

Gender justice, law and religion in Zimbabwe: An evaluation of the role of sacred texts

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Gender equality is something that the human race has been struggling with since time immemorial. No country has achieved gender equality despite the legislative, social, and economic gains for women. Therefore, modern society likes to blame certain groups, such as religion for the gender inequalities which are faced, more than others. The main focus of this study is to evaluate the role of religious leaders in promoting gender equality through the legislation and religious texts in Zimbabwe. The study further explores how certain religious norms and practices can be modified through religious texts to accommodate women in achieving gender equality. The paper acknowledges that religious leaders have a greater responsibility to stand up, speak and act with and on behalf of those with less power, such as the marginalized and discriminated against, including exploited planet Earth. The paper seeks to foreground how certain traditional religious practices and norms have exacerbated gender inequality in Zimbabwe, despite the laws that have been enacted by the government of Zimbabwe to promote gender equality. The data for the paper was gathered through observations and semi-structured interviews conducted with both religious leaders and women to establish how religious norms and practices directly or indirectly affect women and how they can be modified to achieve gender equality in Zimbabwe. The data gathered was analysed through descriptive data analysis. The paper concludes by recommending that religious leaders should be thoroughly trained on how to promote gender equality through religious texts and legislation.

Contribution: The article evaluated the role of religious leaders in promoting gender equality through legislation and religious texts in Zimbabwe. It argued that religious leaders have a higher need to support, advocate and act on behalf of individuals who are marginalised and subjected to discrimination on planet Earth. Hence, its contribution was in promoting gender equality through religious texts and legislation in Zimbabwe for sustainable development.

Keywords: Gender; religion; equality; law; religious leaders; women; Zimbabwe.

Introduction

The status of women in most African societies, including Zimbabwe, has historically been characterised by patriarchal dominance, gender stereotyping, oppression and abuse of women, gender-based violence, race and class issues and the victimisation of women in situations of sociopolitical conflict and religious extremism, to name a few. The self-actualisation of Zimbabwean women is still hampered by these problems today. African women Christians are oppressed and undervalued, even in religious communities, compared with their male counterparts. This is, however, an international problem that has a detrimental impact on the social, political and economic growth of every nation, Zimbabwe included. Thus, gender equality is universally acknowledged as a human right (UNDP 1995:4). In order for both genders to equally contribute to and benefit from societal advancements in the economic, social, cultural and political spheres, gender equality aims to remove obstacles posed by preconceptions and discrimination. According to Christian Aid (2014:4), unequal interactions between men and women in society violate human rights, limit choice and agency and have a detrimental influence on people's ability to participate in, contribute to and profit from development. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2022:1), are both significantly hampered by all forms of gender-based discrimination, which is therefore in violation of human rights. Gender equality, therefore, may be understood in three dimensions:

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- equality in access to and opportunities in economic, political, social and other fields
- equality before and under the law
- equality in dignity (internal worth) between men and women.

Therefore, levelling the playing field is necessary for gender equality, according to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF 2008), so that everyone, regardless of who they are or where they reside, has an equal chance to flourish and realise their potential. It will be impossible to develop just, equal, resilient and prosperous societies without just and equitable interactions between women and men. Therefore, the core argument in this study is that despite the existence of legal instruments aimed at the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, gender inequality continues to exist in Zimbabwe in all spheres of life, including ecclesiastical circles. Gender roles and the status of men and women are closely related to how religious texts have been interpreted over the years by individuals in positions of authority, positions that are overwhelmingly held by men. The theology of subordination in Christianity, according to Landman (2020:2), is based on the male headship of the creation order (Gn 2–3), which is manifested in charismatic leadership combined with paternalistic ideas of God the Father. As a result, patriarchy is regarded as an order that was created and willed by God. Women are portrayed as being so much less valuable than men that they are unable to live independent lives. Therefore, based on this prevalent anomaly, this study seeks to evaluate the role of religious leaders in promoting gender equality in Zimbabwe by changing some religious practices and norms through religious texts and legislative policies. The study acknowledges that religious leaders have a higher need to support, advocate for and act on behalf of individuals who are marginalised and subject to discrimination. As a result, it exhorts religious leaders to utilise their influence to promote justice for those who are marginalised, subject to discrimination and living on an exploited planet.

