


Queens in the Kings Business: African Pentecostal Female Leadership in a European City

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Abstract

This article explores ethnographically how African Pentecostal leaders in the city of The Hague in the Netherlands navigate patriarchal structures and create a space for female leadership. It argues that the female Pentecostal leaders make a gender paradox visible, in which they model Christian womanhood in order to then go legitimately beyond it. The article demonstrates that this becomes particularly visible in how female leaders engage with women in their congregations around matters of gendered and sexual well-being. The article challenges a double bias in research and policy: a secular bias that tends to explain the challenges around gender and sexuality primarily in religious and cultural terms; and a gender bias that only considers religious women's leadership in terms of their agency as women in male-dominated institutional contexts.

Keywords: sexuality, religion, secularity, gender, leadership

Introduction

Every year in the autumn, female religious leaders organize a 'women in leadership' conference in a hotel on the outskirts of the city of The Hague in the Netherlands. These religious leaders, who are all of African and Afro-Caribbean descent, minister to various international churches in the city and annually invite the Nigerian-born and UK-based Pastor Miranda to lead the conference. Every year the conference includes an evangelical outreach event to the red-light district. In 2017, the outreach started just outside the small area of streets in the city center where sex-workers offer their services to customers while standing barely dressed in a window. After a motivational talk that emphasized the outreach to the sex-workers as spiritual warfare, Pastor Miranda led a prayer to invite the Holy Spirit to support the women while doing this. The women were encouraged to ask permission to pray with the sex-workers and to 'invite Jesus in their lives'. The women seemed nervous when going around

in pairs to the sex-workers offering them leaflets with the Biblical story of Rahab and a call to prayer or further contact with a local church.¹ While many sex-workers refused to engage in conversation, Maria (reluctantly) replied to Pastor Miranda's initial questions. She explained she had come from Romania to work in The Hague for a few months to provide for her family, emphasizing the problem of unemployment and the obligations of her motherhood. Upon hearing Miranda telling her about Jesus who could save her, Maria challenged Pastor Miranda: 'Why have you come? This is a dark place, there is no God here. God is in my home. You should come there if you want to talk God'. Pastor Miranda responded by telling her that she need not be a Christian only at home: Christianity is supposed to be lived in one's whole life and not in just a part of it.

¹ Rahab was a prostitute who played a crucial role in helping Israeli spies escape the hostile city of Jericho in the book of Joshua in the Bible.

Pastor Miranda's response reflects a typical Pentecostal understanding of the world and of everyday life, in which one's most important aim is to become fully entrenched with the divine. It is by living a holy life that healthy people, families and societies emerge (Bartelink 2020). From a Pentecostal perspective, sex-workers represent a world that is evil and morally flawed and from which they need rescue (McGrow 2019). However, African Pentecostals living in European cities have to navigate different views on health and well-being. Studying the complexities and paradoxes that emerge in the process of navigating contributes to a better empirical understanding of European cities as contemporary 'frontier zones' in which various religious and secular approaches interact (Meyer 2018: 65). The meeting between Miranda and Maria signals how, in the postcolonial European city, 'differences and distances are produced, negotiated and affirmed in the framework of identity politics' (Meyer 2018: 69). Therefore, understanding the encounter as one between two women with opposing perspectives fails to consider the plurality of views, perspectives and lived realities in the lives of both women.

For example, what goes unnoticed here is how the secular progressive discourse that is influential in contemporary politics in the Netherlands is part of the dynamic (e.g. Schuh et. al 2012). In this discourse, which is dominant in particular in the politics and policies around gender and sexuality, sex-workers are no longer seen as disempowered women, but as entrepreneurs making independent, agentic choices (Gill 2016). In this view, the sex-workers' emancipation mirrors the desired emancipation of religious (migrant) women. Religion is perceived as hindering women's emancipation, while secularism is associated with women's agency and free choice (Scott 2017, 2009). The general assumption for migrant religious women in particular is that they are disempowered and 'unemancipated', especially within their own religious and cultural communities. However, assumptions that religion will dwindle when women emancipate them-

selves and become sexually liberated contrast with how African Pentecostal women develop their religious leadership based on a holy and pious lifestyle (e.g. Mahmood 2005, Casselberry 2017). The vignette illustrates what is by now well known among researchers of Pentecostal Christianity, namely that Pentecostal women do become religious leaders (Martin 2001), while for many centuries female authority was hardly possible within Christianity (Le Roux and Du Toit 2017). Furthermore, as churches have been recognized as spaces in which forms of black and ethnic leadership emerge that challenge established social orders in postcolonial and post-migration societies, Afro-Dutch female leaders make an interesting case (Werbner 1991, Johnson 1991). In particular this is because Pentecostal female leaders paradoxically mirror secular feminists who advocate the necessity to break through the so-called glass ceilings to the top of businesses and institutions.

