.²³ Ironically, in 2020, a year before Plaatjies Van Huffel's death, she recounts the challenges by stating, "As the first ordained woman, feminist scholar in URCSA, the author [Plaatjies Van Huffel] has felt on more than one occasion the full brunt on overt and covert forms of gender insensitivity in URCSA".²⁴

As Kgatla points out, it was only "after a long wait" that Plaatjies Van Huffel was "allowed" to be ordained and appointed to the leadership of URCSA where she became the first woman minister of the Word in URCSA.²⁵ Plaatjies Van Huffel laments herself that her first experience as ordained minister was one of rejection as she was "not allowed" to perform her ministerial functions as pastor.²⁶ Her presence as a woman leader in that particular male dominated ecclesial space was not recognized as legitimate by many congregants who, not only refused her services but, also, left to join another congregation headed by a male minister. Plaatjies Van Huffel was also the first woman Moderator of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa when she was elected in 2012. However, as noted by Kgatla, the fact that Plaatjies Van Huffel was not elected for a second term, was a "humiliating experience" for her.²⁷ Another milestone on Plaatjies Van Huffel's trailblazing journey is that she was the first woman to serve as *Actuarius* of URCSA Cape Synod.²⁸

The four male authors mentioned above set out to honour and acknowledge Plaatjies Van Huffel's "first woman to..." achievements with implicit praise for her courage and resilience. However, it is done without the necessary "reflexive practice" regarding their male-privilege, compliance, and

23 In "Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel: A First Voice on Gender Equity in South Africa" Landman (2021) also indicates that Plaatjies van Huffel's journey was marked with frustration and disappointment.

24 Plaatjies Van Huffel, Mary-Anne. 2019. "A History of Gender Insensitivity in URCSA". *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 45 (3), p.3. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/6250>. Accessed 5 December 2023.

25 Kgatla, "Born into a World." 1-8; Zeze, "What Does Mary-Anne." 1.

26 Kgatla, "Born into a World." 1-8

27 Kgatla, "Born into a World." 9-10.

28 See Landman (2021) 6. Landman also mentions that Plaatjies van Huffel was also the first black woman to be promoted to full professor at the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University (Landman 2021:3; <https://www.remembr.com/en/revprof.mary-anne.plaatjiesvanhuffel>, accessed 4 August 2023).

complicity within ecclesial and academic patriarchal institutional cultures.²⁹ As Dottolo and Tillery argue, “A more careful understanding of systems of power, institutional privilege and marginalization, and the social symbols that communicate status and hierarchy, are necessary.”³⁰ By ignoring reflexive practice, they aggravate the “inequalities of the tridimensional phenomenon of race/class/gender oppression”.³¹ Zeze sees the carving out of leadership for women as the responsibility of women. In a 2021 article titled *What does Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies Van Huffel Have to say to Silent Partners of the Reformed World?* Zeze largely uses Plaatjies van Huffel’s published work verbatim. This, together with extensive quotations and posts from Plaatjies Van Huffel’s Facebook Page, Zeze concludes that, “[T]hrough she [Mary-Anne] is deceased, she is still speaking to Reformed women in the Reformed world”.³²

In an attempt to account for this statement, Zeze cites Hebrews 11:4 as a source,³³ arguing that, Plaatjies Van Huffel, “even though she is dead” has something to say to “her silent partners”, who, according to Zeze, are the “women of the Reformed world”.³⁴ He writes about women and questions their “silence”, oblivious to the fact that women are explicitly and implicitly silenced by the patriarchal normative institutional culture of the church. To be oblivious to the lived reality of women leaders in male-dominated spaces is to be compliant in upholding and justifying the systemic and structural institutional culture of patriarchal normativity.³⁵ Such oblivion also mirrors second-generation gender bias pervasive in patriarchal cultures of institutions and organizations. Second-generation gender bias is the “more subtle, less visible, oftentimes unintentional, and sometimes patronizing

29 What is lacking here is a reflexive use of power in a network of relative power relations.

30 Dottolo, L. Andrea and Sarah M. Tillery, M. Sarah, “Reflexivity and research: Feminist interventions and their practical implications” In *Reflexivity and international relations: Positionality, critique, and practice*, J.L. Amoreaux and B.J. Steele, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 123-141.

