

Supportive Leadership Behavior Key to Breaking the Glass Ceiling in Religious Communities in Malawi

by

Maggie Madimbo

mmadimbo@eastern.edu

Doctoral Student, Eastern University, St. Davids, PA

Maggie Madimbo is Senior Lecturer in Educational Leadership at African Bible College in Lilongwe, Malawi. She holds a Master's degree in Christian Education from Nairobi International School of Theology in Nairobi Kenya. Her career as an educator includes teaching undergraduate students and she also serves as the dean of admissions for the college. Ms Madimbo is currently on study leave from African Bible College as she pursues a PhD in Organizational Leadership at Eastern University, St Davids, PA. Her research interest focuses on the role of mentoring in female leadership development and how women develop as leaders in Malawi.

Abstract

Women in Malawi need supportive leadership behavior in breaking the structures that hinder them from reaching top leadership positions in the church and religious institutions. In the African context, women find it hard to reach the top in religious organizations because the barrier is not only the glass ceiling but it is the whole structure, which includes the wall, the roof. The structural hindrance is very strong because it is embedded in the patriarchal culture, which makes it very difficult for women to be accepted as leaders in society. The whole social structure needs to be restructured in order for women to be allowed to lead and be respected as leaders. Change in social structure can only take place when leaders take the lead in influencing congregants in religious communities to start accepting and respecting women leaders and give them the support they need to excel as leaders.

Key words: Glass ceiling, religious communities, Malawian women leaders

Introduction

In recent years, the number of women in leadership positions has continued to change for the better in some fields, while in other fields not much change has been experienced. According to Christian history, it is clear that most official Church policies excluded women from holding clergy positions. Over the years, policies have changed dramatically within many denominations (Chaves 1997) but the number of women rising to clergy positions remains remarkably low (Konieczny and Chaves 2000). The lack of clear policies to promote women rising to clergy positions and senior leadership positions has worsened the already existing barriers for women to break the glass ceiling in the denominational churches in some parts of the world.

Research has shown that there are systemic barriers such as lack of opportunities and power, lack of mentors and role models for women in organizations, and widespread discrimination, which limit their opportunities to rise to top leadership positions (Morrison and Von Glinow 1990; Goodman, Fields and Blum 2003). There is therefore need for existing leaders in denominational churches and religious institutions to provide supportive leadership behavior to women serving in different leadership positions to break the glass ceiling. By supportive leadership behavior, I mean behavior that gives respect to women and allows them an opportunity to lead; and allows them to rise to the top in denominational and religious institutions.

There is no research that has been carried out on such barriers in the Church and religious institutions in Malawi. In this essay, I employ autoethnography to reflect on my experiences with barriers that stand against women's leadership within the church in Malawi. I explicate two critical incidents to show some of the struggles that women face in Malawi that may resonate with women in other parts of Africa. The incidents that I have shared show that there is a lack of supportive leadership behaviors from current leaders to support women seeking to be part of the top leadership team in religious institutions. I have also used stories of other women leaders who had similar negative experiences to show how the church and religious institutions make it difficult for women to be trained for church leadership. I demonstrate how in some African communities it is not just a glass ceiling but the whole structure (the walls and the roof), which makes it difficult for women to take leadership positions in the church. Empirical research shows that women in different circles face barriers to reach top leadership positions. While there is evidence that in some circles this is changing, not much has been written about the barriers that women face in denominational churches and religious institutions that prepare Church leaders in some parts of Africa.

The glass ceiling is one key barrier that impedes women's career advancement. It serves as an invisible barrier to the advancement of women within organizations across countries. Wirth (2001) defines the glass ceiling as the invisible barriers, created by attitudinal prejudices to block women from senior executive positions. It is a barrier that appears invisible but it is strong enough to hold women back from top-level positions merely because they are women rather than because they lack job-relevant skills, education, or experience (Morrison and Von Glinow 1990; Morrison, White, Van Velsor 1992; Powell and Butterfield 1994; U.S. Department of Labor 1991, 1995).

