

The liberation of women and girls as the liberation of Mother Earth: A theological discourse

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Received: 17 Nov. 2022

Accepted: 18 Mar. 2023

Published: 05 May 2023

How to cite this article:

Chireshe, E., 2023, 'The liberation of women and girls as the liberation of Mother Earth: A theological discourse', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(3), a8300. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i3.8300>

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This article, grounded in ecofeminism, considers the earth as symbolising women and girls and the liberation of women and girls as the liberation of the earth. When the environment is liberated from abuse, its capacity to sustain human life is enhanced. In the same way, when women and girls are freed from all forms of oppression and exploitation and are allowed to be self-actualising people, their capacity to contribute meaningfully to sustainable development and human welfare is enhanced. Given that women and girls play key culturally prescribed roles such as being carriers of life through childbirth, nurturing, caregiving and serving as pillars of the home, their oppression and exploitation stifle their contribution to societal development, thereby curtailing sustainable development. Similarly, abuse of the earth results in environmental crises such as floods, droughts, famine, heat waves and global warming, resulting in the earth's diminished capacity to sustain life. This study was based on literature review and informal interviews involving participants from three churches (the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe, the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe and the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church). This article examined the extent to which religion can empower women to participate in public activities including environmental management, epitomised by the way women and girls in the selected churches are perceived and treated. It is concluded that religion can be both liberating and binding to women and girls and, by implication, Mother Earth.

Contribution: This article highlights parallels between females and Mother Earth, using the treatment of women and girls in three churches as the springboard of the discussion. It considers how far such treatment can promote their participation in public spheres that include taking care of and managing the environment.

Keywords: Mother Earth; liberation of women; sustainable development; human flourishing; Zimbabwean women; gender inequality; human rights.

Introduction

The personification of the earth as Mother Earth derives from its affinity with the roles of women in society, that is, bringing forth life, nurturing and caregiving (Van Wyk 2022:2; Zein & Setiawan 2017:1). Ancient cosmogonies, in which the power of life and creation was wielded by female goddesses or mother goddesses seen as the wives of male deities, contributed to Earth's metaphorical status as Mother (Van Wyk 2022:2). This article, whose theoretical underpinning is ecofeminism, considers the earth as symbolising women and girls and the liberation of women and girls as the liberation of the earth. When the earth is mismanaged, environmental crises, which disproportionately affect women and girls, take place. As Dube (2021) asserts, 'environmental crises are linked to gender oppression' (p. 245). The metaphor of women and girls (females), as representing the earth, forms the heart of this article. When the earth is liberated from abuse, its capacity to sustain human life is enhanced. The earth sustains humanity in the same way women sustain humanity through their nurturance (Owusu-Ansah & Owusu-Ansah 2021:46) and hence the Shona saying, '*musha mukadzi*', literally translated as 'a home is a woman', which signifies the centrality of the woman as a pillar of the home. This suggests that within the Shona cultural context, a home without a woman is not a home, yet homes without men are not unusual. Considering the value of a woman as espoused in the above saying, one would expect women to be treated as jewels, free from violence and discrimination, especially in the domestic sphere, yet the reality on the ground sometimes speaks otherwise. Just like the woman who is said to be a pillar of the home, the earth is the pillar of human existence and flourishing. The earth provides us with a space to live and resources to thrive on (Mpfu 2021:4),

Note: Special Collection: Religion and Theology and Constructions of Earth and Gender, sub-edited by Sophia Chirongoma (Midlands State University, Zimbabwe) and Linda Naicker (University of South Africa, South Africa).

yet we mistreat it in various ways which compromise its capacity to provide for us.

The purpose of this article is to examine the treatment of women and girls in three selected churches, with a view to show the implications of such treatment on the women and girls' contribution to sustainable development including environmental sustainability. The article puts forward that where women and girls are treated with respect and dignity, and given the opportunity to fully, equally and meaningfully participate in community programmes and decision-making, they are empowered to contribute to environmental sustainability and ultimately sustainable development. The contrary is true. Similarly, where nature is used responsibly and in a sustainable manner, human life is sustained (Mpofu 2021:4). This article seeks to address the following questions: Given the analogous relationship between the earth and women and girls, how far does the treatment of women and girls in religion speak to the role and treatment of nature? How far can such treatment impact women and girls' contribution to environmental conservation and ultimately human flourishing?