31 Katie Cannon *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 39.

32 Zeze, “What Does Mary-Anne.” 10.

33 By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith, he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith, Abel still speaks, even though he is dead (Hebrews 11:4).

34 Zeze, “What Does Mary-Anne.” 10.

35 See Elaine Graham, “Different forms of feminist ethics” in *Feminist Ethics: Perspectives, problems, and possibilities*, eds Carl-Henric Grenholm and Normunds Kamergrauzis (Stockholm: Elanders Gotab, 2003) 15-30.

forms of discrimination".³⁶ It includes what Nadar calls "palatable patriarchy".³⁷ In contrast, first-generation gender bias is the more intentional and blatant form of discrimination and oppression against women and those who do not identify with heteronormative gender binaries.³⁸

Exceptionalism discourse: On debunking Badge of Honor rhetoric

It is not my intention to invoke the biblical concept of exceptionalism as "chosen people summoned to perform God's will in the world".³⁹ Neither do I use the term as it is understood in narratives of nationalist exceptionalism.⁴⁰ Instead, "exceptionalism" is conceptually used here and marked as a patronizing prop that camouflages institutional complicity in efforts to uphold patriarchal normativity. As a discursive practice, exceptionalism discourse

36 Second generation gender bias stands in the shadow of the so-called 'grand narrative' of patriarchy that "reifies ideological thinking into an absolute and phallogocentric representation of reality". (Graham, "Feminist Ethics," 29). An illustration of second-generation gender bias is that women leaders are "othered" in patriarchal normative cultures where leadership is understood to be assertively masculine in the sense of exercising 'power over' others. Thus, when women leaders steer towards collaborative, collective, co-creative leadership they are not recognised as 'real' leaders. Yet, on the other hand, when women leaders do act assertively, it is likely that they will be perceived as aggressive and bossy. Because second-generation gender-bias may be seen (if not defended) as being unconscious, oblivious-, even natural behaviour, there is a greater need to push forward against patriarchal pushback.

37 Sarojini Nadar, (2009). "Palatable Patriarchy and Violence Against WO/MEN in South Africa". *Scriptura* 102, (2009), 551-561.

38 See Helisse Levine, Maria J. D'Agostino, and Meghna Sabharwal, "Making the case for addressing second-generation gender bias in public" (2022) 259, accessed September 4, 2023, (cuny.edu) who use a three-level barrier classification to examine leadership impediments" women face in the workplace.

39 See Walter Brueggemann's, "The Hard Work of Exceptionalism" in *Church Anew*, 13 July 2022, accessed September 1, 2023. <https://churchanew.org/brueggemann/hard-work-of-exceptionalism>.

40 Such as the current American exceptionalism discourse of which there is an extensive body of research. There has also been a 360-degree shift in American exceptionalism discourse – from the grand narrative of America as uniquely democratic – an exemplar to the rest of the world; to conclusions that America has passed its time as a hegemon; to "let's make America great again" rhetoric. See Caroline O'Conner, "The Rhetoric of Exceptionalism: Enduring Cultural Frames of American Exceptionalism", *The Public Purpose Journal*, Vol. XX, (2022), accessed September, 2 2023, <https://thepublicpurpose.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Connor-2022-The-Rhetoric-of-Exceptionalism.pdf>.

has “major ideologically-based effects” that reproduce unequal power relations in patriarchal institutional cultures.⁴¹

In the article “Recognition, Resistance and Rest: Drawing from the Womanist Wells of Katie Geneva Cannon”, Nadar and Robertson argue that women “way-makers” come with a “price-tag”, which gives Black women both a badge of honor and also a prize of great burden.⁴² Trailblazers in their own right, Nadar and Robertson, stand on the shoulders of other “way-maker” women, with perspective to see the “responsibility and obligation that comes with being a pioneer”. They poignantly state that “the first black woman to...” narrative constructs a discourse of exceptionalism and Black excellence.⁴³ Moreover, they argue that exceptionalism discourse obscures and precludes the accountability that the structures that prevented women from occupying leadership spaces must bear.

