In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), as in most of the African continent, religion plays an important role. Some argue that this is a consequence of the so-called crisis of modernity, with secular philosophies failing to convincingly explain the origin and destiny of human life (Uzodike & Whetho, 2008:202). Others state that the political and economic crises on the continent cause its inhabitants to resort to religion to help them survive spiritually and emotionally (Uzodike & Whetho, 2008:198–200), while others argue that religion is uniquely empowering, due to African beliefs in the spiritual source of all power (Ellis & Ter Haar, 2004:154). Regardless of the actual cause of its popularity and centrality, it is recognised as the most expansive non-state actor within the region, as it creates networks of influence, humanitarian aid and holistic services in the absence of publicly funded state welfare systems (Manglos & Weinreb, 2013:195). In terms of religious adherence, SSA has undergone significant changes in the past century, with a clear shift from African Traditional Religions (ATR), which according to the World Religion Database had 75% adherence in 1900, towards two of the major world religions, namely Islam and Christianity. By 2010, 86% of the population of SSA indicated affiliation with either Christianity or Islam (Kodila-Tedika & Agbor, 2013:2).

Religion plays a role in how systems of differentiation between men and women are constructed and implemented. As “(p)atriarchy has God on its side” (Millet, 1969:72), religion is recognised by a number of key theorists as one of the central structures through which patriarchy is perpetrated and consolidated within society (cf. Walby, 1986; Millet, 1969; Seguino, 2011). Although it is contested whether religions are inherently patriarchal (see Alexander & Welzel, 2011; Al-Hibri, 1982; Lawless, 2003), patriarchy influences how sacred scripture is selected and interpreted and how men and women are valued and treated within the religious community (Petersen, 2016:51). While there are a number of issues that could be discussed with regards to the intersection between gender and religion within SSA, this chapter will explore three key tensions that we observe at this intersection within the region: the tensions between religion and culture; the tension between women’s agency and women’s complicity in gender oppression; and lastly, the tension between men and women’s participation in establishing gender equity. Each of these tensions remain contentious issues, which not only provoke theoretical debates, but also ultimately have decidedly practical implications for the lives of men, women...
and children in SSA in terms of intervention practice. It is important to note that these tensions are not unique to SSA; however, SSA remains the geographical location where these three issues are particularly salient.4

The first tension introduced is the one between religion and culture. While avoiding both vilifying African culture, as well as the stereotypical ‘traditionalising’ of all things African, we reflect on Christianity, Islam and ATRs in their interaction with culture, as both liberative and oppressive with regards to gender and development issues. In particular, we look at the intersection between religion and culture as it is embodied in patriarchal cultural beliefs and practices. African religious feminisms will be explored in the way they seek to be liberative voices in addressing this intersection. This section is followed by an exploration of the tension between women’s agency and women’s complicity in patriarchy and gender inequality. Exploring the complexity of religious women’s resistance and compliance in the religious beliefs and practices that subjugate them, we discuss the advantages and limitations of feminist frameworks for understanding religious women’s agency. The third tension explored is within the notion of gender partnership. The contentiousness of how men and women are accounted for and included in society is explored especially in terms of religious responses to gender-based violence. The tension between championing women’s voices and responses (“nothing about us without us”), versus the reality of the dominance of patriarchal, male religious leadership, challenges attempts to engage with religion and religious leaders not only on gender-based violence (GBV), but also on a range of development issues.

These three tensions are explored in light of both existing literature and case studies from within the region. Responding to the reality that there is greater adherence to Islam and Christianity in SSA, this chapter has a greater focus on Islam and Christianity (compared to ATRs). However, it is also important to note that while ATR may no longer be strictly adhered to, it remains tied to culture and, therefore, continues to exert an influence on the lived religion of confessed Christian and Muslim adherents—as will be discussed in the chapter.

