

Patriarchy as a Form of Gender-Based Violence within the Religious Circle: A Pentecostal Assemblies of God Church Reflection

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ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence continues to be an issue that has attracted interest and debates in all societies, regardless of the cultural, social, or religious affiliation of an individual, with patriarchal structures taking center stage. The purpose of this study was to explore patriarchy as a form of gender-based violence in the Pentecostal Assemblies of God church, Vihiga County. The study's theoretical background is anchored on a liberal feminism approach, which emanates from the works of Mary Wollstonecraft around 1772 and was advanced by various philosophers, including Simone de Beauvoir. The study deployed a qualitative research approach, collecting data from interviews and relevant literature reviewed. The study targeted women who are GBV survivors within 10 PAG churches in Vihiga County. The 30 GBV survivors in the PAG church were sampled using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Data was analyzed thematically and presented as text. The findings of the study reveal that women have suffered GBV incidences that are supported by biblical patriarchal notations, which are intertwined with misinterpretation of scriptures, adoption of Jewish culture blended with African culture, and limited access to theological education and spaces. The study concluded that embracing male-centric language for God promotes, to a great extent, hierarchical structures, women's inferiority, and female subordination. As a result, GBV perpetrators get a leeway to get away with mischievous acts of violence against women in the name of the "the bible says." In reflection on this study's findings, the researcher recommends that the church's leadership prioritize GBV and declare it a current problem that needs to be addressed concertedly. Additionally, the study recommends that women who have conceptualized GBV and have religious platforms should shun fear and stand up to challenge patriarchal structures, advocating for equality and equity in matters of religious practices and spaces.

Key Words: Christianity, Equality, Feminism, Gender-Based Violence, Male Dominance, Patriarchy

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence [GBV] continues to be an issue that has attracted interest and debates across the globe regardless of the cultural, social or religious affiliation of an individual. Gender-based violence encompasses various forms, including physical, emotional, sexual, and even economic abuse, which are all heavily influenced and sustained by cultural and social dictates. GBV is a multifaceted issue rooted in various historical, cultural, and structural factors. Musoni (2023) argues that the subjugation of women is enforced by the dominant patriarchal systems of thought that enforce strict gender roles and male superiority. Such beliefs find expression in religious doctrines, cultural practices and mainstream organizational systems that work to subordinate women and subject them to violence.

Globally, Gender-Based Violence first caught the eye of the international community seriously in 1992 when the United Nations (UN) made a declaration on violence against women in its general assembly (Joachim, 1999). The declaration contained various issues of concern on the subject matter, inter alia, discrimination against women and abuses against women (Etienne, 1995). In this case, violence against women was conceptualized to mean "Any act of GBV that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life (Rapinyana & Baratedi, 2023)." To achieve the fight against GBV, the international community concerned with GBV called for concerted efforts from various players. Among the players are religious organizations tasked with streamlining social structure and beliefs, among other roles.

Various theological interpretations have dented the reality of what women should and should not do in churches in general. Most churches in Europe, America, and even Asia still hold dearly to the biblical call of men over women. However, it is worth understanding the culture that dedicated the writing of the Bible: The Jewish culture. This implies

that despite the fact that the Bible is sacred, the cultural identity of the time cannot be the same as the current one, as all are not Jewish (Kariuki, 2024). Feminist scholars argue that the world has been progressive and oppression of women has to stop. However, most individuals who still hold patriarchal minds believe that everything changes, but biblical standards remain the same, as God does. This remains a contested and debatable aspect within the religious circle (Stephenson, 2020).

In most African churches, patriarchal structures and beliefs are ingrained deeply, eventually leading to obscured mistreatment of women as evidenced by limited roles and, by extension, failure to ordain women in leadership positions (Dube, 2014). Efforts to halt this are often met by resistance from the church leadership, silencing every voice, sometimes through threats and intimidation. As a result, women have been blamed even in the areas where they ought to be helped when they suffer GBV. Culprits of GBV walk freely around as the patriarchal nature of the society engulfs even the thoughts of the church leadership, which should work hand in hand with the justice system to bring justice home for victims (Nadar, 2009).

