

Women without Limits and Limited Women: Pentecostal Women Navigating between Empowerment and Disempowerment in Kenya

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Abstract

Neo-Pentecostalism has been characterised as offering freedoms and empowerment for women in the Global South, Africa in particular. Despite the limitations on freedom, women are able to negotiate, navigate and contest their (dis)empowerment in the context of rapidly modernized but heavily patriarchal societies, such as Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa. This article explores how women in Jubilee Christian Centre (JCC) and the Ministry of Repentance and Holiness (MRH), popular Neo-Pentecostal Churches, navigate and negotiate between empowerment and disempowerment positions in their spiritual and personal lives. I seek to point out the seemingly invisible yet critical threads associated with gender and religion and how these strands shape women's lives. These threads are associated with self-understanding, self-definition, personal and collective empowerment or disempowerment and the building of self-esteem.

KEY WORDS: Pentecostalism, Women Empowerment, Limits, Patriarchal Imaginaries, Sexed Bodies.

Introduction

Pentecostalism's phenomenal growth in the Global South has been accompanied by exponential growth both numerically and geographically. In conceptualising Pentecostalism's phenomenal growth and its impact in the Global South, a range of authors have been fascinated by exponential growth in numbers of adherents, along with its impact on women and youth (Deacon and Parsitau 2017; Parsitau 2015; 2016; Parsitau and Mwaura 2010; Mwaura 2002 and 2005). In this study I examine how Pentecostal women navigate empowerment or disempowerment (Martin 2002: 23; Sarojini Nadar 2010), in particular how these women use spiritual resources to encourage, affirm and build their spirituality. I also examine how women in these churches understand and appropriate empowerment or disempowerment and how they navigate their spirituality and lived experiences as Christian women in a heavily patriarchal society.

Scholars such as Ogbu Kalu (2008) and Marie Griffith (1997) have drawn attention to the important role of using feminine spirituality as metaphors of power, transformation and encouragement. Kalu, for example, points to the capacity of Pentecostalism to reimagine the feminine spirituality of the Pneuma. He argues that feminine spirituality is radicalised in the Bible with images of God as the mother of Israel, the awesome power of God mediated in predominantly feminine imagery. According to him, 'God's salvation was first broached and activated by Elizabeth, Mary, Anna, and Mary Magdalene. These women had the courage to say yes to the Holy Spirit, and became co-workers with God; their apparent weakness turned into a powerful, prophetic recovery of both church and community.' Griffith (1997) shows how women appropriate rich biblical metaphors and use them to reconstruct their own understanding of Christian womanhood, prayer and submission. While Griffith (1997) speaks of 'evangelical women' as engaged in 'voluntary submission to divine authority', he disagrees as to whether this engagement represents their 'true liberation' for women or not (Griffith 1997).

What is notable though is that many of the studies concerned with women and Pentecostalism appear to pay greatest attention to the manner in which Pentecostal clergy focused on personal transformation and empowerment using spiritual resources without focusing on real, tangible issues that touch on women empowerment.¹ Power, patriarchy, structural inequalities, poverty, gender based violence, racial and ethnic identities are related issues of interest.

Rekopantswe Mate (2002), for example, sees such churches as locales for 'patriarchal control' and the destructive misery of unequal rights and attendant abuses. Similarly, In Ghana, Jane Soothill (2006) has provided a challenging consideration of the means by which women negotiate power through men, especially their husbands. There is, therefore, an increasingly rich vein of work discussing women and Pentecostalism, including in Africa (Freeman 2012; Mwaura 2002; Parsitau 2012; Mwaura and Parsitau 2012; Nadar 2003).

There is also great work on changing gender norms in Africa that have undergone significant changes over the last two centuries (Nadar 2004). Women, especially in urban areas, are expected to navigate submission and patriarchy. Women are required to be, and be seen to be, under the control of and submissive to men (See, e.g., S. Nadar and Potgieter 2010). Similarly, Parsitau and Mwaura (2011, 2012, 2014; 2015) point to the role of Pentecostal churches in Kenya in granting women with voice and leadership positions as demonstrated by the number of women who are founders and adjunct heads of Neo-Pentecostal churches in Kenya.

Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity (classical, indigenous and the Neo-Pentecostals) in Kenya have ushered in a new upsurge in female religious leadership like never witnessed before since the advent of Christianity in Kenya in the 19th Century. In these churches and, as Mwaura (2002: 202) aptly points out, 'women are experiencing a measure of Christian ministerial freedom and equality hitherto denied them in mainline churches.'² Not only are these women visible in ecclesial leadership as founders of churches, bishops, pastors, and evangelists, but they also function as prophetesses, prayer

¹ There are a few exceptions. See Nadar 2009, Nadar and Potgieter 2010, and Mate 2002.

² Mainline churches such as the Roman Catholic Churches, Anglican Churches and the Lutheran Churches are not only institutionalized but also heavily patriarchal while church leadership is largely still in the hands of men. Pentecostal churches believe in the democratization of the Spirit, which means anyone, including women, would start their own independent churches. Yet, in the older Neo-Pentecostal churches, it is still difficult for women to be ordained as ministers, so many women leave to found their own churches.

leaders, worship leaders, faith healers, counsellors, ushers, and heads of various church departments and administrative units.

A significant dimension of spiritual leadership in Kenya is its increasingly feminized face. In fact, one of the most striking features of the Kenyan Neo-Pentecostal scene is the proliferation of ordained female clergy, many of whom are founders, presidents, bishops, evangelists, healers, or prophetesses in new churches. Examples include Bishop Margaret Wanjiru of Jesus Is Alive Ministries (JIAM), Evangelist Teresia Wairimu of Faith Evangelistic Ministry (FEM), and The Rev Lucy Muiru, head of Ladies of Excellence Ministries of Maximum Miracle Centre (MMC), Rev Elizabeth Wahome of Single Ladies Interdenominational Ministries (SLIM) and the Rev Judy Mbugua of Ladies Homecare Spiritual Fellowship (LHSF). In all these churches and ministries, women have assumed leadership positions to a degree that has not (yet) been replicated in mainstream Pentecostal churches or in public life in Kenya in general (Parsitau & Mwaura 2010), signalling women's agency in Pentecostal churches.