This article will be organised into the following sections: Theoretical framework; method; literature review that covers Mother Earth, women's empowerment and sustainable development, and religion and human conduct; the status of women and girls and their treatment in three selected churches (Reformed Church in Zimbabwe [RCZ], Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe [AFMZ] and Johanne Marange Apostolic Church [JMAC]); and a discussion of the role and status of women in the churches under consideration in the context of environmental preservation.

Theoretical framework

The study was inspired by ecofeminism. Because of women's historical social roles as nurturers and carers, ecofeminism sees a connection between them and the land (Anjum 2020:846). Ecofeminism also seeks to draw parallels between the exploitation of the environment and the exploitation of women (Owusu-Ansah & Owusu-Ansah 2021:46; Zein & Setiawan 2017:1). Under exploitation, land and women cease to be productive. Furthermore, ecofeminism views women as more vulnerable to climate change effects induced by poor management of the environment, such as droughts, heat waves and floods, among others (Anjum 2020:846; Owusu-Ansah & Owusu-Ansah 2021:46). Ecofeminists believe that emphasising moral principles like respect, sympathy, care, concern, compassion, gratitude, friendship and responsibility would be a more effective strategy for establishing an ethics of nature (Anjum 2020:846). This strategy takes into account the fact that women are essential stakeholders in the management and protection of natural resources and that everyone must contribute to their preservation and prevention (Owusu-Ansah & Owusu-Ansah 2021:46). Since this study focuses on the analogy between the environment and women and girls in terms of being the bearers of life

and being susceptible to exploitation, it has ecofeminism as its theoretical foundation.

Method

Data analysed in this chapter is based on a literature review, the researcher's observations as she interacted with members of churches selected for consideration, as well as informal interviews¹ with three church leaders, one from each church, and nine congregants, three from each church. The setting of the study was the city of Masvingo, Zimbabwe, and its surroundings. The RCZ, the AFMZ and the JMAC were the churches involved, as already mentioned. They were chosen because they were geographically close to the researcher and represent the three primary Christian traditions prevalent in Masvingo city, Zimbabwe (Missionary, Pentecostal, and Apostolic and/or Zionist). Ethical clearance was obtained from the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies Ethical Clearance Committee. The participants, who were all from Masvingo District, Zimbabwe, were selected on the basis of their religious affiliation, age (all above the age of consent) and availability. Thus, the sampling technique employed was a blend of purposive and convenience sampling. Participants gave their informed consent and were assured of anonymity and confidential treatment of their disclosures.

Literature review

Mother Earth

Earth is conceived of as female and female as earth, based on similarities between women and nature in terms of birthing life (Sarieddine 2018:2). Mother Earth symbolises the environment in which life thrives. Humans and nature are interconnected and depend on each other for mutual sustenance, yet more often than not, people tend to take the earth for granted by abusing it to achieve their economic and political goals (Mpofu 2021:4; Sarieddine 2018:2). Domination of the earth parallels the domination of women as the language of domination is rooted in imperialism and patriarchy (Berman et al. 2021:23). Berman et al. further state that just as Mother Earth and Mother Africa have been exploited by both colonisers and indigenes, women and girls have been physically and sexually exploited and trafficked, thereby being denied their dignity and rights (p. 25).

The world is currently facing an environmental crisis in the form of pollution, global warming and depletion of natural resources, among others, which threaten life on earth (Sarieddine 2018:2). This has come about as a result of the 'rape' of nature. This 'rape', according to Sarieddine (2018:2), has been propelled by an abusive, patriarchal mentality influenced by culture and religion. Climate change has emerged as one of the modern world's defining challenges since the 1990s (Mpofu 2021:6; UN-Women 2014). This has been brought about by destructive tendencies towards nature. As Mpofu (2021:6) argues, '... nature has become violent with humanity because we have been violent with nature'.

1.The interviews were casual and not performed in a formal environment.