The encounter between Pastor Miranda and sex-worker Maria sensitizes us to the paradoxes that are part of living in the postcolonial city. When looking at all these mirrors, I ask: What becomes visible when we zoom in on female Pentecostal leaders of African descent in the Netherlands? I therefore explore African female Pentecostal leadership as an in-between space in which identities are not a given, but in which new ways being and acting emerge (Meyer 2018). I explore this ethnographically, in particular by asking how these female Pentecostal leaders navigate the complex and precarious matters in women's everyday lives that do not fit within the normative ideal type. The title of this article loosely refers to another women's conference entitled 'The King's Business' that will be discussed in this article. While referring to God's holy mission for this planet, the title also indicates a particular gendering of this mission. I am interested in how, within these gendered spaces, particular forms of female leadership become visible.

After introducing the conceptual framework and the study on which this article is based, I

will present an ethnographic exploration of how the Pentecostal aspiration of holiness is gendered and how it is entangled with the sexual and general well-being of women in African Pentecostal praxis. In subsequent sections, I will outline the diverse strategies that African Pentecostal female leaders propose for women (and men) in navigating the gendered norms and ethics around what is considered to be 'good' and Christian sex and in their own subjective experiences of sex and sexual interactions (e.g. Spronk 2014). I will conclude with a reflection on the practices of holiness and care in relation to gender and female leadership, and consider which reflections female religious leadership open up on religion and diversity in European cities.

It's the Patriarchy, Stupid

The encounter between female migrant missionaries and female migrant sex-workers is symbolic of how people from diverse backgrounds meet and interact in a multicultural city such as The Hague. Following Meyer's understanding of European cities as 'frontier zones', I understand The Hague as a space where various religious and secular understandings and practices co-exist (Meyer 2018). The realities of African Pentecostal women's lives in a city such as The Hague are complex, involving a multiplicity of experiences and positionalities. In the following I unpack some of the most relevant of these for this article.

First of all, research demonstrates that women with a migration background struggle to become part of society in the Netherlands (Gorashi 2017, Buitelaar and Stock 2010, Gorashi 2010). This is first of all influenced by their legal status, as many African migrants experience periods of being undocumented (Andrikopolous 2017). Furthermore, migration tends to make women suffer because they often experience a loss of income or occupational status compared to their situation prior to migration unless they migrate as expats (Caarls and Mazzucato 2015, e.g. Coe 2014, Parrenas 2015, Boyle et. al 2008). The shift to a different context that is part of migration

also places additional pressure on families and relationships. Couples who migrate, for example, are more likely to experience marital instability which has negative consequences for women's autonomy and economic security in the post-migration context (Caarls and Mazzucato 2015). Due to women's easier access to the labour market in postmigration societies compared to men, traditional gender roles need to be reconfigured in postmigration contexts (e.g. Pasura and Christou 2018). While this may be empowering for women, it may also add additional pressures in their relationships with men, who have to grapple with the loss of status and hegemonic masculinity post-migration (ibid., e.g. Parreñas 2015). Research shows, however, that women are not powerless victims of these circumstances, but actively navigate their situations and find solutions by drawing on social, emotional and legal ways of support (Feldman-Savelsberg 2016; De Regt and Notermans 2017).

Secondly, national and local public policies often fail to do justice to the lived realities of women of African origin. Informed by secular formations and not immune to public discourses that revive older colonialist racist stereotypes, public policies are often based on the assumption that migrant women need to be saved from their oppressive religions and religious communities (Abu Lughod 2012, Bracke 2012). In the dominant secular progressivist discourse (e.g. Schuh et al. 2012), gender inequality and gender-based violence are assumed to be rooted in religious and cultural factors (Knibbe and Bartelink 2019). Muslim women in particular are constructed as the racialized and gendered others and are excluded from (full) citizenship, unless they are liberated from oppressive Muslim men and become fully secular (Scott 2017: 175). Christianity is more often considered outdated than dangerous (Meyer 2018, Schrijvers and Wiering 2017). Yet, the vilification of homosexuality in conservative Christian settings, the large scale of sexual abuse cases in the Catholic Church and the religious opposition to safe abortion care have mobilized public outrage over gender

and sexuality in relation to Christian religiosity. Moreover, African Christians have become subject to contestations over female circumcision, sex-trafficking and homo-healings (Van Dijk 2001, 2006; Vloeberghs 2012, Wekker 2016, Knibbe et al. 2018). African migrant women, both Muslim and Christian, are therefore predominantly represented as in need of rescue from their religions and cultures (Knibbe and Bartelink 2019; Wekker 2016).