Background on gender equality in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has always strived to achieve gender equality since its political independence in 1980 (Chabaya, Rembe & Wadesango 2009). From a legal point of view, in its continued commitment to removal of all forms of sex discrimination in the society, the government of Zimbabwe has alluded to several national and international gender declarations and conventions. The *Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act of 2013's* section 56 provides a sound framework for the defence and enhancement of the rights of women, men and children, to start with. It not only affirms the equality of all individuals but also expressly outlaws discrimination based on gender. In accordance with Chapter 2, section 17 of the Constitution, the state must work to advance complete gender equality in Zimbabwean society by making sure that all institutions and departments of the government at all levels

guarantee that women have the same access to resources as their male counterparts. The state must take responsibility in correcting gender disparities and bias that result from past systems, as stated in Chapter 2, section 17. Therefore, all forms of gender discrimination are severely prohibited by the *Zimbabwe Constitution Amendment (No. 20) Act of 2013*. In addition, in 2013, Zimbabwe launched a new National Gender Policy (2013–2017), which eventually replaced the 2004 one.

Ajala (2017:1) claims that:

'[G]ender policy is a socially created component that reflects a society's beliefs regarding what it considers to be the acceptable roles for men and women'.

On the other hand, gender is a social construction that defines and distinguishes roles, rights, responsibilities and obligations of men and women (United Nations Women 2010:5). As a result, the new National Gender Policy (2013–2017) was developed socially to specify the roles that men and women in Zimbabwe should play. While the first National Gender Policy (2004) included a number of initiatives to combat gender inequality, this second policy aims to address both the shortcomings of the first and the emerging problems brought on by shifting political, economic and social contexts at the local, national and international levels. Important changes included the complex new constitutional requirements with a focus on gender equality at the national level.

The National Gender Policy for Zimbabwe from 2013 to 2017 states that the country is devoted to economic justice. The National Gender Policy (2013–2017) of Zimbabwe states that the goal is to have 'a gender-just society in which men and women enjoy parity, contribute and benefit as equal partners in the development of the country'. This is important to note. Its stated goal is to '[e]radicate gender discrimination and inequality in all spheres of life and development'. The significance of control and resource access is emphasised in this most recent National Gender Policy (2013–2017). Despite this forward-thinking legislation and these treaties in favour of gender equality, the largest obstacle has been in putting these formal rights into practice and translating them into real achievements for women; in Zimbabwe, they continue to lag behind in a number of important industries. The patriarchal nature of Zimbabwean society, which manifests itself in religious practices and beliefs, has largely persisted.

Therefore, although there is freedom of religion in Zimbabwe, it is logical for religious leaders to conform to the laws of the country that promote gender equality as well as developing gender policies in their churches, as will be recommended next in this study.

Gender equality analysed from a legal perspective

Zimbabwe is a state party to several regional and international agreements and treaties that support gender

equality on the international level. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) of 1979 is one of these accords. According to Article 3 of CEDAW, states must take action in all spheres, particularly in the political, social, economic and cultural ones, and pass all necessary legislation to guarantee women's full development and advancement in order to ensure that they can exercise and enjoy their human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal footing with men. It is important to remember that CEDAW has been used to modify discriminatory laws and policies all around the world. Furthermore, Zimbabwe is also a signatory to the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Men and women have equal rights to enjoy the rights outlined in the covenant, according to Article 3 of the agreement, and those rights should be acknowledged without any type of discrimination.

At the regional level, the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa's Optional Protocol on the Status of Women in Africa observed that women in Africa did not share men's access to resources, rights or authority over decision-making. In addition to making life tougher for women than it is for men, it was observed that such a status quo makes it impossible for nations to succeed and build strong economies. In addition, the 2008 Southern African Development Committee (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development established specific goals for achieving gender equality by 2015. This instrument was designed specifically for SADC member countries and consists of specific commitments to be achieved by 2015. The principles apply even after 2015. What is important about this protocol is that it combines key provisions from all gender-specific international and continental protocols, including Goal 3 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on achieving gender equality, into one document – 'almost a one stop shop' (Norwegian Church Aid 2015:8). Thus, these international, regional and subregional instruments provide standards or yardsticks against which gender activists, including religious leaders, can call national governments to account as well as gauge their performance towards achieving gender equality (Norwegian Church Aid 2015:2).

Therefore, the idea of gender equality is present in Zimbabwe, not only in the constitution, which is the country's fundamental law, but also in international laws, which state that everyone is equal.