Background

In this paper, I argue that positive leadership behavior can encourage promotion of women leaders in the denominational churches and religious institutions in Malawi. Women continue to be under-represented in the mainline denominational churches in Malawi. While the situation seems to be changing in other sectors, most denominational churches appear slow to change. The purpose of this article is to show that supportive leadership behaviors can encourage congregations to have positive attitude toward women leaders in the religious institutions and the denominational churches in Malawi. For example, church leaders can support women by allowing them to preach from the pulpit, or affirm the different roles that women have in the church as part of the church leadership and encourage congregations to respect women and give them the support they need as leaders. Positive leadership behavior toward women can encourage congregants to have a positive perception about women leaders and support them as they lead. Certain leadership behaviors actually strengthen the glass ceiling in ensuring that women find it hard to reach the top denominational church leadership positions. Such behaviors make it difficult for women who feel called and aspire for leadership to have equal opportunity with men as they serve in different ministries. The article has been framed with extant literature on breaking the glass ceiling and leadership.

The ideas expressed in this article started forming in my mind about ten years ago when I enrolled in a Master's program at an institution in Nairobi, Kenya that trains Christian leaders for the African continent. It was during that time that my eyes were opened to some of the negative behaviors that discourage women who feel called and therefore attempt to attain formal training to serve as institutional and denominational religious leaders. It dawned on me that the glass ceiling in Christian denominations can only crack when leaders provide supportive behavior in breaking it. I have chosen two critical incidents that occurred to me at different times and in different places, which were discouraging to me as a female religious leader. In my case, it was mostly religious leaders who were not supportive in their behavior.

In one of the incidents that I have used, I was even asked not pursue a Master's Degree at that time because the institutional leaders felt that it was not the right time for me to study because I was a young newly married woman. Instead, they advocated for my husband to study even though he had not applied for enrollment to study at the institution. Yet just like me, he was also a newly married person. In the next section I will review relevant literature before getting to the critical incidents.

Barriers from Social Structures

In some African communities, due to neo-patriarchal cultures, women are not easily accepted as leaders. Their credibility is not fully accepted even when they have all the qualifications that are necessary for them to play a leadership role in the Church or religious institutions. Women who have been called to serve in Christian circles find it difficult to serve effectively in leadership positions (Ngunjiri 2010; Bjork 2006). The entire social structure makes it difficult for women to penetrate through and be accepted as leaders. Women face this barrier in theological institutions where church leaders are prepared for leadership. Sometimes they are told that they do not belong to these theological institutions that are supposed to be the training centers for Christian leaders. For example, Dr. Mombo who is the dean of academics and professor of Church history and theology at St Paul Theological University in Kenya, noted, “ [as soon as] I entered through the gate, the men asked me, are you sure you are coming to this school? Are you sure you are not going to Kenya Teachers and Technical College down the road?” (Ngunjiri 2010, 108). Because of such unfriendly attitude and perceptions in welcoming women many of them still find it difficult to access theological education. There are still few women in theological education in Africa because the early missionaries who came to Africa linked the study of theology with the ordained ministry and men alone. For this reason, theological education is out of reach to the majority of African women up to the present day (Phiri 2009; Bjork 2006).

Bjork (2006) quoted Musa Dube who argued that sub-Saharan African culture is a patriarchal culture. The patriarchal culture, social norms, economic marginalization and political inequalities pose barriers that affect women and reduce their access to education and employment opportunities. Such culture needs to be challenged to allow women an opportunity to speak and be heard as Christian leaders. “Women in churches are often considered an extension of their husbands and the subordination of women is regarded as the natural order of things” (Bjork 2006, 317). Therefore, church leaders need to take the lead in challenging that culture and allow women to take leadership positions not as extensions of their husbands but in their own right and by merit. Social barriers make it difficult for women to excel when they feel called to serve in religious institutions as leaders.

