

The Role of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in Engendering Theological Higher Education in Africa

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Abstract

This article explores the transformative role of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in engendering higher theological education in Africa. Grounded in African Women's theology, the study analyses initiatives in championing gender equality, inclusivity, and intersectional solidarity within theological academia. The study highlights the historic journey of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in promoting the integration of gender-sensitive curricular and nurturing a new generation of African women theologians. Methodologically, I adopt a qualitative design and use African Women's Theology as a lens to understand the transformative strides made by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians towards engendering theological higher education in Africa.

Keywords: Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians; the Circle; Gender Equality; Higher Theological Education; theological academia

Introduction

The landscape of higher theological education in Africa has been historically marked by gender disparities, reflecting broader intersections of race, class, gender, and colonial legacies that have marginalised African women scholars (Landman 2022, 7). Despite these challenges, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (henceforth, the Circle), spearheaded by visionary African womanist scholars, progressively worked towards establishing a transformative shift in gender representation within higher theological education in Africa. Established against the backdrop of severe underrepresentation of African women in theological education, the Circle emerged as a Pan-African association committed to mentoring African women in academia and addressing critical issues at the intersections of religion, theology, and social justice. This article explores the pivotal role of the Circle in revolutionising African Women's

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Theology, fostering inclusive academic spaces and challenging patriarchal structures within theological higher education in a quest to engender theological education in Africa. Drawing on historical accounts and academic insights, this study traces the Circle's transformative journey from its inception to its current impact on theological higher education and scholarship. The Circle prioritises intersectional solidarity¹ through its advocacy, conferences, and publications. It emphasises the importance of collaborative efforts in addressing systematic disenfranchisement and fostering innovative approaches to theological enquiry and leadership. I examine the challenges faced by African women theologians in higher theological education, including issues related to student and faculty representation, institutional support, and the incorporation of gender-sensitive curricular, underscoring the transformative potential of the Circle in reshaping androcentric and patriarchal ideologies and promoting social justice. I argue that while significant strides have been made in advancing gender equality and inclusivity within higher theological education, persistent challenges remain. Nevertheless, the Circle's enduring commitment to fostering scholarly excellence, promoting intersectional solidarity, and advocating for transformative change serves as a beacon of hope and inspiration for African women scholars and all marginalised people.

Method

Methodologically, the study is qualitative in design, incorporating historical analysis as a foundation for understanding the significance and impact of the Circle. I reference historical accounts and scholarly insights and to support my arguments and claims. Specific examples, events, and initiatives of the Circle are highlighted throughout the article, allowing for examination and understanding of the work of the Circle, its impacts, and contributions. Grounded in African Women's Theology, I emphasise the experiences, perspectives and struggles of women in educational, religious, and theological contexts, providing a lens through which the Circle's initiatives are analysed. Taking an intersectional approach, I foreground the Circle's advocacy efforts that have resulted in increased female enrolment and employment of African women faculty members at universities in a quest to reshape and diversify theological education and scholarship.

1 Intersectional solidarity is about recognizing and supporting interconnected struggles faced by individuals and/or groups who experience overlapping forms of oppression and discrimination. The concept acknowledges that people can face multiple forms of discrimination simultaneously such as those based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, and so on. By embracing intersectional solidarity, individuals and communities aim to build alliances and work together to address systemic inequalities and injustices. Intersectional solidarity calls for an understanding of the complex intersections of various societal factors and identities to create more inclusive and equitable spaces. It is also a call for collective action that is mindful of the diverse challenges people face and seeks to uplift and empower marginalized communities. See: Tormos, F. 2017. Intersectional Solidarity. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*. 5(4), 707-720. <http://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2017.1385494>.

The Genesis and Evolution of the Circle

Historically, African women have faced significant barriers to participation in academic theological education. A myriad of factors pertaining to the intersections of religion, race, class, and gender led to their severe underrepresentation in academia (Masenya 2000, 69; Dube 1999, 216). With reference to the South African context, Landman (2022, 4–5) notes that in the 1980s, very few women were engaged in theological studies at the university level. Moreover, there was very little training available to African women in this vocation and women's studies in theology were not recognised as an established academic discipline. This underrepresentation of African women in academia followed a similar trend throughout Africa for the most part. Taking seriously this lack of representation, renowned Ghanaian scholar and theologian Professor Mercy Amba Oduyoye established the Circle in 1989. According to Oduyoye, the lack of participation of African women within theological academia represents an imbalance. Oduyoye advocates for addressing this imbalance through a "two-winged" theological approach. Drawing on the metaphor of a bird in flight, Oduyoye posits that African theology, devoid of women's faith reflections, resembles a bird with a single wing, rendering it incapacitated and incapable of soaring (Oduyoye 1992, 36-56). However, the objective of the Circle is not merely to serve as the "other wing." Instead, the Circle aspires to serve as a self-sufficient model of African theology, facilitating communication with God for both women and men. After all, it intimates Oduyoye that a bird cannot achieve optimal flight if one wing dominates over the other (Kanyoro 2002, 1).

