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In:

Maseno, Loreen; Mombo, Esther; Muke, Nagaju; u. a. (Hrsg.), Queen of Sheba : East and Central African Women's Theologies of Liberation (Circle Jubilee Volume 2), Bamberg : University of Bamberg Press, p. 57-70. 2024. DOI: 10.20378/irb-92896

Bookpart - Published Version

DOI of the Article: 10.20378/irb-94420

Date of Publication: 28.03.2024

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3 | **Breaking the Walls of a Patriarchal Church with Emily Onyango**

Pauline Njiru

Introduction

The Rt Rev Dr Emily Onyango is the assistant bishop in the Anglican church of Kenya, Bondo Diocese and a founding member of the circle of Concerned African women theologians. She is a scholar, researcher, and senior lecturer who teaches church history in the college of theology at Saint Paul's University, Limuru, Kenya. She leads The Africa Centre for Biblical Equity (TACBE) and is a Langham scholar, one of the top academic teams in the evangelical community. Bishop Emily Onyango has authored numerous publications.

This chapter outlines, Onyango's contribution in Breaking the walls of a Patriarchal Church as a woman who undertook her theological education at a time when the Anglican church of Kenya was not yet sure what to do with women called to serve God in the ordained ministry, rising in the ranks of the same church from a lay reader to a bishop in a male dominated arena.

It names the walls of a patriarchal church of training for the ministry and ordination to the three orders' and how Emily Onyango has broken all of these, opening doors for more women. The paper will also highlight Onyango's theology and the role it plays for present and future generation.

Understanding Patriarchy

The idea of patriarchy dates back to Weber (1947), who used it to describe societies through the status of their household head; however, this has since being advanced. In her book *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice*, Deborah Madsen (2000) describes patriarchy as a cultural or ideological system that favors males and all things masculine as well as a political structure that gives men control and so advances their interests at the detriment of women.

I will define patriarchy as the act of having the male sex take control over women by virtue of believing that they are more superior. This happens in the different social settings, in our homes and churches and other structures, when women become the subordinates as the men dominate.

The term "patriarchy" is well-known and frequently used, yet its literal meaning has never been able to adequately convey its importance and effects. It is "a form of social organization in which the father or oldest male is the head of the family, and descent and relationship are reckoned through the male line". This definition does not talk about the unequal and lower status of women in society nor does it provide even the slightest hint of the long and woeful tale of women's oppression. The definition contains 'father', 'male' and 'male-line'; harmless words when put together makes us question the absence of 'mother', 'female' and 'female-line'. Why 'father', why not 'father-mother', why 'male', why not 'male-female'?

Patriarchy is a hierarchy in which men are in charge or are the rulers. but it can also be a term used to show how power relations function and how the impact of these power relations privileges one group over another.

Prof Tinyiko Maluleke puts it well; "Patriarchy is evil. However, to call patriarchy evil is neither enough nor helpful. The notion of evil is mainly a moral category rather than a concrete and scientific one. Patriarchy is not merely evil; it is ultimately repressive and oppressive. It is not merely something to be frowned upon, but something to be combated and overcome. Patriarchy is a supremacist ideology, i.e. it speaks to the supremacy of the male. It is not merely an attitude; it is a comprehensive, systematic ideology".¹

According to Nyambura Njoroge, "The hallmarks of patriarchy are domination, control, marginalization and gross conduct of injustices and it is exercised and promoted by both women and men".²

¹ <https://iam.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Evil-Of-Patriarchy-Report.pdf>. [accessed 26/04/2023]

² Njoroge, J.N. 2023.

Defining a patriarchal church

A patriarchal church is one in which women are excluded from leadership roles where, power and decision-making is exercised while men are the sole beneficiaries of these positions. This church also denies women access to helpful resources and only gives them limited opportunities to participate in different forums considered of lesser importance and value. This is often accompanied by a belief system that elevates men and subordinates' women. Whereas women are welcomed to worship, sing in the choir, clean the church and put flowers, they are not considered as effective in leadership positions. Mirroring the patriarchal society, the church has also adopted the patriarchal culture where it entrenches gender inequalities using the bible to back up cultural ideologies. Often biblical passages are quoted to keep the women in the pews, for example: "women should remain silent in the churches they are not allowed to speak but must be in submission as the law says...." (1 Corinthians 14:34-35 NIV). "Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness, I don't allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, rather she is to remain quiet...." (1 Timothy 2:8-14). Reading the bible through the patriarchal lens, often leads to the marginalization and oppression of women within the church.