Religion and culture5

According to Kanyoro (2001:36), in the “African indigenous thought system, culture and religion are not distinct from each other . . . there is no sphere of existence that is excluded from the double grip of culture and religion”. This grip has both liberating and oppressive dimensions. It is also important to note that within any discussion of religion6 and culture7 on the African continent, one cannot ignore the complex ways in which colonialism, in tandem with religions such as Christianity, have further complicated this picture8 (cf. Njoh & Akiwumi, 2012; Fagbeminiyi & Oluwatoyin, 2010:2794). It is, therefore, imperative to speak of these as interlinked within the context of society and reflect on the ways in which these notions interplay—for better or for worse—in terms of gender and society.

Religion as reinforcing of harmful cultural practices

The most prominent perspective in terms of the intersection between culture and religion in the African context is the way in which cultural practices have been identified as harmful to women. Oduyoye (1993:109) notes, “within African cultural traditions, beliefs and practices such as stereotypical sex roles, the ritual impurity of menstruating women, and the exclusion of females from certain rituals marginalize women and render them second class citizens”. Additional and perhaps more overt practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting, child marriage, wife inheritance, widow cleansing, polygamy and women’s inability to own
land are—amongst others—recognised as cultural beliefs and practices which marginalise and oppress women within the African context (Rwafa, 2016:43–50; Zulu, 2015: 90–92; Kan-yoro, 2001:36; Ruturo, 2015:312–314). These practices are often deeply aligned with issues of the impoverishment of women, both causing and leading to the feminisation of poverty in the region. Although one should be cautious of essentialising and generalising African gender challenges at a continental level (as there is no universalised African cultural identity nor is culture static), it is important to note many of these beliefs and practices as present in SSA both in the past and in the present.

More recently, within the Sub-Saharan context, the intersection of gender and culture led to devastating outcomes during the HIV and AIDS pandemic. New cultural myths emerged, undergirded by patriarchal cultural beliefs and toxic masculinities, for example that the virus could be cured by having sex with a virgin. This myth, it has been argued, led to the increased raping of girl children and the more rapid spread of the virus (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002). Chitando (2015:278) makes the case that there is, therefore, a need to address toxic and patriarchal masculinities through African cultural values such as ubuntu, by encouraging men to “appreciate the value of accepting the full humanity and dignity of women from an early age”.

The role of religion in reinforcing cultural practices that hinder the equality and power of women in SSA are well documented. Para-Mallam (2006:409) notes, “women’s lives are deeply affected by religious values, norms and laws, linked to indigenous customs, which legitimate male dominance and female subordination”. Myambo’s (2017) exploration of the church’s role in addressing the challenges faced by the Shona girl child discusses not only the many oppressive and harmful cultural practices that target girl children in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe, but also the way in which the church reinforces this oppression by promoting these practices and denying the dignity of women and continuing to promote the subordination of women. Myambo (2017:18) notes the interplay between religion and culture within this context:

What is clearly revealed by the findings is that the patriarchal nature of Shona society defines the role of women in marriage, community and has infiltrated the church. Cultural and societal norms shape people’s theological understandings and beliefs as evidenced by their response to social transformation, social justice and their view of salvation.

**Toxic interpretations**

More often than not, this toxic interplay between religion and culture is reinforced by problematic interpretations of scripture, perpetuating notions of women’s lesser value and status compared to men, and calling for men to ‘rule over’ women (Rwafa, 2016:44). Within Christianity, Pauline passages in particular (such as 1 Corinthians 14:34–35; Timothy 2:9–15; Ephesians 5:22–24) have perpetuated these notions. This has implications not only for how women are viewed, but also for how they are treated. For example, a number of studies have illustrated how the ways in which sacred scripture is used and interpreted actually facilitates and justifies wife beating, marital rape and other forms of gender-based violence (Le Roux et al, 2016;
Para-Mallam, 2006:415). This is confirmed by a Nigerian study which found that as a result of the misuse and misinterpretation of such texts, men are often then “given the right to ‘discipline’ their wives as they see fit” (Para-Mallam, 2006:415). There are also more subtle ways in which cultural beliefs intersect with religious beliefs. Chilongozi’s (2017) thesis, which investigated the issue of maternal health in Malawi, found that the combination of traditional beliefs with regard to marriage and family size, combined with a literal interpretation of Christian religious texts, can reinforce patriarchy and limit the choices that women have on issues such as contraception and women’s health (Bowers Du Toit, 2018:12).

