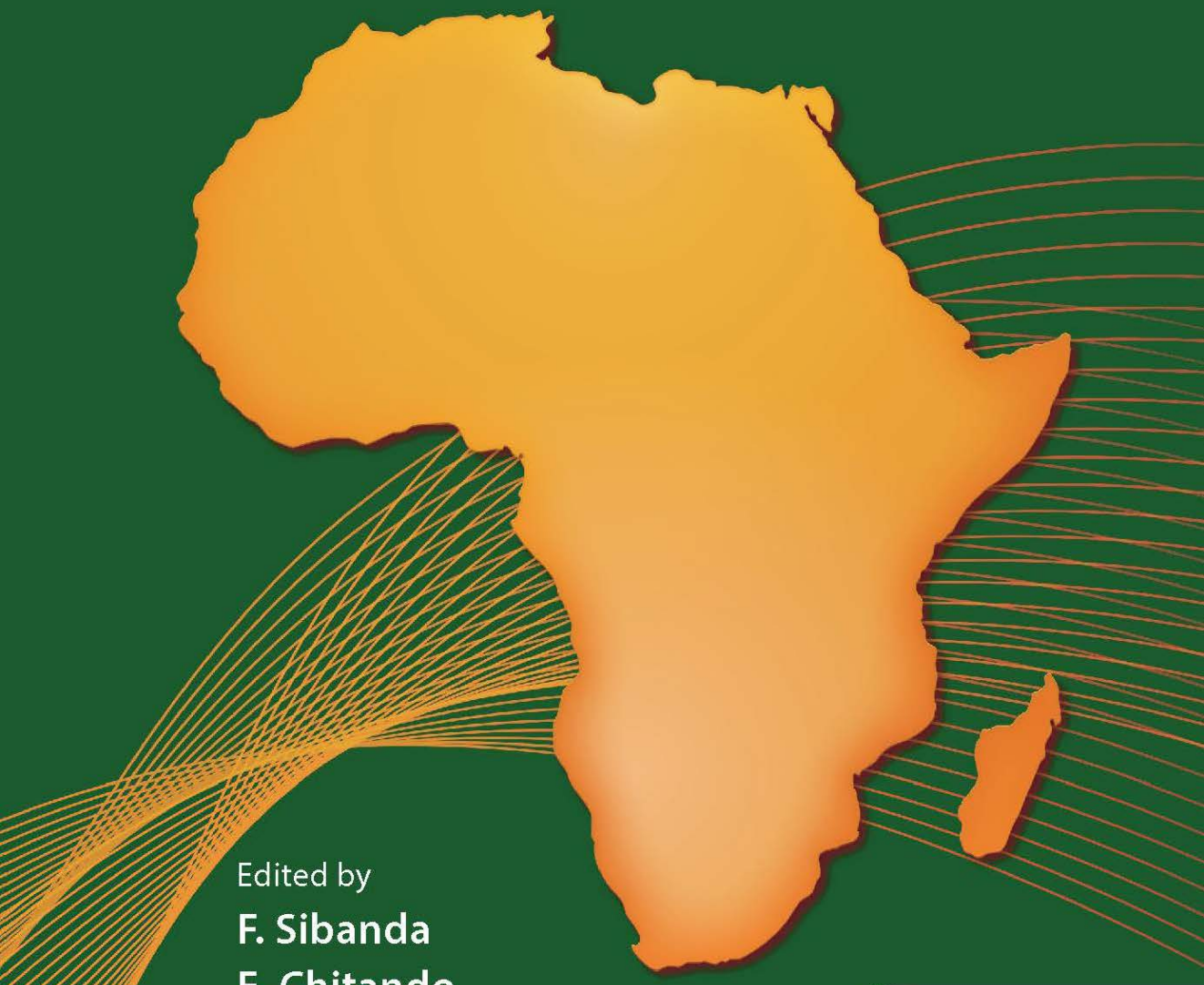
Law, Religion and Leadership in Africa
Published by AFRICAN SUN MeDIA