Citing Tinyiko Maluleke, Nadar and Robertson, echo the warning that the label tagged onto black women leaders as “the first to be appointed to leadership positions” is “mischievously elevated into becoming the biggest portion of the truth” while obscuring the fact that:

They are not the first Black women capable of leading great institutions. They are among the first to be allowed to. For hundreds of years, many capable Black women were denied the conditions and not given the opportunity to lead, by the racist and patriarchal forces who blocked, crushed and often killed them.⁴⁴

41 See Anna-Maija Lämsä Teppo Sintonen, “A Discursive Approach to Understanding Women Leaders in Working Life,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 34 no. 3 (2001) 255-267. She also reminds us that discourse produces “sets of concepts such as ideas, categories, theories and so on, through which we understand the world and relate it to one another, and which are culturally and historically situated” (2001:257).

42 See Sarojini Nadar and Megan Robertson, “Recognition, Resistance and Rest: Drawing from the Womanist Wells of Katie Geneva Cannon” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 170 (2021) 7-18

43 Recognition, Nadar and Robertson, “Recognition, Resistance,” 10-12.

44 28 See Tinyiko Maluleke, “Celebrate black female leaders,” Sunday Independent, November 15, 2020, <https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/the-sunday-independent/20201115/281732682019409>; cf. Nadar and Robertson, “Recognition, Resistance,” 10.

Furthermore, Nadar and Robertson point out that exceptionalism discourse is also individualized as an award to black women who are creative, courageous and resilient. They argue that exceptionalism discourse of black women's excellence holds worthy the achievements of those women whose values and determination emerged because of their struggle with oppression, thus, valorizing the ability to "overcome".⁴⁵ As my discussion on Plaatjies Van Huffel's experiences reveal, the responsibility to overcome is put on women who are experiencing a life of struggle in the patriarchal institutional culture of the church where second-generation gender bias is camouflaged by exceptionalism discourse.

On resisting second-generation gender-bias

"I realized soon after my arrival that I would not only bring the gospel to these people, but that I also would have to deal with stereotyping and conservatism in an environment of poverty."⁴⁶

The comment above was made by Plaatjies Van Huffel in 2012, during an interview on *Radio Sonder Grense*, a national radio station. She was responding to a question about her experiences as the "first woman minister of the Word" in the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa. In reflecting on that interview, Plaatjies Van Huffel points out that gender stereotypes are so deeply entrenched in the patriarchal social structures of the church that they continue to uphold views about women that would ensure their "compliance" with good Christian values.⁴⁷ In this regard I find Katie Cannon's idea of unctuousness as a virtue helpful in resisting second-generation gender bias.⁴⁸

Initially, I found Cannon's idea surprising and rather confusing, especially when I saw that "unctuousness" has many negative connotations such as being backhanded, double-dealing, hypocritical, insincere, two-faced,

45 Nadar and Robertson, "Recognition, Resistance," 12.

46 <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-mourns-passing-of-rev-prof-dr-mary-anne-platejies-van-huffel>, accessed 10 August 2023.

47 Plaatjies-van Huffel, "Patriarchy as Empire: A Theological Reflection" *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* (2011) 259-270.

48 Katie Geneva Cannon, 'Unctuousness as a virtue' is the subject of chapter seven of *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*. (New York: Continuum.1995) 77-90.

fraudulent, and pharisaic. How then could unctuousness be a virtue? Upon further investigation I saw that alternative “words related to being *unctuous* mean being uninhibited, unrestrained and disarming”.⁴⁹ That is when the proverbial penny dropped.⁵⁰ It is precisely the idea of what is expected as normal, good, Christian behavior that has to come under scrutiny as it serves second-generation gender bias.

From Cannon’s reflections on the life and writings of Zora Neale Hurston, she espouses “unctuousness as a virtue”, saying of Hurston that:

In both her life and work Hurston embodied a sensitized candor in relation to the subtle, invisible ethos as well as the expressed moral values emanating from within the cultural institutions in the Black community. As a Black woman artist, subjected to the violence of Whites, of male superiority, and of poverty, Zora Hurston offered an especially concrete frame of reference for understanding the Black woman as a moral agent.⁵¹