It is not only Christianity, however, that perpetuates gender discrimination when it intersects with culture (Njoh & Akiwumi, 2012:6). While some scholars have noted the fact that Islamic law’s insistence on a maximum of four wives has counteracted oppressive ATR practices of unlimited wives, it is clear that this cannot be viewed as liberative. Para-Mallam (2006:413) notes, for example, that Islamic beliefs with regards to marriage and family size and the practice of purdah11 within a Nigerian context reinforces power imbalances already existing within Hausa-Fulani culture. In certain settings, the nature of Islamic teaching in Africa has led to girl children being held back from formal schooling and thus ultimately from the formal labour force, which results in the ‘housewifisation’ of African Muslim women. This, in turn, perpetuates the problem of the African girl child in light of traditional patriarchal beliefs which favour the education of the boy child (Njoh & Akiwumi, 2012:16).

Possibilities of liberation and empowerment

While examples of the manner in which religion can play into the dominance and oppression of women within cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa are well documented, what is often not taken account of is the manner in which culture and religion may also be liberative. Fagbeminiyi and Oluwatoyin’s (2010:2802) study of emerging issues concerning gender, development and religion in Nigeria found that despite the fact that their religious principles differ, “both Muslims and Christians reported that it is through the practice of their religious beliefs that they can impact on social change”. Religious associations in Nigeria have been found to be one of the few institutions, apart from economic associations, that support women in their personal efforts to alleviate their poverty and help them to develop coping mechanisms when “facing desperate conditions” (Para Mallam 2006:410). Both Christian and Muslim women in Para-Mallam’s study spoke of the liberating and empowering effects of faith—thus highlighting the ways in which religion can promote women’s empowerment. This has been true in terms of adult women’s literacy (Para Mallam 2006:419), as well as maternal health. In Malawi, for example, Chilongozi (2017:120) notes the important role played by faith-based organisations (FBOs), such as the Christian Health Association of Malawi, in contributing to the reduction of child mortality. The latter is replicated across the continent as many faith-based organisations serve as sites of the promotion of the human dignity of women and provide platforms for gender and development work to be engaged.

One of the ways in which cultural and religious patriarchal beliefs and practices which obstruct the realisation of women’s rights can be challenged is through religious feminisms (Tomalin, 2013:167). Tomalin (2013:167) indeed argues that they are one of the means through which patriarchal values can be disentangled “from their justification as religious, and to promote alternative
Exploring tensions

(many would argue ‘authentic’) interpretations of religious traditions that are supportive of women’s human’s rights and empowerment”. Perhaps the most prominent example on the continent is that of the African Circle of Concerned Women Theologians (‘Circle’). The theologians in this network, founded in 1989, work from within an African context and acknowledge the fact that “while culture and roots are important to African Christians, at the same time some of the cultural practices are not life-affirming” (Kanyoro in Vähäkangas, 2011:175). In their work, the Circle has sought, therefore, to actively identify and challenge cultural principles and practices that undermine women’s dignity. They also identify disempowering religious teachings and beliefs through careful cultural hermeneutics (Owusu-Ansah, 2016:2). While starting as a Christian network, the Circle has expanded to incorporate women theologians from other religions such as Islam.

The Circle’s work has problematised the ways in which certain cultural and religious beliefs have increased women’s vulnerability to scourges such as HIV and AIDS, GBV, workplace inequity and discrimination in terms of girl child education and the role of women in church leadership and theological education. However, the Circle does not only identify the problems of religion and African culture, but also has sought to uncover liberating and empowering resources in African culture and religion (Bowers Du Toit, 2018; Vähäkangas, 2011:176). Kanyoro, for example, often uses metaphors of African traditional culture in her problematisation of the harmful effects of culture on women, while its founding mother, Dr Mercy Amba Oduyoye, has promoted the distinctly African value of ubuntu in the way in which the Circle itself resists the individualism of academic theology for a more collaborative model of communal theology (Maponda 2016:3; Njorage 2005: 457).

