



# Religio-Cultural ‘Clamps’ on Female Leadership in Zimbabwe: Towards a Liberating Hermeneutic in Mainline Churches and African Initiated Churches (AICs)

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## INTRODUCTION

The life course approach in general is quite an enveloping one in that it is a perspective that attempts to: (1) understand the continuities as well as the twists and turns in the paths of individual lives; (2) it recognises the influence of historical changes on human behaviour; (3) it sees

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humans as capable of making choices and constructing their own life journeys within systems of opportunities and constraints; (4) it recognises the linkages between early life experiences and later experiences in adulthood (Hutchinson, 2005). When the life course approach is narrowed down to human sexuality, one is able to understand that sexual beliefs and behaviours result from an individuals' lifelong accumulation of advantageous and disadvantageous experiences, and adoption/rejection of sexual scripts within socio-historical contexts that they got exposed to during the course of their lives. In the Zimbabwean context, one can safely argue that the actions of women aspiring for leadership roles in churches is a result of their lifelong accumulation of disadvantageous experiences and rejection of sexual scripts within their socio-historical context. Generally, women tend to be more disadvantaged when compared to their male counterparts. At most they are poor; experience violence; have higher rates of illiteracy and are often labelled inferior to men by the society. These drawbacks are more likely to persist throughout women's and girls' lives and, more often than not, intensify with older age.

Focusing specifically on Zimbabwean women, it is apparent that they have since begun to reject the sexual script that views them as inferior and unworthy to take up any leadership roles. Not only had this erroneous teaching been culturally engrained in the society but it has since been entrenched in churches as well to such an extent that in certain quarters, it is still being regarded as divinely ordained. While so much has been said and done by women to assert their ability to lead alongside their male counterparts, clearly, their path towards taking up leadership positions, especially in Church is still quite bumpy. Often times, their aspirations are frowned at and little, if any, is done to address them. In an endeavour to fully appreciate women's aspirations to lead as well as adequately addressing the issue of barricades that still stand in their way to become Church leaders, the chapter shall start off by foregrounding the plight of women in the traditional society and then move on to reflect on the changes that came as a result of consciousness to women's rights. The chapter shall discuss the status of Zimbabwean women in both main-line and AICs at some length and conclude by advocating for a liberation hermeneutic that can serve as a catalyst for unbinding women from the religio-cultural clamps that still barricade them.

## THE PLIGHT OF ZIMBABWEAN WOMEN IN THE TRADITIONAL CONTEXT

The traditional history of Zimbabwean society, just like that of any patriarchal society, shows that the sexuality of women was largely controlled by men. As she developed, a woman belonged to the male members of her family and only to be passed into the hands of other male persons at marriage. All a woman knew, in other words, was that she was a daughter of somebody and was bound to be a wife of somebody at marriage. This finds echo in an observation made by Maureen Kambarami when she stated that:

In the Shona culture, once a girl reaches puberty, all teachings are directed towards pleasing one's future husband as well as being a gentle and obedient wife. Her sexuality is further defined for her, as she is taught how to use it for the benefit of the male race. Furthermore, these cultural teachings foster a dependence syndrome, this is why most African women depend heavily on their husbands for support. As a result, once a husband dies, the woman quickly remarries so as to find another pillar of support to lean on. (Kambarami, 2006: 3)

While indeed some 'escaped' the hook of marriage, it was usually not out of their own volition, rather, they were incapacitated either due to physical or mental challenges and a few who were dedicated as *mbonga-svikiro* (a virgin spirit medium) and virgin girls called *mazendere* (wives to be) who assisted the *mbonga-svikiro* in looking after the Matonjeni shrine (Mataire, 2014; Mukonyora, 1999).

One area which clearly bears testimony to the male domination over women in the Zimbabwe of old was that of courtship and marriage. Not all traditional ways of marriage, however, violated the will of the girl. An ideal way which was used and which did not portray an explicit male dominance was a system called *kutema ugariri* (barter trading manual labour in exchange for a wife) whereby the 'husband to be' worked for his 'future wife' at her parents' homestead for a certain period of time before he was given his wife. Such a form of marriage arrangement, as noted by Bourdillon (1976), used to be the normal way in which most men got married since cattle were scarce. However, this marriage practice has practically died out now since most men are now able to earn cash in wage employment (Bourdillon, 1976). Quite oppressive, however, was a system called *musenga bere* whereby a man simply had to ambush the girl he loved. If he managed to drag her home even against her wish, that girl automatically became his wife. Since this was recognised as a valid

system of marriage, the girl's parents did not object to the bride price which usually followed the ambushing of their daughter.