The contrasts between these lived realities and how they are understood and approached in policies must be grasped in the context of a broader assumption that women's empowerment can only emerge within secular liberalism. Anthropologist Sabah Mahmood (2006) has convincingly demonstrated the dominance of this assumption within western feminist thinking. As a consequence, the agency and leadership of pious women is denied, while the broader patriarchal structures in society in which religious forms of patriarchy have emerged, are shaped and are legitimized remain intact (Mahmood 2006, 2015; also Le Roux and Du Toit 2017). Therefore, rather than focusing on religion alone, modern family norms have to be considered, as research suggests that constructions of the male breadwinner and the feminization of caring labor are influential in sustaining the inequality between men and women (Erickson 2011, Andrikopolous 2017). In most European societies, these traditional gender roles continue to shape male-female relations despite increased female employment, while women continue to be the primary carers in their families, which includes practical and emotional management (Hochschild 2013, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). Given these broader sociological trends, African Pentecostal women in the Netherlands may not experience a huge difference in how they navigate gender-unequal structures at church, in their families or in their (secular) work environments (Casselberry 2017). Furthermore, given the evidence of female leadership in African Pentecostal settings, it is important to understand how African Pentecostal women navigate the patriarchal structures they

encounter in everyday life (Hochschild 2003 and 2013, Erickson 2011).

Focusing further on African Pentecostalism, the transformative impact of Pentecostalism on social and cultural gender relations and roles in many African societies is of crucial importance (Bochow and van Dijk 2012). In many of these societies, and not unlike other parts of the globe, women have the main responsibility for the children and the household (e.g. Bochow and van Dijk 2012, Coe 2014). The reshaping of traditional masculine roles into the figure of the responsible family man has made Pentecostalism particularly attractive to women. Furthermore, the emphasis on marriage as reflecting the personal choices of two individuals, rather than as an arrangement between families, has contributed positively to female agency within the family (Bochow and Van Dijk 2012). The transformation of Christian gender roles is also visible in how Pentecostal churches allow women to access positions of leadership that were historically denied them in most Christian congregations. Finally, as the vignette on spiritual warfare illustrates, Pentecostalism offers technologies that are not confined to the spiritual configurations of families and communities in Nigeria or Congo, but that can be translated and applied across borders in the localities of postcolonial cities in Europe (e.g. Van Wyk 2014). Pentecostalism therefore offers women the religious and theological context for choosing their marital partners and for exercising influence in family, church, profession, cities and broader societies. This leads women to choose Pentecostalism as part of their journeys of empowerment and agency.

In these journeys of empowerment and agency, African Pentecostal women have to navigate certain paradoxes. First of all, the emphasis on men's roles as fathers results in an emphasis on male leadership and in a gender-normative construction of leadership as heads of the family (Van Klinken 2012, Burchardt 2017). While women do become leaders, their leadership is also shaped according to these gender norms. Women are primarily seen as spouses and moth-

ers, and female leaders are often referred to as the pastor's wife, or as mother or 'mummy' (Maier 2012, Casselberry 2017). Furthermore, female leaders are still an exception, and senior leadership positions are mainly held by men (Ukah 2008, Maier 2012). The paradoxical transformation of masculine roles that results in the empowerment of women within the extended family and within in the church, while strong gender norms continue to be emphasized at the same time, is also referred to as the 'Pentecostal gender paradox' (Maier 2012, Brusco 1995, Martin 2001). Why are such strict gender norms acceptable for women as part of how they work towards positions of authority and leadership? In her study of Afro-American Pentecostalism in New York, Casselberry (2017) argues that the paradoxical submission to male leadership produces female holiness and spiritual authority. This work should be seen as a form of emotional labour (Hochschild 2012), as women submit to male leadership and authority in the church and the workplace through a cooperative ethic. This is part of their practice of holiness and produces *holy female personhood* and spiritual authority (Casselberry *ibid.*: 5). Female leaders also perform intimate labour, praying with people and offering pastoral and other forms of support. This gives them intimate knowledge about people, which contributes to their authority and their ability to bend gender and class norms (Casselberry 2017: 151; also, e.g., Klaitz 2019). Women's religiously inspired leadership can therefore be seen as active labour to ensure a 'politics of incomplete male domination' in both religious and secular contexts (Casselberry 2017: 171). The reconfiguration of gender roles and relations in a post-migration context may further amplify this dynamic (e.g. Pasura and Christou 2018). As I will explore in the subsequent sections in this article, female Pentecostal leadership offers us a unique insight into complexities of post-migration life in the European city. It also provides insights into what is a frontier zone in the study of religion, as well as the new ways of being and acting that emerge in highly diverse contexts.

A Brief Introduction to the Study

In this article, I will investigate questions around female leadership in relation to gender and sexual well-being in the context of African Pentecostal Churches in the Netherlands, and in particular in the city of The Hague. These churches are Dutch churches in the sense that they are located in a Dutch city. They can be considered African in the sense that their leaders and the majority of their congregations were born in societies on the African continent or were raised by parents born there.² For many of my interlocutors, the connection to their Nigerian, Ghanaian or Congolese roots was an important reason for attending these churches. The latter were differentiated in terms of their use of language (mainly English, French or Twi, in addition to Dutch), their connections to particular groups and networks of African-Dutch with origins in particular countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, Congo or Eritrea, and their links to larger transnational church organizations or networks originating in Nigeria or Ghana. In terms of their positioning in the Netherlands, these churches are attended by diverse groups of people, including those who were born in the Netherlands, those who have obtained citizenship and those who aspire to do so (Knibbe 2011). Some of these churches are Dutch branches of large, transnational Nigerian- and Ghanaian-initiated churches, as is the case with the Nigerian-initiated Redeemed Christian Church of God (Ukah 2008, Knibbe 2011). Other churches have been started by people who decided to do so after migrating to the Netherlands. Yet others are part of historical Christian denominations such as the Catholic or Orthodox Churches, although these are not explicitly discussed in this article. Between 2016 and 2018, I paid multiple visits to ten churches in