Gender equality in the Old Testament

According to Genesis 1:26–27, men and women were equally positioned in the community of life at the beginning, after being jointly formed in 'the image of God'. They were given the order to rule the world as a unit (Gn 1:28; Sita 2010:401). Humans are created in God's likeness and are therefore called to serve others as his ambassadors and representatives with the capacity to rule. Being created in the image of God guarantees equality that puts men and women on an equal footing, regardless of the task at hand, as well as professional

equality and mutuality open to all (Stephenson 2015:147). Being made in the image of God would also inspire respect and dignity for all people, regardless of gender (Grudem 2010:499; Robinson 2011:1).

Derouet (1980:71) asserts that the burdens of practising the Yahweh religion were shared by both men and women in the OT. Women and men could both participate in worship and offer sacrifices, but according to the practices of the contemporary pagans, as well as in the Second Temple, worship was only for the men of the tribe of Levi (Derouet 1980:71; Reijnen 2010:65). But in the OT, it was unusual for women to hold important positions of authority or even have a voice. Women who played significant prophetic roles included Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Noadiah and many others. Other women, like Esther, were crucial to the salvation of God's people at a pivotal point in their history.

Deborah is a wonderful example of a remarkable woman in the Old Testament. In Israel, the judge was in charge of overseeing the general welfare of the populace in addition to upholding the law. Between Ramah and Bethel in Ephraim, under the 'Palm of Deborah', Deborah carried out her judicial duties (Jdg 4:5). She was sought out by the populace for advice, and she made sure that there was peace among the Israelites. Only Deborah was a prophetess among the 12 judges who took their places in Israel, one after the other.

An effective illustration of genuine equality and complementarity in action is Deborah's narrative. In that scenario, each person fulfilled their role while also treating the others with respect and dignity, regardless of gender or other distinctions. Baraq and Deborah were requested to support the cause of the populace. Baraq respects Deborah's brilliance and spiritual wit despite his military strength, cooperates with her and consents to be under her command. She serves as the group's leader and directs Baraq and his troops to a great triumph for Israel as a woman with extraordinary insight. This excerpt illustrates the importance of complementarity and the potential for success when men and women work together. Therefore, if religious leaders in Zimbabwe were to make use of some of the cited religious passages, this may significantly advance gender equality in the country.

However, on the story of Deborah, Frymer-Kensky (2014:34) postulates that it is uncertain whether this is how she got her political powers and public recognition. He contends that her leadership and role in public life starts before the narrative when her story is captured; hence, her true road to leadership is not recorded, and therefore this important part of her life is somewhat mysterious.

Furthermore, Stanton (1974:81) is of the view that Deborah's story is rarely held up to women as an example to follow. She goes further to point out that women were usually told to emulate the women who were meek and obedient instead, as she puts it:

We never hear sermons pointing women to the heroic virtues of Deborah as worthy of their imitation. Nothing is said in the pulpit to rouse them from the apathy of ages, to inspire them to do and dare great things, to intellectual and spiritual achievements, in real communion with the Great Spirit of the Universe. Oh, no! The lessons doled out to women, from the canon law, the Bible, the prayer-books and the catechisms, are meekness and self-abnegation; ever with covered heads (a badge of servitude) to do some humble service for man; that they are unfit to sit as a delegate in a Methodist conference, to be ordained to preach the Gospel, or to fill the office of elder, of deacon or of trustee, or to enter the Holy of Holies in cathedrals. Deborah was a poetess as well as a prophetess, a judge as well as a general. She composed the famous historical poem of that period on the eventful final battle with Sisera and his hosts; and she ordered the soldiers to sing the triumphant song as they marched through the the [*sic*] land, that all the people might catch the strains and that generations might proclaim the victory. (Stanton (1974:81)

The depiction of gender equality in the gospel and epistles

The words and behaviour of Jesus Christ are used to clarify the concept of equality in the NT, particularly in the gospels. Christ's attitude is strikingly innovative compared with his sociocultural surroundings, particularly the contemporary Jewish laws and practices. This is because neither his social activism nor his teachings made distinctions based on gender, race or class. Jesus Christ valued the women who followed and assisted him, in contrast to 1st-century Judaism and rabbinical teachings that rejected women's humanity (Adeyemo 2008:303). (Lk 8:2–3). Mary of Bethany is praised for being a model disciple because she 'listened intently to the teaching' (Lk 10:39–42). The Apostles and Peter first heard about the resurrection from women (Mk 16:7). Despite the fact that Jesus Christ did not specifically teach about women, his attitude and behaviour towards women and the part they played in his mission were crucial and ground-breaking.