Law, Religion and Leadership in Africa



Edited by
F. Sibanda
E. Chitando
E.G. Konyana
B.P. Humbe

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

ACLARS
AFRICAN CONSORTIUM FOR LAW AND RELIGION STUDIES

26 Constitutional principles and women in church leadership in South Africa: A Bosadi theoretical analysis

Linda Naicker[1]

INTRODUCTION

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, is heralded as a model of progressive human rights because of its fervent commitment to the principles of equality, justice and freedoms for all its peoples. Yet, the translation of these constitutional ideals into practical realities, especially within religious institutions, remains complex and challenging. In this chapter, I discuss the intricate relationship between constitutional principles and the lived realities of women in church leadership roles using the *Bosadi* hermeneutic as a theoretical lens. *Bosadi* is a Sesotho word meaning "womanhood", and the hermeneutic that flows from it emphasises the dignity, agency and leadership of African women. I explore how constitutional provisions can be leveraged to empower women in church leadership and address the persistent resistance rooted in cultural and religious interpretations and norms. I expound on the saliency of religion, gender and law, where historic religious and cultural legacies continue to shape societal norms and institutional practices.

The South African Constitution, with its explicit guarantee of gender equality, offers a legal foundation for challenging discriminatory practices within all sectors of society, including religious institutions. Despite these legal provisions, women in the Church often face significant barriers to effective leadership perpetuated by entrenched patriarchal norms and androcentric interpretations of religious texts and traditions. I interrogate these dynamics through the lens of the *Bosadi* approach, a framework that centres the experiences, agency and resilience of African women, and analyse the status of women in leadership roles or aspiring to church leadership in the South African context. The role of women in church leadership has been the subject of extensive academic enquiry, both in South African and globally. Scholars like Mercy Amba Oduyoye[2], Musimbi Kanyoro,[3] Isabel Phiri[4], Sarojini Nadar[5] and

1 University of South Africa

2 See Oduyoye MA. 1992a. *Leadership development in the Methodist church, Nigeria, 1842-1962*. Ibadan: Sefer.

3 Kanyoro MRA (ed). 1997. *In Search of a Round Table: Gender Theology and Church Leadership*. Netherlands: WCC.

4 Phiri IA. 2000. "Empowerment of Women Through the Centre for Constructive Theology", *International Review of Mission* 89(354):329–37.

5 Nadar S. 2009 July. "'The Bible Says!', Feminism, Hermeneutics and Neo-Pentecostal Challenges", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 134:131-146.

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

Madipoane Masenya[6] have contributed significantly to the ways in which cultural and religious practices marginalize women. Masenya's *Bosadi* hermeneutic, in particular, has been instrumental in foregrounding experiences of African women, offering a critical lens through which to reinterpret biblical texts and challenge oppressive systems.

This chapter builds on this body of work by applying the *Bosadi* approach to the context of South African constitutional law and its impacts on women's leadership in the Church.[7] The urgency of addressing gender inequalities in religious leadership is promulgated by ongoing challenges for women in ecclesiastical leadership roles despite the legal protections afforded by the Constitution. In South Africa, persistent gendered allocation of leadership roles within the Church not only contravenes the constitutional mandate of equality but also perpetuates broader societal inequalities.

This chapter provides critical analysis through practical application of the *Bosadi* hermeneutic to address the challenges faced by women in church leadership or aspiring to church leadership roles, offering a nuanced perspective on how legal and theological frameworks can interact to promote gender equity. The study is qualitative in nature, drawing on both doctrinal analysis of the South African Constitution and hermeneutical analysis using the *Bosadi* framework. Through critical analysis of relevant constitutional provisions, particularly the Equality Clause and the Freedom of Religion Clause, I access their potential for supporting women's leadership roles in religious institutions.[8]