Like in the scripture, where we see women's major contribution to the salvation history, from the midwives in Egypt defying Pharaoh's orders to let the Hebrew sons to live (Exodus 1:15ff) to the women in the Gospels stories who surrounded Jesus with love and support in His earthly ministry, yet their story remained largely untold. A similar pattern of women in the African church exists where they have made immense contribution and their story remain largely untold. Like the PCEA Martriachs who formed the 'Kiama kia Ngo' – *The council of the shield*³ in the face Female genital mutilation to shield the girl child from undergoing the cut, and which later became the woman's guild, yet women contributions continued to be relegated to the margins.

Nyambura Njoroge has noted that the church in Africa has ignored the cries of women. the Women in Africa are in chains of injustice, and the

³ Njoroge, J.N. 2000.

church must face that challenge. In her writings she depicts Jesus as one who understood women and affirmed them. This Line of thought should encourage more women to pursue justice as they find ways and means to break the walls of patriarchy and reach Jesus through service and leadership.

In the space of Jesus the son of Mary and our brother, women cannot accept Marginalization and oppression. Women can and must step out and step up to possess what is rightfully theirs in the church.

It is worth noting that the church exists in cultural settings and therefore, there is usually an overlap between cultural beliefs and practices and Christian beliefs and practices. A good example is marriage among the Agikuyu people of Kenya, where a woman left her parent's home and went to live in the husband's home which would normally be his parent's home. This practice continued to be taught as the norm in the Christian church even when the command usually quoted for marriage in Genesis 2:24 it is the man who leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife. Since in the Agikuyu culture dowry is paid for the bride, it means the parents have been compensated and they give away their daughter to go with the man. In the 1662 book of common prayer, the marriage liturgy invites the relatives of the girl to give away their daughter to the bridegroom; "Who give this woman to be married to this man?"⁴ It is such teachings and practices that continue to entrench patriarchy in the church either consciously or unconsciously. Culturally, due to the home setup and lack of modern hygiene facilities the woman in Agikuyu culture was seen as unclean and had to be secluded during her menstrual cycle, in the 20th century even with the advanced sanitation and tools eg the sanitary towels, the church in many places still taught that the woman was unclean if on her menstrual cycle and this was used to bar women from ordination especially in the Anglican church of Kenya. The roles assigned to the woman in a cultural setting of cooking and nurturing the children consequently become the Christian prescribed roles, slowly denying the women the opportunities of ministry and relegating them to the pews.

⁴ <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/The%20Book%20of%20Common%20Prayer%201662.pdf>, p. 177. [accessed 26/04/2023]

The patriarchal church uses culture and religion to subjugate women to a lesser level and it co-opts women to be the advocates and flag bearers of patriarchy. Those who propagate patriarchy must realize that it is an ideology that works against all in society and should be dismantled and replace with Gender transformative ideologies.

Walls in a patriarchal church

This section addresses the following walls of a patriarchal church, citing mainly the Anglican church of Kenya: training for ministry/ studying theology, ordination to diaconate and priesthood and ordination to bishopric. In a patriarchal church women are relegated to the pews while the men secure the pulpit and other senior leadership positions. In recent years with the influx of ordination of women in the protestant, reformed and evangelical churches we have seen more women achieve leadership. In the Anglican church of Kenya, the wall of ordination for women was broken, many women in their hundreds have had access to theological education and to ordination, quite a number of these women have risen to church leadership roles of becoming rural deans archdeacons, canons and now bishops. This wall of ordination was being broken simultaneously in the mainline protestant and reformed churches especially in the Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian churches in Kenya.

The wall of training for ministry/ studying theology

The mainstream church in Kenya followed the footsteps of the missionary church, where only men studied theology and trained for the ordained ministry. In most cases, where they were accompanied by their spouses in the training colleges, the women were only trained in home making, tailoring and knitting, cooking, and raising children. The ordained ministry was a reserve of the men for a long time.

Emily Onyango was among the first Kenyan women to break the wall of theological training, after joining St Paul's united theological college in the year 1980 to pursue a bachelor in divinity degree. Soaring higher, Onyango graduated with a PHD (history) in 2006 from the University of Wales UK.

