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Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Longwe, Molly
Publisher	Regnum Books International
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Download date	2026-06-12 06:15:13
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166471

(119) AFRICAN CHURCH WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

Molly Longwe

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the agency of African churchwomen organizations as an enduring missionary legacy in the growth and development of African Christianity. It would not be far-fetched to call women organizations 'the face of the African Church' or 'a church within a church'. This is because of the way they have displayed their visibility and their strong character. As Brigalia Bam notes, 'A very significant feature of the role of women in the life of some churches in South Africa is the *Manyano* phenomenon... These groups form a powerful presence in many churches.'¹ While women's organizations in Africa number as many as there are churches and denominations in Africa, this chapter will focus on only a few significant groups and organizations. They are called by various names in the different churches or denominations, according to their languages. For instance, the Women's *Manyano* of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa² or the Women's Fellowship of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe.³ In Malawi, the terms *Chigwirizano*,⁴ *Umanyano*, and *Mvano* refer mostly to Presbyterians (and in other smaller churches); *Umodzi wa Amayi* are the Baptists; *Amayi a Dorika* are the Seventh Day Adventists; *Amayi a Chifundo*, *Legio Maria* and *Amayi a Tereza* are the Roman Catholic groups;⁵ and the Mothers' Union of the Anglican Church (same as in South Africa).⁶

Three issues are reflected in this chapter: how African churchwomen's organizations make a unique contribution to the development and expansion of African Christianity; the reasons for the success story of women's organizations' and the challenges and way forward for these organizations as they continue to grow and serve the church.

Women's Organizations: Tool for Church Development and Expansion

Little did the western missionary women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries know what their untiring work among African women would yield! It was not their expectation that their efforts would yield such great results. To their amazement, they saw Bible study groups, prayer groups and sewing clubs slowly blossoming and forming into women's national organizations. Some organizations struggled, due to resistance and opposition from their colonial mother bodies, such as the Mothers' Union of the Anglican Church in South Africa;⁷ while others were being watched very closely by the male church authorities, like

¹ Brigalia Bam, 'Women and the Church in (South) Africa: Women are the Church in (South) Africa' in *On Being Church: African Women's Voices and Visions*, eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), 13.

² Their website is www.methodist.org.za/organisations/women-manyano.

³ The Church's website is www.elcz.co.zw/churchorgans.html.

⁴ The Church's website is www.kga.org.za/.../ccap-church-of-central-africa-presbyterian.

⁵ Rachel Nyagondwe-Fiedler, 'Pastors' Wives and Patriarchy: Experiences of Church Women in Malawi,' in *On Being Church: African Women's Voices and Visions*, eds. Isabel A Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), 173-183.

⁶ Their website is www.mothersunionsa.org or www.anglicannews.org/.../mothers-union...

⁷ Beverley G Haddad, 'The Mothers' Union in South Africa: Untold Stories of Faith, Survival and Resistance' in *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, eds. Isabel A Phiri, Devakarsham B Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002), 101- 117.

Chigwirizano, of Nkhoma Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Central Africa in Central Malawi.⁸ Scholars acknowledge that through these organizations, churches in Africa have expanded tremendously as a result of the evangelistic programmes which they carried out through direct evangelism, pastoral care and social work, and through the young women's work as discussed below.

Expansion through Evangelism

A few examples suffice here to illustrate that women have contributed tremendously to the development of the church in Africa through their agency and evangelism. Writing on the development of the Baptist Convention of Malawi (BACOMA), Hany Longwe points out that discussion on evangelism and church growth is incomplete without acknowledging the role of women (and youth) and their influence on those processes. Longwe attributes the growth of the Baptist women's organization, *Umodzi wa Amayi*, and of BACOMA as a whole, to the evangelistic revivals of the 1970s and the 1980s and hints that 'when BACOMA talks of numerical gains, the majority were women, because it was the majority of women who responded to the preaching of the Word'.⁹ Similarly, in her work, Rachel Banda examines the role of the Baptist women's organization in the development of BACOMA, especially in Southern Malawi from 1961-2001. She argues that, although there was a high level of foreign missionary influence in the life of the indigenous church, it was the local women who played the major role.¹⁰ In the same vein, the Good Women Association of Nigeria of the Christ Apostolic Church is renowned for their evangelistic seminars, retreats and conferences. Dorcas Akintunde notes that due to their numerous outreach programmes, many converts joined the church. Women were involved in house-to-house evangelism and distributed tracts in market places and other centres within their communities.¹¹

Expansion through Pastoral and Social Work

Providing pastoral work for the needy within their churches and communities has also been recognized as one of the achievements of women's organizations in African Christianity. One example is that of the achievements of the Good Women Association of Nigeria. Akintunde highlights the remarkable impact of the association on the ministry of the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) through women's pastoral work. This includes caring for the poor, the sick, the aged and widows; prison ministries; health and education ministries.¹² Through the Association's School of Midwifery, Akintunde reports that the ministry of the midwives in particular made significant contributions to the growth and expansion of Christ Apostolic Church in Nigeria. The Faith Home Centres run by CAC provide spiritual refuge and a haven of hope to both women and men. Adult literacy programmes to cater for the majority of women who can read and write have been an ongoing focus, not only in CAC but in many women's groups in Africa. The CAC girls

⁸ Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy: Religious Experience of Chewa Women in Central Malawi*, A Kachere Monograph (Blantyre: CLAIM, 1997).