Despite cultural barriers and other challenges, there are still some women who are taking the lead in breaking the structures that hinder women; going through all sorts of humbling and discouraging experiences and circumstances they lead by example. In her book, *Women's Spiritual Leadership in Africa*, Ngunjiri (2010) used stories from 16 women leaders that illustrate some of the ways that women break the glass ceiling to serve in different communities. Ngunjiri narrates the experiences of Priscilla Nangurai, an educator who committed her life to leading Maasai girls to get formal education and fight against other social barriers. Nangurai

...has endured many years of being treated as a cultural traitor. She has struggled with knowing that the community that she has served diligently for most of her professional life has little appreciation for what she has been attempting to do in education of their women (p. 99).

Social structures that keep women down need to be challenged. As Myerson and Fletcher (2000) stated:

It's not the glass ceiling that's holding women back; it's the whole structure of the organizations in which we work; the foundations, the beams, the walls, the very air. The barriers to advancement are not just above women, they are all around them (p. 136).

In most cases within Christian traditions, those who are in support of women holding congregational leadership position, and those against it, both draw support from the Bible (Chaves 1997; Adams 2007). Those who support the involvement of women in congregational leadership claim biblical support for the notion of gender equality (Galatians 3:28). They also point to passages that show women in New Testament churches clearly serving in positions of authority (e.g., Titus 2:4-5; Romans 16:1-6; Acts 21:9; Adams 2007).

The Glass Ceiling Commission (U.S. Department of Labor 1991, 1995) proposed that structural characteristics of organizations are instrumental in the maintenance of the glass ceiling in organizations (Goodman, Fields and Blum 2003, p. 492). Leaders shape structures in non-religious organizations, in the same way religious leaders shape the structure and culture of their organizations.

According to Adams (2007), structural inertia theorists suggest that older organizations are more resistant to change, which would predict that fewer women should be found in positions of leadership in older congregations than in newer ones. In older congregations, this continues to be true and makes it difficult for the few women in leadership to rise to top positions.

Religious institutions like theological seminaries have been structured in a way that makes it difficult for women who aspire to lead to attain theological training and get the right qualifications and skills to be involved in the leadership positions. For example, in theological institutions that prepare Christian leaders like Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST) and Nairobi International School of Theology (NIST) both located in Kenya but serving students from all over Africa, Masters' Degree programs are designed in a way that shows that they are intended for men and not women. In her article on *Major Challenges of African Women Theologians in Theological Education*, Isabel Phiri (2006) argued that one of the challenges that women face when they enroll in theological institutions is that the institutions are built in such a way that they are male dominated in both the student body and the faculty, therefore women are treated as intruders.

Ngunjiri (2010) echoes Phiri when she narrated the story of Dr. Mombo who shared her experience in theological training when she wrote, "The college was particularly male--male in structure, male in the content of teaching; male even in the cafeteria, it was just a male place, and we were made to feel like intruders" (p. 108). In the same book, Ngunjiri also shared her experiences during one of her classes when she was in theological school at NEGST. One of the men in her class claimed that women were not supposed to be in the Master's Degree program. Instead, the man argued that women should be in a certificate program, which was called 'women's program' because it was established with the aim of preparing women to support their husbands in pastoral ministry by giving them home economics and some basic theological training. Such structures clearly show that they were not intended to support women who desire to serve in leadership positions in religious organizations. In such unwelcoming situations, some women may end up being discouraged and resolve to pursue a different career, different from their initial desire and sense of calling to serve as religious leaders.

In a study that controlled for age and education, Goodman, Fields and Blum (2003) found that women and men have similar aspirations, work values, and work-related perspectives. This suggests that women's relative absence from top leadership positions is not due to career aspiration, values, or socialization that would make them inferior candidates for these jobs. Therefore, when women are not able to reach top denominational leadership positions, it is not because they are not willing but rather the organizational structures and cultures are geared towards keeping them from reaching the top. Changing such structures and cultures is the responsibility for current leadership in order to support women who aspire to reach top leadership positions in denominational churches and religious institutions.