In the Kenyan context, understanding GBV has been limited to only domestic violence and much narrower to intimate partner violence. Despite the fact that Kenya enjoys 80% Christianity, statistics show that the majority of women have suffered from GBV (Omayio, 2015 & Wamue-Ngare *et al.*, 2024). Research conducted on GBV in Vihiga County indicates that the County records almost every form of GBV. Scholars who have delved deeper into the GBV phenomenon in Vihiga County have questioned the role that institutions mandated to curb such occurrences as GBV have played as they argue that the terms are just on paper but not on the ground (Ngutu, 2019; Awino & Ngutu, 2023). Specifically, cases of domestic violence have been reported daily, with intimate partner violence leading the line. Various factors have been linked to the occurrence of GBV in the County, including lack of employment, illiteracy, cultural and traditional orientation, and strong patriarchal issues (Njagi, 2017).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

A study by Ellens (2021) reveals that 30% of the world's population is affiliated with the Christian faith, with a mixture of denominations whose doctrine may differ but submit to the one authority, Jesus Christ. Christianity's perspective on justice is pegged to two pillars, righteousness and mercy. Building on these pillars, emphasis on caring for the vulnerable, like the oppressed and the poor, and challenging systemic inequalities take centre stage. Philpott (2014) argues that when talking about justice, teachings from Christianity have, for instance, promoted the concept of restorative justice, where traditional punitive justice has been replaced with reconciliation and healing, hence repairing relationships.

Studies by Ngutu (2019) and Otolo (2020) established that cases of GBV in Vihiga County continue to escalate regardless of the strong presence of Christianity, especially with the dominance of PAG. PAG church, as a prominent and influential FBO with its headquarters in Vihiga County, holds the potential to play a significant role in addressing and mitigating GBV within its community, as demonstrated by other FBOs. However, no study has attempted to focus on the aspect of religion and GBV within Vihiga County. It is in this light that the study, "Patriarchy as a Form of Gender-Based Violence within the Religious Circle: Pentecostal Assemblies of God Reflection," seeks to bring into context the ways through which patriarchal beliefs and structures shape the behaviors and attitudes towards women discourse in religious spaces and community.

1.2 Research Objective

The main objective of this study is to explore patriarchy as a form of gender-based violence in Pentecostal Assemblies of God church, Vihiga County.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The study arguments are anchored on a liberal feminism lens which emanates from the works of Mary Wollstonecraft around 1772 and was advanced by various philosophers until contemporary times, with the likes of Simone de Beauvoir (Sangeetha *et al.*, 2022). The sole focus of liberal feminists is advocacy of women's role in society, with an inclination to religion in particular. The feminist approach has played a vital role so far in creating safer places for women amid pushy and demanding men through power hierarchical power structures in churches. It is worth noting that the approach does not deny the structures in place that reiterate the authority of a man but rather advocates for restructuring and rethinking a working strategy that does not suppress women or promote GBV. The aspects of equality, autonomy, and dignity of women, which call for rethinking and restructuring, are some of the tenets of liberal feminism theory, which aims to protect women's rights and spaces (Weiss, 2019).

2.2 Empirical Review

Frahm-Arp (2024) posits that religion is deemed to be the epitome of justice and equality, where it is expected to bring balance to social matters affecting society. However, this is not the case, as the reality is as far as expected. Historically, it is evident that efforts to establish justice in society based on religious principles have been flawed due to power structures. Sharma (2021) argues that religion theoretically promotes justice and equality, but the practical bit falls short due to the perspective on women's rights regarding dos and don'ts.

A study by Hadi (2017) sought to contextualize Patriarchy and GBV in Pakistan, a country established on Islamic faith. The researcher argues that in Pakistan, patriarchal values are deeply enshrined in the society, which determines the subordinated position of the female gender. The paper posits that patriarchal control is enabled by institutionalized restrictive behavioral codes, gender discrimination, and an ideology that tends to associate family honor with female virtue. Furthermore, the study reveals that societal order in Pakistan is that which promotes abnormal and amoral cultural traditions, creating an enabling environment for women's subjugation. These traditions include; rape and sexual assault, being subjected to burning punishment, acid attacks, forced marriages, domestic violence, torture, and sexual harassment, just to mention a few. Additionally, the study posits that, due to patriarchal issues, Pakistan is ranked 3rd as the most dangerous country in the world for women.

Daoud (2018) studied Debating the Role of Patriarchy in the Incidence of GBV in Jordan, where he systematically reviewed related literature. Findings reveal that patriarchy is a major contributor to cases of GBV in Jordan. This was supported by the fact that 33 percent of the works reviewed affirmed that patriarchal issues dominated most reported cases, pointing towards GBV. Cases of honor killings, rape, sexual harassment, and domestic violence were all connected to patriarchal norms in the society. Furthermore, the study revealed that discussing GBV in Jordan is not easy. It is seen as going against societal norms and structures that give men power over women, creating a hurdle in curbing GBV.