The sermon on Mount Sinai from Matthew's gospel is cited by Derouet (1980:71) as the origin of the law and the new assembly. He contends that Christ's proclamation of the law and the gender-neutral miracles he performed would have established the new assembly (Derouet 1980:69). According to Matthew, all conventional obstacles have been removed and women are now welcome in the new parliament. According to Zumstein (1991:67–68), by showing women who are both apostolic witnesses of the *kerygma* and models of faith similar to the beloved disciple, John's gospel prioritises the status of women in the New Testament. According to L'Eplattenier (1993:93), John also emphasises the importance of women serving as witnesses, particularly Mary Magdalene, who is known as 'the apostle of the apostles'. The Samaritan woman, according to Rekha Chennattu, is the perfect example of a devoted apostle and a mature Christian (Chennattu 2007:385). The Samaritan woman's story in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John brings attention to how the gospels portray equality. The Samaritan woman is a story about a woman

who, despite the challenging circumstances Jewish women at the time faced, demonstrates extraordinary bravery. She was not expected to be involved in public life because women in Jewish society only had a few rights and obligations.

In addition, as the world's saviour, Jesus Christ personally overthrew the oppressive customs that castrated women and established the precedent for gender equality. According to Maertens (1967:132), only men were considered to be full members of the chosen people under the laws of circumcision because they underwent the ritual; women, on the other hand, were considered second-class citizens and they were only accepted through their marriages to their fathers or husbands. This right is available to everyone under the baptismal regime, whether they are circumcised or not or whether they are male or female.

Furthermore, the epistles confirm that women were active participants in early Christian society. Deaconess Phoebe served in the early church's leadership alongside Junia and Priscilla (eds. Madigan & Osiek 2011:5–6; Rm 16:1) (Jay 2014:122; Mathew 2013:96). This indicates that there may have been some gender equality in the early church.

On the basis of points stated here, one may contend that the objective theological status attained in Christ has an impact on the social and functional aspects of non-Jewish members of the body of Christ. They possess the same freedom and carry out the same duties as Jews within the church. This leads to the conclusion that because the woman has been reduced to the same status as non-Jews, she is entitled to the same freedoms as the other two pairs. The irony is that the church still upholds the antiquated tradition of denying women the rights that Christ granted them today, more than 2000 years later. Women should ideally have functional equality in the church as a result of this 'statutory equality'. According to Leenhardt (1978:33), the church should be the place where the peaceful cohabitation of men and women is promoted the most.

Gender equality through religion in Zimbabwe: Responses from women and religious leaders

According to Koenig (2009:284), religion is made up of doctrines, customs and rites that have anything to do with the holy, God, mystic or supernatural. It is essential to the cultural existence of various places. It is firmly anchored in human experiences and affects societies' socio-economic and political trends (Stump 2008). In a similar vein, Peach (2006:62) claims that religion may be a more significant variable in social geographic inquiry than race or ethnicity. The interpretation of religious texts and the cultural and institutional framework of religious groups have an impact on how women are perceived in society. From this perspective, religion is crucial because it addresses the source of human beings and unifies all aspects of human life into a cohesive

whole, according to Schuurman (2011:273–274). Zimbabwe is a multireligious society (Manyonganise & Mhuru 2022:3). Statistics that put Christianity's membership at around 80% give the impression that it has the most adherents, while Mutangi (2008:530) disagrees. Christianity, despite having a majority of adherents, is made up of several formations, each of which may have a different view on how to use the sacred text as a source of law to advance gender equity or how to obey the rules of secular law. In the context of Zimbabwe, whereas secular law forbids gender inequality in many areas of life, some Christian formations, such as some African-initiated 'churches' (AICs), notably their practices and interpretations of sacred texts, actively encourage gender inequality.

Furthermore, religious leaders are also among the most potent forces for societal change because of their roots in patriarchal traditions, according to United Nations Women (2014:2). However, United Nations Women (2014:20) argues that religion has contributed to social divide and disunity. In addition, United Nations Women (2014:20) asserts that a number of gender norms that religious organisations support are gender inequitable. The following questions, therefore, were asked to the participants in this study, and their responses are presented in the next section.

Strategies and programmes on improving relations between men and women in the church and society in Zimbabwe

Participants in this study were questioned about various programs and initiatives aimed at fostering better relationships between men and women in the religion and in society. A female participant who is a vendor had this to say:

'[...]There are no strategies or programs to improve the relations between men and women. Instead, pastors tend to support behaviors and viewpoints that limit the advancement of women's potential. All of the leadership positions in our 'religion are held by men [...].' (Participant 7, female, 36 years)

This response from the female participants made it very evident that religious leaders have not been doing enough to promote the emancipation of women, that is, their complete equality with men in society. There have been quite a number of accusations from women against the silence of the church regarding women's concerns, according to Global Ministries (Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ).

