

Breaking the Stained Glass Ceiling: African Women's Leadership in Religious Organizations

by

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Women's access to leadership positions and authority in organizations and society is limited by social norms, organizational cultures, and structures collectively referred to as 'the glass ceiling'. The 'stained glass ceiling' refers to the same phenomena in religious organizations, the barriers that keep women from attaining leadership positions and authority in churches and other religious institutions.

This special issue focused on African ascended women as leaders in different African communities, in Trinidad and Tobago, and the United States. The papers provide both historical and contemporary views of African and African descended women serving as religious leaders. John S Mbiti, the pre-eminent African philosopher noted that women served as leaders within African Traditional Religion (Mbiti 1988). Similarly, there are women serving within both mainline and African instituted churches in African countries. However, women do continue to be underrepresented in the highest levels of religious leadership, in a phenomenon named the 'stained glass ceiling' not only in Africa but other countries around the world (Adams 2007; Sullins 2000). The special issue focused on women breaking that stained glass ceiling, in terms of the strategies they use to survive and thrive as leaders in religious institutions – churches, religious schools and religious organizations, as well as the potential for employing spirituality in non-religious organizations.

Beginning in West Africa, two papers focus on women's status in religious leadership in a traditional and a contemporary religious institution. The article by Harry Odamtten focuses on women's roles within the African Traditional Religious sphere of the Ga-Adangbe of Ghana. Odamtten argues that women have always had roles that supersede the glass ceiling within the religious sphere, with some limitations. His fieldwork research elaborates on the various public and private religious leadership roles occupied by women in the Ga-Adangbe society.

Looking at an African Instituted/Indigenous Church (AIC) in Nigeria that has grown to also have branches in other parts of the world, Toyin Oluwaniyi explicates the roles that women play in the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim (ESOCS). She demonstrates that, while there are a variety of roles that women play, the higher positions in the hierarchy are primarily dominated by men. In fact, the top of the hierarchy, the Baba Aladura is never open to women – even the name (Baba means Father) indicates that is a position that is only open to men. The ESOCS has a different hierarchy for women, but it does not rise to the same level of power or have authority equal to that of the hierarchy for men.

Moving east, Jane Wakahiu and Mary Salvaterra explicate the experiences of three women religious (nuns) from the Catholic Church in undertaking leadership and community development, after undergoing a leadership development program. The three from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania utilize the lessons they learned and their enhanced skill set to develop their institutions and the surrounding communities. Wakahiu and Salvaterra argue that, leadership development activities may be necessary to enhance the competencies of women in positions of authority; they show that in the case of these three women, the training was invaluable to their continued effectiveness as leaders of faith-based institutions.

Maggie Madimbo uses an autoethnographic approach to narrate her experiences in religious institutions in Kenya and Malawi. A native of Malawi and senior lecturer in a faith-based college, Madimbo narrates two critical incidents that impacted her development as a leader. The first incident occurred within a faith-based institution in Nairobi that trains leaders for churches and other Christian organizations, where she felt unwelcome and unsupported in her efforts to attain higher education. The second incident occurred in a church in Malawi, where the male hierarchy acted in a way as to discourage her from taking the pulpit by 'instructing' her on appropriate dress for the occasion. Madimbo argues that, these kinds of events happen to other women too as she found out in conversations with others in the institution in Nairobi, and may have the impact of discouraging women from pursuing their call into leadership in religious institutions and churches. However, Madimbo's demonstrates that, supportive leadership behaviors by the male hierarchy can be effective in opening the space for women's leadership.

Moving to the Caribbean islands, Joyann De Four-Babb and Shelley-Ann Tenia focused on the experiences of women within the Anglican Diocese of Trinidad and Tobago. Their qualitative study illuminated the nine women's life stories, from their background professional experience outside the church, to their journeys towards ordination. De Four-Babb and Tenia argue that these clergywomen's stories highlight that despite personal characteristics such as resilience and tenacity supported by faith, which help them overcome their challenges, infrastructural and policy requirements need to be strengthened in the Diocese if more and younger women are to enter the clergy and rise to the highest ranks of leadership.

Amongst African Americans in the United States, Brenda Marina and Debora Fonteneau used the life histories of Pauli Murray (1910-1985) Barbara C. Harris (1930-); and Vashti McKenzie (1947-) to exemplify servant leadership. Marina and Fonteneau argue that African American women writers have frequently combined creative efforts with educational pursuits on the way to religious leadership roles. They demonstrate that there is a long chain of academic and religious writers who have voiced a unified cry against racial oppressions; examples include Maria Miller Stewart and Zora Neale Hurston who they show are connected to the stories and achievements of womanist theologians such as Katie Cannon, Cheryl Gilkes and Jacqueline Grant. For Marina and Fonteneau, contemporary women leaders in the religious sphere are standing on the shoulders of those historical figures. Their article contextualizes African American women's leadership in the religious sphere by showing how the historical figures who may not have held a formal religious leadership position, nevertheless by their courageous actions and writings, laid the foundation for later heroines such as McKenzie, Harris and Murray. Educational attainment and engagement in writing and publishing form a running thread through these herstories.

In a similar vein, Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, Sharon Gramby-Sobukwe and Kimberly Williams-Gegner historicize the experiences of African American women within the African American religious sphere. Their study of historical and contemporary Black women and their experiences within churches in the United States suggests that Black women continue the legacy of their past, confronting the stained glass ceiling in pursuing their call to ministry and in identifying strategies for leading in the face of resistance. Their article demonstrates that today, Black women ministers confront the same socio-cultural and exegetical-hermeneutic arguments their predecessors faced, intended to keep them from the pulpit. Yet, centuries of perseverance have evolved strategies of tempered radicalism that help Black women ministers lead in the Black church despite opposition, by bending, breaking out of and circumventing the stained glass ceiling. Their article ends with recommendations for further research on Black women's experiences in negotiating the stained glass ceiling and their strategies for leadership effectiveness in the church.

Finally, expanding the notion of 'stained glass ceiling' beyond the church and back to other organizational contexts, E Anne Christo-Baker, Cynthia Roberts and Christabel Rogalin provide a conceptual and theoretical article to close out the special issue. The three authors begin by exploring the evolution of leadership thought and then specifically focus on gender and leadership in organizations. They use role congruity theory as a vehicle for analyzing gendered characterizations of leadership and ensuing glass-ceiling effects. Because effective leadership is contextually and culturally dependent, they construct a discourse on the interaction of leadership, gender, race, and ethnicity. Specifically, they address leadership from the perspective of African American women in US institutions with the purpose of finding a general framework for analysis. The focus of the discussion shifts to spirituality in organizations and the possibility of leveraging spirituality as a vehicle for creating passages through the stained glass ceiling. The article does an excellent job of providing an overview of the literature on women and leadership and on spirituality in the meaning-making and coping strategies of African American women in the context of the intersecting forces of race, class, and gender.

A common thread evident in all these articles is that regardless of the context, i.e. religious denomination, organization, country or continent, there are numerous barriers facing women of African descent that hinder their ascent to leadership. Nevertheless, resilience and fortitude have led to some women breaking through the glass ceiling. Though conditions are improving, there is still much that can be done by individuals and organizations to remove the barriers that create or perpetuate the stained glass ceiling. Extending the conversations began in *Journal of Pan African Studies* Vol. 3, No. 5 (2009), these articles demonstrate the similarities and continuities amongst African women, wherever they may be in this world, as they struggle to find a place for themselves within a religious sphere that is predominated by Western Christianity and the attendant gender role socializations.

References

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