According to Cannon, Hurston understood suffering imposed by dominant cultures, “not as a moral norm or as a desirable ethical quality, [as so often espoused in Christian circles] but rather as a typical state of affairs” that results from the prevailing dominant ethos.⁵² In essence, unctuousness as a virtue is the creative tension between resistance and endurance. Thus, following Cannon’s take on unctuousness, I argue that endurance to expose and resist second-generation gender bias is necessary as women take up leadership positions and claim their agency in “previously” male-dominated spaces. Thus endurance, as an ethical principle of the virtue of unctuousness, does not mean passive acceptance but, rather, points to the

See Merriam Webster, “Unctuousness,”
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/unctuous>;
<https://www.thesaurus.com/browse/unctuous>

50 Much of what I write here on the subject unctuousness is published in: “The Virtue of Unctuousness? Toward the Moral Agency of Women in Patriarchal Normative Contexts” (Pillay 2021:74-92). I’ve also used the idea in the keynote address I delivered at the Fourth Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel Memorial Lecture held at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University on 11 August 2023.

51 Cannon, “Katie’s Canon,” 91; cf. Pillay, “Unctuousness,” 84.

52 Cannon, “Katie’s Canon,” 78-79; cf. Pillay, “Unctuousness,” 84-85.

intentionality of resisting the subtle, less visible, oftentimes unintentional, and sometimes patronizing, forms of gender bias.

However, resistance through endurance must, at some point, also carry the possibility of transforming patriarchal institutional cultures. To this end, I will explore reflective solidarity as a plausible theo-ethical concept.

Reflective solidarity: Toward transforming patriarchal ecclesial spaces?

As observed from the Plaatjies Van Huffel case, women leaders who are celebrated as "first woman to ..." accomplish this or that achievement, step into "previously" male dominated institutions with the burden of having the legitimacy of their presence questioned. This reality calls into question the grand narrative of patriarchy that "reifies ideological thinking into an absolute and phallogocentric representation of reality".⁵³ It is generally the case where politics of identity is regarded as being of "no consequence"⁵⁴ and when concerns about policies, power, and practices that uphold gender stereotypes are ignored or dismissed as irrelevant.⁵⁵ This is an argument often bolstered by discourses on Christian *unity* based on a false sense of solidarity.⁵⁶

53 Graham, "Feminist Ethics," 29.

54 See Clarice Martin, "A Chamberlain's Journey and Challenge of Interpretation for Liberation" *Semeia* 47 (1989) 105-135.

55 A typical example, in my experience is that, when appeals for gender inclusive liturgical language are dismissed with unreflective reference to Galatians 3:28. While this observation might sound anecdotal, it is true that cherry-picked verses like the Galatians text are often times used without reflexivity on who says what to whom to what effect in the ancient text and contemporary contexts. In my view this leads to a false sense of unity lays claim to the value of solidarity within a community such as 'the church'.

56 The concept 'solidarity' has its origin in Roman Law which "involved the group liability for joint debtors" in "Solidarity Theory and Practice: An Introduction" in *Solidarity: Theory and Practice*, eds Arto Laitinen and Anne Birgitta Pessi (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014) 1-29. accessed September 3, 2023, https://www.academia.edu/10321300/Solidarity_Theory_and_Practice_An_Introduction?email_work_card=view-paper.

While solidarity is generally understood to signal the “willingness of individuals to come together to serve and promote collective interests”,⁵⁷ it is also true that the notion of *solidarity* is (ab)used to uphold unjust social relationships. As Laitinen argues “norms of solidarity are possible which do not manifest equal respect of personhood, autonomy, freedom or egalitarian justice, and which embody patterns of domination, oppression, disrespect and misrecognition”.⁵⁸

Male headship-theology, for example, signals “a kind of unequal solidarity”⁵⁹ that justifies and maintains positional power. Thus, when South African feminist theologian, Denise Ackermann, urges men to join women in their struggle against patriarchal violence because “it’s about the humanity of men as much as it is about the humanity of women”,⁶⁰ it calls into question the complicity and collusion of men within patriarchal institutional cultures. It also calls for reflexivity on male privileges in patriarchal normative church spaces and places. It calls for solidarity that harks back to the origin of the word as it relates to “group liability”⁶¹ and mutual recognition.⁶² In this regard, I find the notion of *reflective solidarity* a helpful theo-ethical concept to challenge second-generation gender bias.