Training for ordination might have looked an easier task, but bigger issues lay ahead. Due to the barriers mentioned above the church was not sure of what to do with women theologians. Women students excelled academically but their male counterparts bragged at them that they will never get the collar, meaning they will never get ordained. In many dioceses it was not clear what roles the women would be given in the church after undertaking theological education. In the diocese of Mt Kenya east, where the writer hails from) which later split to become Kirinyaga and Embu dioceses, trained women theologians were licensed as lay readers while their male counterparts were made deacons and later made deaconess while their male counterparts were priested. As lay readers and deaconesses the women were assigned to parishes to support the male clergy, some were privileged to be given roles of preaching, teaching Sunday school, teaching catechism and visiting the sick. The place of women in the church, having been deemed inferior, also consequently, made the ministries they were assigned look inferior and attract less attention from church leadership. Teaching Sunday school, for example which should be a priority ministry as it is foundational, continues to attract marginal attention in church leadership. Other theologically trained women were only there to be used to make food and beverages for the clergy and the parish meetings and also to serve as office messengers. The way out for many women who had studied theology at that time, like Emily was to do further studies and become school chaplains, or teach theology. With the rise of women in top leadership roles, it is my hope that these neglected ministries will also be given worthy attention and both gender encouraged and supported to take them up.

Upon her graduation with a doctoral degree, Onyango joined Dr Esther Mombo in 1999 to teach at St Paul's united theological college. Navigating the male dominated faculty, the dream of breaking the walls of patriarchy was becoming a reality. Soon after joining the faculty Emily was made the student dean while her sister Dr Mombo served the same faculty as the Academic dean. During their tenure many women students enrolled to study theology and many others went abroad for their master's degree, in the early 2000s women with theology degrees and master's degrees were becoming a formidable force and could no longer be ignored

by the male leadership in the church. Both Onyango and Mombo understood that by supporting many women to study theology, they were creating a real force of theologically trained women and this will greatly contribute in breaking walls of patriarchy.

In the Anglican church of Kenya Rev Lucia Okuthe was the first woman to be ordained in 1981. Soon after the Presbyterian church of Eastern Africa ordained their first, the Rev Nyambura Njoroge in 1982. The many questions the men were asking and using as barriers to women ordination were things like falling in love, dating and marrying, menstrual period, how will the woman handle conditions? By the time Emily was getting ordained, the menstrual period for women was still considered as unclean, and many women stayed away from receiving Holy Communion. Therefore, to imagine a woman in their menstrual period officiating communion was a no-go-zone. The men also battled with child birth and child rearing as these were considered totally a women's job. I remember in November 1991 when I went to the bishops examining chaplains interview in the Anglican diocese of Kirinyaga, to be recommended to be made a deaconess, all the above issues formed the interview questions.

The walls of ordination

The Lambeth conference in 1968, resolution 34, stated that all theological arguments for and against female ordination were both inconclusive⁵. Different provinces took different trajectories. In 1974, three bishops of the American Episcopal Church ordained eleven women. And in 1975, Anglican Church of Canada followed suit in authorizing female ordination.⁶ In 1976, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America passed a resolution declaring that "no one

⁵ Robinson, B.A. (2012). 'Ordination of Female Priests and Consecration of Female Bishops: The Worldwide Anglican Communion, 1960 to 1997'. Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance. [Retrieved 8 January 2018]

⁶ Ibid.

shall be denied access" to ordination into the three orders of ministry: as deacons, priests or bishops, on the basis of their sex.⁷

These provinces had gone ahead of the communion and ordained women, leaving it to other provinces to forge their way forward. Kenya lagged behind for some time especially because some men clergy felt really threatened. Since the bishops examining chaplains who vetted the people to be ordained comprised of largely men and some tokenism women who were also obliged to support the men because they were made to feel that they were the privileged few and had to guard that privilege. Some women were only made deacons and were never priested. I interviewed Rev Martha Mumbi the first woman to be made deacon in the Anglican diocese of Nairobi, she said that the men could not agree for her to be priested. They argued that since she had taught some of them at Church army Africa, they felt that if she was ordained to priesthood she might as well become a bishop, something they could not allow.

The biggest wall to women ordination was the understanding of headship, where the man is seen as the head of the family. In this regard, the question that puzzled those against the ordination of women was; how would a woman become the head of a parish? Emily had to battle and break this wall when upon completing of her bachelor's degree in divinity, she passed the test for ordination. In 1984 and 1985 she was ordained deacon and priest consecutively by the Rt Rev Henry Okullu, the diocesan bishop of the diocese of Maseno South. Although Bishop Okullu was considered to be quite progressive and advocated for the ordination of women, the diocese dragged its feet in ordaining other women. During this time, the other dioceses were still debating on the issues of women uncleanness and headship and struggled before they could actually ordain women. Onyango's parish ministry as an ordained clergy began in 1984 when she posted as a curate at St Stephen's cathedral Kisumu where she served for two years. She was a tutor at St John's School of mission and theology Kokise in 1986 to 1995, where she also became the Principal in the last three years. She was appointed the vicar in charge of Nyakongo Parish in 1995-1996. Up until this time, these were male privileged positions and for a woman to serve and be accepted was no mean achievement.

⁷ Ibid.