Supportive Leadership

Women cannot be effective and responsible leaders without the right skills, tools and resources (Njoroge 2009). Women can attain the right skills by getting the right training. Since they face different challenges when they feel called to serve as denominational leaders, it is important that those who hold leadership positions provide the necessary support for women to enroll in theological institutions. It is by enrolling in theological institutions that women can be trained and acquire the right skills and qualifications to take up leadership positions. The role of supportive leadership behavior in breaking the glass ceiling is necessary in denominational and religious institutions in Malawi and other parts of Africa, in communities that still have negative perceptions and attitude of women leaders. Off course, it is important to recognize that these negative attitudes towards positioning women in leadership are not ‘traditional’ to Africa; rather, they are a result of the confluence of colonialism and missionary Christianity, which had the effect of destroying traditional communities and the gender relations therein (Ngunjiri, 2010). The result of that destruction as far as gender relations are concerned, include the competition for limited positions, and a mix of contemporary norms that are not quite ‘modern’, and not supported by the previous generations and traditions of pre-colonial African communities. Instead, what we have now is the prevalence of norms and behaviors that tend to limit women’s participation in religious leadership, in spite of the long history of such participation in our not too distant past. The story of Dr. Mombo of Nairobi in Kenya in Ngunjiri (2010) illustrates how supportive behavior helps bring change and gives women an opportunity to be accepted as leaders. As a leader, Dr. Mombo used every opportunity she had to advance the welfare of, and speak for women. She influenced the diocesan leaders to consider ordination of women. Ngunjiri wrote, “she succeeded in convincing them, and the Anglican Church in Kenya was among the first mainline denominations to ordain women” (p. 111). She wasn’t the only one pushing for such changes, but her voice was important in those negotiations, especially since she wasn’t seeking ordination for herself.

Another good example of a leader who provided supportive leadership behavior to women in order for them to excel is Dr. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a woman who is behind the formation of The Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians (The Circle). The Circle is a group of women leaders in theological schools and religious organizations in Africa. Dr Oduyoye was supportive of other women by initiating the formation of the group that would provide support to women serving as leaders in theological departments in Africa. Njoroge (2005) writes how Dr. Oduyoye tirelessly provided empowering leadership and helped to nurture collaborative model of working together in reaching out, recruiting and mentoring other women to share in her dream and vision of forming The Circle. Through The Circle, a growing number of publications have been produced and women have continued to break the glass ceiling in religious communities in some parts of Africa. Such publications enable African women theologians to write their own indigenous theologies and contextually relevant interpretations of the Christian scriptures.

In her study at the Second Baptist Church of Evanston in Chicago, Shayne (2004) found that the congregation had a hundred plus years of history of not supporting women. When pastor Taylor took the position of senior pastor of the Second Baptist Church, he decided to provide supportive behavior to women who felt called and desired to go into Christian leadership. He allowed women who were serving under his leadership to do leadership activities and the women were able to lead. Shayne (2004) found that the congregation's perception on women was changing. She wrote:

By allowing women to sit in the pulpit area and function in tasks previously reserved for men, Taylor constructed a new symbolic use of space to support women clergy. Young members socialized under Taylor watched female ministers occupy clerical space and eventually perceived God's calling on their lives to preach (p. 174).

It was through supportive behavior of the leader that the congregation changed its attitude and started to support and respect female leaders. According to Shayne (2004), before Pastor Taylor joined that congregation, the previous pastor never allowed women to sit in the pulpit area designated for ministers, so the congregants were unaccustomed to seeing women sit or speak from behind the pulpit. However, Pastor Taylor abolished such gender norms after the Church appointed him as the new senior pastor. By providing supportive behavior, Second Baptist congregation was transformed into a free space for women clergy. Male church leaders must work proactively to eliminate barriers to women's leadership and ministry advancement.

