



Pursuing a gender and women empowerment agenda: A chronicle of Women Ministry in the Blantyre Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) in Malawi from 1876 to 2023

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Abstract

In this world, women face a plethora of problems such as discrimination, violence, abuse and varied unequal treatment at home, at school, at the work place, at religious institutions and in wider society (Muriithi, 2000:12-13). Women discrimination in the church has been an area of great concern and reflection for many decades. The major challenges have inter alia been about the status, authority of women, ordination and inclusion of women in the decision-making bodies of the church. Such Issues including full participation and inclusion of women in church structures have been partially explored, but not convincingly exhausted (Muriithi, 2000:12-13). Such questions of a gender and women empowerment agenda in the Blantyre Synod have been pursued through the approach of engagement with women in all spheres of life. The study investigates, scrutinizes and analyses how the Blantyre Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) has managed to engage women on a gender and ministry agenda from as early as 1876 CE to the present day in Malawi.

Keywords: Gender, discrimination, sexism, androcentrism, patriarchy, Women Missionaries.

Introduction

This study investigates the gender and women empowerment agenda in the CCAP Blantyre Synod and how the church has engaged with women in church ministry and society from the period of its establishment in 1876 to the present day. Generally, the recurrent challenge in Africa and Malawi in particular, is that cultural beliefs, traditions and practices have for many years tended to overlook most forms of domestic violence, treating them as private issues without the need for external interference (Nyirenda, 2013:9-10). In Malawi, the gender justice and women issues are advocated from both political and social-economic points of view, and the church has not been left out, as it is an important stakeholder and part of the society (Nyirenda, 2016:9f). As far as this researcher could establish, there are a few documents written by Malawian Scholars on a gender and women empowerment agenda, and how the Blantyre Synod addressed women problems in its institutions in Malawi. The study uses a multidisciplinary qualitative and descriptive approach from Social Sciences to chronologically investigate, scrutinize and analyse how the Blantyre Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) in Malawi managed to engage the question of a gender and women empowerment agenda from the early years in 1876 to the present day.

The main question for this study was thus: What are some of the approaches employed for the pursuit of a gender and women empowerment agenda in the Blantyre Synod of the Church



of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) in Malawi? To assist in the research, the following structure was used: the Blantyre Mission and the challenge posed by patriarchy in the African context, the Blantyre Mission in pursuit of a gender and women empowerment agenda from 1876 to 2023, and analysis of the Blantyre Mission in pursuit of gender and women empowerment agenda from 1876 to 2023, followed by a summary and conclusion.

Definition of terms

The point of departure for this study is to understand the meanings of terms such as gender, discrimination, sexism, patriarchy, androcentrism, and Women's Guild (Mvano) in this relevant context. Oxfam (2022/08/31) defines gender justice as the full equality and equity between women and men in all spheres of life, resulting in women jointly being on an equal basis with men, defining and shaping policies, structures and decisions that affect their lives and society as a whole. Nyirenda (2013:25-26) argues that on gender and power issues, when we come to the way human beings behave, women are expected to act according to certain norms, as defined earlier by another culture in another time (Deifelt, 1997:49). Power within has a potential to transform communities to be inclusive, changes in understanding and experience of God are important, and these guarantee justice for all people. In as much as difference cannot be ignored, it should not be viewed as a foundation of division, but rather be seen as a right relation for equality (Rebera, 1997:85-89).

Nyirenda (2013:25-26) holds that the gender approach works to attain a just bond by changing the inequality of relationships, gender differences, and prejudices. It seeks to redress the disparities, to empowering the lesser in this case women, and to ensure them full participation in all areas of a community, in addition, it allows them to participate in decision-making and promotes women rights (Blyth & Robins, 1988:54). Gender is used to define the appearances of women and men that are socially constructed (Muriithi, 2000:32f).

However, sexism goes beyond race, class and cultural orientation of persons in a society. Sexism occurs when privileges are accorded to males over females, on the grounds of gender Ackermann (1991: xvii) argues that sexist oppression is vital to identify and combat, not because it is the basis of all oppression, but because it is the practice of domination that most people experience whether they are oppressors or oppressed. Sexism describes the exclusive ordering of life through gender (Ackermann, 1991: xvii). The division of humanity is deepened by the usage of sexist language. Consequently, sexism is a form of discrimination just as racism or classism. In this particular study, therefore the contention is that the roles of women in the church ministry must be determined along gender justice and boundaries (Muriithi, 2000:32f).

The Blantyre Mission and challenge of patriarchy in the African context

Muriithi (2000:32ff) holds that "patriarchy" in the African context is a form of social organisation in which the father is the head of the family. In the definition of Ackermann (1991: xvi), "patriarchy" means 'rule of the father' and denotes the legal, economic and social systems which validates and enforces the sovereignty of the male head of the family over its members; women, children, workers and property are subordinate to the male heads of families, tribes and societies. Patriarchy, therefore has profound implications for women's personal, societal and religious experiences (Ackermann, 1991: xvi). The imagination and visualisation of God as a male has created an authority in the church that wears blinders to all but male needs and hearing plugs to all but male voices (Muriithi, 2000:32ff). Therefore, as a theological concept, patriarchy has deeply shaped our social systems and perceptions of the relation between God and creation and God and humanity (Ackermann, 1992:25).