Therefore, women have been left by the church to 'groan in faith'. Other findings indicated that despite religious leaders' regard for women and their important roles in family life, particularly with emphasis as mothers and wives, they still see women as inferior beings who should only be subordinate to men. However, according to World Development (Volume 39:8), religious authorities and believers worldwide have a specific duty to affirm the timeless spiritual principle of

humanity's unity, which joins and bonds together the hearts and unleashes the potential of every soul. In an interdependent world, this principle, according to World Development, establishes justice, equality, peace and order. All interactions, including those between men and women, thus must be guided by this idea. It further says that religious leaders must use sacred texts such as Genesis 1:26–28 to advance gender justice.

Church and gender policies in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, there has been controversy around the absence of gender policy in churches. Religious leaders have come under fire for, among other things, being reluctant to implement gender policies in their churches. In an effort to promote gender equality, the Zimbabwean government has passed a variety of laws and programmes. Therefore, while religious leaders are granted freedom of religion, it is expected that they abide by national laws by implementing measures to change specific religious practices and norms that uphold gender inequality in the religion and in society.

In this study, 10 religious leaders were questioned if they believed that enacting gender policies in their church was important. In response to this inquiry, four of them believed that no gender policies needed to be formed, two said that perhaps gender policies needed to be developed and four said with certainty that gender policies needed to be developed in church as a matter of urgency. One of the four religious leaders said:

'[...]We are a part of a network established by the World Council of Churches (WCC) Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy with assistance from the Padare-Enkundleni Men's Forum on Gender and Christian Aid and we frequently host conferences to talk about national laws pertaining to gender equality and how those laws might aid individuals, families, religions, and communities in preserving peaceful cultures [...].' (Participant, male, 56 years, religious leader of the assemblies of god ministries)

Women's empowerment projects in Zimbabwean churches

When asked whether their church supported women's empowerment programmes, women from the Johane Marange sect responded that their church did not provide any such support, and these were the words of one of the female participants:

'[...]Our church never talks about women empowerment projects but as women we sometimes engage in vending to earn an income that we use for supporting our children [...] for some of us, our husbands cannot afford to pay for the education of the children.' (Participant, female, 40 years, cross-border trader)

However, women participants from the United Family International Church (UFIC) all concurred that the church supported initiatives aimed at empowering women. They

explained that Ruth Makandiwa has emerged as a champion for women's emancipation, both within the UFIC church and throughout the entire country of Zimbabwe. They went on to say that Ruth Makandiwa established an avenue for women to network and utilise abilities that will unleash their creative potential and allow them to support themselves financially and the craft industry. One of the UFIC members had this to say:

'[...]As UFIC women, we have been empowered by the *Femme de Substance Programme* that was pioneered by Prophetess Ruth Makandiwa [...] different business women are able to come together and share business ideas [...] now we are able to support ourselves financially [...].' (Participant 10, female, 35 years, UFIC member)

Furthermore, a female participant who owns a clothing shop in Harare from Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA) indicated to the researcher that in their church, they are encouraged as women to use their talents (*matarendu*) in giving birth to, nurturing and moulding successful businesspeople. She also added that ZAOGA has the African Christian Business Fellowship (ACBF) ministry which helps people to secure advice on starting and planning businesses. She said:

'In our church as women we are taught how to engage in different business projects, idle women are rebuked in our church [...] now I own two houses from selling clothes in town [...] we must use our talents [...].' (Participant 10, female, 35 years, UFIC member)

From her explanation of talents, the researcher was quickly reminded of the biblical work ethic derived from Matthew 25:14–30, where a master gave talents to his servants who in turn acted differently in response to the gesture.

Furthermore, Proverbs 10:4 states that 'lazy hands make a woman poor but diligent hands bring wealth'. This verse also is normally quoted to closely associate women with the working of talents. Therefore, the responses from the Johane Marange female participants, as compared with the responses from the UFIC and ZAOGA female participants, made it evident that certain churches are still trailing behind in their support of women's empowerment initiatives, which further contributes to women's continued financial dependence on men. This indicates that certain churches are failing to support women's emancipation. Hence, the researcher concluded that in order to overcome the injustices and inequalities that Zimbabwean women have endured since the dawn of time, the church must stand alongside them.