Equally pointing to the free hand of men over the female gender, especially their offspring, was when there was a case of drought. A starving family man could give away his daughter to a rich man or one who had a better harvest of crops in exchange for a certain number of bags of maize or sorghum so as not to starve his entire family. If the starving man had no daughter, he could even pledge to hand over a yet unborn female child. Even though there are some scholars who try to sanitise such a practice by arguing that no one could force the girl to enter into the marriage contract if she happened not to like her 'allotted' husband, however, most young girls were coerced to accept such pre-arranged marriages because doing so earned her a lot of respect from her family for having saved them from starvation (Bourdillon, 1976: 44; Gudhlanga & Makaudze, 2012). Hence, the limited or no social power for women in the traditional society meant that in most cases, neither the mother nor the girl could object to the arrangement made by the father figure in that family. As such, the husband controlled not only the sexuality of his wife but even also of his daughters.

Another case worthwhile mentioning, which shows how the women folk were subservient to the male gender concerns the payment of *ngozi* (avenging spirit). Among the Shona in particular, it is a recognised tradition that if a member of the family is murdered by a stranger or a known assailant, then that person should pay for the loss of blood by handing over his daughter to be married by one of the surviving members of the deceased's family if the murdered person was a man and if it was a woman, then a small boy was used as compensation (Mawere, 2014). If the spirit of the deceased person is not appeased in this way, it is believed that it will come back and cause havoc in the family of the murderer. Customarily, once a girl has been designated to act as co-payment for the loss of blood, she is not expected to object to the decision made by the male authorities but to act accordingly.

While one can hardly deny the chances of finding some women who could have objected to tailoring their acts to suit the dominant customs favouring the male gender, most elderly women, it appears, resigned to the fate of their traditional customs and tended even to support them. Such a fact of reality finds support in the words uttered by Hazel O. Ayanga who bemoans how, "women have contributed to their lowly status through general acceptance of their prescribed social role and

position [...] and because women despise each other” (Ayanga cited in Gunda, 2009: 258). Such women would act as the instructors to younger women, teaching them in the first place to accept the reality of them being women in a particular religious and cultural set up and instructing them not to challenge the traditional system but rather to press on as courageous women. Any young woman who happened to go against the advice of these elderly women was ridiculed and regarded as a social misfit.

Although most women resigned to the fate of the oppressive social system, there were also a few who managed to occupy positions of influence in their respective societies. As noted by Bourdillon (1976), some women acted as headwomen over subject territories, mediums to senior spirits, while others could even preside over a ceremony when the men appropriately related to the spirits were absent or reluctant to perform the necessary rituals. Explicating further their influential role, he asserts that some men who publicly asserted the prerogative of men to make decisions and control the economy could regularly in private consult their wives on key issues and more often recourse to the wives’ judgements on those important matters.

### THE ERA OF WOMEN’S RIGHTS

With the dawn of Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980, notable changes began to be seen in terms of addressing the plight of women. The important role which they had played during the war of liberation helped to change their status in the society (Bourdillon, 1976). Such an official recognition saw the launch of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, Gender and Community Development in 1980 (Guvamatanga, 2014). Of worth to note also in improving the status of Zimbabwean women was the passing of the Legal Age of Majority Act in 1982 (Bourdillon, 1976). The Bill officially gave all people of Zimbabwe, including women, full adult status on reaching the age of eighteen. What this implied was that women were recognised as being at par with men and hence they could enjoy the same freedom with men or enter into any employment sector without much hindrance. Education was made open to all; hence, focus was no longer only on the boy child but girls too enrolled in schools in their numbers. As all people now had equal access to education, some women began to openly challenge several facets of tradition which they felt were oppressive to the women folk. With broader access to higher

education, some men too began to see some of the pitfalls of their traditional customs and hence they began to listen with sympathy to women's voices of discontent.

What brought a lasting revolution to the status of women in Zimbabwe was the historical Beijing Conference held in China which took place in September 1995 under the theme 'Action for Equality, Development and Peace' (Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995). On the human rights of women, the Conference began by noting that many women face various barriers to the enjoyment of their human rights because of such factors as their race, language, ethnicity, culture, religion, disability or socioeconomic class. Other factors leading to them being disadvantaged and marginalised include their general lack of knowledge, failure to know their human rights, the hindrances they face in trying to gain access to information, as well as their failure to know what recourse mechanism to take in cases of violation of their rights (Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995). As part of the mechanisms to address such challenges, the Conference reaffirmed that:

- The human rights of women and the girl child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of the universal human rights.
- Every person should be entitled to participate in, contribute to and enjoy cultural, economic, political and social development.
- Reproductive rights rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. It also includes their right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence, as expressed in the human rights documents.
- Any harmful aspect of certain traditional, customary or modern practices that violate the rights of women should be prohibited and eliminated. Governments should take urgent action to combat and eliminate all forms of violence against women in private and public life, whether perpetrated or tolerated by the State or private persons (Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995).