Oduyoye was the Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC) at the time of the Circle's inauguration, which took place at a conference at Trinity College of Theology in Legon, Ghana, from 23rd September to 1st October 1989 (Landman 2022, 5). Bringing together African women from Lusophone, Francophone, and Anglophone Africa and the diaspora was an amazing feat, given the severe disenfranchisement of African women globally. This event marked a significant turning point in the discourse on gender representation within theological institutions in Africa. Achieving this feat is also indicative of Oduyoye's commitment to addressing the intersectionality of gender, race, and colonial legacies in African scholarship and at grassroots levels. By convening African women theologians from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including those from the diaspora, this initiative not only challenged the underrepresentation of women in theological education and discourses but also emphasised the importance of intersectional solidarity in addressing the systemic disenfranchisement of African women and the complexities of marginalisation.

Furthermore, the event underscored the need for inclusive approaches to redressing historic inequalities within academia and religious spheres. At this time, African women were not properly represented in published works (Fiedler 2017, 25). Fiedler notes that Oduyoye's collaborative endeavours included collaborations with women from the

Institute of Church and Society, the Programme for Theological Education, and the Ecumenical Association for Third World Theologians. Fiedler (2017, 26) goes on to say that while the inception of the Circle must be attributed to Oduyoye, it was her spirit of collaboration with other African women that led to the founding of the Circle.

Spearheaded by visionary leaders, the Circle's transformative journey continues to play a pivotal role in African women's participation in higher theological education. As a Pan-Africa association of researchers, members of the Circle are dedicated to mentoring African women in academia and addressing pertinent issues at the intersections of religion, theology, and social marginalisation. The Circle's tireless efforts and advocacy for the recognition of African women's full humanity and full participation in all spheres of life bear fruit in many areas and in many disciplines of theological higher education, as African women are trailblazing pathways in building inclusive educational spaces and embarking on other transformative initiatives for the benefit of all of humanity and the earth. The Circle continues to expand its reach and impact, fostering a diverse and interdisciplinary community of scholars committed to addressing the unique challenges faced by African women. Through collaborative research and advocacy initiatives, the Circle focuses on key issues within the ambit of gender equality, HIV and AIDS and environmental sustainability, advocating for the integration of these issues into theological curricular (Landman 2022; Phiri 2008; Phiri, Nadar and Masenya 2005).

Over the years, African women scholars of the Circle continue to transform discussions on religion, gender, society, and Mother Earth. Scholars like Musa Dube, Musimbi Kanyoro, Isabel Phiri, Christina Landman, Madipoane Masenya, Puleng LenkaBula, Esther Mombo, Sarojini Nadar, and more recently, Sophia Chirongoma, Molly Manyonganise, Nelly Mwale and many more, emerge as influential voices in their respective fields, challenging conventional wisdom and advancing innovative approaches to academic and theological inquiry and leadership. From interrogating patriarchal constructs within religious and cultural contexts to addressing contemporary challenges, the Circle continuously endeavours to maintain and uphold space, presence, and voice in higher theological education, fostering research efforts at various levels and maintaining a shared continental agenda. In all this, the Circle is committed to ensuring that it remains responsive to the contextual realities of African women across the continent and in the diaspora while working towards producing innovative and cutting-edge research (Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians 2021).

The six major Pan-African conferences and publications of the Circle reveal its success in disseminating knowledge and fostering dialogue on critical issues affecting the African continent. By amplifying the voices of African women scholars and their collaborators (friends of the Circle who are predominantly African male scholars) and advocating for transformative change within theological education, the Circle remains at the forefront of efforts to create more inclusive and equitable academic spaces for African women and all subjugated peoples. The first Pan African conference in Accra, Ghana, in 1989, focused on critiquing religious and cultural practices that marginalise