The devastating consequences of abusing Mother Earth, such as droughts, floods as well as land degradation, and loss of livelihoods, have challenged humanity to rethink its relationship with nature. As such, the importance of taking care of the earth has become topical (UN-Women 2014:12). A caring attitude towards nature parallels a caring attitude towards women and girls. Conversely, as Sarieedine (2018:2) states, the devaluation of the earth parallels the devaluation of women and girls. Ecofeminists argue that the way women are victimised by violence and oppression is similar to how nature is victimised (Sarieedine 2018:2). On Mother's Day, a poster with the following message was posted on one social media platform, whose participants were mostly female, emphasising the importance of caring for Mother Earth: 'This mother's day let's promise to return love and respect to Mother Earth. Let us help sustain her as she sustains us. Happy mother's day'. The livelihoods of women, especially rural women, depend on nature, and if the earth is threatened by pollution, drought and other hazards, the livelihoods are threatened. For this reason, women are set to benefit from effectively participating in environmental conservation programmes.

Women's empowerment and sustainable development

Gender inequality is prevalent in all cultures, so the issue of women's empowerment² and gender equality is high on the agenda of many (Bayeh 2016:37). According to UN-Women (2014:16) and Odrowaz-Coates (2021:2), gender equality is a necessary condition for sustainable development. Gender equality is when all people of all genders have equal rights and opportunities. Sustainable development is economic, social and environmental development that ensures human well-being and dignity, ecological integrity, gender equality and social justice, now and in the future (Bayeh 2016:38; UN-Women 2014:26). In other words, sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of the present without jeopardising future generations' ability to meet their own needs (UN Brundtland Commission 1987:15). Apart from the socioeconomic dimensions of development, the modern development agenda emphasises environmental sustainability as critical to achieving sustainable development (Achuo, Asongu & Tchamyu 2022:3).

Women's agency and contribution have a tremendous capacity to improve productivity and sustainable use of natural resources (UN-Women 2014:7), hence the need to fully include them. Research has shown that equality for women and girls can play a significant role in all aspects of sustainable development (De Lange 2006; Odrowaz-Coates 2021:2; UN-Women 2014:6). Bayeh (2016:37) throws weight to the argument when he states that sustainable development will not be achieved unless women are empowered and gender equality is achieved. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) place emphasis on the empowerment of women (Achuo et al. 2022:3). Given this,

²Empowerment is a process that fosters power in people. In relation to women, it helps them gain control over their own lives.

efforts to attain a sustainable future need to involve support for women's capabilities and enjoyment of rights.

International norms and standards on the human rights of women and girls, as well as gender equality, provide a solid foundation for advancing action to strengthen women's vital role in achieving sustainable development (UN-Women 2014:20). For example, the Beijing Platform for Action called upon member states to mainstream gender into policies and programmes for sustainable development. The full participation of women is required to achieve sustainable development according to Principle 20 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development of 1992 (UN-Women 2014:20). The Rome Declaration on World Food Security and the World Food Summit Plan for Action, adopted in 1996, urged governments to ensure an enabling political, social and economic environment designed to create the best conditions for the 'eradication of poverty and durable peace based on full and equal participation of women and men, which is most conducive to achieving sustainable food security for all' (UN-Women 2014:20). It can be noted that the voice and active participation of all in decision-making is essential to achieving food security and sustainable development, which have environmental sustainability as one of their prerequisites. Women should, therefore, not be left out of decision-making and active engagement because their lives and well-being are at stake when it comes to development and environmental sustainability.

Zimbabwe has made significant legal and policy strides in promoting gender equality and women's economic empowerment (Tarinda 2019:3). The Constitution of Zimbabwe (Section 80) recognises women's equality, rights and inclusion. Among the founding values and principles of the Constitution (Section 3.1[e, f, g]) is recognition of the equality of all human beings and gender equality. Institutions put in place to enhance gender equality include the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Gender and Community Development; the National Gender Commission; and the National Gender Policy.

Religion and human conduct

While there are diverse religions in the world, this study only focuses on Christianity as one of them.³ Moreover, the focus is not on the whole Christian community, but on a select number of churches in a specific area, as already mentioned. Religion is a source of values that influences people's attitudes and behaviours by instilling specific ways of perceiving, experiencing and responding to reality (Devine & Deneulin 2011:59; Gifford 2001:26). It determines how people approach life in all other spheres (Rukuni 2007). The values espoused by religion may be positive or negative. Religion can empower or disempower. Differences can be used as a basis for discrimination or as a basis for unity in diversity. Religion has the potential to transform societies by inculcating

³The definition of religion is elusive. Scholars of religion do not agree on any one because religion assumes a variety of forms and can be defined from a variety of perspectives. In the context of this study, religion refers to belief in God and specifically refers to Christianity, hence the inclusion of Christian churches.

attitudes of mutual respect and love (see Bieri & Sancar 2009:28). A love ethics motivates social justice. Since religion influences almost all aspects of human life including the relationship with nature, the study of women in different churches in relation to the Mother Earth discourse was found relevant.

