CHAPTER FIVE

BIG WOMEN, SMALL GIRLS

In the previous chapter I analysed some of the key themes in charismatic discourses on womanhood. In particular, the chapter highlighted the emergence of a religious discourse that raises issues of personal development and individual success to new levels, creating tension between women’s social roles and their individual trajectories. In that chapter, however, questions of gender, power and authority, in practice, were left aside in order to concentrate on church attitudes towards women at the level of discourse. In Chapter Five, the focus of discussion turns to more practical questions of power, participation and democracy with regard to women’s church activities.

In some respects this chapter is a response to Martin’s thesis that Pentecostalism represents a worldwide “women’s movement”. Martin’s suggestion, which stems largely from the empirical research of scholars studying the gender implications of the rise of Protestantism in Latin America, is that Pentecostalism represents not only a women’s movement but “a sisterhood of shared experience” and “a buried intelligentsia of women”. In his comparison of Pentecostal churches with Catholic base communities in Latin America he prioritises the concept of “community” within Pentecostalism and posits the existence of a shared bond between female converts: “As they are brought into the circle of participation they more and more actively relate to each other and sustain each other”. Martin extends his thesis to Sub-Saharan Africa, where much of his argument depends on the

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1 Martin, *Forbidden Revolutions*, 52.
2 Green and Gill, for example, highlight the importance of the communal bond within the Pentecostal churches and the extent to which this both provides women with an alternative to kin ties and presents opportunities for the development of social capital amongst an otherwise marginal group (Green, “Shifting Affiliations”, 159–79; Gill, “Like a Veil to Cover Them”, 709–21).
3 Martin, *Forbidden Revolutions*, 38.
5 Martin, *Tongues of Fire*, 203.
assumption—drawn from the work of Ruth Marshall in Nigeria—\footnote{Marshall, “Power in the Name of Jesus”, 224.}—that the new churches are more egalitarian, and hence democratic, than their Catholic or Protestant forebears.

Recent work on gender and the rise of civil society in Africa, however, suggests that churches with egalitarian structures may in fact inhibit, rather than encourage, the democratic participation of their members, especially women. Drawing on the insights of scholars critical of the concept of civil society in Africa,\footnote{In the civil society debate the liberal school of thought has tended to emphasise the potential of civil society organisations to strengthen democratisation in Africa by encouraging the development of social capital and the political participation of its citizens (Michael Bratton, “Civil Society and Political Transitions in Africa”, in Harbeson, Rothchild and Chazan, \textit{Civil Society}, 51–81; Naomi Chazan, “Africa’s Democratic Challenge”, \textit{World Policy Journal}, 9 (2), 1992, 279–313; Larry Diamond, “Rethinking Civil Society: Towards Democratic Consolidation”, \textit{Journal of Democracy}, 5 (3), 1994, 4–17). Organisations identified as particularly effective in this task are those felt to be characterised by internal democracy and decentralised authority structures. Taking its cue from the emergence of civil society in the social history of Europe and North America, the liberal view has conceptualised civil society in Africa “as an autonomous sphere of interaction constituted of free-thinking, self-governing individuals” (Peter Von Doepp, “Liberal Visions and Actual Power in Grassroots Civil Society: Local Churches and Women’s Empowerment in Rural Malawi”, \textit{Journal of Modern African Studies}, 40 (2), 2002, 276).} Peter Von Doepp argues that in rural Malawi the local Catholic church was more effective at encouraging participation among women than the local Presbyterian