Methodology

In this paper, I chose autoethnography qualitative research method because the paper presents incidents that may best be understood as having its origins from a patriarchal culture. Autoethnography is defined as a research method that connects the autobiographical and personal experiences to the cultural and social setting (Klenke 2008; Chang 2008; Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010). By using autoethnography I attempt to produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal experiences that illustrate social phenomena (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010). The method has allowed me to share my own experiences and draw lessons relating to social-cultural phenomena in navigating the stained glass ceiling in my context. I have used two critical incidents that I experienced in the past. One incident occurred when I had just arrived at the theological institution where I went for studies in Kenya. The other incident happened after my graduate studies while I was serving in my local congregation in Malawi. The method has also made me vulnerable as I have shared some negative experiences that I encountered as I continue my walk in religious institutions.

Vulnerability and possible self-exposure is part of the autoethnographic process (Chang 2008; Ellis 2004). In my case it is through these critical incidents that readers can understand the situations that women, who are called, may face as they serve in religious institutions in some parts of Africa. It is also through such incidents that leaders in the institutions may see the unfavorable situations that the organizations they lead create thereby taking the lead to transform people's perspectives as they provide support to their female colleagues.

According to Ellis and Bochner (2000) and Chang (2008), autoethnography connects personal experiences to the culture. Using autoethnography in this study has helped me as the researcher to look deep into the patriarchal dominated culture and I hope it will help the reader to gain a cultural understanding of the African and Christian cultural influence on gender related issues in an indirect way (Chang 2008). Further, autoethnography is inherently empowering, and I found that it enabled me to be reflective about my experiences in the hands of religious leaders, and inform my choice in becoming a supportive servant leader/lecturer who is willing to advocate for women in my own institutional leadership position. It is my hope that my story inspires those who have the privilege to serve as leaders in such a culture to offer supportive behaviors to their female colleagues.

You Are Not Welcome in Here

The first critical incident that occurred as a defining moment in my life took place in a Christian higher learning institution. It was in 1999 when I had just arrived in Nairobi, Kenya where I was going to pursue a Master's Degree in Christian Education at Nairobi International School of Theology (NIST). The school year started in August and I got married in June the same year. I was already engaged when I began the application process; therefore I knew that I would get married before the beginning of the academic year. During the communication process I notified the administrators about my intentions of getting married before the beginning of the school year. When it was time for me to go and start my studies my husband and I had agreed to go together the first time and then he would return to Malawi once I was settled. Upon arrival at NIST, I was welcomed with a very cold welcome speech once I introduced my husband. I was first welcomed by the then vice principal. In his discouraging welcome remarks he said I had put myself in an awkward situation because I was married. I did not understand what he meant by this. He continued and said that he was not sure if the institution housing committee would let me stay in the house they had allocated to me. In the initial agreement that we had, I would pay half the housing fee because I had been considered for institutional aid, which would cover the other half, but since I had gone with my husband, I was now required to pay the full housing fee.

Before we parted ways the vice principal had asked us to come and have further discussions with him the following day. He continued to say he did not believe it was God's will for me to be in school at that time because I was newly married and as a woman I was not supposed to be in school doing graduate studies while my husband was not. The following day I was shocked to see that his attention shifted from me to my husband who of course was not a student at the school. It quickly became evident that he was no longer interested in continuing the conversation with me. The whole time we met I was out of the discussion. Instead the vice principal directed his questions and the whole conversation to my husband just because he is a man. It was evident that the school leaders gave me such treatment because I am a woman. I realized later that in my class, there were some men who were also newly married but had left their spouses in their countries. By the design of the institutional programs women were supposed to be doing certificate in the "women programs". The women's program was aimed at preparing women to support their husbands in pastoral ministry (Ngunjiri 2010). I also noted the institution was not prepared to have an international female student whose husband had not enrolled at the institution. In their discussion, it was clear that the school leaders did not welcome me and did not want to support me in my desire to pursue a Master's Degree in Christian Education, which would equip me to be a leader.

The Vice Principal decided that I was allowed to study on condition that my husband would stay with me; a decision which was not fair to us because my husband was not planning to stay in Nairobi but to go back to Malawi and study. As a result of my husband staying with me the institutional housing committee decided (which I believe was the vice principals own decision because he mentioned it in the discussion when we met earlier) to remove the institutional aid that they had initially given me. The third condition was that my husband also should apply for enrollment at a school and be accepted. At this time most institutions had stopped receiving new applications for that academic year. This was also a condition for the vice principal (and my husband) to know that it was God's will for me to study at that time. Finally, I was told that I had made a bad decision to pursue graduate studies. From this incident I felt that the leadership at that institution did not want to support me to pursue my dream to be trained as a Christian leader.