These women are not only assuming prominence locally, but also internationally, as overseers, as many of their churches and ministries have expanded trans-nationally, with branches in various other African countries as well (Mwaura and Parsitau 2010; Parsitau 2010a; Parsitau 2012a). Moreover, previously marginalized, 'non-typical' women, such as those who are single, divorced or widowed, have also assumed leadership roles in these new churches, ministries and fellowships as exemplified by the lives and churches of Bishop Wanjiru and Evangelist Wairimu (Parsitau 2010; Mwaura and Parsitau 2010).

The vast majority of Neo-Pentecostal churches in Kenya include a women's ministry or wing, while some have emerged with particular prominence as well. The country also contains a more limited number of churches aimed exclusively at a female membership (Deacon and Parsitau 2017). Examples include Jubilee Christian Centre (JCC), Jesus Is Alive Ministries (JIAM), Faith Evangelistic Ministries (FEM), Single Ladies International Ministries (SLIM) and Rev Lucy Natasha of Prophetic Latter Glory Ministries International.

Others are not necessarily founded by women but have huge women membership and activities aimed at women congregants. The Ministry of Repentance and Holiness (MRH) founded by self-proclaimed Prophet David Owour, for example, is an end-time millennial church that gives prominence to rituals on purity, holiness, sin, sex, female bodies and dress codes. This ministry is very popular with women folk who find Prophet Owour's message of repentance, holiness and moral probity attractive to them (Parsitau 2015, 2016). Particular churches have also evolved that offer assistance for women to perform this submission in an especially exaggerated manner.

Given the critical roles women play in the founding, maintaining and expanding of these churches, little attention has been devoted to how women in these churches navigate different types of (dis)empowerment, particularly in heavily patriarchal cultures such as Kenya where women are negotiating empowerment as women of both worlds, namely women struggling between modernity and tradition.

In this article, I compare the different modes of women empowerment or disempowerment visible in two radically different Neo-Pentecostal churches to find out and understand how they navigate and negotiate empowerment or the lack of it. The two churches were chosen because of (1) their radically different forms and ideas about

empowerment and disempowerment, (2) their both having popular programmes and activities that are specifically designed for women, (3) both churches representing different views about empowerment and appeal to different clienteles, (4) both churches espousing radical theologies that appear to limit and empower women in different and paradoxical ways, and 5) women in both churches experiencing and navigating these tensions in their day today lives.³

The article is guided by the following questions: how do these women and their clergy understand empowerment? What are the spaces in which this is contested and navigated? What are the spiritual resources that these women appropriate to contest (dis)empowerment? How do women in JCC and MRH understand and conceptualize these terms? How do they navigate Christian womanhood and submission at the same time? Here below, I present data and analysis on two such ministries, namely Jubilee Christian Centre's Daughters of Zion and its Women without Limits Programme, as well as the Ministry of Repentance and Holiness (MRH) and its King's Daughters Ministry.

This article is built on research conducted by the author throughout 2016. My concern was to gather extensive data and knowledge of varied voices of lay congregants to conceptualize their worldviews and agency in respect of empowerment or disempowerment in a complex, contemporary Kenyan society. Methodologically I therefore utilized participant observations⁴ in the MRH and JCC during services (including noting sermon material, presentation, performance and spatial construction); conducted semi-structured interviews with leaders and congregants; held extensive informal discussions in churches, homes and during everyday activities with Pentecostal adherents and those from other or no faiths; and triangulated with media (including social media) and oral reporting of current events. All these engagements were placed within an understanding of the contemporary literature on African Pentecostalism.

I interviewed women about their views and conceptualization of empowerment. The nature of this research necessitated spending extensive periods of time with particular churches: months or even years. Thus, the information discussed here comes from particular congregations that I know extremely well, but my conclusions are extrapolated from additional sources as well: specific research, knowledge of the literature, and ten years of working with Kenyan Pentecostalism.

Jubilee Christian Centre's (JCC) Daughters of Zion (DoZ) and Women without Limits Programme

Jubilee Christian Centre is a Neo-Pentecostal Church founded and led by Bishop Allan and Rev Kathy Kiuna. This prosperity gospel inclined church was founded in 1999 and is situated in Parklands in Nairobi with branches in Nakuru and other parts of the country. The Kiunas are big proponents of the gospel of health and prosperity, as attested by their flashy lifestyle and sermons. The JCC is a sleek Christian organization run like a business or company using marketplace rhetoric and principles of marketing to maximize profits.

³ The article is based on ethnographic data gathered throughout 2016 as a result of a landmark study, 'Propelled by the Spirit: Pentecostalism, Innovation and Competition in Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe'.

⁴ The nature of this study lends itself to participant observations, where I observed the conduct of members of these churches: how they lived and practiced their faith, their modes of dress, how they conducted themselves daily, and how they interacted with non- members of their churches.

Similarly, the Kiunas run monthly church magazines and they produce and sell CDS, DVDS, video and music albums. Kathy is the praise and worship team leader and is also in charge of the praise and worship wing. The Kiunas heavily appropriate billboards/posters/hand bills, websites and social media: Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. Church adverts are also found in local daily newspapers as well as women's magazines. The Kiunas are portrayed by the Kenyan media as a celebrity couple who are constantly called upon to give tips on how to have a happy marriage and sustain romantic relationships.