Compliance and agency

As the previous section on religion and culture made clear, in SSA women are marginalised within its various patriarchal religious traditions (Uzodike & Whetho, 2008:218). However, it is important to note that the nature and extent of this oppression differs based on religious tradition and geographical location. For example, African independent churches and Pentecostal churches are known to make greater allowance for female leadership, compared to mainstream churches such as the Catholic Church or Protestant churches (Mapuranga, 2013:75). African Traditional Religions’ creation myths describe the Creator as a Father-Mother God that created both men and women, although patriarchal metaphors borrowed from Christian missionaries have influenced these inclusive metaphors (Moyo, 2004:74). Muslim communities in SSA are generally characterised as having more gender equality than Muslim communities elsewhere in the world, as food cultivation is women’s work and women, therefore, contribute more substantially to subsistence activities (Spierings et al., 2009:506). Thus, while religious traditions in SSA are patriarchal, the nature and comprehensiveness of its impact on women can be vastly different depending on religious tradition and location.

Nevertheless, religion is recognised as being a key role-player—for some, the role-player—in sustaining gender inequality (Le Roux, 2014). However, looking at religion and gender inequality in SSA more closely, we see two interesting characteristics emerge. The first is that some religious women comply with patriarchy, upholding and supporting the patriarchal system. Second, feminist responses to such religious women often fail to recognise the agency that may be driving supposedly compliant behaviours.
Female compliance

Highlighting the existence and impact of patriarchy can lead to the development of a simplistic binary: women (only) as helpless victims and men (only) as all-powerful perpetrators (Hunnicutt, 2009:565). Yet, such an absolute binary of male/perpetrator versus female/victim does not explain the range of responses to patriarchal dominance that come from women. A number of studies of religious communities in SSA have noted how religious women directly or indirectly support systems and practices that subjugate them or oppose efforts to end such systems and practices (e.g. Macule & Nadar, 2012; Nadar & Potgieter, 2010; Mapuranga, 2013; Palm et al., 2019). The reality is that some women support the patriarchal system; some women resist efforts that seek to transform society into a more gender equitable one; and some women stigmatise and discriminate against women that dare to oppose patriarchal beliefs and practices.

A recent baseline study conducted in Liberia with Christian and Muslim faith leaders and congregation members revealed that women consistently hold more gender inequitable attitudes than men do. In this study, commissioned by Episcopal Relief & Development, female congregants reported more patriarchal and violent-supportive attitudes than male congregants, and this was consistent across both the intervention and comparison groups. When compared with male congregants, female congregants had significantly more inequitable gender attitudes (p < 0.001), justification for physical VAWG (p < 0.001), justification for sexual VAWG (p < 0.001), and support for rape myths (p = 0.009). The same was true of the faith leaders, with male faith leaders and faith youth leaders having significantly more gender equitable attitudes than their female counterparts (Le Roux & Corboz, 2019).

Terms like ‘toxic femininity’,13 ‘formenism’14 (Nadar & Potgieter, 2010) and ‘patriarchal bargaining’15 (Kandiyoti, 1988) have been used when discussing this phenomenon. These terms have often been used in relation to the actions of religious women when attempting to explain their compliance with patriarchal religious structures. Various reasons have been offered for this compliance. First, some argue that religious women choose to abide by the restrictions placed on them by religion, as religion frees them from the broader structural forces and limitations placed on them by patriarchal family structures and competitive labour markets. Thus, they strike a bargain: they uphold religious edicts even though it restricts them, for it shields and protects them too. Second, some argue that women strategically use and appropriate religion for extra-religious reasons, including for economic opportunities, cultural affiliations and political ideologies. Thus, religion is strategically used to help them in meeting the demands of life. Third, some argue that religious women’s compliance is, in fact, fake. They subvert, adapt and resist religious dogma through non-compliance, partial compliance or personal interpretations (Avishai, 2008:411).

Whatever the reason for and extent of compliance may be, it is important to recognise that some religious women are complicit in the patriarchy and gender inequality espoused by their religious tradition. There is often resistance to acknowledging this fact (Le Roux, 2019a); however, it is important not to ignore or deny some religious women's complicit roles in the systems, beliefs and practices that subjugate them. Comprehensively addressing gender inequality will require also responding to what drives their compliance with and support of patriarchy.
Exploring tensions

Compliance or agency?