The position and role of women in religion determine the extent to which they can actively participate in their communities and hence contribute to environmental preservation and sustainable development. Their participation, according to literature (e.g. Bayeh 2016:37; Odrowaz-Coates 2021:2), can contribute to environmental preservation, thus effectively reducing environmental disasters that usually disproportionately affect more women and girls than men and boys. Thus, when a religious organisation (church in this context) undermines women's participation and contribution to decision-making pertaining to programmes and projects of their communities, including environmental matters, it is in a way contributing to the degradation of Mother Earth, hence this article's assertion that abuse of women and girls is abuse to the environment.

The forthcoming sections present findings from the empirical study pertaining to women and girls' treatment in three different churches and what implications that treatment has on Mother Earth.

Findings from the empirical study

Women and girls in religion (Christianity)

Women and girls in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe

Participation in religious activities and services: The study revealed that the church bases its gender theology on the notion, based on Genesis 1:26–27, that men and women both possess the image of God and are therefore equal before God. Men and women are given similar rights in the religious sphere. All religious leadership posts are open to men and women. This seems to pacify Mercy Amba Oduyoye who in 1995 called upon the church to shed its image as a male organisation with a female clientele (Oduyoye 1995:488). Since 2002, women can take on any leadership position in the church although patriarchal attitudes sometimes militate against the equal representation of men and women in church leadership structures (Hendriks & Rutoro 2008:51). Notwithstanding the current dominance of men in leadership, the church has taken steps towards the achievement of gender equality, thereby addressing the demands of SDG 5.

Given that the inclusion of women in top church leadership and decision-making positions such as ministers of religion, deacons and overseers is a recent phenomenon, the chances for attaining a near-ideal scenario in terms of gender equality by 2030 are high. The recognition of women's leadership could be an indication that the voice of women is heard and that the concerns of women are also considered agenda items in the church. The inclusion of women has the potential to inculcate, in members of the church, a mentality that men

and women are equal as they can both equally represent God in ecclesiastical settings. Furthermore, it raises the self-esteem of women. The institutionalisation of female leadership also suggests that the church has a gender-responsive philosophy that is likely to engender the respect of women within the church. Power with, rather than power over, is encouraged as this creates an environment of open dialogue which is a necessary condition for the full participation of all in sustainable development and environmental sustainability issues (see Bayeh 2016:38).

Marriage: In marriage, women are free to choose their life partners, but they receive guidance from the church on how to choose suitable life partners. The church takes it upon itself the responsibility to guide youth and does so through youth programmes. There are guilds for boys and girls, where they are given life 'tit bits' including issues of courtship and marriage. The guidance is often provided during youth workshops and conferences where senior church members teach them about love, courtship and marriage to assist the youth to make wise choices regarding life partners. Marriages are not prearranged by elders or parents but they can facilitate love relationships (match making) although this is rare.

While love is emphasised in marriage, women are taught to submit to their husbands who are the family heads, reminiscent of Ephesians 5:22–31 and Colossians 3:18–19. The husband has the final say on decisions, but he has to consult his wife and exercise fairness. The husband is taught to be considerate and not selfish. While the equality of the sexes is affirmed in the religious and spiritual spheres, women are treated as subordinates to their husbands, who, as heads of families, have the final say on family matters and are family spokespersons with the outside world. The implication is that the notion of gender equality is given lip service because it is permitted in one sphere and negated in the other. This draws attention to the enduring nature of patriarchy. Given that the husband has the final decision, his influence over his wife's actions extends outside the home; as a result, equality is bestowed upon women on the one hand while being revoked on the other hand.

In sum, the church teaches gender equality in the public sphere but does not affirm the same in the private sphere of the family. This has the potential to sow seeds of discrimination and violence against women. Notwithstanding this unequal matrimonial relationship, husband and wife are urged to live in harmony. Domestic violence is publicly condemned. The teaching on love for the wife, as Christ loved the church (Eph 5:25), is emphasised. However, the teaching on wifely submissiveness is not immune to abuse as some men may, according to Sarriddine (2018:3), use their religiously assigned powers⁴ to control their wives' conduct. This also curtails women's participation in environment management issues.