Kathy and Bp. Allan Kiuna are authors of books, namely: *Marriage That Works*, *Transformed Woman That You Need to Be*, *Daughter of Zion Celebrate Yourself*, and *Appointed with Destiny and Anointed for the Marketplace*. All these are found in the JCC Resource Centre and Bookshop. Kathy is also a musical artist who leads praise and worship, a fashion designer, a mother of three and a grandmother of one. The Kiunas are fabulously wealthy and have caused a lot of controversy because of their flashy lifestyles.⁵

Rev Kathy Kiuna, who co-pastors with her husband, is also an Associate Pastor of JCC and the head and founder of the Daughters of Zion (DOZ) Ministry, which is the women's wing of JCC. DOZ was founded in 2003 and runs a weekly televised programme called 'Women without Limits', which is popular with women members of the church as well as non-members. From its inception in 2003, the DOZ ministry has grown from less than a dozen members to thousands of loyal women followers. The vision and mission of DOZ, according to Rev Kathy, is derived from Isaiah 62:10-12.⁶ Its mandate, according to Rev Kiuna, is to 'Raise the Standard among Women' so that they can be the best they can in their homes, workplace and in every sphere of their lives. Kathy explains that God called her to minister to women: 'God gave me a passion for women. He said to me, Kathy, go raise standards for women! As a result of this call, I want to see women change for good, to believe in themselves, to fulfil their destinies. A lot of women are so beautiful but they don't see it, they let men belittle them and tell them what to do'.⁷ This programme therefore aims to empower and uplift women to rise above their current circumstances. In her own words, Kathy had this to say: 'Given that women in Africa have been criticized, ridiculed and looked down upon, women need to be supported to raise above all these. They need to understand that they are not secondary and that they matter'.

Focusing on uplifting women, the ministry's monthly and annual convention and seminars attract thousands of women. This arm of the church ministry gathers up to 4,000 women every last Saturday of the month from all walks of life to discuss issues affecting not only their spiritual life and needs but also their marital, social, economic and emotional needs. DOZ has since expanded to include daughters of Zion Cooperative Society, a savings and loans organization which aims to provide cheap loans to start and run small to medium businesses.

Kathy is also a TV host who runs the 'Women without Limits' TV talk show broadcast on Nation Television (NTV) every Sunday 4 pm, and on Trinity Broadcasting Network Family Television on Mondays at 8:30 pm; and a Daughters of Zion mentorship class on

⁵ This information was gleaned from excerpts of an interview of Rev Kiuna in a leading women's magazine, *True Love*, by Damaris Irungu: 'Incredible Journey, Kathy Kiuna on her Critics, Marriage, Divorce, Faith and Being herself,' *True Love East Africa*, November 2011, Carol Mandi Publications, pp. 42-47.

⁶ See for example an advertising feature: 'The History of Jubilee Christian Church: Celebrating 11 years of God's Faithfulness: to God be the Glory,' *Saturday Nation*, January 30, 2010.

⁷ Kathy Kiuna interview on Citizen TV on 20th June 2010, 9am.

the same channel. The ‘Women without Limits’ programme is a pseudo-motivation and talk show in which women sit down around a living room kind of set up to narrate and share their personal experiences and journeys in life and how this programme and Kathy Kiuna in particular has helped them walk this journey. The programme gives women a forum to air their views, a space for women grappling with various issues such as gender-based violence (GBV), wife beating, abuse, lack of financial security and many others such themes. In this programme women meet to share stories of resilience and hope, survival, personal reformation, entrepreneurship and business and a raft of many issues.

Besides these weekly and monthly meetings, Kathy also hosts Daughters of Zion annual conferences and symposia. The monthly meetings, as well as the annual conferences dubbed Women Without Limits International Conferences, attract local and international Pentecostal clergy who are invited to come minister and preach to these largely women-centred meetings (with men being allowed into the meetings for two days while six days are exclusively for women). These meetings are the locus for women empowerment, largely through spiritual resources and motivational language and teachings.

Heavily repeated terms used in these meetings include ‘transformation,’ ‘excellence,’ ‘empowerment,’ ‘anointing,’ ‘blessed, healed,’ ‘raised,’ ‘filled with the Holy Spirit,’ ‘set free,’ ‘set apart’ and ‘released’.⁸ Meetings, conferences and seminars feature titles such as ‘Models of Destiny’ ‘Women of Excellence’ ‘Women without Limits’ ‘Women of Fire’ ‘Spirit-filled Women,’ ‘Daughters of Zion’, ‘Daughters of God’ and ‘Daughters of Faith’.⁹ Women without Limits empowers women through motivation speak, affirmation through spiritual resources and scriptures, a kind of empowerment using spiritual capital and religious language. Thus, sermons may explore the means by which women can overcome challenges, but such issues are essentially family related and concerned with getting by in circumstances as they are currently structured in Kenyan society (Deacon and Parsitau 2017).

Sermons are therefore built around issues such as how to handle husbands, children, house-helpers, finances, and wife inheritance. But it is also a space for confessional testimonies built around themes of spiritual transformation. Frequently women testify about how they experienced a spiritual turn around as a result of joining this ministry or participating in the church activities especially women focused activities such as the ‘Women without Limits’ programme and annual symposia.

It is in this manner that the Reverend Kathy Kiuna states that she has a passion for women and wants them ‘to believe in themselves, to fulfil their destinies’.¹⁰ These confessional sessions act as sort of therapeutic spaces while the talk show offers these women space to speak up, to ventilate, to cry and lean on Kathy to let go of their pain. Marie Griffith (1997) has argued that church spheres, particularly fellowships, conferences and other such meetings, provide women with space to sob and ventilate in the presence

⁸ Field notes 2016 gleaned during the Women without Limits Annual Convention, 30th Aug-6th September 2016.

⁹ This information was gleaned from field notes and participant observations while attending and viewing ‘Women without Limits’ TV programmes as well as annual conferences throughout 2016.

¹⁰ See, for example, an advertising feature on ‘The History of Jubilee Christian Church: Celebrating 11 years of God’s Faithfulness: to God be the Glory’, *Saturday Nation*, January 30th, 2010. Kathy describes her passion for women as a calling from God which is so strong she never remained the same.

of a community of loving women or a shared sisterhood where there is support and group solidarity.

However, the programmes appear to focus more on Rev Kathy, who no doubt is the star of the programme, than providing women with real solutions to their problems – say, for example, bringing in psychiatrists and therapists to take these women through their pain and trauma in a professional manner. In fact, Kathy’s role in the programme is to probe and ask questions to these women who can sometimes share very harrowing experiences that they have been through. But these accounts are then framed as testimonies of women who have experienced a spiritual release thanks to the prayers and encouragement of Rev Kiuna.

