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## WOMEN IN FAITH-BASED AGENCIES

### Background

Religious institutions are important in establishing norms, upholding morality and values. Since time immemorial, religion has been defined as a men's leadership role. In various religious settings, the voice of women is rarely heard due to the patriarchal dispositions of societies in which these religions emerged, among other factors.

### Distribution of Kenya's population by religion

Christianity is the main religion in Kenya. As of 2019, over 85 percent of the population identified as Christians, among which 33.4 percent were Protestants, 20.6 percent Catholics, 20.4 percent Evangelicals, and seven percent from African Instituted Churches. Furthermore, nearly 11 percent of Kenyans were Muslim.

### Status of women's leadership in religious institutions

Despite their numerical strength, women's voices are not only marginal in many religious institutions such as churches but their contribution is hardly ever recognized by the respective institutional leaderships, particularly at the level of decision making and preaching.

For instance, in many Christian denominations in Kenya, ordination of women as adjunct leaders and pulpit preachers is still being discussed. Even in the public spheres, people still debate whether women should be allowed to preach, lead and found their own churches. Yet Christian churches in Kenya have more women than men in both mainstream, as well as the Pentecostal, evangelical and charismatic churches.

### Interesting facts

In 2021, Dr. Emily Onyango became the first woman to hold a high ranking position in the ACK following her appointment as assistant bishop, a post created by the diocese. This makes it easier and possible for women to move into positions of leadership.

In 2021, Venerable Rose Okeno, a 52-year widow, became the second female bishop of the Anglican Church of Kenya following her election as Butere Diocese Bishop. This is a clear indication of the church's unfolding history of women in leadership.

These facts are proof that women are slowly but progressively taking over the leadership roles across religious institutions.

### **The role women play in various religious settings**

Women carry out incredible responsibilities for the survival and sustenance of religious institutions. They put in time and money in unpaid hours cleaning, ushering, organizing, receiving guests, singing, leading praise and worship, teaching Sunday school, cooking for guests, collecting offerings, prophesying, praying, and offering social and spiritual support to the sick (physically and emotionally).

Women also create and generate tremendous social capital, creating community prayer cells, mobilizing resources to form networks for support, fund-raising, forming wedding committees for members, arranging funerals, joining merry-go-rounds, and generally looking out for the welfare of members. Much of this replicates the domestic chores they undertake at home. As such, they are fundamental to the very life and sustainability of religious institutions.

### **Factors affecting the Participation of women in church leadership**

**1. Reluctance to ordain women to ministry:** The Catholic Church, for example, still does not ordain women to ministry, neither can women administer or preside over the Holy Communion. Other churches are gradually ordaining women, while others cannot even discuss or consider women's ordination.

In many established Pentecostal churches, women are still not ordained to leadership positions despite the so-called democratization of the charisma. Nevertheless, women are moving out to establish their own churches. They then invite their former bishops to ordain them, which is paradoxical. Except for Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical churches, where women have successfully founded and carved out their own ministries, women in male-founded churches hardly ever rise to leadership positions. In all other churches, and as far as the leadership of spiritual communities are concerned, women's voices remains at the fringes or margins, especially in masculine spiritual spaces – at least at the level of church leadership and decision making.

**2. Cultural and historical barriers:** Historically in Islamic societies for example, the women's role has been within the home, which has limited and created obstacles for female leaders.

**3. The female clergy are seen as a threat to their male counterparts:** Most of the female clergy pastoral roles are seen as a threat to their male counterparts.

### **Conclusion**

Unless there is religious freedom, minority groups, including women, will not be at the table and their vital, productive and creative voices will not be heard. This calls for the urgent need to correct the notion that women should not serve in leadership levels by working towards supporting women to be part of the ordained ministry across all religious institutions. By so doing, Kenya will be moving towards the full realization of gender equality.