⁹ Hany H Longwe, *Christians by Grace – Baptists by Choice: A History of the Baptist Convention of Malawi*. Kachere Theses no. 19, Mzuni Books no. 3, (Zomba/Mzuzu: Kachere Series/Mzuni Press, 2011), 239-312.

¹⁰ See Rachel Nyagondwe Banda, *Women of Bible and Culture: Baptist Convention Women in Southern Malawi*, Kachere Theses no. 7, (Zomba: Kachere Series, 2005), 18-88.

¹¹ Dorcas O Akintunde, 'The Achievements and Hurdles of the Good Women Association of Nigeria (1943-2001)' in *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devakarsham B Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002), 93. See also Reinhard Ludwig Frey, *History of the Zambia Baptist Association 1905-2005*, Kachere Theses no. 18 (Zomba/Mzuzu: Kachere Series/Mzuni Press, 2009), 239-312.

¹² Akintunde, 'The Achievements and Hurdles of the Good Women Association of Nigeria (1943-2001)', 91-95.

have not been left out of the Association's caring ministry. This is evidenced by the emphasis placed on the education of the girls through the establishment of girls' schools.

Space for Passing on the Legacy to Young Women

In their quest to maintain the traditional structures of passing on African values, many women's organizations created space to cater specifically for the needs of young women, especially as they enter adulthood.¹³ Another aim was to nurture young women in their faith through these rites. Much to the dismay of the western missionary teachers, some women's organizations struggled to have Christianized rites of passage. Articles in the volume *Rites of Passage in Contemporary Africa*, edited by James L. Cox, show this tension.¹⁴ This was due to the westerners' lack of understanding of the importance of religion and rituals in African culture. As Oduyoye notes, 'African rituals have an import that is at once psychological, spiritual, political, and social' because of their integrated worldview.¹⁵ For instance, the major significance of puberty rites in most African ethnic groups is that a young person becomes a member of his or her community, and therefore takes on adult responsibilities, including marriage and bearing children. However, inasmuch as African Christianity has been commended for the enculturation of these rites, African women theologians have argued for a hermeneutic of 'suspicion' of these rites. They note that even in their Christianized form, most of the teaching encourages the subordination of women.¹⁶ Rosemary Edet, for example, notes the ambiguity of childbirth rituals. She points out that while the rituals are occasions of thanksgiving, joy and celebration, and give the mother a sense of accomplishment and inclusiveness, they also impart ritual impurity and guilt to the act of bringing forth new life by imposing some taboos.¹⁷

Women's Organizations: Reasons for a Success Story

While African churchwomen through women's organizations are hailed for their unique contribution to the development and expansion of Christianity in Africa, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle) must also be hailed for bringing the voices of African churchwomen to the fore for theological analysis.¹⁸ For instance, Mercy Oduyoye regards the volume, *Her Stories*, edited by Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devakarsham Betty Govinden and Sarojini Nadar, as the Circle's first attempt 'to sweep the rooms for our religious communities until they have retrieved the lost coin'.¹⁹ Through their stories, a variety of

¹³ Some of the rites that an individual goes through in life are pregnancy, birth, naming, puberty, marriage, death and burial.

¹⁴ James L. Cox (ed.), *Rites of Passage in Contemporary Africa: Interaction between Christian and African Traditional Religions* (Cardiff: Academic Press, 1998). See also Molly Longwe, *Growing Up: A Chewa Girls' Initiation*, Kachere Theses no. 15, (Zomba: Kachere Series, 2006); Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*; Rachel Nyagondwe-Fiedler, *Coming of Age: A Christianized Initiation among Women in Southern Malawi* (Zomba: Kachere Series, 2005).

¹⁵ Mercy A Oduyoye, 'Women and Ritual in Africa', in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, eds. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A Kanyoro (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2006), 9.

¹⁶ For example, see *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, eds. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. Kanyoro (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2006).

¹⁷ Rosemary N. Edet, 'Christianity and African Women's Rituals', in *The Will to Arise*, 32.

¹⁸ The Circle emerged as a platform for African women's theologies; where women's experiences, perspectives and theological reflections are brought to light with the aim of bringing 'dignity, liberation and fullness of life, especially to the women in Africa', see Nyambura J. Njoroge, 'Preface', in *Talitha cum! Theologies of African Women*, eds. Nyambura J. Noroge and Musa W. Dube (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), viii.