² The term 'African' is problematic, as are the terms 'diasporic' or 'migrant churches' (cf. Knibbe 2011). Acknowledging this, I choose to use the term as a descriptive term when referring to churches or interchurch groups with diverse African roots, who often refer to themselves in these terms as well. In some of the churches and in the interchurch settings, Afro-Caribbean women participated as well.

The Hague, participated in a course on Christian Leadership at the Bible College of the RCCG, and attended five Pentecostal conferences and over ten interchurch meetings on themes related to sexual well-being or health more broadly. I have conducted ten formal interviews, though most of my interviews were informal and spontaneous.³ In this article I focus mainly on Pentecostal churches and ministries, much of the material coming from fieldwork in the RCCG. Most of the female leaders I introduce by pseudonym in this article I have followed over the course of these three years, interacting with them in several public meetings, reading their work and sitting down for longer conversations and interviews.

My interest and approach to the fieldwork stem from both scholarly and personal engagement with religion, gender and cultural diversity. I grew up in a Calvinist Protestant family in the Netherlands and participated in various charismatic, Pentecostal networks and churches until my early twenties. The fieldwork I did for this study made me return to Pentecostal churches twenty years later, which was in some ways a reconnection with familiar religious practices. However, my role was different. The churches and their leaders welcomed me in their churches as a scholar, which they saw as a prestigious role. It also meant that I was always noticed, I stood out in my whiteness, as well as for my perceived social and economic success. The choice to focus on women was motivated by previous research on the intersections of religion, secularity, gender and sexuality. Being a cisgender woman certainly helped me access women and female spaces as part of the broader fieldwork in African Pentecostal churches. It was in these female spaces that I noticed how the themes around gender and sexual well-being were addressed more elaborately than in regular meetings.

³ These activities were part of the now-funded research project Cultural Encounters carried out by Knibbe, Spronk, Bakuri, Wiering and myself (all in this issue).

Undoing and Doing Gender in a Pentecostal Mission

There is gender equality in the church because both men and women can be leaders.

When I interviewed the male Dean of the Pentecostal Bible College I attended in April 2017, leadership was the proof of gender equality. I myself, on the other hand, was quite puzzled by what I observed in the field. A few months earlier that year I had attended a European Women's Conference in Amsterdam organized by the RCCG and entitled 'Queens in the Kings Business'. For much of the conference I wondered what made the conference a women's conference. Was it the style in which the female leaders were dressed? The elegant hats and hair-styles were both modest in the sense of covering up their bodies and colourful and luxurious. They reminded me of the late Queen Elizabeth of England or the former Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. Or perhaps it was the language used throughout the conference, which signposted gender in the teaching, prayers and worship? The service book announced worship and prayer sessions with talks from prominent female leaders addressing themes such as 'The King's Business', which was the conference theme, and Bible reading 'from our mother in Israel', as Pastor Fole Adeboye, the wife of the General Overseer, is referred to within the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG).

To understand how leadership is gendered in African Pentecostal churches in the Netherlands, one needs to be aware that Christian, Pentecostal leadership, is first and foremost shaped by a desire to secure Christian spaces for Christianity and conquer new terrains for Jesus with the aim of (re-) converting the dark continent of Europe (cf. Knibbe 2011; Knibbe and van der Meulen 2009). While leaders migrate to the Netherlands for different reasons, a missionary calling is always part of their narrative (Oblau 2009). In the missionary paradigm of Pentecostal leadership gender equality is assumed, and gender differences are considered irrelevant. The women's conference, an all-female gathering, did not come across as a female space. I could see little

difference between the worship and sermons in this conference compared to the Sunday services, Bible college lectures and conferences I attended during my fieldwork. Furthermore, women such as Pastor Mercy, who ministers to a church in the The Hague's city centre, seem to support the claim of the Bible College Dean. Being ordained as a pastor while working as a legal expert in the Rwanda Tribunal in Tanzania, she quickly found herself engaged in a leadership role when she came to the Netherlands for a position at the International Criminal Court. She is a full pastor to the parish she currently ministers in. Pastor Mercy is no exception. Her educational and professional background seemed to matter in her leadership more than her gender.