Again Muriithi (2000:33ff) holds that androcentrism means 'male-centredness.' However, what is thought of as being universally human is not determined by what women and men together understand and experience, but has been exclusively laid down, described and categorized by men (Ackermann, 1992: xvii). There are prejudices associated with women, such as for



example, that women are over-emotional, physically weak, irrational, and also that there are specific duties that only they are supposed to perform (Muriithi, 2000:64ff). Therefore, it is argued as they are irrational, emotional, and physically weak, they cannot manage leadership roles especially in the area of administration and management. Therefore, androcentrism defines the parameters and implications for the unfortunate present status, character and place of women in the church and many other institutions in society (Muriithi, 2000:33-34f).

In this study, therefore, gender and power approaches state that we are all created in the image God, *imageo Dei* and we must thereby be fair, balanced, equal, and responsible as we care for God's creation (Genesis 1:26-27, Nyirenda, 2013: 4-5f). The Holy Spirit empowers us all, both men and women (John 16:7-12, Acts 1:8). Jesus valued all human beings. He never excluded but included everyone in his ministry regardless of gender, race, status etc (John 4:1-30, Acts 10:38, Galatians 3:27-28). Gender, extensively, calls the church to open up its structures to unmask the thinking that sets up patriarchal hierarchies and to enable the divine plan for all human relationships between women and men to develop (Oduyoye, 1995: 184). This approach calls for equal justice and balanced participation of men and women in the church and society (Nyirenda, 2013:4-5f).

Some related views

In the Orthodox Church by way of comparison, Nicolaidis (2022:2) states "If we accept that human beings have natures which are created in the *imageo Dei*, then women are invariably equal in their humanity to men". Furthermore he argues that their roles varied in what they could do and included teaching and instructing and large numbers were involved in the missionary activities. Women were allowed to serve as apostolic preachers and many were involved in caring for those who were ill and required some spiritual support (Nicolaidis, 2022; 2016; 2005). They may not however serve as priests, even though they were allowed to be deaconesses in the early Church.

In South Africa, as in Malawi and elsewhere, women have also been marginalised from church activities. Dweba et al, (2020:1) argue that in South Africa "Notwithstanding the fact that, women are the majority of the membership of the churches, church structures, and the biggest consumers of religion, services and theologies appear to be mainly shaped by male perceptions and aspirations across churches". They maintain that in all the branches of for example, the St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission, churches are mainly modelled upon and rigidly apply a male leadership domination basis.

Blantyre Mission in pursuit of gender justice from 1876 to 2022

The European Missionaries from Scotland, who came to Africa in the 1870s, firstly operated the missionary enterprise in the context of African philosophy of patriarchy (Ackermann, 1991: xvi). The Scottish Missionaries first adopted the patriarchy (rule of the father) as the legal, economic and social systems which validated and enforced the sovereignty of the male head of the family over its members; women, children, workers and property are subordinate to the male heads of families, tribes and societies (Ackermann, 1991: xvi, Muriithi, 2000:32ff).

However, after its establishment in 1876, the Church of Scotland had a passion for founding and operating Women's work at Blantyre Mission. The Church of Scotland consistently sent Women volunteers to work among girls and women (Mthipela, 2021:46). Later, the Blantyre Mission slowly started to pursue issues of gender by vigorously incorporating women at the heart of the ministry of the church (Mthipela, 2021:46f). Of the first 16 African members of the congregation at the Blantyre Mission, 5 were women (Matecheta, 1951:8f). Women's work was started by the wives of the early Scottish Missionaries who came along to support the work of their husbands and others such as volunteers in mission work. In 1878, Rev. Duff MacDonald and some women volunteers such as Mrs Fenwick gathered 12 young girls for Bible study, games and traditional dances in the afternoon at Blantyre Mission (Matecheta, 1951:8ff). In 1881, Rev MacDonald and later Miss Janet S. Beck, Mrs Bella Scot and also Mrs



Hetherwick developed a “School System” for girls whose aim was to empower them to become responsible Christian mothers in order to sustain their families (Matecheta, 1951:8ff). Women Missionaries taught girls and women nursing, midwifery skills, tailoring, knitting, and childcare and nutrition. Other domestic activities included gardening, household chores, reading and writing (Ross, 1996:21f). Later, some local married women joined the group of young girls. In 1888, the number of girls and women increased to 60, prompting the Church of Scotland to send more Women Missionaries specifically to work with women groups (Ross, 1996:21ff).

Early African Women learners and teachers in 1876-1888

The first group of 5 women to become Christians included Soyaga, Kunitawa, Molly Mbolebole, Ndiagani, and Rose Majonanga (Matecheta, 1951:8ff). Most of the women were wives of the early African leaders at Blantyre Mission. Soyaga was married to Donald Malota, Kunitawa was married to Kapito, Molly was married to William Matengo, Ndiagani was married to Joseph Bismarck and Rose was married to John Rondau Kaferanjira. Consequently, Soyaga and Kunitawa were baptised by Rev. David C. Scott on 24 July, 1887, Molly, Ndiagani and Rose were also baptised by him on 13 May, 1888 (Matecheta, 1951:8ff). However, the Blantyre Mission Girls Boarding Primary School and other Mission Health Centres produced good teachers and nurses respectively. Miss Rose Majonanga was one of the first 8 outstanding girls produced at the Mission (Matecheta, 1951:8ff).