In this chapter, through the lens of the *Bosadi* approach, I analyze and explore ways in which constitutional principles can be harnessed to challenge and transform gendered practices in leadership. Specifically, I argue that the South African Constitution, as interpreted through the lens of the *Bosadi* hermeneutic, provides a powerful validation for advancing gender equality in church leadership. By re-reading and interpreting constitutional and biblical texts from the perspective of African South African women, this study puts forward a more inclusive and empowering model of church leadership that aligns with the values of equality and freedom inherent in the Constitution. I first provide an overview of the *Bosadi*

6 Masenya MJ. 2001. "A bosadi (womanhood) reading of Proverbs 31:10-31", in Dube M.W. (ed). *Other ways of reading: African women and the Bible*. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature.

7 See Masenya MJ. 1996. *Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African context: A bosadi (womanhood) perspective*. Unpublished dissertation, University of South Africa. Masenya, "A bosadi (womanhood) reading of Proverbs 31:10-31"; Masenya M J. 2003. "Trapped between two "cannons": African South- African women in the HIV/AIDS era", in Phiri IA, Haddad B and Masenya MJ (eds). *African women, HIV/AIDS and faith communities*. Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications; Masenya MJ. 2004. *How worthy is the woman of worth? Rereading Proverbs 31:10-31 in African-South Africa*. New York: Peter Lang; Masenya MJ. 2005. "An African methodology for South African Biblical Sciences: Revisiting the Bosadi (womanhood) approach", *Old Testament Essays* 18(3):741-751.

8 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, ss 9 and 15.

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

hermeneutic as it pertains to leadership roles of women in South African and the study of gender and religion. This followed by an examination of the constitutional provisions related to gender equality and religious freedom. I then discuss the challenges faced by women in church leadership and the cultural and religious resistance to women in church leadership. In so doing, I offer a framework for interpreting religious and constitutional texts in ways that lead to the practical implementation of effective and inclusive church leadership in South Africa. Finally, I reflect on the broader implications of the study for the ongoing struggle for gender justice in South Africa and beyond.

THE *BOSADI* HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

Bosadi is a Sesotho word meaning "womanhood". The *Bosadi* hermeneutic emphasises the dignity, agency and leadership of African women. The *Bosadi* approach was developed by South African biblical scholar Madipoane Masenya.[9] As an African women theologian reflecting on her journey into women's liberationist discourses, Masenya notes that initially, she embraced Western feminist perspectives but later recognized the relevance of African American womanism, which goes beyond issues of gender to address issues of race and class in their discourses. However, this brand of womanism fell short as a theoretical guide for the African-South African context in that it was concerned with the struggles of African American women. Consequently, Masenya developed the *Bosadi* hermeneutical approach, which is overtly inclusive of the concerns of African women in Africa.

Bosadi hermeneutics is a womanist interpretive approach that seeks to empower African women through re-reading biblical texts and societal norms through the lens of African womanhood. Masenya elucidates that given the racial history in South Africa and in Africa at large, where African peoples were named and their cultures defined by others (the West), it was imperative that she assert her own identity as an African womanist scholar. The *Bosadi* hermeneutical approach acknowledges the powerful role of the Bible in the lives of African-South African women, particularly in their struggle for liberation and survival. It emphasises the significance of the Bible as a resource and a source of empowerment, especially for marginalized peoples. Furthermore, it recognizes the caution needed due to the historical use of the Bible in Africa as a tool of oppression, justifying colonialism, apartheid and patriarchal domination.

The *Bosadi* hermeneutical approach asserts that the Bible should be approached with faith, focusing on its potential to transform lives positively rather than as a mere object of scholarly debate. *Bosadi* hermeneutics foregrounds the importance of developing contextual biblical interpretations that address pressing issues

9 Masenya M. 1992. "A Bosadi (Womanhood) Reading of Genesis 16", *Old Testament Essays* 11(2):271–287; Masenya M. 1996. "Proverbs 31:10–31 in a South African Context: A Bosadi (Womanhood) Approach", DLitt et Phil Thesis, University of South Africa; Masenya M. "Proverbs 31:10–31 in a South African Context: A Reading for the Liberation of African (Northern Sotho) Women", *Semeia* 78: 55–68.