Theological institutions like NIST, which were established with the aim of training Christian leaders, may be in the forefront of discouraging emerging female leaders. Their negative behaviors contribute to the glass ceiling since such behaviors discourage women from getting the right qualifications, which can make them rise to top leadership positions in Christian institutions. To worsen the situation this incident happened to me before I met any of my classmates and it was not done in the open. If I had decided to go back home as they suggested, none of my would-be classmates would have known it. But I chose to persist and attain my training in spite of this unwelcoming entry point. It is notable that NIST now has women in faculty and administrative roles, thus hopefully the institutional culture and structure is more welcoming to women students.

Let Us Teach You How to Dress Appropriately

In another incident that happened in a church context, I was given an opportunity to preach in a Presbyterian Church in Malawi. The denomination then did not support women leadership in the Church. Many people in that community considered preaching as a male-only domain. I was asked to preach at a mid-week prayer event. Before the day I was going to preach, I was approached by some of the male leaders from the church, who happened to have been my classmates when I was doing a Bachelor's Degree. The Church leadership thought it was necessary to sit me down and notify me about the order of the event. To my surprise the leaders came to teach me how to *dress* before standing in front of the congregation. I was a college professor at the time. These church leaders were aware that I teach at a Bible College, which trains Christian leaders. In fact some of these denominational leaders were my students and I taught them when they were doing their undergraduate studies. Their goal was to make it sound like I knew nothing about public speaking and presentation. This was just a way to frustrate and discourage me from serving as a leader. I listened to them tell me about how to dress, then went ahead and preached, but it did not escape my notice that their motives were to 'put me in my place' as a woman.

Discussion and Conclusion

As has been discussed from the literature, what keeps women from reaching leadership positions in the church can best be described as structural barriers – not just the glass ceiling but concrete walls too (Meyerson and Fletcher 2000). In situations where the leadership decides to provide supportive behaviors, it helps in breaking the glass ceiling and allows female leaders to be supported and recognized as leaders (Shayne, 2004). As shared above from my personal experiences, it is sad that sometimes Christian leaders who are expected to set the standards and be the example in encouraging emerging leaders are in the forefront to thicken the walls and the roof making it harder for women to be recognized as leaders. In the incident that happened at NIST, I was being blocked by the institutional leaders. Instead, it was through my husband's supportive leadership behavior that I was able to pursue my calling. My husband was willing to sacrifice everything he was doing at home in Malawi to come and stay with me as required by the institution. It was only after my husband had said in the meeting that he wanted me to study at that particular time and he was willing to support me in pursuing my calling that I was allowed to stay and study at NIST. My experience made me realize that there is need for leaders to provide supportive behavior that will help women to penetrate through these barriers. Now that I serve as a college professor and a religious leader, I continue to see the need for leaders to provide positive support to emerging leaders and those who are already in service so that they can reach the top. I would like to encourage other religious leaders to rethink their role in providing supportive leadership behavior towards breaking the barriers in denominational and religious learning institutions.

In the NIST incident, I was sidelined from the discussion in the meeting because in some cultural groups and certain religious denominations, women have no say in the public or in front of men because men are expected to be the leaders while women follow their husbands. My husband as my 'head' had to make the decision on my behalf, which was respected. It was only after my husband had shown his support that I was allowed to continue with my plan of pursuing a Master's Degree the first semester until the other conditions were met. NIST is a religious institution affiliated with a conservative US Para church organization. It (NIST) was established to train leaders for the church in Africa. At the time of my study there, 30 percent of the students pursuing Master's Degrees were women. In the certificate program, it was a hundred percent women because the program was designed to train women whose husbands were pursuing a Master's Degree. As I shared my story with other female students, it was clear that several of them had similar stories. For example, there was one woman who was single and was not allowed to have any leadership position because she was single. At that time she felt that her situation was unique to her. There was yet another woman who was a widow and she was older; she experienced similar struggles but she also thought her situation was unique. In that context then, women as a group were not united to advocate against institutional discrimination. Each woman had to fight her own battle.