⁴Very often men and women alike affirm female subordination on the basis of biblical texts such as Colossians 3:18, Ephesians 5:22–24, Titus 2:5. The effect of such teachings is usually oppression of women.

Equality of boys and girls: The official church teaching is that girls are as important as boys and that both should receive equitable treatment in both the church and the home. Both sexes are taught to grow up as God-fearing children who also respect themselves and other people regardless of gender, age and other statuses. Early, forced and arranged marriages are against the social teachings of the church. The church encourages children to be children first before they can be parents. As such, the church recognises marriage for those above 18, the legal age of majority. Boys and girls, as church youth, are encouraged to actively take part in church activities, including preaching. They feature on the church's duty roster of leading services.

Domestic responsibilities: Since men are taught that women and girls are to be treated with dignity just as men, those who tenaciously follow the church's teachings shun violence against women, both within and without marriage. When women are free from violence and are allowed to realise their full potential, they can serve as 'solution multipliers' and thus contribute immensely to sustainable development (see UN-Women 2014:7), hence achievement of UN Sustainable Development Goals, especially 1, 3, 5, 11 and 13. Although men are taught to respect women and to facilitate women's realisation of their potential; unfortunately, cultural factors continue to wear women down and in some way prevent them from fully participating in economic and social activities in their communities, including environmental management. This resonates with Bieri and Sancar's (2009:28) statement that while women's participation in income-generating projects is increasing, they are still burdened by other time and energy-consuming responsibilities imposed by traditional gender roles. Related to this is Bennett and Daly's (2014:8) view that caring responsibilities in the family result in 'time poverty' on the part of women. This means women will be so tied up with domestic chores that they will not have time to participate in activities outside the home. This also has bearing on their participation in environmental awareness and conservation programmes. More involvement of men in domestic activities would go a long way in lightening the burden for women, thereby enabling them to participate fully in community programmes.

While the official church teaching is against gender-based violence or any other form of violence, some people will always violate church teachings, especially when these clash with cultural norms. It is, therefore, not surprising that some men violate church teachings on gender equality, assuming a superiority complex over women, as research has revealed (e.g. Chireshe 2012; Phiri 2001). Females who fall 'victim' to such men, as children and wives, have limited chances of making significant social and economic contributions to their societies, including the management of Mother Earth.

Women and girls in the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe

Participation in religious activities and services: The AFMZ equally values males and females and encourages them to work together in advancing the church's goals. Boys and

girls, men and women, are given opportunities to participate in church activities, including leading Sunday services. Even in the non-religious spheres, they are allowed to participate as long as this participation does not compromise their faith. The church is open to the religious leadership of both men and women up to the level of pastor. The headship of the church is assumed by a male bishop. As in the RCZ, females who feel called upon to ministry are encouraged to take up the vocation as pastors. A married woman can be a pastor while her husband is not, and this is acceptable in the church, as in the Protestant church. However, in the domestic sphere, the woman who leads her husband as a pastor is supposed to assume a subservient role, that is, to be prepared to listen to and obey her husband without question. She is subordinate to him. Thus, as in the RCZ discussed, gender equality is promoted in the public sphere but not the private sphere, and this may have negative connotations for women.

Marriage: In terms of marriage, in the AFMZ, the scenario is somewhat similar to that obtained in the RCZ; although when it comes to courtship, the pastor plays an important role. Notwithstanding the involvement of the pastor or his wife or both, youth have the freedom to choose life partners. They are not forced into marriage. Child marriages, as in the RCZ, are forbidden. Furthermore, as in the RCZ, the husband is the head of the family and makes final decisions about the family although he is expected to consult his wife, who is supposed to be submissive to him. Wifely submission is supported by both culture and religion. However, the Church places emphasis on mutual love, respect, trust and care. While the teaching on the headship and submission model as the ideal in marriage could engender gender-based violence, this is moderated by the teaching on love and marital harmony, found in texts such as Colossians 3:19 and Ephesians 5:25–31.