In 1884, Rev. Scott sent Alexander Hetherwick and Henry Henderson to find a suitable place for the new mission station in Zomba. Hetherwick set up a new mission station at Domasi. He was accompanied by Women Missionaries in the name of Miss Margaret Christie and Miss Louw who later opened a primary school near Malemia Village at Domasi. Other women from Scotland who worked hard at Domasi included Mrs Roger, a sister nurse, Miss Roberts, Miss Eddie, Miss Macvicar and many more (Matecheta, 1951:10).

Mulanje Mission and Miss Liddle in 1890s

In 1890, Blantyre Mission sent Robert Cleland to open a new Mission Station at Mbulumbuzi in Chiradzulu and later Mulanje. He built a school building in chief Chikumbu's area. Rev. Currie was the first ordained minister of Mulanje Mission (Matecheta, 1951:10-14). Other Missionaries who worked with him included Mrs Currie, Dr Robertson, Mr Adamson and Mr Herd. When Chief Mkanda attacked the Mission Station in 1895, all European Missionaries left for Blantyre. Later Rev. Smith went to be the second minister at Mulanje Mission in 1897. He was accompanied by Mr. Sabstoon, a teacher and Miss Liddle who taught girls and women on life skills such as knitting, sewing and Bible studies (Matecheta, 1951:10-14).

Panthumbi Mission and Miss Bell and Miss Alice Werner in 1893-1904

In April, 1893, Rev. Scott sent Harry Kambwiri Matecheta, a teacher and evangelist to start a Mission Station at Panthumbi in Ntcheu among the Ngoni of Chikuse. Matecheta in the company of Willie Scott built a church, school and a house for women missionaries. In November, 1893, two women missionaries, Miss Bell and Miss Alice Werner went to join Matecheta, and they worked mostly amongst girls and women at Panthumbi (Matecheta, 1951:19-20). This was in contrast to the will of the Foreign Mission Committee (FMC) whose ideology was that white ladies could not be under the supervision of Black Africans. Additionally, the Women's Committee of Foreign Mission (WCFM) insisted that women missionaries should only serve under the supervision and care of an ordained or medical missionary (Ross, 1996:150f).

The Women's Work Committee of Foreign Mission (WCFM) alleged that African men had immoral attitudes and behaviour that impacted negatively on the white ladies (Ross, 1996:150f). After staying at Panthumbi for a short time, Miss Bell and Werner suffered from malaria. They went back to Blantyre Mission, leaving a group of 30 women and the missionary work in the hands of Africans (Matecheta, 1951:21-22f). Therefore, the courageous and bold approach of voicing out the concerns of women issues was one of the first instances in which



the early Women missionaries fought abuse and violence against girls and women, seeking gender justice and a women empowerment agenda in the church and generally in society.

Blantyre Mission and Miss Janet S. Beck from 1887-1916

Miss Janet Beck was one of the outstanding women among the early missionaries who championed the development of a women's ministry among local women (Mthipela, 2021:39f). Miss Beck developed good relationship with Black Africans. She loved African women. She adapted village life, and she stayed in grass thatched and muddy houses. She ate locally made foods. She was later called "mother," (Mama) and "advisor" (Namkungwi), therefore, she was a true pioneer of Women's Work at the Blantyre Mission (Mthipela, 2021:43f). At first Women Missionaries were restricted to work among children, girls, and women only, and they never participated in decision making bodies of the church such as the Mission Council (Mthipela, 2021:40f). In 1896, Janet Beck presented an overture to the Mission Council that local women should be given an opportunity to attend the Council and make their voices heard as voting members. The Council rejected and turned down this request (Blantyre Mission Council Minutes, 1904:07f).

In 1904, a breakthrough came when the Church of Scotland adopted a resolution to allow women represented at the Blantyre Mission Council. Eventually, the Church of Scotland appointed Miss Janet Beck to represent women at the Mission Council (Blantyre Mission Council Minutes, 1906:10f). Other women missionaries who played a leading role at Blantyre Mission included Miss Walker, a teacher who mentored girls, and she married Mr Lindsay and later joined him at Limbe. Mrs Bella Scott and Mrs Hetherwick taught girls at the Primary School. They taught women laundry. Miss Beck championed as a teacher for girls and women mostly at a knitting and sewing class using her machines. Every year she sold garments which she made and raised funds to support Panthumbi Mission Station in Ngoni land in Ntcheu District. She sent 50 pounds to the station every year (Mbanga, 2001:6ff). Miss Beck also taught Bible classes at the Blantyre Mission. When Harry Kambwiri Matecheta was appointed to learn printing at the mission, he always attended Bible classes organised by Miss Beck (Matecheta, 1951:11-17).