While the outcome of the Beijing Conference was received with mixed feelings by men, to most women it sounded like a triumph in their call

for recognition. Those who resented the outcome of the Conference criticised in particular the clause that women too had the right to decide on the number, spacing and timing of their children, as well as the clause that women had the right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence. Knowingly, some men decided to brush aside anything that had to do with Beijing, but this was not without consequences as some women decided to walk out of their matrimonial homes in pursuit of the Beijing spirit of equal rights. During their leisure-time discussions in the contemporary society, some men often make reference to Beijing with a note of disdain as they view it as a time-wasted occurrence in history which is eroding their grip on the women folk which was passed on to them through bygone generations. Even some States which were signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Cairo (1994) and the Beijing Declaration (1995), are known to be at the forefront in obstructing women's and girls' rights to make choices on their reproductive health.

The Zambian government, for example, is said to have suspended a television advertisement campaign which was promoting the use of condoms, especially among the young as a fight against AIDS (Kanyengo cited in Hellum & Knudsen, 2007: 347). This fact is underscored by Hellum and Knudsen who contended that: "Women and girls' rights to reproductive choice is often a site of contestation between international human rights law and co-existing social, cultural and religious norms" (Hellum & Knudsen, 2007: 363). Echoing similar sentiments pertaining inheritance issues, Julie Stewart and Amy Tsanga aver that: "The quest for women to have equitable, let alone equal inheritance rights in the African context is frequently highly contested" (Stewart & Tsanga, 2007: 408). The deep-seated cultural norms and traditions still have a greater binding on the people, hence, the uneasiness felt by other conservative folks whenever they hear of the 'free-range' kind of lifestyle for women.

### WOMEN AS MASTERS OF THEIR OWN DESTINY

Parallel developments within the Zimbabwean society have seen some changes in the status of women. Though the changes so far can hardly be characterised as total emancipation of women, it is undeniably true that women are slowly gaining mastery over their own sexuality. Added

to the conditions leading to the improvement of the welfare of women was the opening up of the legal profession at independence. With the advancement in education, it meant that many lawyers came to join the legal profession. Consequently, many women began to have access to legal representation as well as legal information, some of which was and continues to be provided by women legal practitioners. Helping to disseminate legal information were also some nongovernmental organisations which have been established to advocate specifically for women's and children's rights. Such an environment has enabled ordinary persons to know either the different aspects of state law which impact on people's lives or know, as noted by Stewart and Tsanga, at least someone who knows something about the law (Stewart & Tsanga, 2007: 423).

Education has enabled many to stand up for their own rights as advocated by the Beijing Conference and some have taken a step further in helping other women to know what recourse mechanisms are available and which may be followed in cases of the violation of their rights. Among those taking a lead in helping other women to find their way is the Girl Child Network led by Betty Makoni (Casper-Milam, 2013). Currently in Zimbabwe, an abused girl child, for example, can be helped to rebuild her life once more by those very organisations which are dedicated towards defending the rights of women. The same applies to a divorced woman.

As a further sign of women gaining control over their own lives, particularly their sexual and reproductive health and rights, there has been an increase in the number of women who are opting to become single mothers. Taking advantage of the declarations of the Beijing Conference, they argue that it is their right to make a free choice in the area of reproduction; free of any coercion, discrimination or violence. For them, being single mothers leaves them with the freedom to do what they like without bowing to any male voice as their counterparts in marriages. Though not a Zimbabwean woman herself, Mary Mohler at least summarises the general sentiments expressed by most single mothers across the world when she says:

As a single parent, you are free to indulge all those little idiosyncrasies that you try to rein in when you live with someone else. If you're a neatnik, you can give in to your compulsions and hang things in military order by color, size, or type of garment; if you're not, you can wallow in disarray. You can sleep late or retire early, eat crackers in bed, watch old movies,



leave all the windows open, let the dog sleep next to you. After years of tenuously maintained compromise, you get to do what you want when you want. (Mohler, 2020: 1)

Not only does single motherhood leave them free from any male coercion, they see it also as a passport to venturing into any form of business, any form of lifestyle or partnership with other people of their free choice. Influencing too the desire to lead a free single life is the new technological age that the Zimbabwean society has been exposed to. Films and literature from other cultures which extol sexual freedom have, as noted by Bourdillon, had a role in changing the nature of Zimbabwean society (Bourdillon, 1993: 42). Such films tend to portray the comfort of life when one is unmarried and the ease with which one can accumulate as much wealth one may dream of through going out with different men without any constraints and this for sure is emulated by many.

As women gain control over their sexuality and are attaining the same educational qualifications as men, there have been indeed some surprises in the once male-dominated Zimbabwean society. Hardly is there any employment sector now that does not have women representation. From taxi drivers to haulage truck drivers, women have continued to show their presence. Even managerial positions that were once the preserve of men have seen some women taking up those roles. 'What one person does, another person can do (better),' whether publicly announced or unspoken, has been the philosophy of these high aspiring women.

### WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN ZIMBABWE'S MAINLINE CHURCHES

While women appear to have successfully ventured into most fields that were once deemed the preserve of men, it has not been so the case in church circles. In those churches where some inroads have been made to recognise women, such as the Methodist Churches and the Lutheran Church, there appears not to be so much to celebrate as those few in leadership positions still feel that they are under the surveillance of male leadership. In her undergraduate dissertation submitted to the Midlands State University, one of the few female bishops in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, Evermay Nyabonda, argues that it is not easy for women

to get appointed as a Presiding Bishop of the Church due to the male-dominated control of the Church (Nyabonda, 2018). Similar sentiments were expressed by another female pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ), Betse Ndlovu (2013) who argued that despite women being allowed to train as pastors in the ELCZ, there was still a visible problem of the dehumanisation of women as women are not recognised as Bishops and Deans in the very Church which they feel they are part of.

Some mainline Churches have remained adamant in denying women access to top leadership positions in the Church. The Catholic Church, for example, has not promoted the training women in its seminaries, let alone ordain them as members of the clergy. The argument commonly made is that Jesus did not choose women among his disciples and not even to his mother did he bequeath the gift of priesthood but just to his male followers. As a response to the petitions and lobbies which were being raised by members of various Christian communities and groups clamouring for the admission of women into the pastoral office at par with men as what was obtaining in the other Christian communities stemming from the Sixteenth-Century Reformation, Pope Paul VI in 1976 issued an official Declaration *Inter Insigniores* against women's ordination. The Declaration, which was issued through the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, categorically stated that "the Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination" (Pope Paul VI, 1976). In issuing the Declaration, the Pope, however contradicted the biblical findings of his own special committee from the Pontifical Biblical Commission. He also seemed oblivious to the fact that Bishop Felix Davidek had ordained married men and women in Czechoslovakia in exceptional circumstances to preserve an underground church which was behind the Iron Curtain (McEnroy, 2011). In his Declaration against the ordination of women, Pope Paul VI further explained that the fact of conferring priestly ordination only on men is "a question of unbroken tradition throughout the history of the Church, universal in the East and in the West... This norm, based on Christ's example, has been and is still observed because it is considered to conform to God's plan for his Church" (Pope Paul VI, 1976).

The Declaration made by Pope Paul VI was later echoed twice during the papacy of John Paul II. In 1994, Pope John Paul II issued the Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* whereby he reaffirmed that the

prohibition against women's ordination was definitive and off-limits to further discussions (McEnroy, 2011). During the following year in June 1995, he wrote a Letter which was addressed to women. In the Letter, while the Pope praised women's historic contributions to the Church and society as mothers, wives and social leaders and apologised for the Church's failure to recognise these contributions, he, however, insisted that priesthood is not about domination but service. He argued that men and women have a diversity of roles in society, hence the Church's stance on an all-male priesthood is not a sign of male domination, and rather, it is embracing their complementary natures. He also maintained that doing so is in no way prejudicial to women because such a stance is congruent to Christ's choice to entrust only to men this ministerial task (Pope John Paul II, 1995).

Following in the footsteps of his predecessors, Pope Benedict XVI in 2010 criminalised women ordination alongside gay marriages and paedophilia. Of the three criminalised offences, Benedict XVI made it to appear as if women ordination or even suggestion of it was one of the most serious. This was evidenced by his immediate defrocking of Bishop William Morris of Australia in 2011 for merely having raised a suggestion to consider the possibility of ordaining women so as to alleviate the shortage of priests (McEnroy, 2011).

Although the Popes have throughout history continued to hold that women ordination is by biblical law off-limits to further questioning, there is a continuous debate among people whether the papal interpretation of the biblical law is valid. A number among both the lay and clergy feel that the Bible is continuously being interpreted in ways which are not liberative to women who constitute the greatest percentage of Church membership. This biased usage of the biblical texts can actually be traced back to the arrival of the Gospel on the African soil. Writing about the Churches in Nigeria, Bateye (2008: 114) avers:

The Bible was used authoritatively by the Western Orthodox Churches to silence women and prevent them from assuming administrative pastoral roles in the church hierarchy. There was therefore ambivalence in the stance of Western Christian mission pertaining to women. On the one hand, they claimed to liberate and empower women, while on the other hand, there was a rigid rejection of women from taking up leadership roles in the church, and in some cases even the larger secular Western Society.

The Nigerian experience provides a window to what was happening throughout the African continent wherever the Gospel found its way. Though some African Christian women were able to find legitimacy for their inclusion in leadership positions in the mission churches from the biblical passages which depict women like Deborah, Miriam, Prisca and Lydia playing prominent roles, it would appear the missionaries overlooked these passages as they were bent on silencing women.

What made the Gospel message more appealing on the African soil is that it resonated well with aspects of the traditional patriarchal mentality of African societies, hence, nobody dared to challenge the Western use of biblical texts to silence women and to prevent them from taking up administrative roles in the Church regardless of their historic contributions to church planting, growth and even their large compositions in Church membership. Writing on gender and power in African Christianity, Philomena Mwaura (2005) argues that while women still dominate the pews in mainline churches, African Instituted Churches (AICs), Charismatic movements and Pentecostal churches, they are, however, absent from the power structures of the churches, which are male-dominated. She further noted that a dominant male ideology has ensured that women continue being clients in the churches, just as they were in shrines of traditional society. As a result, some women, writes McEnroy (2011), feel as though they are guests in their own house, continuously being cheated by their clerical male counterparts because they cannot counsel the congregation, say mass, and neither can they perform other priestly duties, except just doing other communal duties as nuns.