The testimonies appear to legitimize Kathy’s place in the ministry as an anointed servant of God with women’s issues at heart. It seemed to me that these women participated in the programme to speak about very sensitive issues only to validate Kathy’s place as an anointed servant of God whom God has used to bring healing to hundreds of women, rather than focusing on tangible issues that these women continue to grapple with. During participant observation, I noted that although several women narrated harrowing and in some cases disturbing narratives of abuse, including gender and sexual based violence, there was no evidence that this programme provided tangible social-psycho support and therapy for these women who have heavy issues at heart. At the same time, and while the programme granted women space to ventilate, the programme did not scratch the surface to tackle real and tangible issues of empowerment, namely power and exclusion, social and structural injustice, that continue to perpetuate GBV, poverty, inequality, patriarchy, marginalization and dependency on welfare. Instead, Kathy focuses on non-issues such as beauty, class, loving and esteeming oneself, as clearly demonstrated by her concerns below: ‘This is the passion and calling God has given me for women. I want to see women change for good, to believe in themselves to fulfil their destinies’.¹¹

To Kathy, a lot of women are so beautiful but they don’t see it, so they let men belittle them and tell them what to do. Many women are looking outside for fulfilment, but that is wrong. She says: ‘As a woman you should love yourself and be a go-getter. Many women are looking outside for fulfilment, but that is wrong. Whatever you need to fulfil you is on the inside. Don’t limit yourself to what you can become! Find yourself as a woman and go up!’¹²

The kind of empowerment promoted by Kathy limits women into the home and private sphere, the kind of empowerment where women understand their destinies in the family: such destinies are to be wives in second place to a husband who ‘is the head of the home’. Overall, Kiuna states that her aim is to assist women in making ‘a man comfortable in his place [because then] he will let you be comfortable in yours’.¹³

In this case, Kathy’s empowerment is that of a woman empowered to submit, a woman who knows her place in her home. In appealing to women’s notions of Christian

¹¹ This information was gleaned from Kathy Interview with Lillian Muli’s TV programme ‘Women and Leadership’ on Citizen TV 30/8/2016 Prime Time News.

¹² This information was gleaned from incepts of an interview of Rev Kiuna in a leading women magazine, *True Love*, by Damaris Irungu: ‘Incredible Journey, Kathy Kiuna on her Critics, Marriage, Divorce, Faith and Being herself’, *True Love East Africa*, November 2011, 42-47.

¹³ Irungu, ‘Incredible Journey’.

womanhood and navigating the portrayal of women by the church as defined by her position in the family as submissive to the men in their lives, 'Women without Limits' provides a safe space for women to find shelter within the church from explicitly oppressive manifestations of the kind of patriarchy that Kathy promotes. For example, women who are victims of gender-based violence find the sense of belonging or sisterhood that is generated amongst members of the church, with this sense being built on devotion to God rather than the husbands. Her teachings seem at odds with women empowerment that goes beyond the simplistic motives of helping women find themselves and loving themselves and making themselves beautiful so that they can make their men comfortable in their space, so they would let you be comfortable in yours.

At the same time, Kathy's opulent life is in contrast with the women she preaches to and aspires to empower. Kathy projects the image of an immaculate woman with an impeccable sense of style, a woman of God who lives large, has a beautiful family, a romantic spouse, plays golf, drives sleek cars, leaves in upmarket and high-end Nairobi, and holidays in South Africa and the Caribbean. She exudes class, power, grace, beauty, style, riches and images the woman who has arrived.

In this sense, she represents the 21st century modern Kenyan woman who has made a complete break with the past, a past characterized by poverty and luck and struggle. She appeals to the middle-class women aspiring to arrive like her even though many can only aspire and dream of living her life. A number of the women I spoke with were very critical of Kathy's teaching and lifestyle. Many felt that Kathy cannot relate with their present circumstances characterized by poverty, suffering, injustice, violence, abuse, lack and brokenness. Sally had this to say during an interview:

Kathy Kiuna is fake, lacks empathy and is out of touch with ordinary women's sufferings. Her programme is not meant for women like me. Her open opulence and her story that reads like that of rags to riches is not my story. She cannot understand me or my issues. When I see her interviewing women on TV I feel sad for those women. If I can see through her fakeness, why can't they?¹⁴

Yet, the 'Women without Limits' programmes remain popular with women congregants who find the teachings and sermons in this programme empowering to them as individuals. Akoth, a postgraduate student and a staunch follower of Kathy Kiuna's 'Women without Limits' TV programmes and a frequent participant in the monthly seminars and conferences, credits Kathy's teachings for giving her a new lease of life. This is how she described her experience:

Before I joined JCC churches and started attending 'Women without Limits' monthly meetings and annual conferences, I was at the verge of collapse. You see, I was sexually abused as a child by my cousin and my parents did nothing about it despite me informing them what happened. I grew up bitter and depressed and struggled with lack of self-esteem and confidence. I just got by but I have suffered depression for a long time. When I started attending 'Women without Limits', I experienced spiritual transformation and I began to develop self-esteem. I learnt to let go of my pain and forgive my abuser. Now I am a better person and I am

¹⁴ Sally (not her real name) is a house girl who leaves in Nairobi and used to patronize DOZ meetings whom I interviewed in June 2016 in Nairobi Parklands.

indebted to mum [Kathy] for giving me my life back though her life transforming sermons. This is why I always plan to attend this meeting.¹⁵

Others explained to me how Kathy's personal story ministered to them in deep and personal ways that their lives would one day change to look like Kathy's. Others spoke about the power of the gospel of prosperity that Kathy and her husband preach and promote. Many women explained that it has given them aspirations and hope for financial independence. Pentecostal churches offer women with an alternative community and space in the midst of personal and family instability, violence and economic hardships. It seemed to me that the gospel of prosperity, which promises health and wealth to the faithful, legitimizes and supports women's economic independence. It has a message relevant to the realities of life for a section of Kenyan women and provides for their individual needs, thereby making it a promising movement for the advancement of women in Africa.