Domasi Mission and Miss Margaret Christie and Miss Louw in 1884-1904

In 1884, David Scott sent Alexander Hetherwick and Henry Henderson to find a suitable place for the Mission Station in Zomba. Hetherwick set up a new Mission Station at Domasi where he opened a primary school. Miss Margaret Christie, Miss Louw, Mrs Roger, a nurse, Miss Roberts, Miss Eddie, Miss MacVicar and others worked hard to establish Domasi Mission Station, a church building, primary school and a farm for industrial farming (Matecheta, 1951:10ff).

In 1895, Domasi Mission was attacked by Chief Kawinga, a Muslim slave trader of Machinga. His intention was to kill all European Missionaries and wipe out Christianity in Malawi (Matecheta, 1951:21f). The women, Miss Christie and Miss Roberts refused to flee from the Mission Station. They chose to remain there in the company of Rev. Dr Clement Scott together with his wife, Bella (Matecheta, 1951:21f). After the war, which traumatised Mrs Bella Scott, she felt troubled at seeing so many dead bodies around the Mission Station. Mrs Scott was so compassionate that she regretted the death of Chief Kawinga's soldiers at the hands of the Mission guards arguing: "Why did the Mission guards not just wound them on the stomach and bring them here at the Mission so that we could treat their wounds?" (Matecheta, 1951:21ff). Later Mrs Scott became very ill. Scott decided to save the life of his wife by taking her back to Scotland, but unfortunately, she died on the way at Quelimane (Matecheta, 1951:21ff). In 1904, a group of women started what was known as the "Women's Guild" at Domasi Mission Station. The main purpose was to train women in Bible study and knitting skills (Matecheta, 1951:21ff).



Zomba Mission and Miss Margaret Hunter in 1930-1936

Miss Margaret Hunter was one of the outstanding Women Missionaries in the 1930s. Her Missionary work contributed greatly to the growth of Women's Work in Zomba (Matecheta, 1951:11ff). However, she resigned from her work to work on her PhD in Edinburgh. When she submitted her resignation, people responded by saying: "The Mission work in general and Zomba in particular are much poorer of her departure".

Margaret Hunter resuscitated the Livingstone Memorial Hospital in Zomba and Missionary Medical work in the district. She provided additional medical care to the whole of Zomba Station when the resident Minister was transferred to Blantyre in 1932 (Mbanga, 2001:7ff). In the absence of a resident Minister, Hunter took charge of Zomba Mission Station during the time when people assumed that a woman was not capable to handle any administrative and evangelistic issues of the church. She strongly demonstrated that women also had the potential to take charge of male-dominated duties of the church (Mthipela, 2021:43).

In 1906, Zomba Mission Station also established the Women's Work Committee. The objectives of the committee were to teach fellow women the Word of God, motivating them in the faith, doing charity work and knitting (Matecheta, 1951:22ff).

Blantyre Synod and Women's Work (Mvano) in 1945-1956

From 1945 to 1946, Women Missionaries in Mulanje formed Women groups known as *Amai a Baibulo* (Bible Women). The *Amai a Baibulo* focused on teaching Christian women the Scriptures, knitting, sewing skills and cookery. The aim of the groups was to empower women holistically, so that in the end they could develop the welfare of their families, church and society (Maleta, 1998:20/08). Later, the Women groups spread as far as Kambenje at the bottom of Mulanje Mountain. The Women missionaries were extremely dedicated to the point of walking on foot to the surrounding villages to meet local women for various classes offered (Maleta, 1998:20/08).

In 1947, Mrs Debora Cook formally organised structures of a "Women's Guild" commonly known in vernacular language as Mvano at Mulanje Mission Station. The first Chairlady of the Women's Guild Committee in Mulanje was Mrs Edith Mlanga. She was commemorated by building a girls' hostel at Nursing School at Mulanje Hospital. Later, in 1948, the Women's Guild "Mvano" was established in Blantyre. In 1949, the Women's Guild "Mvano" was started in Zomba and in 1950 the Women's Guild "Mvano" was also started in Domasi. In 1950, the Synod organised the first training class of Parish Women Supervisors called "Amai Oyendera" (Silamoyo, 1986/06/22).

On 12 January, 1950, the Mission Council recommended that the Blantyre Council be responsible for the Women's Work in Blantyre Mission. Before 1950, the Blantyre Mission Council was responsible for the entire Women's work. The Blantyre Presbytery Annual Conference agreed to form the Presbyterian Women's Council comprised of the following individuals chosen by the responsible minister through Kirk Session in each district within the Blantyre Presbytery covering all congregations. The first convenors of the Blantyre Presbytery Women's Council were Mrs Margaret Benzies, Miss Edith Wesley and the Secretaries were Dr Gwen Dabb and Mrs Grace Makonyola (Silamoyo, 1986/06/22).

On 13th July, 1950, Mrs Edith Wesley presented the report of the Women's Work meeting (Presbytery report, 1950) which indicated programme activities including hospital visitations, gift presentations to the needy, cleaning the windows and floor of the church buildings, interviewing women with cases for discipline during Kirk Session (Presbytery report, 1950). During the Blantyre Presbytery Annual Meeting on 27th March, 1952, it was reported that there were 15 Mvano branches in the Presbytery. In 1954, the number of Mvano branches increased to 44 (Presbytery report, 1952). The rapid growth of Mvano branches in the Presbytery necessitated the need for training of leadership. On 25 March, 1954, it was reported that 27 women attended the Leadership Training Course (TLC) at Mulanje. It was also recommended



that Women workers be trained to serve their respective parishes as” Amai Oyendera” (Mvano Parish Supervisors).