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

structural and systemic injustices and issues of health and well-being while bridging the gap between academic biblical scholarship and grassroots readers of the Bible. Ultimately, *Bosadi* hermeneutics is committed to African-centred biblical and theological approaches to social justice issues in Africa. This approach is eminently contextual and is concerned with reflections of the realities of African women, contributing to the broader African renaissance.[10]

Traditionally, women were assigned the roles of caregiving within ecclesiastical contexts, reflecting broader societal and ecclesial norms, despite Jesus' teaching of inclusivity in the Bible. Deeply engrained patriarchal structures and the misuse of biblical scripture hinders women from acting in full capacity in leadership roles within the Church and even assuming leadership roles in the Church. There is therefore a stringent need to deconstruct ideologies that are harmful to women and reconstruct more inclusive and empowering frameworks that redefine leadership within the Church, reflecting more equitable leadership structures.[11] In this light, the present study applies *Bosadi* hermeneutics to explore how the South African Constitution, with its emphasis on gender equality and religious freedom, can be utilised to empower women in church leadership roles. Additionally, this approach critically examines the resistance women encounter within religious institutions, specifically the Church in South Africa, highlighting how such resistance is rooted in both cultural and religious interpretations.[12]

---

10 Masenya M. 2005. "An African Methodology for South African Biblical Science".

11 Adonis M. 2017. "An African Women's Theological Analysis of a development programme: 'Churches, Channels of Hope'", Master of Theology Dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 32.

12 Some African scholars have offered a critique of the *Bosadi* approach, noting that it closely resembles African inculturation hermeneutics, primarily by comparing biblical and African cultures. Gloria Kehilwe Plaatjie, for example, argues that the approach is theoretically developed in academic spaces, rather than engaging directly with non-academic Northern Sotho women, a claim Masenya refutes by highlighting her continuous interaction with women from all social spheres and clarifies that the approach extends beyond academia by critically engaging with gender, class and power structures at grassroots levels. Additionally, Sarojini Nadar has suggested that the *Bosadi* approach overly idealizes African culture, but Madipoane Masenya counters this by acknowledging the oppressive elements within both biblical and African traditions. See Plaatjie GK. 2001. "Toward a post-apartheid black feminist reading of the Bible: A case of Luke 2:36–38", in Dube MW (ed). *Other ways of reading: African women and the Bible*. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature; Nadar S. 2001. "A South African Feminist Reading of the Bible: Cases in Point", *Scriptura* 78:75-85; Masenya, *How worthy is the woman of worth*, Masenya M. 2001. *"An African methodology for South African Biblical Sciences".*

In particular, Masenya declares that these critiques are an oversimplification of the *Bosadi* approach and ignore its critical engagement. The *Bosadi* hermeneutic, contends Masenya, critiques not only gender injustices but also classism, xenophobia and the marginalization of African women in both biblical and African cultural contexts. Unlike traditional inculturation hermeneutics, it does not accept the Bible uncritically, recognizing its historical use in oppressive systems such as apartheid theology. Furthermore, the claim that the *Bosadi* approach is detached from grassroots African women is inaccurate, as it is rooted in real, lived interactions with these women beyond academic settings. Ultimately, the *Bosadi* concept is not an elitist theory but a liberation-centered hermeneutic that seeks

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONSTITUTION AND GENDER EQUALITY