Analyzing the church leaders and the congregations, Kobo (2018) stated that gender-based violence is a problem and a challenge of the twenty-first century for theological discussion and the Church in South Africa, especially the patriarchal structured nature of the operation. Today, there is a need to have life-promoting theology and teachings in the 21st century. It was seen from the gender audit studies that men should refrain from making general statements against GBV. It was also observed that they should coordinate (GBV) initiatives, question the culture that fuels GBV, confront perpetrators and ensure protection and support to survivors.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study deployed a qualitative research approach, collecting data from interviews and relevant literature reviewed. The study was conducted in Vihiga County, Kenya, specifically focusing on the PAG church. The researcher chose PAG church because it is the most dominant church in the study area. The qualitative approach was chosen because it can capture individuals' experiences at a personal level. The study targeted women who are GBV survivors within 10 PAG churches in Vihiga County. The 30 GBV survivors in the PAG church were sampled using snowball sampling techniques to help get women who are victims of GBV in a religious context, in particular, with the help of their pastors. Data was collected through interviews and analyzed qualitatively. Responses were presented in the form of text in relation to the themes of the study.

IV. FINDING & DISCUSSION

4.1 Patriarchal-Based Scriptural Misinterpretation

Christians believe that the scriptures are sacred and meant to bring societal order to the world. However, some scholars have questioned the role of scriptural interpretation in some of the practices within the society. Gender-based violence continues to be related to the scriptural notation. Mwale (2022) reiterates that denominational differences arise from the element of doctrinal interpretation, with finer details interpreted differently. With such a ground of seeing the same scriptures from different angles, loopholes for making wrong judgments are created, justifying why denominations act differently in various circumstances. Based on this, GBV has been seen within the church walls and, by extension, in society, with the cases dying off due to the biblical connotation that it allows patriarchy.

The findings in this study established that women in churches suffered domestic violence day in and day out despite their inclination to the church as a place of solace. For instance, the bible in Ephesians 5:22-24 calls for the wives to submit to their husbands, and this can be interpreted to mean the husband has the right to correct the wife physically, thus leading to physical abuse (Ephesians 5:22-24, NIV). Ademiluka (2020) posits that the interpretation of this passage has caused more harm to women than justice, as it has called for the oppression of women and subjugation of women in marriages. Ezeorunye (2024) argues that this submission should be based on mutual respect, love, and headship, bringing about peaceful co-existence within marital relationships.

Joyce (2009) reiterated that devoted wives bow down to their husbands' oppression by surrendering their careers for the lord's sake and his illustration here on earth. Sims (2016) opined that the rationalization for male supremacy started with the creation order as specified in Genesis 2. Within this context of creation, the interpretations put man first and then a woman comes after. Additionally, the notion that a woman is a product of a man's rib brings even further confusion. It lays the ground for GBV to thrive, that man was created before woman and supports the authority of man. The fundamentalist reading also goes further to justify the aspect of female subjection in the aspect of being a helper, implying that women were not created to be equal to their male counterparts but rather as subordinates. In this context, man was viewed as the benchmark of humanity, the image of God, and giving birth to the lesser woman. During the interviews, one of the respondents said:

One obvious thing in marriage is disagreements; however, in my case, I could not find the space to express my grievances, as it felt like I was not being submissive to my husband. One thing that stood out during my stint in marriage was the siding of the pastor with my husband. On three occasions, I remember the scriptures from Ephesians 5:22-24 being read to remind me of my duty as a wife. In my life, I understood that the church was the final destination for my marital problems. Therefore, when I felt that our pastor was not helping me, I left my marriage with my children. I feel free now from that bondage where you are not allowed to question anything, however wrong it is (Victim 2, Interview).

The study furthermore established that the church promoted patriarchy within its leadership and duty structures in reference to the biblical background. Through this, GBV thrives through the social-cultural exclusion of women in the leadership and duties allocation may be compounded by the church's doctrinal imposition of the Bible as limiting their place practices of excluding women from leadership positions in the church and supporting them in most cases, the culture of the church during the times of Paul challenged women's authority to lead men and preach 1 Timothy 2:12 do not allow to effectively address GBV issues and perpetuate a culture of silence and inaction.