Domestic responsibilities: In terms of domestic workload, in the Pentecostal church, the scenario is similar to that obtained in the RCZ. Women often suffer from 'time poverty' that may militate against their full contribution to development issues. The church teaches that the domestic sphere is the domain of women who should take care of it and ensure that everything in the home is in order. During women's fellowship gatherings, the AFMZ women, like those in the RCZ, share skills on how to be good house managers who please their husbands. This implies that women have to adhere to patriarchal norms whereby they fulfill domestic roles with the goal of pleasing their husbands, an affirmation of gender inequality. If they are professionals, they have to double up as domestic managers. This leaves them with little or no time to participate in public activities and decision-making processes, including management of the environment. Men are socialised in both church and society that roles such as caregiving and domestic chores are meant for women. As such, very few men are prepared to help their wives with domestic chores. However, for boys and girls, there is gender parity in carrying out domestic chores as most parents in the church tend to encourage their

boy children to work alongside their sisters in carrying out domestic duties such as cleaning, cooking and washing, among others.

Women and girls in the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church

Participation in religious activities and services: The JMAC regards females as second-class citizens. The church discriminates against women and emphasises the superiority of men. In so doing, the church dehumanises women and girls who are neither allowed to preach in a mixed congregation (with men and women) nor to take on religious leadership. The church justifies this status of women based on texts such as 1 Timothy 2:11–15, Colossians 3:18–19, I Corinthians 14:34, and Ephesians 5:22–23. As Sarieedine (2018:3) states, ‘... religion has taught men that women are inferior to them and women are bred to obey their husbands, leading to the abuse of women’. Such abuse of women can be likened to the abuse of the environment by humans, given its grounding in ‘rule over’ (dominance).

Marriage: Polygamy is the norm in the church. A respectable man in the church has more than one wife. Marriage is often arranged by the fathers or guardians of the bride. Girls have very limited to no opportunity to choose their spouses as marriage is often arranged without their consultation. Girl-child marriages are a norm. While the right to health, education and choice of a spouse is denied to both sexes, the female sex is more disproportionately affected as it is more at risk of sexual and reproductive hazards. This denial of rights is a form of violence that interferes with the normal development of children. Because girls are not allowed to realise their full potential owing to the denial of the right to education and health, as well as early marriages, they cannot contribute meaningfully to sustainable development, let alone, environmental conservation. This suppression also contributes to the feminisation of poverty as the child brides are usually expected to engage in frequent childbearing, without applying family planning methods, and they have to fend for themselves and their children as in most cases married men in the church depend on their wives for sustenance rather than serving as breadwinners for their families. In a polygamous marriage, each woman has to ensure that she works hard to support herself, her husband and her children, who are often short-spaced; the short spacing itself limits the woman’s capacity to work outside the home.

Discussion

The earth and humanity are interrelated. When the earth is in a sound state, human beings flourish. The degradation of the earth gives rise to devastating environmental consequences that disproportionately affect women and girls because of social hierarchies and biases (Berman et al. 2021:25). Similarly, violence against women has devastating consequences upon society as women are the careers of life and moral education. There is, therefore, a need to take care of both Mother Earth and women so that humanity thrives both socially and economically. As such, men and women

need to work together, respecting one another and valuing the contributions of each person so that all contribute meaningfully and effectively to the welfare of society and the environment. When women’s contribution is suppressed, ignored or trivialised, there can be no sound development and flourishing of humanity (UN-Women 2014). Human flourishing takes place in an environment that is free from discrimination, exploitation, violence and any other social ills (Hlatywayo 2012:124).

Gender equality and respect for the rights of all are the foundations of sustainable development (UN-Women 2014:14). When women and girls are embraced and are free to make choices and exercise their God-given talents, dream and aspire, they are more likely to contribute significantly to the welfare of society, by diligently taking care of the environment and engaging in economic and social development-oriented projects and programmes. As UN-Women (2014:13) states, women’s participation can only be effective and meaningful if underlying gender power relations are transformed and women’s specific knowledge and capacities are recognised and supported. This suggests that the teachings of the church that recognise the full humanity of both men and woman permit them to fully participate in both private and public spaces. The contrary is true. In this connection, Hlatywayo (2012) poses a question that suggests that there is no human flourishing without the full and equal participation of men and women in the development process. He asks, ‘Can the African continent and the church multiply, develop, and be fruitful without the equal participation of both men and women?’ (p. 124).