The South African Constitution is widely regarded as one of the most progressive legal frameworks worldwide, particularly due to its comprehensive Bill of Rights that explicitly guarantees gender equality. Central to this commitment is Section 9, commonly known as the Equality Clause.[13] This section prohibits discrimination on various grounds, including gender, sex and religion, making it a powerful tool for advancing women's rights in all areas of life, including religious contexts. The clause is particularly significant for women in the Church in South Africa because it provides a constitutional basis to challenge gender-based discrimination within religious institutions. Historically, many religious institutions in South Africa have been marked by patriarchal interpretations of religious texts and customs that limit women's roles and rights within their communities. The Equality Clause empowers women to seek legal redress when faced with discriminatory practices that restrict their participation in religious leadership, decision-making or other religious activities. Additionally, Section 15 of the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion, belief and opinion, plays a critical role in protecting women's religious rights.[14] This section ensures that individuals and communities have the right to practice their religion freely, provided it complies with the law. For women, this means that they are entitled to engage in religious practices, hold beliefs and express opinions without fear of discrimination or repression based on gender. The intersection of Sections 9 and 15 is particularly important in the context of women's religious rights. While Section 15 protects the autonomy of religious communities to govern their internal affairs, including the practice of religious rituals and interpretations of religious texts, this autonomy is not absolute. It must be balanced against the rights enshrined in the Equality Clause. Therefore, religious practices or doctrines that discriminate against women can be challenged, and if necessary, reformed to align with the constitutional mandate of gender equality.

In practical terms, the South African constitutional framework provides a robust foundation for women to advocate for greater inclusion and representation in religious leadership roles. Women can and must leverage the Equality Clause to address barriers such as exclusion from clergy positions, unequal participation in religious decision-making bodies, or any other form of gender-based discrimination within their religious communities. Moreover, the protection of religious freedom in Section 15 ensures that women's efforts to claim these rights are not seen as an infringement on religious beliefs, but as an affirmation of their right to practice their faith on equal terms with men.

In sum, the South African Constitution not only protects women's rights in broader society but also offers a powerful legal framework for advancing gender equality within religious institutions. The Constitution, by prohibiting gender-based

to empower African-South African women through a critical and contextual reading of scripture: See Masenya, "An African Methodology for South African Biblical Sciences", 746.

13 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, s 9.

14 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, s 15.

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

discriminations and guaranteeing freedom of religion, enables women to challenge and transform practices and customs that have traditionally marginalized them, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society. Notwithstanding the above analysis of the South African constitutional provisions, the lived experiences of women in ecclesiastical leadership roles reveals a significant gap between legal ideals and practice. While the Constitution provides a legal framework that supports gender parity, the translation of these principles into religious contexts is fraught with challenges. This is where the *Bosadi* hermeneutic becomes crucial, as it provides a lens through which to analyse and address these challenges from an African womanist perspective.

CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH

One of the key challenges faced by women aspiring to leadership roles in the Church is the deep-seated resistance from some Christian denominations. This resistance is often rooted in patriarchal interpretations of biblical texts, which have historically been used to justify the exclusion of women from leadership positions. For instance, certain biblical passages have been interpreted in ways that reinforce male dominance and marginalize women's roles within the Church. The *Bosadi* hermeneutic challenges these interpretations by re-reading these texts in a manner that affirms the dignity and leadership capabilities of women. Kelebogile Thomas Resane, a scholar of public theology and Pentecostal Studies avers that culture and Christianity often portray femininity as inherently flawed or impure, while masculinity is often linked with spiritual superiority and divinity. The idea of male headship within biblical texts, Resane argues, aligns with some cultural doctrines that uphold male dominance and leadership.[15]

Resane goes on to say that the roles of women and men in church leadership should be seen and understood as complimentary and not conflictual, fostering a symbiotic relationship. Moreover, that it is essential that the Church and other religious institutions abandon religio-cultural practices that contradict constitutional rights and focus on those that align with biblical principles of justice and equality. Women's struggle for liberation and leadership resonates with Jesus' aspirations for the liberation of women, including those in ecclesiastical settings. Importantly, cultural and religious injustices regarding the treatment of women in both church and society must be rectified.[16] Elsewhere, Resane notes that women in church leadership remain constrained by social, cultural and theological factors that limit their ministry.[17]

15 Resane K. 2023. "A *makoti* in a Patriarchal Society: Culture, Christianity and Constitution in Collision?", *Scriptura* 122(1) :1–16.