As for the Anglican Church, there appears to be no unanimity over this matter. While there has been a move in other Provinces of the Anglican Church to accommodate female clergy, the Province of Central Africa in which the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe falls under, has over the years leaned towards the Catholic position. Though the Province has not taken the hard stance of the Catholic Church that the issue is off-limits for further discussions, it appears most Synods which have ever since debated this issue have almost come to the same conclusion that the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe is not yet ready to accommodate female clergy. On being asked why women were not taking up leadership roles in the Anglican Church, the former Archbishop of Harare, Bishop Chad Nicholas Gandiya responded that the Church had culturally inherited the patriarchal standpoint of the biblical writers whereby anything done by women is barely recognised as compared to what is done by men

(Mapika, 2015). While the provision is there in the *Acts of the Diocese of Harare CPCA 1975*, for example, that in every parish there should be two wardens and two deputies regardless of gender, most churchwardens in Harare, as noted by Mapika (2015) are male and it would appear a majority of women in the Anglican Church are not comfortable being led by their female counterparts, let alone them leading Holy Communion.

The prevailing state of affairs in the Anglican Church brings to light some realities that one needs to empathise with and find ways of redressing them. In the first place, one gets the sense that women to a greater extent are contributors to their own downfall despite their numerous cries that they be freed from the control of men. In shunning their own from leading Holy Communion and performing as churchwardens, they shoot themselves in the foot, instead of assisting some of their own to rise to positions of influence. If women are really to make it in meeting their aspirations as leaders, there has to be a shift on most of what they have been brought up believing. They are only able to rise above themselves when they come to know that certain things that they take to be realities are not. For example, they need to recognise the reality of demystifying the myth that women are weak, that God is male and that God in biblical tradition revealed Godself only to males. It is the association of maleness with God in particular that above all needs to be redressed. They have to wrestle with the reality that God has no gender and on that basis, males and females are equal before God.

Having discussed the low status of women in mainline churches, it is the thrust of the next section to assess the position of their counterparts in AICs given that they fought alongside their male counterparts to liberate themselves when they formed AICs. It would be interesting to find if this quest for liberation really translated into these women being unboundedly free to take up leadership positions in the new churches alongside men.

## WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN ZIMBABWEAN AFRICAN INITIATED CHURCHES

African Initiated Churches (AICs), as the name suggests, are a group of independent Christian Churches whose origins can be traced to the African soil. A simple definition of these Churches as given by Martin West (1974) is that they are autonomous Church groups with an all-African leadership and an all-African membership. AICs are such a broad group and Bengt Sundkler classifies them into two broad groups: the

Zionists and the Ethiopian Churches (Sundkler, 1976: 15). While Sundkler had identified two broad groups within AICs, Tapiwa Mapuranga (2013) adds Apostolic type Churches to the umbrella tag, AICs. Let me hasten, however, to acknowledge that the classification of AICs is not an easy one given the flux state that characterises them. The attempt towards classification has remained a contested terrain among scholars, for example, Biri (2020), Gunda and Vengeyi (2018), Mwaura (2005) and Mapuranga (2013) whose positions on this matter lie beyond the immediate interests of this chapter.

In this discussion, it suffices to say that the term AICs in the context of Zimbabwe, would be used in reference to Churches that include the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), Johane Marange, Johane Masowe WeChishanu, African Apostolic Church, Independent African Church, Guta RaJehova and Neo-Pentecostal churches such as the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Church (ZAOGA), Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM), Family of God (FOG) and the United Family International Church (UFIC). While the beliefs, forms of governance and doctrines of these Churches might differ in some aspects, what makes them all AICs, as argued by Mapuranga (2013), is that they have a common thread running through them in terms of beliefs and practice. This includes also the fact that they were formed out of a desire to be independent in organisation, leadership and religious experiences from the mainline Churches. Be that as it may, the issue of commonalities does not also serve the immediate interests of this chapter. The focus here, as noted earlier on, is how these Churches either accommodate or deny women from leadership positions.

Writing about gendered space in AICs, Mapuranga (2013) argues that the position and status of women in these Churches is ambivalent. While in one regard they can be characterised as marginalised, on the other, they are seen exercising their agency to take up leadership positions. She cautions, however, that researchers who are looking for “formal leadership” on the part of women in AICs are likely to be disappointed, because their leadership is best seen in terms of their capacity to subvert patriarchy (Mapuranga, 2013).