Reflective solidarity goes beyond the rhetoric of inclusion. It speaks to the legitimate power of the presence of diverse bodies. Jodi Dean defines reflective solidarity as “the mutual expectation of a responsible orientation to relationship”.⁶³ She argues that mutual recognition is a precondition for reflective solidarity and explains that a communicative understanding of “we” “enables us to think of difference differently”. As such, Dean says reflective

57 See Ruut Ter Meulen, *Solidarity, justice, and recognition of the other*, 2016. DOI: 10.1007/s11017-016-9387-3, accessed September 5, 2023. While the argument made by Ter Meulen is for solidarity as a core value underpinning health and welfare systems, I find it resonates with the argument for reflective solidarity that goes beyond altruism and reciprocity but invokes concepts of justice and just relationships. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5167774/>.

58 Laitinen, “Solidarity Theory,” 127.

59 Laitinen, “Solidarity Theory,” 127.

60 Klein, “In Conversation” 61; cf. Pillay and Jacobsen, “Remembering Tutu’s liberation”.

61 Laitinen, “Solidarity Theory,” 1

62 Laitinen, “Solidarity Theory”.

63 Jodi Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers: Feminism after identity politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 3.

solidarity may serve as a bridge to overcome "competing dualisms of us/them, male/female, white/black, straight/gay, public/private". Dean additionally espouses reflective solidarity as a theoretical concept to move "out of the 'we' of identity politics". However, I argue that a shift away from identity politics ought not to ignore the politics of identity and difference, precisely because the "we" in "the church" does not refer to a homogeneous group. Thus, I argue that, with reflexivity⁶⁴ on the part of both men and women, the notion of *reflective solidarity* could be a conduit for rethinking the value of solidarity not as a social value in an abstract sense, but as an embodied ecclesial practice toward transforming the patriarchal institutional culture of "the church".

Concluding Remarks

Marking "first woman to..." achievements is an important and necessary sign of recognition and celebration. However, often the celebration valorizes women's achievements to the benefit of the patriarchal culture of institutions. Thus, pausing to celebrate should also call for a pause to commiserate, to mourn, to be upset, to be sorrowful, to be disturbed, and to ask, "How many more "first woman to..." badges will it take before such "bragging rights" claimed by the church, for example, are seen as a badgering burden placed on women?

While the aim of "first woman to..." discourse may be to celebrate the leadership milestones by marking the achievement of women, the patriarchal institutional culture of the church remains a millstone for women in leadership positions previously reserved for men. To commiserate is, in a sense, to recognize the fact that women are burdened over and over again, generation after generation, with the task of clearing weeds that cushion the patriarchal track of male privilege.

64 Andrea L. Dottolo and Sarah M. Tillery, explain that "reflexivity is not only reflection" but a practice that necessitates an analysis of power and a self-awareness of positions of power and privilege. While their argument is aimed at the positionality in the context of research, the idea that, "more careful understanding of systems of power, institutional privilege and marginalization, and the social symbols that communicate status and hierarchy" are equally necessary in my argument for solidarity. See their chapter "Reflexivity and research: Feminist interventions and their practical implications" in *Reflexivity and International Relations: Positionality, critique, and Practice*, eds J.L. Amoreaux and B.J. Steele (New York: Routledge, 2015) 123-141.

In this paper I have argued for debunking of “the first woman to...” exceptionalism discourse as it perpetuates patriarchal ideals. While this is not a new or novel argument, references made here to Plaatjies Van Huffel’s case serve to illustrate the argument that being ‘awarded’ a “first woman to...” badge of honor may also be a badgering burden. Therefore, I suggest that pushing forward against patriarchal pushback, which is greatly evident in second-generation gender bias, calls for a virtue of unctuousness that holds in creative tension endurance and resistance in challenging and transforming the pervasive institutional culture of patriarchy in “the church”. Considering the theological value of “solidarity”, I suggest that reflective solidarity may be a plausible response in a move towards transforming the patriarchal institutional culture of the church. As a theo-ethical concept, it could direct Christian women and men to reflect on their positionality and complicity in upholding the patriarchal institutional culture of the church. Reflective solidarity is not merely about “inclusion” but, rather, involves recognizing the legitimate presence of “othered” bodies, while also lending itself to challenging heteronormativity implicit in patriarchal institutional culture of the church.

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