However, the gender paradox was visible in the aesthetic and discursive construction of leadership. In my preparations for a full-day lecture on Christian leadership at the RCCG Bible College I attended, I read, for example:

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable (...) He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?). (Course Manual on Christian Leadership, CRC Bible College)⁴

As reflected in the text, a Christian leader is by default a man, who needs a heteronormative, patriarchal family structure to complete his male leadership. Part of Pentecostal masculine self-formation is a 'holy' lifestyle that includes self-discipline and a disciplined family. In doing so, religious leaders 'become enviable role models to the members of their parishes' (Knibbe 2011). With female leaders, the story is more complex. For some female religious leaders, such as Mercy, there exists a space in which to develop their leadership independently of a husband, or with their husbands present but not in a leadership

role. Other female leaders shape their leadership as a 'pastors' wife'. Dr Grace Sola-Oludoyi, a medical doctor by training, is currently in the senior leadership of the RCCG Europe Mainland Mission together with her husband. In her book *Trials of a Pastor's Wife* she introduces the pastor's wife first and foremost as 'the queen of her husband, the helpmate, lover and the supermom', before turning to the many roles and responsibilities of pastor's wives as 'first lady, prayer warrior, doctor, role model, minister and 'mother in Israel'' (the latter being a typical reference to the wife of the General Overseer of the RCCG). Pastor Julie introduced herself to me in an interview as a legal expert in an international organization, and as a pastor and a diplomat's wife. Her introduction was followed by the concluding sentence: '... so in short, I am the pastor's wife. I followed him when he became a pastor just as I did for his diplomatic job'.

However, her laugh and twinkling eyes when she made the remark about following her husband indicated that there was more to this conclusion. In the following two hours of the interview, she talked about her ministry, her vision and her approach. Her husband was remarkably absent from our ongoing conversation. Even though the notion of a 'pastor's wife's leadership is framed as depending on male leadership, the example of Pastor Julie suggests that female leaders do not understand their leadership only in these terms. In her book Sola-Oludoyi also confirms that a female leader should not be submissive and 'living in the shadow of her husband (...) she has a role to fulfil' (Sola-Oludoyi 2015). Therefore, even though women's leadership is often constructed in relation to male leadership, in practice women may shape their leadership roles independently from their husbands. As the examples in this section suggest, their educational and professional backgrounds may be influential in this. At the same time, male senior leadership is (also) dependent on the ability to have a stable marriage and family along with professional and material success.

⁴ Unpublished document obtained during my participation in the CRC Bible College as a student in 2017.

Intimate Matters

'Socially, the fundamentals of orderly society, the family, are embedded in a deep crisis (...) the problems we confront in our homes, business and society emanate from a lack of leadership.' (Olowu, vi, viii)

In the African Pentecostal perspective, a fruitful marriage and a healthy and disciplined family are key to realizing spiritual and political impact. The spiritual, the political and the intimate are therefore closely interlinked (e.g. Bartelink 2020). Dele Olowu devotes a substantial part of his book on leadership to marriage and the family. Olowu is Special Advisor to the General Overseer, leader of the European Mission of the RCCG and a retired university professor in public policy. In a part of the book that is co-written with his wife, Mrs Bukky Olowu, he emphasizes the importance of female virtuosity for leadership (Olowu 2012: 39). In her book on pastors' wives, Sola-Oludoyi emphasizes the responsibility of a pastor's wife to ensure romance and a satisfying sex life as important to the leadership of her husband (Sola-Oludoyi *ibid.*: 52).

As part of the Pentecostal transformation of masculinity, sexual discipline for men is emphasized in the norm of being faithful to their spouses. However, another paradox becomes visible, as the responsibility to manage male sexual desire lies primarily with women. The Marriage Counseling Handbook of the RCCG, for example, gives women advice to keep themselves pure: 'Sisters, you should be very firm and should discourage any unhealthy overture from brothers. Males are moved easily by sight. A deliverance minister could suddenly be overwhelmed by lust and passion'. Male sexual desire, apparently, must be navigated not only in the marital bed, but also in relationships between male leaders and female congregants in the church. During the conference 'Queens in the King's Business', Elizabeth, a senior female leader from The Hague, explained that: 'Men are wired so that they demand sexual intercourse more than women do; that is how God has made them. It is your part as a wife to satisfy your man sexually'.

Since sexual pleasure is considered important in realizing a stable marriage, and since stable marriages are in turn the basis for healthy families, churches and societies, it is considered the responsibility of churches and religious leaders to support their congregants, and in particular women, in having healthy sex lives. In her remarkably detailed talk during the conference, Pastor Elisabeth offered rather explicit information about possible sexual positions and techniques that enhance sexual pleasure. There was a clear emphasis on male sexual pleasure during the workshop, and there was also a very candid and open way of explaining sexual intercourse. The tone of the talk was light and humorous, though not devoid of normative remarks. Elisabeth explained which position was considered Christian and which was not, announcing she only talked about vaginal sexual intercourse between a husband and wife, because 'others are abuse, we don't do it'. She also emphasized that solo-sex is sinful and not allowed. However, she also argued that sexual pleasure for women is important. Pastor Elisabeth emphasized: 'I am in my sixties, so I am allowed to say it Sex calms the nerves', inviting laughter and cheering from the audience. The affirmation of sexual pleasure as important for women turned the Women's Conference into a female space in which intimate matters could be discussed. In this space women are simultaneously holy and sexual. Moreover, there is no contradiction between the two as long as sex happens within the heteronormative context of marriage (see also Werbner 2010 on Pakistani women in Manchester).