However, is non-resistance to patriarchy automatically compliance with patriarchy? It would be a mistake to automatically denounce as compliance all the actions of religious women that do not resist patriarchy. This is a trap that feminism easily falls into. Feminism has a dual agenda, as it is both a mode of analysis (studying women’s status) and a political agenda (calling for what needs to change). Unfortunately, these two are often collapsed, and religious women’s situation and actions are often only analysed in terms of its resistance or compliance with patriarchy (Mahmood, 2005). Just because some religious women do things to support and uphold patriarchy, it does not by default mean that all religious women’s actions are driven by this same motivation. Religious women’s behaviour can potentially mean something very different if not automatically approached with a patriarchal resistance/compliance binary frame of analysis.

Responding to religious women’s support for patriarchy and gender inequality thus holds the added challenge of holding the tension between complicity and agency. First, as discussed earlier, it is important to recognise when religious women are complicit agents and not only helpless victims in the religious beliefs, practices and systems that subjugate them. At the same time, their agency should not only be understood in terms of compliance or resistance to patriarchy; agency is more than (only) the ability to achieve one’s own interests despite the pressure of custom, tradition, religion or any other obstacles (Mahmood, 2005:8). Looking at religious women’s actions only through the lenses of patriarchal compliance or resistance could miss why these women do what they do. One has to be contextually sensitive and relevant, analysing based on what is seen and experienced by those in the situation. This calls for a different approach to agency:

[I]f the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific, then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility and effectivity . . . In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms. (Mahmood, 2005:14–15, emphasis original)

A recent study requested by Episcopal Relief & Development and the Zambian Anglican Mothers’ Union (MU) looked at how the MU is challenging or contributing to violence against women and children. In this highly participatory study, the key methodology used in the study was an adapted form of Photovoice, in which rural, illiterate and local language speakers could also serve as research assistants. Over a period of five months, the trained research assistants, all local MU members, shared photos and voice notes (using mobile technologies) with the research leads. The research assistants took a number of photos of MU sessions where members were taught to cook different kinds of food. On seeing the photos, the research leads (who are based in South Africa) understood the research assistants as using it to expose how the MU enforces rigid and limiting gender roles. However, when listening to the voice notes that accompanied the photos, as well as the two-day end line analysis discussions (where the research assistants analysed and discussed all the photos they took), it was clear that many MU members actually experience joining these sessions as acts of agency. They were getting out of their houses and choosing to learn how to cook meals from other cultures and countries and not only ‘cultural’ foods. That was why the research assistants photographed it—as showcasing the agency of these religious women and their religious organisations, and how it enables them to step beyond culturally scripted roles (Le Roux, 2019a).
Reflecting on and responding to gender inequality in religious traditions and communities in SSA thus requires an almost paradoxical positioning. On the one hand, to be open to recognising the ways in which women are complicit in upholding the religious systems and structures that subjugate them, but at the same time not automatically interpreting their actions only as either compliance or resistance to patriarchy. This is a challenging tension to hold, but necessary in order to understand and respond adequately to not only gender inequality, but also the lives and realities of religious women.

**Gender partnership**

The global UN HeForShe movement drew renewed attention to the need for partnership between genders in order to achieve gender equality. The campaign argues that gender inequality affects all people and not only women and advocates with men and boys to commit to gender equality by taking the HeForShe pledge (HeForShe, 2019). HeForShe is an example of how the idea of gender partnership is used to counter the belief that certain issues are only women’s issues. Increasingly there are campaigns, movements and interventions that target men and boys in order to address problems that affect women and girls most directly. However, this kind of approach is contested, and it can be questioned whether gender partnership is actually possible within religious communities in SSA, considering the patriarchal nature of these religious communities.

The discussion in this section uses gender-based violence as an exclusive lens for exploring gender partnership. This is done for two reasons: first, because this is a setting in which a gender partnership model is heavily contested; second, leveraging religion in response to GBV is in itself contested. It is to this second issue that we first turn.

**A double-edged sword**

Gender-based violence is a global health, development, humanitarian and human rights issue. It is a major concern in SSA, taking on many different forms, including intimate partner violence, female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage. For example, 17 of the 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriage are African (Girls Not Brides, 2019).