women and placed much emphasis on the dignity and agency of African women. The second Pan African conference in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1996 demonstrated the expansion and inclusivity of the Circle and focused on the challenges faced by single mothers and the role of polygyny/polygamy within African communities. At its third Pan African conference in 2002 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the Circle shifted its focus to address the pressing issue of HIV and AIDS and its impact on African women. At this conference, the interplay between religion, culture and HIV and AIDS was explored, emphasising the need for a holistic approach to support women affected by the virus. The fourth Pan African conference in Yaoundé, Cameroon, in 2007, paid special attention to the vulnerability of the girl child and women to HIV and AIDS within religious contexts with the aim of developing theological responses in support of the infected and affected. The fifth Pan African conference took place in Kempton Park, South Africa, in 2013, in the aftermath of significant societal changes in South Africa. This conference addressed issues of gender-based violence and patriarchal structures, highlighting the need for transformative biblical hermeneutics to challenge patriarchal interpretations and promote women's agency. The sixth Pan African conference in Gaborone, Botswana, in 2019 centred on commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the Circle with a special focus on the Circle's enduring commitment to scholarship and empowerment. In explorations of the interconnectedness of African spirituality and women's roles in environmental stewardship, the conference embraced among others, themes of ecological justice, eco-theology and the United Nations Sustainable Development goals. These innovative conferences have been instrumental in guiding African women's scholarships by providing a platform to share their experiences, challenges, and theological insights (Landman 2022, 5–14).

The Circle's focus on inclusivity means the inclusion of women from diverse backgrounds and cultures, fostering a rich exchange of ideas and experiences across Africa. Its social engagements demonstrate commitment to mentorship and advocacy. Undoubtedly, through its system of mentorship, conferences and publications, the Circle has and continues to significantly contribute to African women's scholarship, challenging traditional interpretations and fostering innovative approaches to doing theology that exemplify the full humanity of all people. Yet, the Circle is not without challenges of its own as it continues to grapple with issues around financial constraints and the implications of this for its continuity and reach. In light of this, the Circle should, going forward, diversify its funding sources in a sustained way. Possible avenues could be more rigorous exploration of grant opportunities and formal partnerships with organisations sharing similar goals, such as institutions of higher education. Moreover, in terms of capacity building and training, there needs to be more consideration of the administrative development of members in order to strengthen its internal capabilities. It is incumbent on the Circle leadership, for the sake of safeguarding the Circle's future, to develop long-term sustainability plans that address leadership succession, financial stability, and organisational growth.

African Women's Theology

African Women's Theology serves as a platform for African women theologians to engage in theological reflection and writing rooted in intersectional understanding of the challenges faced by African women across gender, race, class, cultural and religious lines. African Women's Theology is not a central initiative of the Circle - it existed prior to the launch of the Circle through the efforts of a few African women scholars primarily engaged in theological higher education at Western institutions. The establishment of the Circle served as a testament to the existing groundwork of African Women's Theology (Gunda 2024, 2). Grounded in African womanist theorisations, African Women's Theology challenges patriarchal constructs and advocates for the full humanity and agency of African women. Adopting a holistic approach, it addresses a range of socio-economic, political, cultural, religious, and other societal challenges faced by African women. Through collaborative research, African women theologians seek transformative change within the ecclesia, theological academia, and society at large, promoting equality, justice, and the full humanity of all people. Central to the mission of African womanist theologians doing African Women's Theology is addressing the pervasive experience of sexism, which manifests across ethnicities, social locations, educational statuses, and economic positions (Gunda 2024, 2).

Mentorship

Fundamental to the Circle's mission is its mentorship program, a cornerstone initiative deeply rooted in the theological and academic ethos of fostering scholarly excellence and inclusivity among African women theologians. The mentorship program is not merely a peripheral aspect of the Circle's activities but stands as a testament to its commitment to advancing theological scholarship that is contextually grounded and globally relevant. This program is strategically designed to nurture cutting-edge research by African women scholars, providing them with the necessary support, guidance, and resources to engage in rigorous academic inquiry. Within this program, seasoned researchers who have demonstrated academic excellence in their respective fields are encouraged to mentor newcomers, thereby facilitating the dissemination of knowledge and expertise (Phiri 2009, 6). This approach not only enriches the quality of research but also cultivates a culture of mentorship and mutual learning within the Circle community. Recognising the diversity within its ranks, the Circle adopts an inclusive approach to mentorship, acknowledging the unique perspectives, experiences and challenges that African women scholars from various backgrounds and contexts bring to the table. This inclusivity is vital in fostering a rich and vibrant exchange of ideas, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration and challenging traditional paradigms within theological studies.