## THE MARGINALISATION OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES

Women’s marginalisation, as pointed out earlier on, is not an import of missionary activity but it has been an entrenched practice in many African societies. Missionary activity can only be seen as having brought

what seemed to be a divine seal to what was already held by indigenous peoples that women cannot be accorded the same status as men. Despite AICs being autonomous Church groups with an all-African leadership and an all-African membership, they have not divorced from the missionary interpretation of the Bible in regard to women. The African Apostolic Church of Paul Mwazha, for example, interprets 1 Timothy 2:11–15 and 1 Corinthians 14:34 literally to discriminate against women. Based on the said texts, women in this Church are not allowed to talk in church or to appear as the leaders of the congregation. While some women in this Church are allowed to say a prophetic word, that role of being a prophetesses does not translate in them being counted in any way in the Church's hierarchy. This finds echo in the words of Mabhunu (2010) who noted:

Despite the inroads that women have had in AICs ... consideration of personal testimonies and observations have indicated that they still have limited roles in leadership positions. Women are recognized as healers, midwives and prophetesses. But all women in AICs, even prophetesses, are excluded from the church hierarchy. The expression of equality in leadership is denied for women ... Prophetesses are also excluded from positions of authority and influence such as occupying positions of secretary general or treasurer. (Mabhunu [2010] cited in Mapuranga, 2013, online)

A common trend in most AICs is that it is generally men in these Churches who acquire theological training and men also have opportunities to attend annual synods and conferences where they get opportunities to get elected into leadership positions. Contributing also towards women finding themselves on the fringes of the Church is the general leaning by many AICs towards the Old Testament given its closeness to African traditional religion. While missionary Christianity had tried to demonize traditional religion, most AIC founders started their Churches as a revolt against the missionary approach, hence, they sought to uphold and revitalise their traditional values and religion. Due to its rootedness in African religion and culture, the Johane Marange Church, for example, makes recourse to purity codes in the book of Leviticus to curtail women from assuming any meaningful leadership positions. Just as in African traditional religion, younger women in AICs are viewed as impure by virtue of them being associated with blood either through giving birth or their monthly menstrual cycle. Though women in these churches have strength in numbers, there is no way they can utilise this to their advantage given

the socially constructed belief that they cannot lead as men, their deprived chance to get theological training, as well as lack of representation in key decision-making meetings/synods.

### ELEVATED WOMEN IN AFRICAN INITIATED CHURCHES

In the foregoing paragraphs, it has been highlighted that women in AICs tend to be more of guests in their own houses, occupying less influential positions in the church. However, there are some exceptional ones who occupy key positions such as being church founders, prophetesses, priestesses, choristers, healers and itinerant preachers. This is mainly evident in some of the Spiritual/Zionist/Apostolic AICs, as well as in Neo-Pentecostal Churches and the revival movements. This finds echo in Chitando (2004: 122–123) who notes:

Women have played a significant role in the rapid spread of AICs in Southern Africa. Apostolic women in their distinctive white garments and Zionist women in colourful outfits have become an integral part of urban life in the region. It is women who constitute the majority of members within AICs, and they have been central in the emergence of transnational networks that have emerged...One of the key attractions is the space that has been granted to women in these new religious movements. They are allowed to express themselves fully, and to occupy key offices as prophetesses.

The issue of space, as noted by Chitando, is very critical in attracting many women to AICs. Herein, space is granted also to single mothers, the divorced and separated women who are rarely given positions of responsibility in mainline Churches. In AICs, such women can be ordained or given other church responsibilities because the determining factor is not about a person's gender but an individual's spiritual gifts, seniority and experience. The understanding in these churches is that spiritual power is charismatic and both men and women are equally channels of God's power. Formal education also is not considered primary, thus a woman may have little formal education, limited economic means and low social status, and yet endowed with charismatic gifts that enable her to take up church leadership.



Through their dedicated ministry of word and deed, women in Spiritual AICs have managed to gain for themselves a highly distinguished reputation. At times, their evangelisation ministry as healers, prophetesses and priestesses extends to cover also Church leadership and management or even local political matters. Daneel (2000), for example, mentions the wife of the late Bishop Mutendi of the ZCC who acted not only as a prominent prophetess-healer but also as a pastoral consultant, giving advice to the ZCC chiefs and elders on local disputes (see also the chapter by Mukora in this volume).

While it is a common phenomenon that churches with a pneumatic emphasis tend to open more space for women's active participation, in Neo-Pentecostal churches, women play even greater leadership roles. In the case of the ZAOGA Church, Bishop Eunor Guti, for example, is second in command to her husband and Church founder, Archbishop Ezekiel Guti. The same applies to Prophetess Ruth Makandiwa, the wife of Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa, the founder of the UFIC. What is behind the elevation of women in these churches is basically the Pentecostal theology that provides avenues for Charismatic gifting regardless of gender. An assessment of the structures of authority in these churches, as pointed out by Mwaura (2005), reveals an egalitarian structure influenced by a democratic spirit and women have been able to experience ministerial freedom not possible even in the Spiritual AICs. Women in these churches, as she further argues, are not just "spiritual mothers," but they have executive administrative positions as well.