In the RCZ and the AFMZ churches where women enjoy some equality with men, they are likely to contribute effectively to societal development. In the Zimbabwean context, such an environment is conducive to the attainment of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2015–2030), as well as the realisation of the National Development Strategy 1⁵ (NDS1) and Vision 2030. The SDGs likely to be achieved have a bearing on the Earth’s capacity to sustain life which is a function of men and women working together to preserve it (see Achuo et al. 2022:3). When the earth is taken care of, environmental hazards are minimised, and this has the effect of protecting humanity, especially women and girls, because their vulnerability increases during times of disasters (Owusu-Ansah & Owusu-Ansah 2021:46). As Dube (2021) argues, environmental crises are linked to gender oppression (p. 245). In this regard, protecting Mother Earth is tantamount to protecting the welfare of women and girls and ultimately communities. Disregarding the earth is linked with the abuse of women and girls. As Berman et al. (2021:125) assert, ‘Abuse of the earth exacerbates the abuse of women and girls’, especially those in rural areas who have the burden of securing water and fuelwood for their families (UN-Women 2014:8) and are the cultivators of the bigger portion of the land.

5.The theme of NDS1 is: Towards a prosperous and empowered upper middle income society by 2030.

Since women's empowerment contributes to environmental preservation in Africa (Achuo et al. 2022:3), the creation of an enabling environment for women to fully and effectively participate in development programmes cannot be overemphasised. Thus, when women are empowered to participate in public activities including environment awareness and conservation programmes, they can contribute to environmental preservation. Practices of the JMAC militate against women's full contribution to environmental sustainability. Patriarchy in the church has resulted in a scenario similar to that described by Hlatywayo (2012:121) as one in which women have been subordinated, oppressed and prevented from making full and equal contributions to their communities. The lack of life choices among girls in the JMAC confines them to the occupation of housewife, thereby hampering the realisation of their rights and full participation in both private and public spheres. By making children to become parents before their time, the church limits their participation in community development, including projects to do with environmental awareness and conservation. This limited environmental awareness may make them contribute to environmental degradation that results in environmental challenges such as water and land pollution (Egaga & Akinwumi 2015:184). As a result, their livelihoods and those of their communities will be negatively affected, thereby engendering vulnerability to poverty and poor health.

There is a need for a paradigm shift, in the JMAC, from the concept of women as inferior beings to an understanding of the equality of the sexes. This paradigm shift can lay a foundation for a safer, healthier, more peaceful and more productive society (see Uzodike & Isike 2012:52). Cognisant that males are the main beneficiaries of patriarchal systems that often drive them to deny women and girls the right to fully participate in public spheres including holding public offices, Hlatywayo (2012:123) tasks male religious leaders to take steps towards the transformation of notions of gender, contributing towards the promotion of positive masculinities, that is, positive ways of being men. Positive masculinities challenge the oppression of women, gender-based violence and discrimination, thereby laying a conducive environment for the celebration of the role of women and girls in sustainability issues.

The study reveals that the church's attitude towards women is influenced by its interpretation of the Bible, its surrounding culture and its history. The diverse interpretations owe to the fact that the Bible itself is ambivalent when it comes to women; it is both oppressor and liberator, so a church can take a liberal or conservative stance depending on the biblical verses it decides to emphasise. As already highlighted, abuse of Mother Earth has partly to do with the limited participation of all people in conservation programmes, especially women who are important stakeholders alongside men. A domineering attitude that informs abuse of women is likely to disregard the environment, hence the need for gender equality.

Conclusion

It can be noted that churches with a more egalitarian attitude towards women and girls open up opportunities for them, resulting in them making significant contributions to society and hence contributing to the preservation of Mother Earth. When Mother Earth is liberated from degradation, women and girls are liberated from vulnerabilities associated with environmental disasters. Given that women and the earth birth life, by choking women, society is choking its welfare in the same way in which environmental degradation threatens the earth's capacity to birth vegetation and all living creatures (Dube 2021:90) and, ultimately, to feed its people.

As the abuse of women and girls leads to their disempowerment and inability to contribute to environmental sustainability, a violence-free environment would go a long way in empowering them to not only take care of the environment but also contribute towards sustainable development, socially, economically, spiritually and morally. Against this backdrop, churches, especially those that treat women as second-class citizens, need to be encouraged to empower women and girls to fully participate in their communities in both public and private spheres.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the participants who volunteered information for this study.

Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

Author's contributions

E.C., is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Great Zimbabwe University's Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies Ethics Committee (No. PRSREC 0015).

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Author conducted field research largely based on authors own observations and informal interviews with congregants.

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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