The church incident was somehow similar to the NIST experience in as far as discouraging women from pursuing ministry leadership, except that at my church the leaders were also using women to discourage each other. The church leaders were telling leaders of women groups (like Women's Guild in the Presbyterian Church) to discourage other women who were interested in preaching. The worst scenario was when some church leaders pulled together a group of women and asked them to sign a letter that said women were not supposed to serve as leaders and preachers in the church. In both these incidences it was difficult for women to support each other because the problem was with the whole structure, which needed to change. Hartog and Dickson (2004) asserted that:

Leadership is originally the source of the beliefs and values that gets a group moving to deal with its internal and external problems. If what a leader proposes works and continues to work, what once was only the leader's assumption gradually comes to be a shared assumption (p. 274).

This view highlights the impact that leaders can have on organizational culture, even as illustrated in the quote from Shayne (2004) cited previously. Leaders are responsible for creating and changing organizational cultures, including any assumptions about effective leadership and who can serve in leadership roles.

If leaders in Christian institutions perpetuate limiting assumptions and behaviors towards women students, they are creating a situation where all those students (men and women) will be socialized and trained to believe that women should only serve in subservient roles. Therefore, it is imperative for leaders of religious institutions to lead their followers in setting a good example in supporting female leaders. The example of pastor Taylor of Second Baptist of Evanston in Chicago can be emulated by church leaders; changing the structures and involving women in roles perceived as for men only does have the effect of changing assumptions. Due to supportive leadership behavior, the glass ceiling cracked in one congregation. Though this happened in the USA, similar supportive leadership behaviors would be required in the Malawian context. In the two incidences that I have shared the leaders would have to also deal with social norms in each community relating to perception of women's leadership in the public arena. If leaders lead by example to promote such behaviors, it is possible to slowly but surely break the concrete walls and stained glass ceilings.

Christian leaders should take it upon themselves to encourage supportive behaviors toward women as they serve and lead others. In communities where oppressive behaviors may be considered the norm, Christian leaders should take the lead in providing supportive behaviors that will help followers to change their perspective. In situations where the leaders have a negative attitude toward promotion of female leaders, there is need to expose such behavior and provide alternatives. Leaders would then serve as transformative change agents in their communities.

The story of Dr. Esther Mombo in Ngunjiri's (2010) book is a good example of a leader who transformed her community, fought against social injustice, and broke the thick walls, ceiling and roof at Saint Paul's University (an interdenominational institution) and the Anglican Church in Kenya. Dr. Mombo, who at first was not treated with respect at the religious institutions because she was a woman decided to stay put so that she could make a difference for others. In her first position at a Bible college, as a young unmarried woman, even though she had a Master's Degree, she was not given a house because the institution did not want to give her a house next to the men's dormitory. She had to live with a family so that the institutional leaders could be sure that she was chaperoned. She experienced discrimination in her career though she was well qualified, just because she was a woman. Through many years of work and leadership in Christian institutions, Dr. Mombo has fought injustices that are perpetrated against women in Christian institutions and churches. She has been energized to level the playing field and transform the organization where she worked, especially in making them more amenable to women (Ngunjiri, 2010).

Her struggles have contributed to the ordination of women in the Anglican Church in Kenya Diocese of Kitale and she also managed to increase the number of women in theological training at St Paul's, which would prepare women in taking leadership positions in the church. Dr. Mombo intentionally chose to engage supportive behaviors to empower and equip women leaders who felt called to ministry. In Malawi and other parts of Africa we need selfless leaders like Dr Mombo who will support women to be accepted as leaders. The struggle that women face can be mitigated against if current leaders take charge in breaking structural barriers that hinder women are called to serve as leaders in religious institutions.

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