The Circle's mentorship initiatives extend beyond traditional academic settings to encompass student-staff collaborations, creating opportunities for emerging scholars to actively participate in scholarly publications, conferences, and research projects (Phiri

2006, 6–9). This collaborative model of mentorship not only bridges the gap between theory and practice but also empowers the next generation of African women scholars to become agents of change within their own communities (Kanyoro 2002, 27–32). Importantly, the mentorship program of the Circle is transferrable across educational institutions, allowing for greater impact. This level of adaptability ensures that mentorship within the Circle suits the unique needs and contexts of different academic and theological settings, thereby ensuring effectiveness (Ayanga 2016, 1). Undoubtedly, the mentorship program of the Circle serves as a catalyst for transformative theological education and scholarship. Through fostering cutting-edge research, promoting inclusivity within diversity and nurturing the next generation of African women theologians, the Circle continues to shape the landscape of theological studies, challenging existing paradigms and working towards more equitable and just academic, theological, ecclesial and societal spaces. The Circle has, to date, expanded its presence across Africa, Europe, and North America, boasting chapters in numerous countries. These Chapters include coordinators and research leaders who mobilise African women scholars and scholars who are friends of the Circle for research and community-based development, allowing regional and national chapters to shape their research focus based on local contexts, thereby enhancing its mentorship capacity (Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians 2021).

Empowering Access: The Circle’s Impact on Female Student Enrolment

African women stand resilient amidst global challenges that impinge on their freedoms, humanity, and human rights (Monohan 2004, 2). Despite navigating through structural oppressions sponsored by colonial, patriarchal, cultural, and religious systems, African women, while facing vulnerability and disparity, actively seek avenues to engage and contribute positively to their communities and wider societies, demonstrating remarkable resilience. The Circle supports these efforts by advocating for and providing platforms for African women to voice their perspectives by sharing their experiences of struggle and triumph. The Circle prioritises advocating for the agency and advancement of African women within ecclesial, educational, theological, and societal domains.

At the time of the Circle’s inception, theological higher education in Africa was dominated by male scholars. The Circle’s intention has always been to implement initiatives that increase female enrolment, aiming to balance gender representation and promote inclusivity and gender justice. In support of this claim, reference is made to Landman (2022, 7), who discusses the South African context. Landman recounts an incident in 1994 when Brigalia Bam was newly appointed as General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches. Upon hosting a Circle meeting in Johannesburg, Landman observed that out of the large assembly of women in attendance, only four had received formal theological education, and all four were white. Bam expressed understandable concern regarding the situation. Through collaborative efforts, the Circle has always promoted the increase of enrolment and equal access to higher theological education for black African women. Initiatives such as scholarships,

mentorship programs, and awareness campaigns have contributed to a rise in female enrolment, fostering diverse and inclusive learning environments within the spectrum of theological higher education (Phiri, Nadar and Masenya 2005). Challenging patriarchal structures in academic institutions, the Circle's focus is the empowerment of African women with critical skills for scholarly engagement in social and ecclesial justice, equity and equality, stewardship of Mother Earth, health and well-being and a host of other social justice categories. In their quest to increase African women's enrolment at the university level, the Circle also encourages churches to send more female students to university to study for ministry or social development roles (Phiri 2007).

African Women Faculty in Higher Theological Education: Challenges and Advocacy

African women theologians actively engage with theological institutions to advocate for the permanent employment of women in theological teaching roles. However, their endeavours encounter obstacles from institutional leadership that lack a commitment to gender empowerment in theological education. To navigate these challenges, these theologians engage in theological reflections and seek insights from peers who have successfully addressed similar obstacles (Phiri 2009, 10). Prominent African womanist theologian and founding member of the Circle, Isabel Phiri, identifies patterns concerning the recruitment of women faculty at African universities from 1989 to 2008. Phiri observes a notable absence of female representation in faculty across numerous universities in Africa. She further notes that when women were appointed, they predominantly taught non-theological subjects, reflecting the patriarchal and androcentric tendencies prevalent in African theological higher education during that period.

Additionally, Phiri highlights that female faculty in theological departments often held part-time or limited-term positions. This precarious employment situation hinders African women theologians from realising their academic potential, impeding their research focus and publication efforts, which are crucial for academic advancement. Despite these challenges, Phiri maintains that African women theologians in higher theological education actively engage in advocacy and educational roles, educating church leaders, laity, and the powers that be at universities about the ministry of women. Moreover, they advocate for supportive environments for female faculty. The Circle actively advocates for supportive environments for female faculty and collaborates with theological institutions to promote permanent employment of women in faculty roles within higher theological education. The Circle has played a pivotal role in bringing to the fore the importance of female faculty as part of integrating gender issues into theological curricular (Phiri 2009, 11).