Her contemporaries Esther Mombo (now Prof Esther Mombo) and Joyce Karuri (now Rev Dr Joyce Karuri) were both tutors at Kapsabet bible school Diocese of Eldoret and St Andrew's college of theology and development Kabare diocese of Mt Kenya East respectively. According to the three women, terms and conditions for the women and the men differed significantly, especially the paycheck. In the Anglican church of Kenya, these three women's role, in theological education was a major contribution to breaking the walls and letting more women in. A decade after Onyango's ordination, the ACK Diocese of Kirinyaga ordained the first three women to the office of deacon in December 1992 breaking the walls and opening the doors for ordination to all the women who trained for ministry and successfully went through the bishops examining chaplains for vetting.

Onyango was later to be a role model and an inspiration to many young women as she was admitted in the diocese of Kirinyaga in 1996 where she was posted to lecture at St Andrew's college of theology and development. Although Karuri had taught in the same college for many years, the young women aspiring for ordination looked up to Onyango as a role model because she was an ordained clergy. During this time the diocese of Kirinyaga had admitted many women to train for ordination having ordained its first women clergy in July 1992, and December 1993 to diaconate and priesthood respectively. Alongside lecturing, Onyango also served as the Director of studies and later the vice principal in St Andrew's college, positions which until then in the history of the college were a preserve of the men.

In 1999, Emily Joined Dr Esther Mombo in St Paul's Theological college to teach church History. Very soon she would become the dean of students, giving her the opportunity to sit in the College Board. The biggest challenge of these pioneer women was that they had to be their own role models, although Emily admits that her Sunday school teacher and her Christian religious education teacher in high school were her role models. They did not have theologically trained and ordained women to be their role models. In the Presbyterian church of Eastern Africa, Nyambura Njoroge after her ordination in 1982, became a shining star and a role model to many. Their performance bar was set too high, any little mistake or error was magnified. Onyango's quiet spirit is admirable,

some of us who face it head on, find her too quiet. In Her quietness, walls have been broken. Her nomination to be the assistant bishop was faced by controversy, some members of her diocese feeling that time was not ripe for women to become bishops. It was challenged by six who alleged that the election was in total disregard of the canon law. They argued that the diocese was unable to afford an assistant bishop, stating financial constraints. The bishop had indicated that she would continue to teach at St Paul's university and this made the nay Sayers to argue that "If they can appoint someone then second her back where she came from then they do not need her services."⁸ They asked the Archbishop Most Rev Jackson Ole Sapit to intervene.

In 2014 the GAFCON primates adopted a moratorium on the ordination of women to the episcopate in their provinces. The move came after women priests unsuccessfully stood for election in the Anglican Church of Kenya in 2012 and 2014. After the moratorium was introduced, the GAFCON primates created a Task Force on Women in the Episcopate chaired by the Rt. Rev. Samson Mwaluda of Kenya. Their 2017 report recommended a moratorium be placed on ordaining further women bishops, "as the issue poses a threat to the unity we prize", former GAFCON chairman Archbishop Peter Jensen of Sydney said.⁹

However, the 24th meeting of Kenyan General Synod held 25-26 September 2019 at All Saints Cathedral in Nairobi, affirmed its support for women bishops. The language of the constitution allows any priest in good standing in the province aged 35 and older to stand for election. The consensus of synod was that the language of the constitution should explicitly state that male or female clergy may stand for election – not relying upon grammar to imply that male pronouns in the language of the constitution include the female. The amendment will not take legal effect until it is endorsed by the 2021 meeting of synod.¹⁰

In March 2021, Emily broke the wall and was ordained the first woman bishop in the Anglican church of Kenya, and fourth in Africa after

⁸ <https://anglican.ink/2021/01/26/appointment-of-women-bishop-in-kenya-challenged>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Anglican Church of Southern Africa ordained Bishop Ellinah Wamukoya bishop of Swaziland in 2012, Bishop Margaret Vertue Bishop of False Bay in 2012 and in 2016,¹¹ South Sudan Primate Daniel Deng Bul consecrated the Rev. Elizabeth Awut Ngor as an assistant bishop of the Diocese of Rumbek.¹² In September 2021, the second woman got elected to become the diocesan bishop of Butere, Kenya, beating two male candidates. Now opening wide the gates for more women to become bishops in the Anglican church of Kenya.