Women are perceived very differently in the church, especially in critical issues. The reason why I am pointing this out is that female ministers in most churches are not allowed to carry out some functions in the process of their ministry work on the basis that the bible does not allow. Most of the time, a woman minister in the church would be involved in activities like preaching and specific kinds of prayers, but excluded from core activities like presiding over church ordinances. Additionally, like in my PAG church, no woman has ever risen to the topmost position of leadership. This is a typical image of a patriarchal society where leaders of the church are not ready to accept that we are not living under the law but by grace. For instance, Paul's writing, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet," from his first letter to Timothy, has been misused by most people. In this regard, Paul was speaking concerning the culture of Jews, but non-Jews have used this against women who have been called to ministry. This is just an example among many other scriptures in the bible that have been used to stereotype women in society.

The respondent in the narration above points out the two critical factors within the PAG church, the leadership limitation and the performance of church ordinances. This problem has been observed more so in mainstream churches, with most women being members who cannot participate in major church activities beyond their membership roles. Such sentiments were echoed by 70% of the respondents, pointing out that there was a problem to be considered by various churches that wanted to eradicate GBV within their system of operation.

Most of the preachers in the church still subscribe to the case of the woman who was found in adultery, as portrayed in the Gospel of John. The Bible clearly states that Jesus was brought a woman who was found in adultery, and the crowd wanted to stone her. In this story, I notice that the man was given special treatment since the bible says that the woman was caught in the very act. This implies that the man was present, but the crowd did not see any fault in the man but rather decided that the woman should die. Given that the law of the land by then permitted this and Jesus rejected it implies that Jesus changed the order of this and brought equality in the perspective of sin and the place of a woman. However, what some church leaders are doing today, even within PAG, would imply that they still believe that the law is in control and that women should be mistreated because the bible says so. Too bad.

The plight of women on GBV can be seen and felt from the narration above. A point to consider here is that the church leaders are being mentioned as part of the problem instead of being part of the solution. Just as the narrator ended her narration, "too bad" implies that something somewhere will be a mess and needs to be addressed, just as the previous passage from the district woman director indicated.

In his book, Masenya (2019) highlight two critical issues relating to the church's role in GBV. First, they postulate that the church should align the scriptural issues that are related to GBV in a context that fits to avoid the misuse of various scriptures to disadvantage women and promote GBV. Second, the church should correctly separate the aspects of cultural and biblical concepts when addressing GBV. Similarly, a position that was held early by Graham

et al. (2004) urged the church to reconsider their perspective on GBV, especially in line with the reasoning of the biblical concepts.

The Campaign (2007) argued that the bible has traces of what can be termed as serious cases of GBV on various occasions, but each one of them has to be taken into context. He states that some cases of GBV were seriously condemned, and perpetrators were taken into account, while others seemed not to favour women, as the law was somehow oppressing women. However, he posited that the bible has every word that can be used to condemn cases of GBV rather than promote it, as some tend to misuse it. Early on, the work by Heise (1998) laid a platform for GBV to be understood on a biblical basis, saying that the bible chooses the words to use when defining the relationship between men and women. For instance, she explains the use of words like “submission” and “respect” as the bible calls on women to act and reflects on the way the two are misused to perpetrate GBV.

4.2 Patriarchal Cultural Influences

Most women have been placed in subordinate roles, while men enjoy pivotal roles through the blending of long-standing patriarchal traditions. These patriarchal cultural influences have seeped into religious spaces and institutions, shaping their practices and beliefs, right from the leadership to the members or followers. The aftermath of events in most African churches can be related to the strong patriarchal influences that dictate how gender roles are executed, devoid of the rights and privileges a woman ought to enjoy within the context of her service.

The way patriarchal issues manifest in churches within the African continent differs as the culture of the land is rich, with most of the cultures warming up to the fact that women are not permitted to lead or be part of the rituals that take place. Musoni (2023) points out that in South Africa, gender inequality and women being denied opportunities to minister and officiate liturgical duties in most churches is simply that the war against GBV is still far from being achieved. Just as Otolu (2020) reiterates, during special occasions, the church has blended with the culture of the land in most cases, in that women ministers are not allowed to preside over functions like weddings, dowry, baptisms, Holy Communion and to some extent preaching. In General, such situations contribute to the broader systemic inequalities that cast doubt on women’s capacity and expression in a spiritual context.