### EXECUTIVE OR DERIVATED POWERS?

While indeed some women in both Spiritual and Neo-Pentecostal Churches appear to be masters in their own right, it is not all rosy as it appears. Various hurdles still stand in their way despite their charismatic endowment. Just as the late Pope John Paul II acknowledged that the historic contributions and sacrifices of women in Catholicism go unrecognised, so too with women in AICs, often their efforts go unnoticed. While they sacrifice a lot in the growth of their churches, it is not surprising to see the progress and success being attributed to their male counterparts. Even in the annals of history, it is almost difficult to know that they were part of the planting and expansion of churches, save their husbands or male compatriots in the field. In the case of Neo-Pentecostal Churches, one wonders whether the posts held by such people like Prophetess

Eunor Guti or Prophetess Ruth Makandiwa are positions of real power or they are just ceremonial and symbolic posts. Their leadership positions appear to have been facilitated through the principle of co-dependency whereby they are in those positions only by virtue of their husbands' positions as founders/archbishops. Administrative functions of the Church appear restricted to their husbands and the only domain they appear to have some administrative power is within women's organisations. In the AFMZ, for example, while the wife of a pastor may perform some administrative functions in women's organisations, she remains answerable to her husband who either instructs her on what to say or vets her script before she goes to such gatherings (Interview with a male pastor in the AFMZ, Zvishavane, 12 October 2019). If the husbands of such women were to pass on, it would not be surprising to see them relegated to the dust bins of Church history.<sup>1</sup>

What is quite significant to note is that even in those cases where women have been founders of churches, it appears none has been able to bestow the Church's leadership in the hands of another woman. As rightfully pointed out by Mwaura (2005), this has happened in the Mai Chaza Church, Lumpa Church of Alice Lenshina and Gaudencia Aoko's Legio Maria Church of Africa. None of these women has been able to bequeath leadership to another woman. While some women in Neo-Pentecostal churches appear to be a step ahead given their access to formal education and are already applying a liberating hermeneutic in their readings of scripture, critiquing even Pauline injunctions which appear retrogressive towards the cause of women, they nevertheless experience restriction and have to contend with negative attitudes. They face resistance from male authority and are frequently stigmatised and demonised. This tends to be worse for single women who at times are resisted also by fellow women as potential 'gold diggers,' ever on the lookout for married men for material benefits (Biri, 2019). What Hackett observed with regard to Nigerian Charismatic Churches equally applies to AIC women in Zimbabwe when she said: "[... there still exists] ambivalent attitudes towards women. At

<sup>1</sup> These same issues are also raised by Mpumelelo Moyo in this volume in a chapter entitled "The Emergence of Churches and Ministries founded/led by Women in Zimbabwe."

one level they may enjoy greater participation and leadership opportunities in God's army, at another level, they are frequently stigmatized and demonized (notably those of the unmarried and 'liberated' vanity)" (Hackett cited in Mwaura, 2005: 442).

## INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURES

Since the starting point of orthopraxis in the Church is the Bible for both mainline and some AICs, more needs to be done around the interpretation of Scriptures. As reflected in the foregoing discussion, males in both mainline and AICs often determine interpretations that are regarded as 'valid,' and normative hence, to be upheld by all followers in their churches. They easily do so because they have access to the pulpit where a male-oriented hermeneutic is developed and communicated. Since they deem themselves as having a God-given mandate, they determine how texts about men and women are understood, how gender is performed at home and in the Church. It is the same men who officiate at weddings where they reinforce dominant narratives that call women into subordination (Gabaitse, 2012). While at times women in both mainline and AICs preach also like men, hold Bible studies or even share testimonies, their interpretations of the Bible should not be seen going contrary to that of males; it is males only who should determine interpretations that are acceptable for the community of believers. Acting contrary to this, one would see herself being arrayed before a disciplinary committee, if not being made to cease from being a member of the Church.

Given such a scenario where only males determine the interpretation of scripture, it is worthwhile to encourage a liberating hermeneutic that promotes an egalitarian community of believers. Such an interpretation will, in the long run, afford women an opportunity to enter fully and as equal members into the mainstream of church leadership.

## LIBERATING HERMENEUTICS

Liberation hermeneutics, as noted by Stanely Porter (2007), is an approach that seeks to combine biblical exegesis and liberating praxis into one cohesive approach to create a feminist liberating-seeking theology. As its starting point, proponents of this approach begin with a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' against the patriarchal monopolisation of scripture and the traditional interpretation. After being suspicious of

everything surrounding the text's earlier interpretation, the next step they take is a 'hermeneutic of remembrance' whereby effort is made to recognise women and their contribution to Christian origins. This hermeneutic, as further articulated by Porter (2007), places the text within its historical cultural setting, and through this placement allows the cultural influences and structures of power dominance to be acknowledged. This, in turn, will result in their removal from the text enabling thus the true meaning to be placed within the values of the twenty-first century. The goal of such an endeavour would be "to expose the hidden power scheme within the Bible and the patriarchal cultures and to revise these long-held beliefs to bring equality for women and their viewpoints" (Porter, 2007: 108).