Blantyre Synod and the Women Workers (Coordinators) in 1956- 2022

On 20 September, 1956, the Blantyre Mission Meeting resolved that one woman should undergo three-year training at Mulanje to work full-time amongst girls and women in town in cooperation with a minister, his wife and some White missionaries. Mrs Betty Chumba was identified, trained at Mulanje and was then sent to start her work at Chigumula and other churches under Rev. Cedrick Nkunga in 1957(Silamoyo, 1986/06/22).

In 1958, the Blantyre Synod organised the first training class of Parish Women Supervisors (popularly called Amai Oyendera) for the three Presbyteries at Blantyre Mission. The class comprised Mrs Bena Silamoyo and Mrs Chisewa Chipanda for Blantyre Presbytery, Mrs Kabambe and Mrs Madula for Zomba Presbytery and Mrs Kapata and Mrs Malinda for Mulanje Presbytery (Silamoyo, 1986:22/08). The training was done by both White Missionary and African Women workers such as Mrs Cooke, Dr Gwen Dabb, Mrs Christina Sangaya, Mrs Ella Nkunga, Mrs Pembereka, and Mrs Makonyola assisted the women in their capacity as ministers’ wives (Brochure, 1998). The objective of the training was to equip the Parish Women Supervisors with the necessary skills so that they could likewise train women leaders in their presbyteries and congregations (Mthipela, 2021:56).

In 1959, the Blantyre Synod resolved that each of the three Presbyteries should train one full-time worker. In 1964, the Blantyre Synod recommended that the Women’s Work Committee should recruit a well- qualified Malawian Woman to do full-time women’s work in the Synod (Mthipela, 2021:56). In 1967, Mrs Bena Silamoyo was appointed and trained for the job. She became the first full-time worker at the Synod Women’s Desk. In 1968, two more women were trained namely Mrs Kawere and Mrs Kabambe (Brochure, 1998). Other women workers included Miss Chatsika who operated from Makwasa in Thyolo, Mrs Chisanga came from Blantyre Presbytery, Mrs Silamoyo came from Livilidzi Presbytery, Mrs Kabambe came from Chingale-Zomba and Mrs Namaja who operated from Mulanje Presbytery (Brochure, 1998).

Blantyre Synod and Chigodi Women’s Training Centre in 1968-2022

In 1968, Blantyre Synod opened the Chigodi Women’s Training Centre in Limbe. The centre has trained many Christian women in practical skills such as cooking, tailoring, knitting, agriculture, running of small businesses and Bible Education. It also runs some week-end courses, women’s conferences, retreats and seminars for the church and society in order to equip and empower women for a range of challenging situations, and to help to sustain their families, their congregations and communities. Meanwhile, the Blantyre Synod has trained more than 25 Women’s Coordinators and thousands of Mvano leaders across 18 Presbyteries in Southern Region of Malawi and Ntcheu.

Blantyre Synod and Women Ministers in 1976-2022

In April 1976, the Blantyre Synod produced a Ten-year Strategic Plan. In the Strategic Plan, the Synod adopted a resolution to train young women for women’s work (Blantyre Synod Minutes, 1976:16). It further stated that qualified young women with a Junior Certificate of Education (JCE) or a Malawi Schools Certificate of Education (MSCE) should be recruited immediately for theological training at Kapeni Theological College (Blantyre Synod Minutes, 1976:16).

Blantyre Synod and Getrude Sulumba in 1976-2022

In 1976, Getrude Sulumba was selected and joined the College. The College moved to Zomba in 1977, and she then finished her theological training at Zomba Theological College in 1980. After graduation she was posted to Chigodi Women’s Centre as the Principal Tutor (Mthipela, 2021:57f).



In 1996, she went for further studies to South Africa at the University of Fort Hare where she graduated with a Master's Degree in Theology, majoring in practical theology (Mthipela, 2021:57f). Later, she was also given an opportunity to teach at the same university in the Faculty of Theology where she taught practical Theology and Gender and Theology for a period of five years. She, however, decided to return home afterwards (Kapuma, 2000:37f). She described her late husband, Paul, who died in a road accident in 1998 in South Africa as being supportive throughout all her endeavours as he stood beside her all the time (Kapuma, 2000:46f). Kapuma, who got married in 1981 to Paul, has two children-Kondwani and Atupele (Mthipela, 2021:57f).

From 2005 to 2010, Kapuma was administering full-time at Chilumba, Nthemba, Namiyango and Mulanje CCAP churches respectively before she joined Zomba Theological College in October 2010. While teaching at Zomba Theological College, Kapuma was also a minister at Matiya CCAP church and at Masika CCAP (Kapuma, 2019:09/22). Later, Kapuma enrolled with the University of Pretoria in South Africa and attained her dream of achieving a PhD qualification in 2019 saying: "I always believe that God's time is the best. When time was ripe, God opened doors for me to go for my PhD studies" (Kapuma, 2019:09/22). Mrs Kapuma then worked with the Blantyre Synod since 1980 and was ordained in 2003 (Kapuma, 2019:09/22).