In my years of ministry in the church I have noted that one of the weapons used against women progress by the supporters of patriarchy is to make women who have broken the walls of a patriarchal church to think of themselves as better for a lack of a better word, than those who may still be struggling with patriarchy. Women who have climbed the ladder must constantly remind themselves that, firstly, they are no better than their struggling sisters. Secondly, they need to work hard to bring more women to where they are so that they can amplify the women work and voices. Thirdly, they must refuse to be used by patriarchy to close doors for other women or sit in the court rooms to condemn other women who may be facing Gender wars and are struggling with walls that create barriers in their expression of ministry in church. Professor Esther Mombo and Dr Nyambura Njoroge for example, have demonstrated that numbers matter in women's liberation by enabling so many to study theology, by linking them to scholarships and mentoring them. Many women look up to Dr Onyango to open such doors into the church's top leadership spaces.

¹¹ <https://www.google.com/search?q=Women+Bishops+in+anglican+church+in+Africa&oq=Women+Bishops+in+anglican+church+in+Africa&aqs-chrome.69i57.11466j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8> . [accessed 02.30 14/03/2023]

¹² <https://religionnews.com/2021/08/05/amid-hesitation-in-african-anglican-provinces-kenya-appoints-first-two-women-bishops/> . [accessed 02.32 14/03/2023]

Emily Onyango's Theology

Dr Oyango is a church historian and has written extensively on issues of women. She links Gender based violence (GBV) to patriarchy, understanding of masculinity and femininity, social and economic factors. Onyango argues that African cultural practices like forced marriages, female genital mutilation and widow inheritance also lead to violation of women.¹³ She challenges the church to do more advocacy on the area of GBV to be able to support survivors better. In her paper 'The Challenge of Gender-Based Violence in Kenya and the Response of the Church'¹⁴ she demonstrates that the church has a long way to go in addressing the issues that affect women, especially GBV, rape, wrong theology especially around marriage that condemn women to bear with violence and almost always with dire consequences. She commands double share of respect from her students and congregation members as a scholar and a senior church leader and her approach to issues of patriarchy will continue to influence and have impact on many.

With her appointment to assist the bishop of Anglican Bondo diocese in Kenya, Onyango works in training clergy, and encouraging child empowerment. Upon her appointment she committed to participate in a 'well-structured pastoral ministry focusing on marriage, family and gender issues, including empowerment of widows. I particularly expect us to offer hope for those shackled by gender-based violence'¹⁵. The notion of a well-structured pastoral ministry is problematic since the church has been seen through its teaching of *Vumilia* (persevere) theology¹⁶, submission of the woman to the man to condone Gender based violence and it remains a challenge on how Onyango will navigate this role while remaining loyal to the bishop.

¹³ <http://www.missiontheologyanglican.org/article/the-challenge-of-gender-based-violence-in-kenya-and-the-response-of-the-church/> . [accessed 26/04/2023]

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Masai, J. (21 January 2021). "UPDATE: Kenyan Female Bishop Election Challenged". The Living Church. [accessed 5 February 2021]

¹⁶ <https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2930&context=jiws>. [accessed 26/04/2023]

Challenges that women face in a patriarchal church

I will name some of the challenges that women face in patriarchal church, and how they can break down the walls that keep them marginalized. Firstly, their voices and experiences are often muted, ignored or dismissed, which can make it difficult for them to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives and the life of the church. This can also lead to a lack of representation of women's perspectives and concerns within the church. Secondly, women are often excluded from leadership roles and positions of authority within the church. This can limit their ability to contribute to the life of the church and make decisions that affect the wider community. Thirdly, women may also face sexism and discrimination within the church, which can make it difficult for them to feel valued and respected as full members of the community.

To overcome these challenges, women especially those in the margins must be given the right to self-represent themselves, gone are days when the church was seen as the voice of the voiceless, with immense work with marginalized groups I advocate for self-representation especially acknowledging that every human being in which ever language has a voice, although these voices could be faint and subdued and that the role of those in leadership like Onyango is to amplify these voices by creating safe spaces for them to be heard and acted upon. Secondly women should be allowed to self-represent themselves, and this will happen by devolving leadership in the church so that the top leadership usually male in most denominations is not entitled to policy and decision making on behalf of those in the pews, instead churches must find ways of congregant participation in matters policy and decision making. And thirdly churches must be at the forefront in fighting sexism and discrimination based on gender, working towards creating and sustaining just communities for men and women. An ideology that must be promoted from Sunday school all the way to other church categories.

CONCLUSION

Onyango and her contemporaries have demonstrated that higher theological education is key in breaking the walls of patriarchy. Other ways of breaking the walls of a patriarchal church is by reading the Bible

and gaining new insights away from the traditional patriarchal interpretations. Women coming forward for electoral positions and refusing to be cowed. Mentorship is key, we must keep the numbers growing so as to eventually defeat patriarchy and create just communities for all human beings to be, grow and thrive.

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