In the case of Rev. Kathy's ministry, she represents a break with the past, and a new beginning with modernity. This, it seems to me, is the reason why 'Women without Limits' programmes essentially appeal to Nairobi middle-class women who desire modernity and want a complete break with the traditional past, while women of humble backgrounds cannot relate with her teachings and sermons. Yet, and irrespective of these women's life circumstances, Kathy's teachings and sermons appear to shape women's spiritual and personal lives in ways that seem invisible but which personal narratives of women followers of this programme believe have impacted them in deep and powerful ways.

Throughout field research, dozens of women explained to me how the teachings and sermons by Rev. Kathy, particularly in the 'Women without Limits' programme, personally spoke to them or helped them understand and value themselves better, gave them an identity that changed how they defined themselves, gave them self-value, self-esteem, self-love and to understand their place in the universe. And while many respondents were divided as to the impact of this ministry on their lives, there is no doubt that DOZ and 'Women without Limits' has given Kathy Kiuna space to grow as a pastor and as a minister independent of her husband. It is strategic for Pentecostal churches to have a women's wing in the church for two reasons First, this platform has given Kathy tremendous visibility, authority, voice and power to shape not just her own theology and message but also to grow her leadership skills and acumen. Secondly, it makes sense for churches to have a women's ministry for a number of reasons; women are important to any church in terms of numbers. Numbers translate into more tithes and offerings, but also allow the pastors' wives space to spread her own influence and carve out a niche for herself away from her husband. Rev. Kathy's DOZ has indeed enabled her to carve her own space and path away from her husband.

The Ministry of Repentance and Holiness (MHH)

The Ministry of Repentance and Holiness (MRH), is a Neo-Pentecostal movement that burst into the Kenyan public sphere in 2004. This strange but controversial ministry was founded by self-proclaimed Prophet David Edward Owour, a scientist turned preacher and puritanical moralist who has made issues of sex and sexuality the central message of his theology. In this ministry, sex or 'sins of immorality' as it is normally referred to takes

¹⁵ Interview with Akoth, (not her real name) on June 2016 in Nakuru.

centre stage as reflected in a series of highly sexualized and highly publicized sermons and church discourses. Here, sex is also categorized as a grievous sin which attracts the wrath of a vengeful God while women are depicted as temptresses and their bodies portrayed as sites and loci for sin and sinfulness (Parsitau 2015; 2016).

Empowered Women: Female Spiritual Leadership in the MRH

The MRH is very popular with women folk who find its message of repentance, holiness and moral probity attractive. Also, the church is good to women, most of all single women: widows, divorcees, single unmarried mothers and others. In fact, women occupy a visible public role in this ministry. Many are ordained bishops, pastors, deacons, heads of altars and disciples/apostles, and evangelists. Currently, the ministry has already appointed twelve women bishops, serving as heads of regions such as counties and districts.¹⁶

Some counties are huge, both geographically and in terms of the number of districts they include and large concentrations of altars within them. There are perhaps thousands of female pastors who lead hundreds of altars (as churches are referred to in this movement) dotting much of the country be it in rural or urban centres. Women are also empowered to become spiritual leaders who adjudicate cases of conflict between members in various altars. Women also sing in altars, lead worship services and crusades, provide ushering services, and translate sermons into Swahili for the prophet, who preaches in English during large repentance and holiness crusades and rallies.

One such woman clergyperson, Bishop Gladys, is among the 12 women bishops heading large counties. Gladys is currently commanding a country which is made up of five districts and 80 altars. Bishop Gladys, who also doubles up as a business woman and an interior designer, described to me her responsibilities as a bishop. These include overseeing and providing leadership to over 300 pastors serving under her and coordinating the activities of all the altars under her care.

Other such roles and activities performed by Bishop Gladys and other deacons serving as heads of counties include weekly preaching, discipleship and mentorship to the youth, providing leadership, counselling couples and those planning to get married, officiating at weddings and funerals, presiding over the Lord's table or the Holy Communion, and presiding over activities and programmes for widows, orphans and the vulnerable.

Asked why the Ministry of Repentance and Holiness is popular with women, Bishop Gladys had this to say: 'The reason women love this ministry is because it embraces and accepts women irrespective of their present circumstances. Women therefore feel loved, accepted and not judged. The church also takes care of widows and orphans and the vulnerable.'¹⁷

Bishop Gladys further explained that the church services always have two offering baskets; one for widows, orphans and the vulnerable and for paying utility bills for the staff working in the altars. Every once a month she explained that they have contributions for the widows and vulnerable women's basket. After the collection, all the monies are banked and the altars apportion the money to those very needy women who need to pay

¹⁶ According to Bishop Gladys, Overseer of Nakuru County during a series of interviews held between June and September 2016 in Nakuru Town.

¹⁷ Personal interviews with Bishop Gladys 2016 in Nakuru.

school fees for their children, pay hospital bills and buy food and other supplies. This action and undertaking makes the ministry very popular with women because it takes care of their welfare.

At the same time, the fact that this ministry does not judge single women: divorcees, those that never married but have children, widows and other such categories in a society that frowns upon single women makes this ministry attractive to women. Women are accepted and embraced just the way they are. This is how Bishop Gladys explained it to me during an interview:

This church picked me up from the trenches, cleaned me up and gave me a new beginning. I was a divorced mother of six and a victim of gender-based violence. My ex-husband beat me senseless and nearly broke my spine. For two years, I was confined to my bed unable to do anything. I suffered horrific abuse: physically, emotionally and psychologically. I made a decision to walk out of my marriage with my six children. I had nothing to carry with me and I went into the unknown. I was hurting, raw, bitter, abused, poor and vulnerable. I had no self-esteem or confidence or self-worth. I joined this ministry and it completely transformed my life. I was embraced and welcomed to the church just the way I was. No one judged me, I felt accepted just as I was and this comforted my heart in ways I cannot explain. This has made me love the Lord and I will serve him for ever. Today, I have a new story, a new life, a new song and I am somebody. The church picked me from the dustbin to this comfortable space I am in. Today, I am in a good place. Bless the Name of the Lord.¹⁸

Bishop Gladys' testimony attests to the kind of personal empowerment and transformation that this ministry accords to women. It is the kind of personal transformation that visibly changed them from the inside and gave them both spiritual and monetary resources to rebuild their shattered lives. So, this is a different kind of empowerment, one that speaks about changed lives, valuing them and rebuilding broken lives.