Blantyre Synod and other women ministers in 2001-2023

In Blantyre Synod, Rev Edina Navaya was the first woman to be ordained as a woman church minister in 2001 after a long period of controversy relating to the ordination of women. Mrs Navaya was trained at the Zomba Theological College from 1997 to 2000. However, Mercy Chilapula was the second woman to be ordained in 2002. Rev. Mercy Chilapula became the first woman to be elected as the Moderator of Blantyre Synod in 2007, while Mrs Edina Navaya was elected Blantyre Synod Moderator in 2021 (Mthipela, 2021:58ff). Consequently, from the years 2000 to 2023, Blantyre Synod has trained and ordained high-profile women ministers who rose to the positions of Directors of Ministries and Departments, Presbytery Moderator, Vice Synod Moderator, and Synod Moderator such as Mercy Kalipinde Chilapula, Mirriam Linyenga Chipeta Banda, and Edina Navaya, Messie Kananji Spiki, Janifer Kananji, and many women ministers.

Other women ministers who rose to prominence as Desk Directors on Women's Work Committee include Reverends Anne Kapinda, and Lexa Malumbe. Some are also Moderators of Presbyteries and Congregations, directors of institutions, lecturers, and many more. Therefore, Blantyre Synod proudly reports that it has ordained over 28 Women Ministers, 25 women Coordinators, hundreds of women elders and deacons since 2001. However, Nyirenda (2013:9-10f) argues that the Malawi government and the church recognize the position of women as an important factor in development, poverty reduction, and improvement in the standard of living. Despite equality in rights being guaranteed by the Constitution and legislation of Malawi, women are still marginalized. Men still tend to lead in decision-making and employment status as compared to women who are still marginalised (Nyirenda, 2013:9-10f).

Analysis and evaluation of the Blantyre Mission in pursuit of gender and women empowerment agenda from 1876 to 2023

In light of the discussion above, the study now analyses and evaluates how the Blantyre Mission managed to pursue a gender and women empowerment agenda from 1876 to 2023 as follows:



The Blantyre Mission and the challenge of patriarchy

The study established that there was a strong challenge of patriarchy in African communities during the period when the first Scottish Missionaries came to Malawi in the 1870s (Ackermann, 1991: xvi). However, after its establishment in 1876, the Church of Scotland in contrast to patriarchy, had a passion for Women's work at Blantyre Mission. The Church of Scotland consistently sent Women volunteers to promote a gender and empowerment agenda among girls and women (Mthipela, 2021:46). Later, contrary to the spirit of patriarchy, the Blantyre Mission slowly started to pursue a gender justice and empowerment agenda by vigorously involving women at the heart of the ministry of the church (Mthipela, 2021:46f). The first 16 African members of the congregation at the Blantyre Mission, 5 were women (Matecheta, 1951:8f). Women's work was started by the wives of the early Scottish Missionaries who came along to support the work of their husbands and others such as volunteers in mission work. Women Missionaries taught girls and women nursing, midwifery skills, tailoring, knitting, and childcare and nutrition. Other domestic activities included gardening, household chores, reading and writing (Ross, 1996:21f).

Nyirenda (2013:27-28) holds that empowerment is a process, not an event, and concerns people, not objects. The gender and women empowerment agenda has a sense of emancipation from some mental and physical captivity and it does not only benefit an individual, but also often initiates a cooperative achievement. Empowerment brings about a permanent change that opens a new worldview for individuals and organizations (Nyirenda, 2013:27-28).

Msangaambe (2011:204) holds that empowerment should focus more on reclaiming, than reacting. Empowerment is described as adding on the existing power. Therefore, marginalized people should be empowered so that they can each set their own pace to develop socially, spiritually and also economically. Empowerment is a theological exercise having God Himself involved at the centre of the process. God calls workers into the field, gives them gifts, and empowers them despite their gender differences (Nyirenda, 2013:28f).

Therefore, the church must rework or challenge patriarchal structures of the church and society to continue reflecting on the gender and women engagement agenda with confidence. In a gender and empowerment agenda perspective, the church must open up its structures, to unmask the thinking that sets up patriarchal hierarchies and enable the divine plan for all human relationships between women and men to develop as needed (Oduyoye, 1995:184).

Blantyre Mission and Gender and Women empowerment agenda

The study established that gender justice is the full equality and equity between women and men in all spheres of life, resulting in women jointly, and on an equal basis with men, defining and shaping policies, structures and decisions that affect their lives and society as a whole (Oxfam, 2022/08/31). In 1904, the Church of Scotland adopted a resolution to allow women to be represented at the men dominated Blantyre Mission Council. Eventually, the Church of Scotland appointed Miss Janet Beck to represent women at the Mission Council (Blantyre Mission Council Minutes, 1906). Other women missionaries who played a leading role at Blantyre Mission included Miss Walker, a teacher who mentored girls, she married Mr Lindsay and later joined him at Limbe. Mrs Bella Scott and Mrs Hetherwick taught girls at the Primary School. They taught women laundry. Miss Beck championed as a teacher for girls and women mostly at a knitting and sewing class using her machines (Mbunga, 2001:6ff).