Increasingly, there is international recognition of the importance of engaging with religion, religious leaders and religious communities in order to address GBV (Le Roux et al., 2016; Le Roux & Bartelink, 2017). For example, the closing speech at the 2014 Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict “recognised the need to engage faith-based organisations as active partners in the fight against sexual violence, both in helping to formulate strategy and in providing front-line support to survivors” (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2014). Religion is seen as part of a holistic response to GBV, leveraging religion and religious leaders’ embeddedness and trust within local communities (Thomson, 2014; Tomkins et al., 2015), and the ability of religion to socialise individuals, dictate acceptable behaviours and regulate social relationships means that it can be a decisive player in ending GBV (Le Roux & Bowers Du Toit, 2017).

Various organisations thus engage religiously and/or with religious leaders and communities to address GBV: for example, World Vision and Islamic Relief Worldwide through their Channels of Hope Gender methodology and workshops and Tearfund through its Transforming Masculinities programming. Increasingly, secular organisations and institutions also engage religiously. For example, USAID’s project ‘The Role of Religious Communities in Addressing Gender-based Violence and HIV’ was rolled out in Sub-Saharan Africa (Herstad, 2009), while
the UK’s ‘What Works to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls? Global Programme’ grant funded a project in the Democratic Republic of Congo that targeted religious leaders and religious groups (Palm et al., 2019).

However, religion, religious leaders and religious communities are also responsible for upholding gender norms and beliefs that facilitate and condone GBV (Le Roux et al., 2016; Le Roux & Bowers Du Toit, 2017; Bowland et al., 2011; Bradley, 2010). As discussed earlier, religions in SSA are overwhelmingly patriarchal and key drivers of gender inequality, meaning that they espouse and uphold beliefs, practices and traditions that are conducive to GBV. The majority of religions and religious communities in Africa do not recognise the autonomy of women, upholding religious and cultural traditions that marginalise women (Uzodike & Whetho, 2008). They often stigmatise, discriminate against and reject GBV survivors, especially survivors of sexual violence (Le Roux et al., 2016; Le Roux & Bowers Du Toit, 2017; Bowland et al., 2011). In some instances, religious leaders and communities even call for violent practices on religious grounds. For example, child marriage is justified by religious beliefs in the sanctity and importance of virginity (Le Roux & Palm, 2018).

This is, thus, the first major tension, namely that religion has tremendous potential for helping address the scourge of GBV in SSA, but at the same time is (at least partly) responsible for the GBV being so common in SSA (Le Roux, 2014). Arguably, however, both sides of this paradox are justification for the need to engage with religion on GBV, as its potential should be leveraged, but also as ending GBV will be impossible without addressing this major driver (Le Roux et al., 2016).

Men or women?

The second tension is around working with religious leadership. There is now increasing engagement on GBV with religious leaders, recognising their gatekeeper positioning and their influence on community beliefs and behaviours (Haddad, 2002; Solarsh & Frankel, 2004; Tomkins et al., 2015). They are trusted and respected, are embedded within the local community and understand local dynamics and processes (Thomson, 2014), and religious leaders are seen as key role-players in promoting the rights of women (Tomkins et al., 2015).

However, religious leaders in SSA are overwhelmingly male, which raises a number of challenges in leveraging their response to GBV. Female survivors may find it difficult to approach male religious leaders for support, thereby inhibiting disclosure. Furthermore, where male religious leaders understand GBV as women-only problems, this can mean that they rarely prioritise the issue or directly address it (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012). Many male religious leaders are guilty of wilfully ignoring the rights and needs of women, as they privilege “the rights of the group over the rights of the individual, and marginalised women’s voices in favour of a focus on traditional values and institutions such as the family and places of worship” (Dhaliwal & Patel, 2017:91).