This ministry also grants women tremendous opportunities to serve and find meaning. For example, they sing in church, lead worship services in altars (and crusades as well as providing ushering services during large repentance and holiness crusades and rallies. Thus, national altars (gatherings such as crusades and prayer rallies) become not just sites for the formation of a sort of shared sisterhood and identity making but also and more importantly sites of holiness and gendered geographies, spaces where women find meaning, acceptance, and value as well as spaces to sharpen their leadership roles. Here they learn to speak in public, learn to lead praise and worship, and develop skills and acumen such as public speaking, preaching, counting of the monies they collect and distributing them according to the needy and deserving of cases.

Yet beneath the veneer of spiritual empowerment for female followers of the ministry are complexities and tensions and constraints manifested in a subtle control of women's bodies, sexuality and relationships.

¹⁸ Face to face interviews with Bishop Gladys August 2016 in Nakuru.

Limited Women: Women's Dress Code, Gender, Sexed Bodies and Patriarchal Imaginaries in the Ministry of Repentance and Holiness

An important distinguishing feature of the MRH is the distinct way in which women followers dress to embody holiness. Women's bodies and dress not only take centre stage in this ministry but are also linked to the theme of repentance and holiness. Women followers of the MRH have embraced a unique dress code characterized by long flowing and loose dresses, ostensibly to embody holiness as taught by their Prophet. Besides, women are also urged to embrace certain manners, mores and practices that are deemed appropriate and of value to religious life.

The dress code forbids the wearing of sleeveless tops, hemlines at or above the knee, slit skirts that expose the knees and thighs, open shoes, bare legs and uncovered heads. Women are taught to conceal their bodies by dressing in this particularly conservative manner. They are required to cover up not just to embody holiness but also so as not to lead men into sexual temptation. Such control over dressing and sexual needs is in clear conflict with ideas of women's empowerment.

How the Prophet's women followers dress is dictated by his teachings. For example, when he speaks about women's bodies and dressing, he often quotes Hebrews: 12:14, 'Make efforts to be holy, for without holiness, no one will see the Lord!' He teaches his female members that their bodies are 'Temples of the Holy Spirit' and must therefore be kept clean and covered at all times. Women must cover their bodies also in order that the Holy Spirit may dwell in them. This is what the Prophet told women followers in one prayer rally attended by this writer: 'When you cover your body, you are saying: I respect and honour my body which is the temple of the Lord. So make sure you do not defile the House of the Holy Spirit by dressing indecently.'¹⁹

In another sermon, Prophet Owour decried the manner in which 'current fashions and fads' have rendered most of today's Christian women 'virtually nude'.²⁰ In response to such teachings women in the MRH have evolved a unique dress style that is designed to cover their entire bodies. By covering their bodies, these women not only embody holiness but also protect themselves from men's roving eyes. They are told that in causing men to lust after them, they would sin against God, the Holy Spirit and their own bodies, which would then prevent them from entering the Kingdom of God. Thus, women must dress holy before the lord and at all times guard their purity and morals. Portions of the scriptures are often quoted to drive the message home. For instance, Romans 12:1 states: 'The Lord is beseeching you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable before the Lord.'

To further legitimize his teachings on holiness and women's dress, the Prophet likes to portray himself as one who speaks and converses directly with God at all times. This is what he says:

The Lord also spoke to me very clearly about the abhorrent and state of immoral dressing in the church beginning with the pastors, pastor's wives, worship leaders, worship teams, and hence the congregation. The playing of *ndombolo* dance (a kind of dance from Central Africa) in the church as a form of occult worship in Kenyan

¹⁹ Sermon preached by Owuor on August 6, 2013 at Afraha Stadium in Nakuru.

²⁰ 'The Man Who Baptized Raila Odinga. Exclusive Interview with David Owuor', *Arise Africa Magazine*, special edition, 2009: 12.

churches and the dressing of worship dance troupes in T-shirts exposing their navels, playing of rap music, the perming and frying of male worship leaders' hair, including the punching and putting a shiny ring on the nose and at times earrings, these things could not go without catching the negative attention of the Lord. These things defile the altar of the lord.

The Prophet continues:

Whoever looks at a woman and lusts at her has already fallen into adultery. Pastors have fathered children in church and there are many Sunday school kids fathered by their pastors. You just need to look at these kids' ears to see who they resemble! This is an abomination before the Lord!²¹

It is such kinds of teachings that influence how women, and to some extent men, dress in the Ministry of Repentance and Holiness. Holiness is promoted as the only means through which people will enter the kingdom of God. Consequently, women's dress and bodies have become not just sites of contestation, debate and discourse about morality/immorality but also arenas of patriarchal surveillance, control and power, regulation and instrumentalisation, and signifiers of meaning and spirituality (Parsitau 2015a &b).

From the foregoing discussion, it seems apparent to me that women's bodies and dress are being used as sites of protest against perceived moral and spiritual decay. MRH women submit to the authority of the prophet and his teachings on patriarchy and submission. His teachings and sermons influence their lives in very personal ways, how they dress, personal grooming, and holy dressing that is not worldly. These women are called daughters of the King and holy sisters who are born again by grace, children of God, preparing to be ruptured soon when Jesus Christ the messiah comes.

Thus, in the Ministry of Repentance and Holiness, women are bound together by a common faith and dress code but also bound in submission to church authority, teachings and rituals. The complexities of women's material and spiritual church work and its articulation with liberating and constraining doctrines is an interesting dimension of this particular ministry. At the same time women's majority status coupled with demonstrative worship practices places women's revealed bodies at the heart of religious life. In mixed services women face the danger of accusations of inappropriate, challenging behaviour (Parsitau 2015; Deacon and Parsitau 2017).