Caring Work

That intimate matters relate to the caring work of female leaders was illustrated during the King's Business conference. During a Q and A, Pastor Elisabeth and two other female leaders on stage responded to questions that women in the audience had written on paper and handed to the session's facilitator, Pastor Julie, who was introduced earlier in the article. A question for 'advice to a good friend' silenced the laughing and

cheering audience. According to the anonymous note read out by the facilitator, this friend had been sexually abused as a child and had problems enjoying sex in her marriage, so any advice would be welcome. Pastor Elisabeth, who was forced to respond instantly and seemed somewhat uncomfortable, advised the 'friend' to pray for healing and to focus on her husband's sexual pleasure as a way to learn how to enjoy sex again. Pastor Julie gently summarized pastor Elisabeth's advice, while adding some suggestions of her own. She said that these were complicated questions to respond to in a public forum and that support from a pastor and from professionals was needed in these complex situations: 'Abused women need help and care, they need a proper diagnosis and professional support with their healing process'. She was very clear in pointing out the limitations of the pastors' role, implying that pastors are not equipped to support survivors of gender-based violence.

This moment struck me as significant, as leadership was no longer framed solely within the missionary paradigm, with its strong emphasis on holiness and being a good Christian role model. When I interviewed Pastor Julie a few weeks later, she explained further her awareness of the complexities and precarities of women's everyday lives and experiences. 'As much as you want to focus on the spiritual part, you cannot neglect the practice', she said. Pastor Julie expressed what I have observed with other female leaders in interviews and in interchurch gatherings for leaders that focused on topics such as sexual well-being, sexual violence and raising children. Many female religious leaders were deeply involved in the lives of women and families living in precarious circumstances. In addition, and similar to pastor Julie, these female leaders brought a professionalism into their leadership that they had developed in their secular jobs and careers. An example is Pastor Ruth, who is the founder and pastor of an international ministry that currently has parishes in The Hague and outside the Netherlands, in Canada and Nigeria. She is also a university lecturer in microbiology in the

UK. Pastor Ruth is regularly invited to churches and interchurch gatherings in The Hague to speak about sexuality education. Most churches do not address sexuality until a couple who want to marry participate in marriage counselling. While male and female leaders I interviewed expressed that they saw a need to offer sexuality education because of teenage pregnancy in their congregations and communities, they struggled with how to balance Christian norms with information about the body and sexuality. Addressing a room of twenty pastors and church leaders in The Hague, Pastor Ruth criticized religious leaders for their reluctance to address sexuality with unmarried people: 'You can't be naïve! Children grow up, develop hormones! The Holy Spirit won't protect you from sex!'

Pastor Ruth emphasizes the importance of giving children and teenagers knowledge about their bodies and about sexuality, alongside teaching them the Pentecostal norms and values around abstinence and fidelity. In doing so, she challenges assumptions among churches and religious leaders on how teaching on sexuality may encourage young people to engage in sexual relations when they are still unmarried. The combination of her professional knowledge and spiritual authority allowed her to claim authority, to bend and break certain gender norms. In one meeting, for instance, Pastor Ruth publicly challenged a male religious leader who had made assumptions about women's roles in sexual relationships based on interviews he had conducted with other male religious leaders. On the church website it is explained that Pastor Ruth was called to leadership, and that her husband followed her mission to serve as a deacon in the church. This reversal of gender roles is an example of how gender norms can be changed by female leaders based on the degree of spiritual authority they are able to exercise.

Gender Trouble, Spiritual Trouble: Female Leadership in Precarity

The female Pentecostal leaders introduced in this article demonstrate various strategies that Afri-

can Pentecostal women can draw on to navigate gender paradoxes in the messy and complex context of a post-migration, post-colonial European city. The approaches of Pastor Miranda and Pastor Elisabeth place a strong emphasis on being a good Christian woman. Both pastors demonstrate an approach that seems to be more aware of the precarities and power relations in which women of African origins build their everyday lives in Dutch cities. In this section I will discuss the practices of holiness and care in more detail, without assuming that these are completely different or opposed.