16 Resane, "A *makoti* in a Patriarchal Society".

17 Resane K. 2021. "The Voices and Experiences of Vhavenda Women in the Pentecostal Churches in Thohoyanou", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 47(2):3.

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

The *Bosadi* approach offers a nuanced framework for interpreting the Bible in the context of African cultures concerning African women in church leadership. The *Bosadi* hermeneutical approach does not merely compare the biblical text with African cultures; it critically engages both, especially in terms of race, gender, class and marginalization of African women. This critique challenges both the biblical text and cultural practices that contribute to the subjugation of women. It also scrutinizes how certain theological interpretations have been used historically, to justify oppressive practices such as apartheid and the marginalization of African women in Africa.

This critical stance sets the *Bosadi* approach apart from traditional South African male theological discourses, which did not take into account the experiences of African women.[18] In a passage worth quoting at length, Masenya writes:

> My perception of the cause of this crisis [the marginalization of African women] is the past history of how humanity was defined in South Africa. Normative humanity was White, especially White male. Any other race than the White one was less esteemed. Any culture other than the Western one was viewed with ridicule. The African culture was no exception. It was and is still dubbed a heathen culture by some of those who are against change. As a result of these factors, Africans lost a sense of self-esteem. Against this background, as an African child grew up, she/he would grow up with a feeling of inferiority and the desire to be White. They were socialised to frown upon their God-given race and culture. For African girls, it was a double disadvantage, for larger society as well as one's own community pushed the womenfolk to the background. A girl could therefore wish she was a boy as boys were and are still more valued than girls in this culture. Given such a history, one would argue that there is an urgent need for African South Africans, particularly women, those who are right at the bottom of the occupational ladder, to call themselves by their own names, to get out of the habit of feeling foreign in their own context.[19]

Thus, the *Bosadi* approach was developed with the important goal of reclaiming African cultures while avoiding their idealization. To that end, it critically evaluates biblical texts against the backdrop of the lived realities of African women and other racially and culturally oppressed groups.

This aspect of the *Bosadi* hermeneutic is particularly important for African women in church leadership as it underscores the importance of not blindly adhering to interpretations of biblical texts that support patriarchal and androcentric structures. In seeking to revive and affirm African cultures while not idealizing it, the *Bosadi* approach allows for crucial engagement with cultural practices that may be harmful and limiting to women's roles in the Church. *Bosadi* hermeneutics, with its focus on the experiences, struggles, triumphs, agency, resilience and resistance of African

18 Masenya, "An African Methodology for South African Biblical Science".

19 Masenya M. 1997. "Redefining Ourselves: A *Bosadi* (womanhood) Approach", *Old Testament Essays* 10(3):439-448.

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

women in Africa offers a balanced critique that neither romanticizes or completely rejects African cultural heritage but reclaims it in a way that supports the liberation and empowerment of African women. Its propensity for focusing wholly on the African context while addressing global concerns makes it relevant for diverse settings, including church leadership and the prioritization of the experiences and concerns of African women within church leadership.

The *Bosadi* approach is committed to ensuring that theological interpretations remain connected to the lived realities of African women, and this tenet is of particular importance for issues of church leadership where there remains a disconnect between academic reflection and everyday experiences of women in the Church. The *Bosadi* approach unequivocally affirms the identity, leadership capacity, experiences and roles of African women in the Church today and dissuades interpretations that perpetuate their marginalization. The *Bosadi* approach then, is a powerful tool for women in church leadership to assert their rightful place in religious, cultural and social spheres of life on the African continent.