During the interviews, one of the Women ministers in PAG Church, who has served for a long time as a Reverend, brought out several revelations that relate to patriarchy as a form of GBV in churches. Mentioning what she has gone through personally, the respondent points towards being denied a chance to execute duties that are generally under her docket, concealment of some occasions and members that she ought to take part in, and openly being overlooked on most occasions just because she is a woman and the culture of the land puts men ahead of women. She narrated:

I have had some astonishing experiences which demoralised me to the extent of thinking that I am the wrong person for the right task. This is even though I have served in the capacity of a reverend in PAG Church for quite some time. However, what my male counterpart can do, I find myself being denied access on some occasions or denied the right to preside over. For instance, one of my members had a family occasion that required my input on the material day. The occasion was done in my absence, after which I overheard rumours that another pastor was hired by my church members to carry out the duties I was to do. After engaging them, they opened up and told me that a woman is not allowed to preside over such occasions in their land. This is just an example of what most of us go through, for I have experienced such occasionally.

This respondent paints an image of a pastor who cannot carry out her roles effectively despite being ordained as a reverend. In the real sense, the case depicts the power of patriarchal cultural influence over the independence of the church, especially women ministers. This reduces women ministers to minor roles as compared to the positional equality of their male counterparts in the same capacity.

4.3 Patriarchy-Based Theological Education Spaces

Mwaura (2015) postulated that the history of women and education is a challenging issue that has caused more harm to women's voices and expression. Down the line, women have been underrepresented in education opportunities and acknowledgment at the expense of male dominance. As Parker (2021) states, this effect has extended to the church as most of the theological spaces are occupied by men, with most of the scholarships equally given to them. This presents a serious patriarchal issue that dents the identity and capacity of women to contribute to the theological discourse. In this regard, Masenya (2019) posits that women have woken up and embraced feminism as a response to the oppression of men who want to remain the authority in matters of theology. Through this, diverse perspectives of women's issues have been expressed in various feminist approaches, inter alia, radical, reformist and reconstructionism.

Responses from this study point out the cases where respondents agreed that there are deliberate efforts to shun women's voices in theological spaces. During the interviews with respondents, the study established that only two

respondents had a mileage in theological studies, one with a diploma and another with a degree from the same institution affiliated with the church. During the interview, one of the respondents opined:

When I was in college taking my studies, there were deliberate efforts to stop me, as most men pointed out that my duty was to be at home to take care of my family. I remember one day when we entered the class in the afternoon, the lecturer discussed whether it was right for women to pursue theological studies. In a class of 43 students, only four (among them my only female classmate) took my side to justify why it was important to participate in theological studies. How can you explain this, yet the class was preparing ministers who would serve in various PAG churches?

Reading from the narration above, the traditional role of women resurfaces. The perception that women are family custodians has thwarted the efforts and desires of women who wish to expand their theological niche. Additionally, from a critical angle, the lecturer raising the discussion portrays an image that the system still upholds the systemic patriarchal structures that suppress women's agenda toward education in general. Still, from the same narration, it is evident that most women have not risen to take centre stage in theological spaces, as only two females were in a class of 43 students. This may imply that the institution was not committed to seeing women progress theologically.

Simply limiting women's ability to enhance their theological education makes the agenda of fighting patriarchal-based GBV more difficult. This is true because fighting from outside is so difficult, unlike fighting from within. However, for women's feminist agenda to expand and be effective, they need to be part of the theological alignment, being involved in enacting theological policies in addition to leading theological reforms.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Since time immemorial, religious institutions have been designed after the hierarchy and patriarchal systems of governance. Patriarchy enables the domination of the male gender, thus fostering male chauvinism, which in turn leads to a hegemonic, structural, and authoritative male rule in each segment of society. Most of the churches across the globe have embraced male-centric language for God, which promotes hierarchical structures, teaching women inferiority and accepting female subordination. Churches have portrayed an image of tolerance of intimate abuse as a result of heteropatriarchal values and deceptive theological inclinations. Biblically rooted patriarchy has not only given abusers a leeway to perpetuate GBV but, in an equal measure, thwarted efforts to curb other forms of GBV. Manipulation of scriptures leads to spiritual coercion to maintain male dominance. Generally, activism through feminism continues to cause a perspective shift on what women can do, their theological spaces and leadership capabilities, challenging the biblically rooted patriarchy, which in the long run seems to be yielding fruits. However, to reach the desired level of results, there is a need for concerted efforts and goodwill from major players like church leaders, activists and women to collaborate and resolve the critical issues step by step. Finally, GBV awareness of church leadership is imperative in creating a church that can transform the community to see the need for combining GBV.

5.2 Recommendations

In reflection on this study's findings, the researcher recommends that the church's leadership prioritize GBV and declare it a current problem that needs to be addressed concertedly. Additionally, the study recommends that women who have conceptualized GBV and have religious platforms should shun fear and stand up to challenge patriarchal structures, advocating for equality and equity in matters of religious practices and spaces.

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