Looking at women in both mainline and AICs, it has been established that they find themselves in a devalued state, not as a result of their own weaknesses, but rather due to the patriarchal monopolisation of scriptures in these churches and the long-held belief that women cannot in any way be compared to men. The text monopolised most in the subordination of women is the creation passage where a woman (Eve) was created second and from Adam's rib (Gen.2:4). This passage has traditionally been interpreted to mean women should be subservient to men since they were an afterthought and created out of man. Some male interpreters regard this traditional interpretation as God's design hence, normative for the community of believers and would not entertain any other interpretation not in line with this view.

It is such traditional interpretations noted above coloured by cultural influences and power dominance that ought to be removed from the community of believers and substituted by an egalitarian interpretation of the texts. In their fight to attain liberation and an egalitarian existence, there is perhaps no better starting point for women in these churches other than revisiting the same foundational creation passage and challenge how it has been traditionally used against women. From a twenty-first-century perspective, it is quite scandalous to believe that a woman is really the product of a man since there's no implication at all in the first creation story that men and women are in any kind of unequal relationship before God.

Employing a canonical, close reading to texts, one is able to see that the opening chapters of Genesis (Gen.1-3) provide the interpretive foundation for the rest of Scripture. This finds echo in Deborah Sawyer who avers, "In the opening chapters of Genesis, the triangular relationship of

God/man/woman is set in place to explain and inform subsequent narrative and legislation as it unfolds” (Sawyer cited in Davidson, 2007: 15). After God created animals and brought them before Adam, God is said to have found no fitting *‘ezer*. The Hebrew word *‘ezer* used here does not connote an assistant, an inferior being, but rather the term refers to a relational term describing a beneficial relationship. The specific position of the woman intended here, as argued by Davidson (2007: 29), should be gleaned from the immediate context. When Adam looked at the animals, he found no fitting companion, the *‘ezer* intended is clearly ‘a real companionship that can only be given by an equal, egalitarian partner.’ When Eve is introduced to Adam, his joyous exclaim, ‘bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh’ does not entail the notion of subordination but of mutuality and equality, a person so close as one’s own body. The man actually becomes aware of his own identity as he discerns the identity of the woman. Humankind, as pictured here, is thus complete only when both male and female are viewed together, both were made in the image of God, hence, none was to have authority over the other. Gilbert Bilezikian (1985) put it succinctly when he said,

Conspicuously absent in Gen. 1-2 is any reference to divine prescriptions for man to exercise authority over woman ... The total absence of such a commission indicates that it was not part of God’s design/intent. Only God was in authority over Adam and Eve. Neither of them had the right to usurp divine prerogatives by assuming authority over each other. Any teaching that inserts an authority structure between Adam and Eve in God’s creative design is to be firmly rejected since it is not founded on the biblical text. (Bilezikian [1985] cited in Davidson, 2007: 35)

A theology of human sexuality that can easily be discerned from Gen.1-2 stems from the equal pairing of male and female, both being created in God’s image (Gen.1:27). Both also are blessed and jointly instructed to procreate and subdue the earth (Gen.1:26, 28). Both, as opined by Rebecca Groothuis (1995: 27), were “commanded equally and without distinction to take dominion, not one over the other, but both together over the rest of God’s creation for the glory of the Creator.” Clearly reflective in these passages, therefore, is lack of ontological superiority/inferiority over the other.

Given, therefore, that the Edenic paradigm (Gen.1-3) provides the interpretive foundation for the rest of Scripture, women in mainline and

AICs in re-reading this creation story and subsequent passages in the Bible should celebrate their liberation from the male interpretive framework that has over the years been imposed on them. Taking a cue from the Edenic paradigm, they should not let any person instil and dictate any inferiority complex in them using the Scriptures.

## CONCLUSION

Applying a life course approach to the lives of women in mainline and AICs in Zimbabwe, the foregoing narrative has been able to demonstrate that the Bible in particular has been used to inhibit women from attaining their aspirations. Read and interpreted from the worldview of men, it is males who determine interpretations that are valid, normative and upheld by their churches and more often these interpretations are construed in such a way that women should be contended with their subdued positions. To promote an egalitarian existence which would see women achieving their aspirations in the churches that they feel they belong to and no longer to be just like guests in their own house, a call has been made for women to put into praxis liberative hermeneutics. The Edenic paradigm has been identified as the best launching platform to meet their endeavours since it is interpretive foundation for the rest of Scripture. It is, therefore, pertinent that the churches in Zimbabwe be the ones that lead society by example through ensuring that all their leadership structures are gender-inclusive. This would strategically position the churches to serve as a beaming light into the country's future, characterised by gender justice and gender equality.

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