THE ROLE OF THE CONSTITUTION AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

The South African Constitution serves as a critical catalyst for change by providing a legal framework that supports the inclusion of women in leadership roles, including within religious institutions. However, the effectiveness of this framework is contingent upon its implementation and the willingness of religious institutions to align their practices with constitutional principles. Progressive religious organizations in South Africa have begun to leverage constitutional principles to promote women's empowerment in ecclesiastical contexts. These organizations recognize the importance of aligning their practices with the values of equality and inclusivity enshrined in the Constitution. They are also more open to reinterpreting religious texts and traditions in ways that affirm the leadership potential of women.[20] The *Bosadi* hermeneutic supports this approach by encouraging a re-reading of both religious texts and societal norms in ways that empower women and promote gender equality. The significance of the South African Constitution as a catalyst for change lies in its inclusion of various sectors of society including religious institutions where women have traditionally been marginalized in leadership roles. However, the challenge lies in the practical application within deeply patriarchal structures of many religious communities still prevalent today.

A key aspect of *Bosadi* hermeneutic is its emphasis on *Ubuntu*, a concept deeply rooted in African philosophy and underscores the communal nature of human existence. Encapsulating the Zulu maxim "*umuntu ngamuntu ngabantu*" (a person is a person through other people), highlights the interconnectedness of humanity and

20 Nel BP. 2019. "To Build a New Church Together? Exploring Interdisciplinary Dialogue with a Christian Women's Ministry: Addressing Patriarchy in URCSA", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 45(3):1-15.

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

all created things and challenges individualistic tendencies within societies.[21] In the context of women in church leadership, *Ubuntu* is an advocation for communal effort in the struggle for women's liberation, full participation and leadership. From the perspective of the *Bosadi* approach, the empowerment of women in leadership roles is not an individual achievement but a communal necessity. The inclusion of women in leadership strengthens the entire community, fostering justice, respect and mutual care. Religious institutions are encouraged to embrace women in leadership structures as valued and essential contributors to the spiritual and social wellbeing of communities.

Where biblical texts have been used to justify the exclusion of women, the *Bosadi* approach advocates for a re-reading of those texts from the perspective of African women to uncover ways in which the text speaks to the realities and needs of African women today. Recognizing that the Bible is not value-neutral, the *Bosadi* approach argues that interpretations of the Bible have been shaped by the contexts and perspectives of its authors, who were for the most part male and patriarchal, reflecting the androcentric bias used to justify the marginalization of women. The *Bosadi* approach reclaims aspects of the text that are liberating to women, thereby affirming their humanity, dignity, resourcefulness and capacity for leadership.

The South African Constitution provides the legal mandate for gender equality and women's leadership, but the real work of change takes place within institutions, including religious ones. It is imperative that these institutions recognize the importance of aligning their practices with the values of equality and inclusivity enshrined in the Constitution. This means being more open to reinterpreting religious texts, traditions and customs in ways that affirm the leadership potential of women. Sadly, many religious institutions, various pockets of the South African Church being no exception, remain resistant to change and reform. This resistance, often justified through appeals to androcentric interpretations of religious authority and tradition, creates significant barriers to the implementation of constitutional principles regarding women.

The *Bosadi* approach offers a way forward by providing a framework for the Church to engage with religious traditions and the Constitution in a manner that is respectful of past responses and is responsive to present realities and needs. In encouraging a re-reading of religious texts and a re-interpretation of religious and social contexts, the *Bosadi* approach fosters an alignment of religious practices with constitutional values without abandoning life affirming cultural and religious identities. The *Bosadi* approach is therefore a valuable resource to affirm and empower women in leadership roles in the Church and women aspiring towards leadership roles in the Church. It promotes a vision of leadership that is inclusive, affirming, participatory and communal. The *Bosadi* approach therefore encourages the embracing of more equitable leadership structures, regardless of gender, helping to bridge the gap between constitutional promises and gender equality.