¹⁹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'Preface: Naming Our Mothers', in *Her Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa* eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden and Sarojini Nadar (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002), xi.

experiences of women of faith in Africa are analyzed from women's perspectives. Nyambura Njoroge draws attention to the pioneering African Christian women, 'the unsung heroines, who after "hearing and knowing" the word of God from missionaries went out their own way to become missionaries among their own people'.²⁰

This success of the women's organizations resonates well with Mary McClintock Fulkerson's observation that faith traditions create 'subject positions' or roles that hinder or limit women instead of liberating them. McClintock Fulkerson argues that in such cases 'the faith of a woman can enable her to resist such powerful oppressive messages and help her find the strength to preach and lead others and exercise a high degree of autonomy'.²¹ Thus, African churchwomen's organizations are a reality of this resistance to the patriarchal church. The women have been successful by creating spaces for themselves to function in accordance with their gifting and full human potential as God originally intended. Their success is seen as a means for the women's self-expression, leadership skills development, spiritual development, and space for ecumenism as discussed below.

A Form of Self-Expression

Dignity and a sense of belonging are features that women's organizations have given to African women. In analyzing the beginnings and development of women's organizations in Africa, African women theologians acknowledge how the women's organizations have been space for self-expression as children of God. Remarkable about the Anglican Mothers' Union in South Africa, Haddad states that 'these churchwomen's organizations are an indigenous expression of African women's spirituality'.²² Women's spirituality must also be seen as a characteristic of the traditional spirituality of African people, whose concern for spiritual power from a mighty God to overcome certain spirit-world based evils that threaten life, often results in an extensive and extended time of prayer for healing and deliverance.

Women created for themselves safe space for prayers, Bible study, and freedom to use their God-given gifts. As women fellowship together and share their lives together, it gives them a sense of belonging to the church of God. While culturally African women are recognized through their motherly and wifely roles, the women are able to serve their God through their organization, although with clerical control in some church traditions.²³ Speaking about the *Manyano* Women's Movement of the Methodist Church in South Africa, Lyn Holness observes that the uniform also gives the woman a 'sense of identity, of being somebody in her own right'.²⁴ Nyagondwe adds that the issue of identity is much more important to the women than the meanings of the uniforms or of the colours. In addition, the uniform gives the women a sense of unity and belonging.²⁵ Thus, dressed in her uniform, a woman assumes dignity, self-confidence and a sense of pride, not just within her organization but within a patriarchal society. Phiri notes that once a woman wears her uniform, it gives her a certain amount of power and authority, especially when they go out witnessing and preaching.²⁶

²⁰ Nyambura J. Njoroge, 'Reclaiming Our Heritage of Power: Discovering Our Theological Voices', in *Her Stories*, 42-43.

²¹ Cited in Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward (eds.), *Theological Reflection: Methods*. (London: SCM Press, 2005), 150.

²² Haddad, 'The Mothers' Union in South Africa', 101.

²³ See, for example, Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*, 71-90 and Haddad, 'The Mothers' Union in South Africa', 104.

²⁴ Lyn Holness, 'Women's Piety and Empowerment: An Observer's Understanding of the Methodist Women's *Manyano* Movement', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* No. 98, (July 1997): 26.

²⁵ Nyagondwe Banda, *Women of Bible and Culture*, 111.

²⁶ Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*, 83.

Space for Leadership Talent Development

If one glances at the organizational structures and the many activities of the women's organizations, one cannot fail to notice talented and strong leadership. Having been denied access to positions of leadership within the male dominated church, women have created spaces for themselves to exercise and develop their leadership roles among women. Speaking about Chewa women, Phiri argues that while the Christian message of new life in Christ attracted large numbers of African women to the church, the same message resulted in the women losing the leadership roles that they enjoyed in their traditional religious cultures.²⁷ However, looking at the success story of these organizations, it shows that the women did not remain passive, bemoaning their loss. Instead, they found alternative ways of continuing and utilizing their leadership roles in the new context which the missionary women had introduced to them, although restricted to women's organization. Njoroge notes that it was the training and development of women's leadership through their organizations that equipped them to participate in the emerging ecumenical movement, theological education, church leadership and even the ordained ministry.²⁸