Church teachings on gender equality in Zimbabwe

Participants in this study who were both women and religious leaders were asked if gender equality was ever taught in their church. Some of them responded favourably to the situation and some blatantly told the researcher that gender equality is never discussed in their churches,

especially those from the Johanne Marange sect. They had this to say:

'[...]In our church, we are advised to conform to the church teachings of being submissive to our husbands [...].' (Participant, female, 38 years, unemployed)

This response indicated to the researcher that some of the teachings create an atmosphere that increases male dominance and female subordination. This is supported by Madziyire (2013:85) and Sibanda (2011:75), who claim that women in some of the churches in Zimbabwe are rarely given a chance to define their individual identities other than being a daughter, wife and mother. Similarly, Vengeyi (2013:63) is of the view that the Johane Marange apostolic church prevents women from holding leadership positions, as they are deemed incapable of making decisions. She argues that the church misinterprets the creation story (Gn 1–2), citing it as the basis for forbidding women from holding any leadership position in the church. Madziyire (2013:85) found that in the Johane Marange church, women cannot hold positions as secretaries, treasurers, baptists and preachers. They are not supposed to address men in public places; as such, they are not allowed to preach. Women are ascribed a subordinate status, both at church and at home. This makes women feel incompetent to make autonomous decisions in their lives.

Furthermore, regarding the women participants who reported that their church discusses gender issues and the need for change, they claimed that the only issue was that the majority of their church leaders did not publicly denounce gender inequities as sinful or illegal, nor would they even acknowledge that they also participate in the undermining of women. However, a resounding majority of religious leaders stated that they often educate about gender equality because the government of Zimbabwe persuaded them to do so. They even cited Galatians 3:26–28 as one of the verses they use when teaching on gender equality, which says:

'[...]For in Jesus Christ you are all children of God through faith [...] There is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'

Recommendations

After taking into account the research's more general conclusions, the following recommendations are made for this study. Religious leaders in Zimbabwe should apply their strategies and programmes to advance gender equality more thoroughly through legislative policies and religious texts. As a result, one finding of this study was that religious leaders were hesitant to implement gender policies as well as introduce programmes and initiatives focusing on enhancing the relationships between men and women in the church and society. Religious leaders must therefore create gender policies, strategies and programmes that enhance relationships between men and women in the church and society in Zimbabwe, as they are one of the agents utilised to promote gender equality.

In Zimbabwe, the call for the teachings on gender equality by religious leaders in their church is long overdue. By citing religious passages that discuss gender equality and justice in the Bible, the researcher suggests that religious leaders should regularly preach about gender equality in their church. Religious leaders should emphasise in their sermons that both men and women were equally created in the image of God and that together have dominion over the earth as stipulated in Gen 1:26–27. Church leaders must understand that they should be actively involved in restoring women's dignity by addressing the intricate and fundamental principles of masculine control, domination, identification and centredness that still exist in the church and society. In order to safeguard women from all sorts of discrimination and to enable them to fully participate in all aspects of life, they must change the patriarchal roots in society into roots of empathy, care, healing and equality through their teachings.

Another recommendation is that in an effort to advance gender equality, religious leaders could start women's empowerment initiatives in their congregations. It is important to keep in mind that the church has a major role to play in resolving the historical gender disparities. The church must accept that it must enable women to feel themselves as deserving of God's favour, that they are free to act as agents in the kingdom of God and that they have the right to demand respect and access to equal opportunities both inside the church and in the broader society. In the light of this, women's equality will serve as evidence of a democratic society in which they can engage in economic, political, social and cultural activities without experiencing patriarchal oppression or discrimination. Finally, based on the researcher's findings, religious leaders need to receive extensive training on how to advance gender equality through legislation and holy texts. They ought to be recognised as constituents who stand up for those timeless, unifying ideals or spiritual values that support gender equality as lovers of humanity.

Conclusion

The researcher's primary goal in conducting this study was to evaluate the role of religious leaders in promoting gender equality through religious scriptures and legislation in Zimbabwe, since they are amongst the most potent forces for societal change. Hence, the researcher began by outlining the idea of 'gender equality' in order to provide a proper description. After that, the chapter discussed the national and international gender policies that have been implemented and how religious leaders could use them to get rid of certain religious norms and practices that either directly or indirectly prevent women in Zimbabwe from reaching their full potential. Thereafter, the researcher sought to understand the role of patriarchy and religious practices in hindering the gender advancement of women in Zimbabwe. Finally, the researcher went on to discuss the responses from participants on the questions she posed to them.

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L.M. is the sole author of this article.

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Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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