In a gender and women empowerment agenda perspective, no system should be used to dehumanize and marginalise anyone on the basis of their gender, race or class (Muriithi, 2000: 31f). This contention emphasizes integrity and equality as fundamental and formative principles of creation. Women in the church should be able to experience the grace of God and see Christ as the saviour who takes out of them all life-denying situations and gives them back abundant life.



The study established that the church should practically recognize women as full human beings created in the image of God who are able to respond to God's calling. Therefore, women should be let free to fully participate in all the spheres of the church. The church ought to be a community of believers who are directly responsible for their relationship with God (Muriithi, 2000:94-95f). Women and men should be working together as equals in recognition of each other's dignity and integrity in the household of God. After all the Church as the people of God, comprise the entire body of Christ and the entire communion or fellowship of all of the disciples of Jesus. All baptised believers men and women alike are part of the chosen race and the royal priesthood, which form the holy nation of God (Nicolaides, 2010). While women participate in the church today in almost all capacities, the church needs to face the challenge of numerical disparities between women and men. This great difference has led many to think that women are just put in some places in the church as a token to silence anyone who dares raise any questions about equal participation of women and men. Over the years women have worked to liberate themselves from male domination (Muriithi, 2000:94-95f).

From a gender and women empowerment agenda perspective, the church should embark on educative programmes that include women and men and these should be strategically geared towards instilling positive images of women and men in the church (Muriithi, 2000: 94-95f). Nyirenda (2013:4-5f) holds that gender and power theory state that we are all created in the image God, to be equal and responsible as we care for God's creation. Jesus Christ valued human beings; He interacted with a woman at a well (John 4:1-54). His ministry was supported and funded by women (Luke 8:2-3). He never excluded, but included everyone in his ministry regardless of sex, gender, race, qualification and status (Galatians 3:27-28). Therefore, from a gender and empowerment agenda perspective, the Holy Spirit empowers us all to demonstrate full equality and equity between men and women without distinction in all spheres of life (John 16:7-15, Acts 1:8, Nyirenda, 2013:4-5f).

Blantyre Mission and Women's Work Ministry (Mvano)

The study established that Women Missionaries in Mulanje formed Women groups known as "Amai a Baibulo" (Bible Women) who focused on teaching Christian women the Scriptures, knitting, sewing skills and cookery in 1945 to 1946. In 1947, Mrs Debora Cook formally organised structures of Women's Guild known as Mvano at Mulanje Mission Station. Later, in 1948, the Women's Guild (Mvano) was established in Blantyre. On 12 January, 1950, the Mission Council recommended that the Blantyre Council be responsible for the Women's Work in Blantyre Mission. In 1950, the Synod organised the first training class of Parish Women Supervisors called "Amai Oyendera" (Silamoyo, 1986/06/22).

The study additionally established that from a gender and women empowerment agenda perspective, women in Mvano groups had opportunities to hold leadership positions, gain higher status recognition, receive special training, and develop new skills from their participation (Phiri 1997:74f). Some women saw the Mvano as a place of refuge, a place to go and gain support in times of need (Phiri, 1997:74f). The Mvano's Africanized European hymns, as expressed in some of their dance songs, are frequently taken for granted and are not placed on a par with church hymns that follow Scottish Presbyterian tradition (Henderson & Gilman, 2004:37f). The Mvano typically perform their dance songs outside the church building, before and after the central event, and peripherally to the main activities (Henderson & Gilman, 2004:37f). Mvano provide a sense of community for their members. Women meet other women at meetings and events, and women within the organization help one another in times of need. Attending meetings and events of the church also provides women with alternate activities to those of their day-to-day lives (Henderson & Gilman, 2004:37f).

Therefore, from the gender and women empowerment agenda perspective, the church must be a community of believers who are directly responsible for their relationship with God (Muriithi, 2000: 94-95f). Women should not be barred by the church structures and hierarchies from offering their talents and gifts in the service of the church of which they are part and parcel. Women should not be permitted or allowed by men to take part in the church leadership



but should do so by their own right (Muriithi, 2000:94-95f). Therefore, in a gender and empowerment of women agenda perspective, the church must specifically target Women groups (Mvano) on educative programmes to empower them holistically; so that in the end they could develop the welfare of their families, church and society (Maleta, 1998:20/08).

Blantyre Mission and Women's position in leadership

The Blantyre Presbytery Annual Conference agreed to form the Presbyterian Women's Council comprised of the following individuals chosen by the responsible minister through Kirk Session in each district within the Blantyre Presbytery covering all congregations. In 1947, Mrs Debora Cook formally organised structures of Women's Guild known as Mvano at Mulanje Mission Station. In 1950, the Synod organised the first training class of Parish Women Supervisors called "Amai Oyendera" (Silamoyo, 1986/06/22).