Women in the MRH must conduct themselves like holy daughters. Holiness is understood in a twin sense: inward and outward. Moral or inward holiness consists of righteous living, thought and speech, guided and powered by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which includes abstaining from sex especially in the case of unmarried men and women. Practical or outward holiness, on the other hand, involves maintaining certain standards and dictates, among other things, modest apparel and the maintenance of gender distinctions.

Women believers are urged to dress modestly, with restraint and limitations; thus, some forms of appearance are considered off limits. Certain items of clothing are considered immoral, indecent and unacceptable, and by wearing them a woman is said to

²¹ 'The Man Who Baptized Raila Odinga,' 13.

show dishonour and disrespect to God. Miniskirts, tight pants, trousers or jeans, short dresses, sleeveless tops and so on are strictly forbidden for female followers of the church. In addition, women generally are expected not to wear makeup or jewellery; they must cut their hair short or keep it covered.

Women are urged not to dress like men or wear men's clothing because it is clearly stated in Gen 22:5 that women should not wear men's clothes. Further, tight pants or trousers are strictly discouraged because they outline the female anatomy which leads men to temptation and lust. In particular while attending church service as well as Bible studies meetings, women are urged to dress holy so as not to cause the terrible sin of sexual immorality. On the other hand, men must be clean shaven at all times and must not wear tight pants, jeans or shorts. They must always dress officially in suits and always be neat and clean.

They are also expected not to watch secular movies or television programs that are not spiritual as this is thought to corrupt their bodies, minds and morals. With the current social trends all over Africa due to globalization, there have been major shifts in how young women and men dress. Yet in this Ministry certain modes and styles of dress are considered immoral. By submitting to the authority of the Prophet and his teachings, women must therefore follow the stringent dress codes established by the MRH so that they may embody holiness.

Women are also taught that they are princesses, daughters of the king, and must carry themselves as such. Many of Prophet Owour's female followers prefer to wear purple because the colour signifies royalty. The Prophet himself wears robes of fine white linen and dons a long flowing beard reminiscent of the Jewish patriarchs of the Old Testament. Jessica Meuni, a member of MHR, explains that the way the Prophet dresses is dictated to him by God, through dreams and visions. At times, it is suggested that God personally shows him a picture of the clothes he should wear to a crusade or rally. Even his long beard is a command from God and the reason for it remains a secret between him and God.

Holy Ghost anointing, prayer, testimony, song and all manner of worship and religious life all create definitive markers of what is deemed acceptable Christian holy life in this Ministry. Given that external signifiers of holiness have been codified most rigorously on women's bodies, religious practice provides significant sites for aesthetic analysis. By adopting stringent tenets of comportment and dress, this Ministry actually restricts women's sartorial choices.

On the other hand, through empowerment and preaching, the Prophet advances a remarkable theology of inclusion that places women, including those who are single or widowed, at the heart of his Ministry. The Ministry therefore offers women space for shared sisterhood bound together by a common spirituality. He promotes a sort of teaching in which women go back to the past because modernity is evil and unholy and women must dress to embody virtue and holiness. For some women, especially elderly and middle-aged women, this represents a sort of moral empowerment for saved daughters who must cover up for holiness. When I asked university students who are members of this ministry why they dressed the way they did, they explained that they have been taught by the church to cover up for their future husbands. 'I am covering up for the one' said Jessica, a student at a public university.

Church gatherings, crusades, meetings and fellowships become therefore not just sites for the formation of a sort of shared sisterhood and identity making but also, and more importantly, sites of holiness and gendered geographies. Here women are bound together by a common faith and dress code but also by submission to church authority, teachings and rituals. By submitting to the protocols of gendered spaces, women in this church show their conviction and faith in church doctrine which strengthens both their individual religious grounding as well as the Ministry's corporate identity as a holy body. Women's adherence to tenets regarding dress and gendered space strengthens individual and community spiritual identity because the counter binary or agreeable contradiction of revelation is always in play. Their bodies actualize the merging of material, temporal and spatial realms.

This church ferments women with a feeling of belonging to a shared sisterhood of holy daughters. I witnessed ways in which clothing marks and connects these church women in public crusades, prayer groups and camps, in church premises and even in the workplace. These women so to speak *wear* holiness. Looking over the sea of attendees in a huge crusade, their distinctive style (although individualized according to taste and size) is striking and their majority status provides compelling and reinforced evidence of obedience to Owour's messages and teachings. It also speaks of his influence among his thousands of followers. Owour's female followers dress in white, signifying purity and embodying holiness. Their cohesive body of shared sisterhood is bound together by an almost uniform dress code.

In this church, as in many patriarchal Kenyan cultures, women's dress is an indicator of holiness and righteousness and female bodies are seen as locales of sex, sin, immorality and pollution. Holiness and righteousness are rubrics that are markers of self-identity, and a woman's appearance serves as a key indicator of these qualities within her. According to Jessica, women must be holy at all times: they must watch out how they dress and sit even at home, because the Lord can show up anytime. Being decently dressed and covered at all times and places shows respect, honour and the fear of God. This is what one lady said to me in an interview: 'If I am a true daughter of God, then my dressing must reflect my holiness and righteousness. My clothes must be truly born again and the words that come out of my mouth must be measured'.

Despite women's majority status in the MHR movement and demonstrative worship practices, beneath the veneer of their spiritual empowerment are complexities, tensions and constraints manifested in a subtle control of women bodies, sexuality and relationships. Pentecostal performance thus represents restriction and bounding of women's behaviour within patriarchal expectations and control. Women, who perform gifts of the spirit or demonstrate initiative, are subject to significant church censure through the control of their bodies and personal freedoms and liberties in respect of dress. Thus, Pentecostalism plays an important role in women's attempts to protect themselves but does not challenge and in fact maintains gender structuration. Furthermore, whilst we can see the role of male control over females in these actions, behaviours and performances, of particular importance here is the extent to which women submit themselves to male authority, in this case that of the prophet.