Another aspect of leadership roles in women's organizations is that of pastors' wives. It has been noted that being the spouse of a minister is considered as another opportunity for African women to serve in a leadership position in the church in Africa. For instance, Njoroge observes that it was the missionaries' wives who consequently introduced the same leadership pattern in mission churches for the pastors' wives.²⁹ In some church traditions, the leadership of the pastors' wives in the women's organizations is clearly stated, while in others it is not prominent. For instance, in the Baptist Convention of Malawi, the major responsibility of pastors' wives is reflected in their leadership role in the women's organization.³⁰ Pastors' wives are involved in teaching women during weekly meetings; inducting new members until they qualify to wear the uniform, and carrying out pastoral duties among the churchwomen. Longwe observes that a pastor's wife's leadership in pastoral care and visitation at the local church level sometimes takes on more importance than that of her husband. Some pastors' wives could be prepared more for this work of ministry in case they have an opportunity for theological education.³¹

Space for Spiritual Development

Women's organizations are not only renowned for their outreach programmes but also provide space for spiritual development of their members. Through their organizations, women ground themselves in the scriptures. Bible study and prayer is the major activity in their weekly meetings. For one to become a member of an organization, one has to undergo some training of at least three months, which includes learning and memorizing Bible verses. A strong advocacy for strict Christian values for the women and their families is one of the objectives of most of the women's organizations. Women are also encouraged to teach their children Christian values.³²

²⁷ Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*. Musopole also speaks of Ngoni women who, armed with spears, fought and guarded their villages, see Anne Nachisale Musopole, 'Sexuality and Religion in a Matriarchal Society', in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, eds. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2006), 197.

²⁸ Nyambura J. Njoroge, 'Reclaiming Our Heritage of Power: Discovering Our Theological Voices', in *Her Stories*, 42-43.

²⁹ Njoroge, 'Reclaiming Our Heritage of Power', 43.

³⁰ Molly Longwe, 'A Paradox in a Theology of Freedom and Equality: Experiences of Pastors Wives (*Amayi Busa*) in the Baptist Convention of Malawi (BACOMA)', PhD Thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2012, Chapters 6 and 7. See also Rachel Nyagondwe Banda, *Women of Bible and Culture*, 117.

³¹ See Longwe, 'A Paradox in a Theology of Freedom and Equality', chapters 6.

³² Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*, 88.

Space for Ecumenism

While the women's weekly meetings provide space for growth at local level, many groups have national, continental and international meetings within their various denominations.³³ Of interest here are the ecumenical groups to which many of them also subscribe for fellowship and prayers. Two examples are the Pan African Christian Women's Alliance (PACWA), the product of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar. The second one is the World Day of Prayer under the World Council of Churches (WCC). Njoroge observes that the women's quest for cooperation in prayer and social-economic issues paved the way for unity, and entry into the twentieth-century ecumenical movement.³⁴

Women's Organizations: Challenges and the Way Forward

African churches recognize the tremendous contribution of women's organizations to the church in Africa. Similarly, African women theologians acknowledge the women's impact that through their energetic and resilient faith and spirituality, women permeate Christianity in Africa 'with a form and character that is indeed worthy of recognition'.³⁵

However, the growing influence of women's organizations elicits fear in some churches. This was seen in the case of Nkhoma Synod where Phiri noted that the women were often reminded to keep the unity between the church and the women's organization, and accord church leaders due respect. An elder was therefore appointed to attend all the weekly meetings with the view of controlling what they discuss and reporting their discussions to Session and the General Assembly.³⁶ This is viewed as an example of the extent of patriarchy in the church. However, women theologians have also been critical of the way these women's organizations use and abuse their power. Without realizing it, they also promote patriarchy by oppressing and marginalizing other women and men when they take positions of leadership.³⁷

It is the concern of the women theologians that both women and men should seek new ways of forming the present-day church. The question that we may ask is: To what extent are the women's organizations empowering women? This is especially with regard to the ordained ministry, since women have shown their leadership skills and are the ones who form the majority of church membership. Another concern is that not many of the women leading in these organizations have any theological education. This is especially evident in their conservative ways of interpreting the Bible. There is a need for women to challenge patriarchal models of misinterpretation because they are the ones who suffer. For this to happen, more and more women have to rise to the challenge of becoming theologically trained and well versed in their sacred texts. These organizations provide safe space where transformation in the church can take place, given the right tools. Young women should also be encouraged to study life-affirming theologies with the intention of coming back to their organizations and leading Bible studies more freely.

Conclusion

The success stories of churchwomen's organizations in African Christianity show how these women have exhibited dynamic leadership skills and spiritual growth, both at congregational and ecumenical levels. Since more and more church traditions are now ordaining women ministers, women need to take seriously the challenge of theologically equipping themselves. This will equip them to take on leadership roles in

³³ For example, the Baptist Union of Southern Africa (BWUSA) is a regional meeting under the Baptist World Union of Africa.

³⁴ Njoroge, 'Reclaiming Our Heritage of Power', 43.

³⁵ Phiri, Govinden and Nadar, 'Introduction' in *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, 2.

³⁶ Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*, 87-92.

³⁷ Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*, 85-86.

churches and other church organizations, as well as teaching roles in theological institutions and universities.

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