The study established that in a gender and women empowerment agenda perspective, in April 1976, the Blantyre Synod produced a Ten-year Strategic Plan in which it adopted a resolution to train young women for women's work (Blantyre Synod Meeting Minutes, 1976:16). It further stated that qualified young women with a Junior Certificate of Education (JCE) or Malawi Schools Certificate of Education (MSCE) should be recruited immediately for theological training at Kapeni Theological College (Synod Minutes, 1976:16). The Blantyre Synod placed women in a high position of leadership in the church and society. A woman is measured as a sacred vessel of life, responsible for continuation of the community, and nourishing and shaping of that life (Phiri, 2007:36).

A Women's place in a leadership role in the church is influenced by the attitudes of those in administration and those of women themselves. There were several reasons given for the positions taken by different people against women's participating in the leadership roles. Both men and women did not seem to have problems with women in leadership roles, but indicated that women should not go beyond given limits (Muriithi, 2000:58f). Among the negative reasons given are that women are always emotional and quickly irritated and therefore they should not be in administrative positions. Women are supposed to be more involved in the domestic chores only so they should not get so involved since this adversely would affect their families (Muriithi, 2000:58f).

In a gender and women empowerment agenda perspective, the church must revisit its doctrines, policies and church governance. Education must be the best 'master key' to transformation and women empowerment. The church must innovate educational initiatives and programmes to further empower women. Gender and power theory state that we are all created in the image God, to be equal and responsible as we care for God's creation (Muriithi, 2000:32ff). The Scriptures hold that Jesus Christ valued human beings (John 4:1-40, Acts 10:38). He never excluded any, but included everyone in his ministry regardless of gender, sex, race, qualification and status (Nyirenda, 2013:4-5f).

Blantyre Mission and the challenge of funding Women's Work Ministry

The study further established that in the gender and women empowerment agenda perspective, from the very beginning of the Women's Work ministry, the Blantyre Mission met a many challenges with regard to funding its women programme of activities. Miss Beck as a teacher, championed the notion of mentoring girls and women, mostly at a knitting and sewing class using her machines. Every year on her own initiative, she sold garments which she made and raised funds to support Panthumbi Mission Station in Ngoni land in Ntcheu District. She sent 50 pounds to the station every year (Mbanga, 2001:6ff).

Nyirenda (2013:68ff) holds that while gender issues have become more normal in policies, challenges keep on manifesting with regard to the implementation, monitoring, cultural bias, political will, and inadequate budgetary allocations to gender equity actions. There must be a greater need for the church to support and adequately fund a Women's Work Ministry. Budget allocations for women's work activities must be updated and cash flow problems must be



timely eliminated. Therefore, a woman who has been engaged, educated, challenged and empowered to become an excellent leader in the church. The Women issues need equal participation by of both women and men in fundraising activities for the church ministry responding to God's calling for the church and elsewhere where there is need in communities.

Summary and Conclusion

This study chronologically explored the gender and women empowerment agenda in the CCAP Blantyre Synod, how the church engaged women in church ministry and society from the period of its establishment in 1876 to the present day. The study also reflected on the Blantyre Mission and the challenge of patriarchy in the African context, the Blantyre Mission in pursuit of gender and women empowerment agenda from 1876 to 2022, and analysis of the Blantyre Mission in pursuit of a gender and women empowerment agenda from 1876 to 2023.

The study established that a gender and women empowerment agenda requires full equality between women and men in all spheres of life, resulting in women jointly, and on an equal basis with men, defining and shaping policies, structures and decisions that affect their lives and society as a whole (Oxfam, 2022/08/31). The church must understand that gender issues have become normal in most varied organizations, structures and policies. Challenges are also reflected with regard to the implementation, monitoring, cultural biases, political will, and inadequate budgetary allocations to gender actions (Nyirenda, 2013:68ff). However, there are many opportunities, assurances and affirmative actions for the promotion of women rights and full participation women in both the church and community (Nyirenda, 2013:67-68f). The issue is that women need to be equal participants with men in the church ministry responding to God's calling.

Nyirenda (2013:4-5f) holds that gender and power theory state that we are all created in the image God, to be equal and responsible as we care for God's creation. Therefore, women should not be barred by the church structures and hierarchies from offering their talents and gifts in the service of the church of which they are part and parcel (Muriithi, 2000: 94-95f). Women and men should be working together as equals in recognition of each other's dignity and integrity in the household of God (Nyirenda, 2013; Dweba et al, 2020; Nicolaidis, 2005; 2010; 2016; 2022; Oduyoye, 1995). While women participate in the church today in almost all capacities, the church also needs to face the challenge of numerical disparities between women and men. This great difference has led many to think that women are just put in some places in the church as a token to silence anyone who dares raise questions about equal participation of women and men. Over the years women have worked to liberate themselves from male domination (Muriithi, 2000:94-95f). Therefore, from a gender and women empowerment agenda perspective, the church must open up its structures to unmask the thinking that sets up patriarchal hierarchies and be ready to enable the divine plan for all human relationships between women and men to develop (Oduyoye, 1995: 184).

It is proposed that this is how a gender and women empowerment agenda approach could be reflected as full equality and equity between women and men in all spheres of life, resulting in women jointly, and on an equal basis with men, defining and shaping policies, structures and decisions that affect their lives and society as a whole, for the betterment of humanity.

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