Thus, there is an increasing call for intentional engagement with various kinds of religious leaders and not only the top levels of the religious hierarchy. Intentional engagement with female religious leaders is especially prioritised (Le Roux, 2019b). Engaging with female religious leaders challenges the religious patriarchal system that emphasises male points of view, and female religious leaders also have unique access to women in the community (Le Roux & Palm, 2018). Yet, religious women are inhibited by the “stained glass ceiling” (Sullins, 2000) which prevents so many of them from attaining the top leadership positions within their religious organisation, or leads to them being ostracised when they do achieve leadership positions (Marumo, 2016). Female religious leaders are, within all religious traditions, concentrated at...
subordinate levels (Ngunjiri, 2010; Sullins, 2000), and how high they are allowed to go differs depending on the religious tradition and institution (Adams, 2007).

Religions for Peace realised the importance of engaging directly with religious women in its work in Sub-Saharan Africa, when it saw the results of doing so. Religions for Peace started the Women of Faith Network as they realised that women are not always in positions of ordained power, even though many fulfil important roles in their religious communities. It was the Women of Faith Network, and not the traditional religious leadership that Religions for Peace worked with, that highlighted the need for GBV response in religious communities. The Network’s insistence on the importance of such religious response led to USAID, in partnership with Futures Group International and Religions for Peace, formulating and implementing a project to improve the ability of religious leaders and FBOs to respond to GBV and its links to HIV (Herstad, 2009).

The debate around engagement on GBV with male or female religious leadership takes place within larger, international debates around how male and female roles are understood within GBV prevention and response. There is strong feminist resistance to what is perceived as male co-opting of the violence prevention agenda, where male-led movements are not truly pro-feminist and only “reinvent patriarchal ideas about what needs to be done to end gender-based violence” (Walsh, 105:139; COFEM, 2017). This tendency is clearly present in some religious male-led movements, for example the Mighty Men Conference in South Africa, in which strong male headship is espoused as the solution to all societal ills (Pillay, 2015:62).

These debates make it clear that how men and women are positioned and prioritised within GBV prevention and response has decided practical implications for the issues that are prioritised, the types of victims that are responded to and how funding is allocated and spent—all relevant issues when considering religious responses to GBV.

**How to work with SSA religious leaders on GBV**

The reality is that the majority of religious leaders in SSA are male. The power of these male religious leaders should not be underestimated, especially as they often control access to their religious communities. It will arguably be impossible to mobilise SSA religious communities for GBV prevention and response if it is done only by women and through sensitising and empowering only women (Le Roux & Bowers Du Toit, 2017). Fundamental structural and systemic change is only possible if the mindsets of those that are in power—overwhelmingly men—are transformed, so that they allow change to occur. Therefore, one has to work with male religious leaders on GBV (Le Roux & Bowers Du Toit, 2017).

Yet, how does one then ensure a women-centred response to GBV, one that is sensitive to the realities, needs and leadership of women? The idea of gender partnership within a religious response to GBV can be useful, by highlighting that both genders share responsibility for addressing GBV and that both have unique contributions in responding to it (Le Roux & Bowers Du Toit, 2017). In practice, however, it remains challenging to prevent male voices from monopolising religious response. It is a critical priority to identify and engage female religious leaders to such an extent that they truly partner in setting the agenda and ensuring its execution.
Conclusion

What emerges most clearly from the previous discussion of three tensions at the intersection of religion and culture in Sub-Saharan Africa is that the intersection is nuanced and complex and holds much creative tension and the possibility for both oppression and liberation. This is a challenge to both academics and practitioners in the field of religion and gender within the region. First, it highlights the importance of collaboration. For example, highly trained and skilled theologians are equipped to reinterpret sacred scripture in ways that empower women, yet it requires grassroots practitioners and religious leaders to ensure that these reinterpretations reach and transform the way local people think.

Second, it highlights that work on religion and gender in SSA is not done in a vacuum. The issues confronted here, for example religious women’s complicity in patriarchy, is not unique to SSA. The challenges of ensuring women-centred responses to GBV is not unique to religious responses to GBV but is common to ‘secular’ responses as well. There is much that can be learnt from work being done in other regions of the world, as well as from non-religious responses to the issues being raised.