First of all, for all the female leaders with whom I interacted in the context of my study, good Pentecostal womanhood is rooted in the practice and performance of a holy lifestyle. This requires intense religious labour (e.g. Casselberry 2018), as has become visible in this article. The vignette already indicates that inviting the people to bring Jesus into their lives in the red-light district is not something that these women do lightly and easily. It required intense prayer before, during and after the outreach. Moreover, the outreach itself was seen as a form of spiritual warfare. Engaging in this spiritually dangerous and morally fraught part of the city, as well as coping with the reluctance of the sex-workers to agree to talk to them, were all part of this intense labour. Bringing people to Jesus is serious business. It's 'The King's Business', as the organizers of the Women's Conference put it, the word business indicating that good Christian womanhood indeed requires work. I observed women performing such intense religious labour in church settings as well. Before stepping into a leadership role during a religious service, pastors kneel down next to their chairs and pray intensely. I met Pastor Julie after her prayer group in a Hague parish church, when she had not been at home after a long day at the office. Individual women I interviewed and a group of female pastors from the Rotterdam area I joined for an evening retreat all mentioned their daily and weekly routines of prayer in the morning. For Pentecostal Christians these intense practices of prayer and worship

have the purpose of becoming fully absorbed by their spiritual lives and developing an intimate relationship with God (e.g. Luhrman 2005). This is significant beyond personal and church life, as it also affirms that they are good Christians and good citizens (Fumanti 2010). For female leaders this serves as a way to claim spiritual authority (e.g. Casselberry 2018).

Secondly, this article has demonstrated that sexuality is intrinsically part of living holy. It is from living holy that good sex emerges (e.g. Spronk 2014), while good sex in turn also constructs holiness. Living holy is emphasized as important to all Christians, regardless of their gender. However, the construction of good sex in African Pentecostal churches relies on distinct feminine and masculine roles, symbolically marked by referring to female leaders as wives and mothers. I noted the centrality of male sexual desire and virility that is central to both male and female roles. Women are expected to fulfil male sexual desire to realize a stable marriage, or resist men and their urges to prevent sexual interaction outside of marriage. Female sexuality, in other words, appears to be central to the personal and social transformation that is required to produce good Christian personhood, families and congregations (e.g. van de Kamp 2012). Moreover, male-female relations are sexualized to produce a form of masculine authority that is associated with virility (Obadare 2018, Lindhardt 2015). Women's cooperative ethic, as we observed in the figure of Pastor Elisabeth with her emphasis on women's responsibility to please their husbands sexually, has the purpose of completing male authority that otherwise remains incomplete (Casselberry 2018).

This study has focused on female Pentecostal leaders, women who are predominantly middle-class, educated professionals, and part of an emerging elite within religious and ethnic communities (e.g. Werbner 1991). In informal interactions with the women who made up the audience of the two conferences there was a lot of appreciation for how space was created for what they considered to be 'typical' women's

issues, yet in this informal public setting there was little opportunity for more detailed conversations about how they experienced the ways in which sexuality and intimacy came up during the conference. However, research among Afro-Dutch women conducted as part of the same project, did suggest that religious leaders do play important roles in offering knowledge, guidance and counselling on matters of sexual well-being (e.g. Bakuri 2021, Bartelink and Knibbe 2019). A focus on female leadership among Afro-Dutch Pentecostal women is also relevant in terms of how it reflects broader trends in female leadership in European societies. Pastor Elisabeth's construction of female and male roles in marriages illustrates the division of labour in which the physical and emotional support of members of the family falls primarily on the women (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). Yet, as the irony in Pastor Julie's introduction of herself as a pastor's wife indicates, this is not the only narrative about women. Since the 1960s women are no longer defined solely by their husbands, and their individual biographies have changed alongside the dynamics within marriage and the family (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). Female leadership makes these changes visible, hence offers a lens on how the pressures on family and marriage that have emerged since then are navigated and solved within African Pentecostal communities in European cities.

This article has demonstrated how female leaders navigate the challenges of gendered norms and individual lived realities in different ways. The outreach in the red-light district in the vignette constructs the Pentecostal women as 'respectable' Christian women in contrast to the unsaved sex-worker, who is a woman in need of recovery and conversion (e.g. McGrow 2017). The sex-worker Maria resisted this binary opposition. Maria's critique can be seen as a critique on women who reaffirm and promote patriarchal norms. Her critique laid bare the limited interest of the missionaries in the sex-workers' lives, their multiple identities, their religiosity and spirituality. While we do need to consider that,

from a Pentecostal perspective, saving women to become part of the Kingdom of God is also a loving and divine act, the encounter reveals women who are caught up in the patriarchal construction of gender and sexuality. Lacking knowledge about the individual women who were doing sex work, the glass windows became 'mirrors' (McGrow 2017) in which the sex-worker had to be the very other to the Pentecostal women: 'unholy', 'unsaved', 'unchaste' and 'unclean'.

These mirrors, however, also indicate that Christian rescue missions have something in common with secular progressive politics, as discussed in the literature review. Secular progressivism problematizes religion and culture as hindering women's empowerment, which has influenced domestic and international policies and programmes that focus on rescuing women from harmful religions and cultures (e.g. Abu Lughod 2015, Bartelink and Le Roux 2020). Christian rescue missions that want to save women from their lives in darkness and sin tend to be seen as deeply problematic because they confirm the secular preoccupation with religion as a force imposed on women. Yet, both are missionary endeavours that centralize a problem analysis that is not (necessarily) shared by women who are affected by inequality and violence. They also tend to impose their solution strategies without considering how those women who are subjected to them propose to navigate precarity and realize well-being.