Church Spaces as Loci for Empowerment or Disempowerment? Analysis and Discussions

From the above discussions, it is clear that Neo-Pentecostal churches offer women many opportunities to serve in their respective churches. It also accords them with a caring support network as well as opportunities for self-development. For example, women, who because of their poverty and personal circumstances find themselves excluded from other self-help groups, find a place in these churches like we have seen in the case of Bishop Gladys and women in the Ministry of Repentance and Holiness. This observation is validated by many studies that have shown that one of the strengths of Pentecostal Christianity is that it is a more inclusive religion that facilitates the participation of marginalized groups (Soothill 2006, Gill 1990, Martin 1991).

Not only do women who patronize these churches receive social, spiritual and psychological support, they also feel affirmed and their dignity upheld. This source of personal validation is especially important for women who are sick, widowed, childless, divorced, or accused of witchcraft. Whereas single mothers, divorced and separated women are rarely given positions of responsibility in mainline churches, the Neo-Pentecostal churches such as MRH ordain such women and give them other church responsibilities as demonstrated by the case of Bishop Gladys which serves as an encouragement to such women that even if society frowns on them, they can rise above that to become respected religious visionaries. In these churches, it is acknowledged that spiritual power is available to both men and women and that both are empowered to teach, preach and found churches as long as they have been called by God and endowed with charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, worship, prayer and fellowship also provide these women with opportunities for spiritual rejuvenation and escape from the drudgery of life. As already highlighted above, worship in these churches is participatory, refreshing and exuberant and in many cases led by women. Worship services also become loci where every persons' needs are mediated in the context of prayer, singing and dancing. This creates a sense of belonging and community.

Through prayer, women are able to have a sense of release and relief even as women freely express themselves in worship, by giving testimonies, leading praise and worship and sometimes-experiencing pneumatic and ecstatic experiences such as speaking in tongues, trances, visions, prophesying and dancing. Here, their spirituality accords them space and the freedom to express themselves, disclose their inner feelings and tensions in a context devoid of restrictions.

Scholars have noted the therapeutic roles of prayer in the lives of women in these churches. During prayer and worship services and when gathered for their annual conferences, fellowships, cell group meetings, or Bible study groups, these women share their stories of sufferings and restoration through confessional testimonies. The meetings allow them to disclose their inner life among generally supportive women.

This opportunity has therapeutic effects on women who find time and space to ventilate in a context of sisterly support. These meetings also provide moments for entertainment and relaxation. It has been argued that since women do not have the same social outlets as men, the church and women groups become centres for socialization, welfare association and building networks of trust. The churches not only provide

fellowship and spiritual support, they also offer solidarity in times of need (Griffith 1997, Parsitau 2015).

From the foregoing, it is clear that the two churches provide a caring network of support to women and opportunities for personal development. Within these churches, women forge networks of social, financial and spiritual support that may not be available in other places. Gaining moral authority and boosting self-esteem improves women's chances of developing activities beyond the home and widen their networks of sociability, thereby encouraging female individuation. Here, women not only exchange ideas on how to run their families, but they also share access to empowering information like legal counsel, how to conduct business and even to lead a prayerful life. For these reasons, church spaces are not just spaces for worship but also act as civic spaces as well as spaces to access legal aid and advice. Nevertheless, both churches do not scratch the surface to condemn the social, economic and structural issues that continue to perpetuate gender inequality that limits women empowerment in patriarchal societies.

Conclusion

In this article I have examined how different categories of Pentecostal women struggle to navigate between empowerment and patriarchy in a complex and contested social and cultural context and milieu. We have shown how married Pentecostal women have carved space for themselves within their churches and how some, such as Rev. Kathy Kiuna, have used that space to raise up major enterprises such as 'Women without Limits'. At the same time, I have shown how limited this empowerment is, even for Kathy Kiuna, who maintains that though she is empowered, she also knows her place in her home. Hence, I point to the limitations, dilemmas and paradoxes that Pentecostal women clergy face as they try to navigate and mediate between empowerment and submission. Women such as Kathy essentially submit to their husbands despite, or perhaps in keeping with, certain rhetoric of empowerment that is found in sermons and teachings in mixed ministries and those exclusively for women alike. The latter in particular help women to survive in a heavily patriarchal society but do not challenge the structural issues that predominate in Kenyan society. In order to consider the importance of this situation, I argue that women in Kenya operate as 'sub-oppressors' and that 'the very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped' so that they act in ways demanded by males who hold positions of power within patriarchal hierarchies. In this manner Pentecostal women can also be seen as enforcing the wishes of men, and this finding would at the least represent a challenge to those who portray Pentecostalism as offering a new equality of opportunity to all its adherents.

Equally though, wider processes of cultural hegemony can be seen as Kenyan Pentecostals attempt to address contemporary urban challenges such as giving meaning to human life, while simultaneously equipping themselves to be resourceful in meeting diverse challenges. This is not to suggest that they are successful in addressing the challenges in their lives by changing their circumstances. Instead, the mechanisms employed allow some limited protection from rumour, judgment and exclusion – rather than opening up new modes of existence in which these attacks are avoided, or those who hold such attitudes have their opinions and understandings remade (Deacon and Parsitau 2017). It seems to me then that Kenyan Pentecostalism is a complex mix of empowering and disempowering standpoints. For example, women's ministries promote a sort of feel-good motivation rhetoric but fail to bolster or support challenges that women might make

in taking a stand against a heavily patriarchal culture. I wish to emphasise that the nature of this culture can be viewed in the light of a dominant Christian conception of gender roles and structuration.

Understandings of homes, families and individual gender roles have undergone significant changes in Kenya and across Africa, in part due to transformation in modes of production, but significantly, I think, in response to conceptions of Christianity. As mentioned above, a variety of authors have engaged in disputes as to whether predominant understandings of Pentecostal and Evangelical Christianity with regards to women are positive or negative. However, there is little dispute as to whether they have produced changes and are significant in terms of gender conceptualisation.

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