Third, in terms of gender and religion in SSA, the dominance and tenacity of patriarchy remains the central concern. It reinscribes very specific ways of being men and women—ways which this chapter has shown to be harmful especially to women. Religion plays a key role in the forms that patriarchy takes and the ways in which it is reinforced. Furthermore, in this context it is important to understand that engaging patriarchy in this context includes both religion and culture.

Each of the identified complexities and nuances imply that practitioners and academics in the fields of religion and gender within the region will need to take hands in order to propose and advocate for sustainable and systemic strategies, which both seek to identify and harness forms of religion in service of the flourishing of African women.

Notes

1 ‘Sub-Saharan Africa’ refers to the area of the African continent that is south of the Sahara Desert. Thus, it includes countries within the central, eastern, western and southern regions of Africa (Sub-Saharan Africa, 2015). It should be noted that this is an extremely diverse notion as it includes several regions within Africa, each of which have divergent colonial histories, diverse indigenous cultures and, therefore, diverse forms of African Traditional Religious beliefs and practices. This chapter is, therefore, is by no means exhaustive and only seeks to highlight emerging issues at the intersection of gender and religion.

2 African Traditional Religions involve the totality of the life of the African, drawing as its sources on African life, African art forms, institutions and oral traditions. As such it is a cultural heritage, influencing the instinctive reactions of Africans and their interpretations of reality (Oborji, 2002:15–16).

3 We acknowledge the fact that this presupposes a simple binary of ‘men/women’, which could be interpreted as heteronormative. For the purposes of the article we have chosen, however, to focus the discussion on the interplay between males and females as it is a key site of struggle with regards to women’s rights in SSA. This in no way denies that other gender categories are also contentious and should be the subject of further research.

4 As scholars from the region we are mindful of Western biases, which at times utilise cultural critique to vilify all African cultural beliefs and practices rather than merely critique harmful practices. We, therefore, pay special attention in the chapter to the nuanced interaction between religion, culture and gender.

5 It is important to note that there is no generalised or universal African culture and that this section, therefore, seeks to cautiously identify specifically documented intersections between religion, culture and gender within specific contexts.
Religion is identified as the institutionalised system of beliefs and practices that a person holds regarding the supernatural realm (Lunn, 2009).

Culture is derived from experience, more or less organised, learned or created by the individuals of a population. This includes those images or codememt and their interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations or from contemporaries or formed by individuals themselves (Avruch, 1998: 17).

Van Klinken (2013:31), for example, argues convincingly that missionary Christianity gave birth to new forms of patriarchy, which further reinforced African cultures’ and traditional religions’ patriarchal beliefs and practices.

The term ubuntu, present in many of the languages and cultures within southern Africa, refers to ‘humanness’ and relates to the “attributes of being human such as the sense of belonging, selflessness, hospitality, sharing, humility and respect” (Kumalo 2016:23). As an ethical construct, it refers to the notion that one is only fully human in relation to others.

In addition, it has meant that women in the region have been prevented from occupying leadership roles within the church based on these texts (cf. Chitando 2015:152).

Purdah is the practice in both Islam and Hinduism that “involves the exclusion of women from public observation by means of concealing clothing (including the veil) and by the use of high-walled enclosures, screens, and curtains within the home” (www.britannica.com/topic/purdah).

Refer to note 9 for a definition.

The term ‘toxic femininity’ is being used as counterpart to ‘toxic masculinity’, referring to stereotypically female traits that are endorsed by a culture but damage society and ultimately women themselves.

“Formenism, like masculinism, subscribes to a belief in the inherent superiority of men over women . . . but unlike masculinism, it is not an ideology developed and sustained by men, but constructed, endorsed, and sustained by women” (Nadar & Potgieter, 2010:143, emphasis original).

‘Patriarchal bargaining’ refers to the set of concrete patriarchal constraints within which women strategise. “They also influence both the potential for and specific forms of women’s active or passive resistance in the face of their oppression” (Kandiyoti, 1988:275).

For a more in-depth discussion of how this can be achieved in both research and intervention, see Le Roux (2019a).

Photovoice is a participatory tool which allows for individuals with little money, power or status take photos of their communities (sometimes focused around a specific theme), with the aim of identifying what needs to change and to motivate such change (Strack et al. 2004).

Bibliography


Exploring tensions


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