21 Masenya, "Redefining Ourselves".

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

THE INTERSECTION OF LEGAL PROVISION, CULTURAL NORMS AND RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

Despite the constitutional guarantee of gender equality in South Africa, the realization of such equality remains elusive. This is largely due to deeply entrenched cultural and religious norms that continue to marginalize women and restrict their leadership roles within the Church. This presents a multifaceted web of challenges where legal provisions, cultural norms and religious interpretations often intersect in complex and contradictory ways. Through prioritizing the experiences and agency of African women, the *Bosadi* approach paves the way for more inclusive and empowering models of religious leadership, thereby combatting persistent patriarchal cultural norms and religious interpretations within the Church.

This is a powerful outcome, because in the Church, in particular, the allocation of leadership roles largely continues to be determined in a gendered way. In the Church as well as within many African cultures, longstanding patriarchal traditions assign distinct and often subordinate roles for women. These norms, frequently endorsed by religious tradition and interpretation, justify female subordination as the natural order of things. For example, Benita Nel, a university lecturer and member of the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa, notes that within the the URCSA, the practical realization of gender equality within its ranks is limited. Moreover, laments Nel, there is a lack of advocacy by women themselves, and men continue to dominate in decision-making processes, highlighting the persistence of patriarchy in the Church. Its failure to embrace gender equality underscores the challenge of reconciling cultural norms with constitutional principles of equality for all because of the cultural and religious resistance to reinterpreting traditional gender roles and reluctance to challenge patriarchal structures that underlie these roles.[22]

At its core, the *Bosadi* hermeneutic challenges dominant androcentric interpretations that marginalize women and therefore aligns with the constitutional values of freedom and equality for all, creating pathways for the realization of gender parity in church leadership. The *Bosadi* approach takes seriously the notion that the marginalization of women in church and society is not merely a reactionary response to contemporary challenges but has deeper theological roots. *Bosadi* hermeneutics addresses these roots by advocating for a hermeneutic of suspicion that critically examines the patriarchal assumptions underlying traditional interpretations of the Bible.[23] By advocating for a reinterpretation of cultural norms and religious practices that are dismissive and life denying to women, the *Bosadi* approach reimagines religious leadership that is inclusive and life affirming to women. This includes women's ecclesial leadership on all levels, including ordination of women and active participation of women in all aspects of church life, from decision-making processes to theological reflection.

22 Nel, "To Build a New Church Together?".

23 Masenya M. 1995. "African womanist hermeneutics: A suppressed voice from South Africa speaks", *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 11(1):149–155.

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

Despite challenges posed by cultural and religious norms, African women have a crucial role to play in the African South African Church. The *Bosadi* approach, used to advocate for African South African women in church leadership, emphasises the need for dialogue and mutual understanding between different stakeholders within the Church, including women, men and church leaders. In fostering this culture of dialogue and inclusivity, the *Bosadi* approach can help to build more equitable and just ecclesial communities that truly reflect the constitutional values of equality and freedom for all.

CONCLUSION

This chapter emphasizes the South African Constitution's pivotal role in influencing the status of women in ecclesiastical leadership, while highlighting the ongoing challenge of translating constitutional gender equality into religious practice. I employed the *Bosadi* hermeneutic as a critical lens for addressing these challenges by advocating for the reinterpretation of religious texts and cultural norms to affirm the dignity and leadership of African women. The findings of this study highlight the necessity for continued dialogue between constitutional authorities, religious institutions and civil society to align legal ideals with lived experiences. As religious organizations in South Africa increasingly adopt constitutional principles of equality, the potential for women to fully participate in church leadership grows, fostering a more just and equitable society. Lastly, the study demonstrates that the *Bosadi* hermeneutic not only provides a critical lens for analysing the status of women in church leadership but also offers a transformative approach that aligns with the progressive values of the South African Constitution. By foregrounding the experiences of African women and advocating for their empowerment, the *Bosadi* hermeneutic contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality and religious freedom in South Africa, paving the way for a more inclusive and just religious community.

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888