Female Pentecostal leaders' perspectives and approaches in respect of gender and sexuality are more complex and diverse than public understandings of religious conservatism suggest. The ethnographic account of conversations around sexual well-being in church contexts, forms of care and support become visible that often remain unnoticed within both the dominant secular *and* Christian discourses. When I invited Pastor Julie to reflect on her gentle correction of Pastor Elisabeth's advice that women with sexual trauma should focus on sexually pleasuring their husbands, she suggested that Pastor Elisabeth is an older woman and that generational differ-

ences in addressing sexuality in public were at play. Furthermore, Pastors Ruth, Julie and Mercy all bring their professional and academic knowledge and skills into their practice as pastors. This does not make all female leaders formally independent of their spouses or marital status in the context of the church: after all, Pastor Julie is also a pastor's wife. Yet, these female leaders' roles go beyond the traditional gender roles to which society confined them for so long. At the same time, their authority as 'mothers' in the church is also vested in their class position and, in the cases of Julie, Mercy and Ruth, their professional knowledge and skills.

The question remains to what extent these leaders as 'mothers' are endowed with an authority that also denies women in less privileged positions their agency (e.g. Gaitskell 2000 on the construction of motherhood in missionary narratives in South Africa)? Here we have observed how female leaders' caring work creates a space for alternative forms of leadership in the church. While caring relations may reaffirm gender and class differences, Hochschild (2013) also reminds us that care produces empathy. In the case of the female Pentecostal leaders in The Hague, this meant that they created a space for leadership around precarious gender and sexual issues that does not fit the normative ideal type of Pentecostal discourse and theology. This 'politics of the personal', as observed in historical studies of female Christian leadership in southern Africa, creates solidarity among women across racial and class divides (Gaitskell 2000, 88). In the context of the African-Dutch churches this translates not only into a more sensitive and knowledgeable approach to issues around sexual well-being, but also into a greater awareness for those women who need professional support. The care that was expressed for survivors of sexual trauma by the female leaders during the Kings Business Woman's Conference also created a space in which to mend and challenge patriarchal religious and social norms. The focus of the conversation shifted from the focus on (male) sexual pleasure as a basis for a stable

marriage to the well-being of the women and their experiences of sexuality. In addition, pastor's roles were also acknowledged as limited and their authority as incomplete. While people might consult them and seek advice regarding matters of sexuality, it was emphasized that this should not exclude seeking professional support.

It is in the complex realities of post-migration life in diverse cities in Europe that Pentecostal norms and ideals regarding sexuality have to be navigated in relation to the real and lived experiences of women. I argue that it is within such frontier zones (Meyer 2018) that female leadership emerges as an in-between space in which new ways of being and acting can unfold. The intimate and caring labour performed by female leaders within the churches allows them to complement the practices of holiness and spiritual authority with the practices of empathy and care. In doing so, a form of leadership emerges that is more attuned to the complexity and precarity of life in the frontier zone.

Conclusion

In this article, I have investigated female, African Pentecostal leaders in the Netherlands and the religious labour they perform to navigate patriarchal systems and create a space for female power and influence. While questions about diversity in contemporary societies often focus on religious and cultural differences, this focus distracts from how challenges around diversity are gendered. In addition, the ways in which women exercise power and influence in the context of both secular and religious patriarchal structures continue to be overlooked and ill understood. In this article I have demonstrated ethnographically that the leadership and religious labour of female Pentecostal leaders need to be understood in the context of a gender paradox. Women can grow into leadership by performing intense religious labour. However, paradoxically, this religious labour includes female leaders modelling the perfect Christian woman. A woman's responsibility to be a good Christian woman is first of all emphasized as her ability to satisfy her hus-

band sexually and be a good mother. Yet, female leaders model Christian womanhood in order to go beyond it legitimately, as they engage with women in their congregations who struggle to live up to these ideal types. The intimate religious labour that female leaders perform creates a space for power and influence in church and society. Some female leaders use that space to critique patriarchal gender norms and practice empathy and care.

In this article I have argued that research should consider female leadership as a site of power and influence, beyond emphasizing women's agency in male-dominated institutional contexts. This will enable scholars to have a more critical understanding of leadership as it is shaped and altered by women within their everyday practice of leadership. It also challenges policymakers and NGOs concerned with the challenges around gender and sexuality in diverse European cities and communities to consider female religious leaders as authorities and to recognize the religious and professional qualities they bring to their roles as leaders in religious communities. Research on female leadership in African Pentecostal settings, and more broadly in religious conservative contexts, remains overlooked. The influential role that female leaders play in the lives of the people in their congregations and communities goes unnoticed, and with it the possibility of more nuanced and complex understandings of how diversity and difference are constructed, navigated and countered in the lived experiences of religious (migrant) women. It will therefore be useful to conduct more research in various countries and institutional networks, and to consider the intersections of education and professional experience, as well as class and race, alongside gender.

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