A gendered approach to theology, as advocated by Phiri (2009, 12), serves as a pivotal framework for exposing and addressing various forms of injustice within church,

society, culture, and biblical interpretation. This approach additionally offers critical insights into the complex interplay between gender, power dynamics and societal structures. By interrogating the patriarchal foundations embedded in religious doctrines and cultural practices, gendered theological perspectives unveil systemic inequalities and biases that marginalise not only women but also LGBTIQ+ and other communities. Furthermore, Phiri's emphasis on cultural and religious constructions of gender underscores the fluidity and diversity of gender identities beyond binary categorisations, making room for consideration of those categories within the theological faculties of higher education, paving the way for more inclusive and affirming theological interpretations that validate the presence, experiences, and identities of LGBTIQ individuals and all marginalised peoples. Phiri's approach not only advocates for institutional change but also promotes gender-sensitive curricular, supporting marginalised communities within religious and educational spaces.

Moreover, Phiri's approach promotes social transformation and advances gender studies, including LGBTIQ+ perspectives. African women theologians encounter significant challenges in advancing gender equality in higher theological education. Nevertheless, their persistent advocacy and institutional initiatives, exemplified by initiatives advocated for by African women theologians like the establishment of a Chair in Gender and Religion at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, indicate progress towards creating inclusive academic environments and transforming religious leadership across Africa.

Curriculum Transformation: The Circle's Impact on Theological Education in Africa

The Circle is a driving force in transforming theological education in Africa, particularly in reshaping the curriculum to be more gender inclusive. The Circle's efforts have focused on challenging patriarchal narratives (Hinga 1994; Maseno and Mligo 2019; Kanyoro 2001), integrating womanist perspectives (Kobo 2018; Nadar 2005) and incorporating indigenous knowledge systems to create a curriculum that reflects the diversity and richness of African traditions (Kanyoro 2001; Oduyoye 1992). In advocating for an inclusive and diversified theological curriculum, the Circle has contributed to expanding the scope of theological inquiry for students and scholars. Moreover, by highlighting the contributions of African women theologians, the Circle has enriched academic discourse and fostered a more inclusive and holistic understanding of theology. By promoting a gender-sensitive pedagogy, the Circle has contributed to critical thinking, dialogue, and collaborative learning, where students are equipped with knowledge and skills to challenge and reshape oppressive theological paradigms. Equally, the Circle has played a pivotal role in advocating for Africanization and decoloniality as integral aspects of the theological curriculum in Africa. Consequently, the Circle engages in theology that resonates with African realities and experiences, enriching academic discourses and reshaping oppressive paradigms.

Advocacy

Circle's advocacy efforts have a profound impact on engendering theological education in Africa. By advocating for gender-responsive admission policies and practices, the Circle addresses systemic barriers that have historically marginalised African women. These advocacy efforts have resulted in the creation of enabling environments, promoting women's advancement in theological education and scholarship. Moreover, the intersectional way in which the Circle addresses advocacy, being cognisant of race, class, gender, sexual identity, and other categories, directly impacts and enhances the status of marginalised groups within institutions of higher learning. However, as a way forward and in considering the phenomenal strides the Circle has made with regard to engendering higher theological education, it must prioritise the establishment of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess its impact on policy changes with regard to female student enrolment and female faculty recruitment in order to assess institutional transformation. This data-driven approach will inform future advocacy strategies, ensuring that the Circle continues to engender theological education in Africa effectively. This will ensure continuity in the Circle's efforts towards advocating for a just educational system where African women have the opportunity to fulfil their potential and contribute to societal development. Undoubtedly, as the Circle continues its work, its impact will be felt not only in higher education but also within broader struggles for gender equity and social justice across Africa

Conclusion

In this article, I analysed the Circle's significant role in transforming higher theological education in Africa. I also explored the Circle's pivotal responses that challenge deeply entrenched patriarchal structures, historically marginalising African women students and faculty in higher education. The Circle's collective endeavours in mentorship, advocacy, and resilience have been instrumental in driving substantial change and promoting social justice within higher theological education. Its role extends beyond catalysing transformative theological education across Africa to nurturing exceptional African women scholars who have achieved distinguished scholarships and assumed leadership roles. The Circle serves as a compelling testament to the enduring resilience and indomitable spirit of African women in academia.

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