

# A case study of the Methodist Church in the light of Luke 18:1–8 to address the plight of women

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As much as Zimbabwe is considered one of the highly literate countries in the Global South, with well documented succession and inheritance laws, womenfolk continue to be stripped of their assets after the death of their husbands. This trend became even worse during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic when movement was restricted, making it difficult to access the courts of law. Using a mixed methodological approach of a desk research and qualitative interviews conducted in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, Zororo Comfort circuit in Harare, it has been noted that women and girls face numerous horrific experiences, pushing them to wallow in the margins of society. This study therefore calls for the church to address the vulnerability of women and girls using a deviant theory. To date, there are increasing figures of domestic violence, sexual assault, and child marriages. Financial and communal disturbances corresponding through continuous pandemic challenges for women are aggravated, and those who survive find it challenging to hunt for fairness because of stockpiled court issues and freedom for the perpetrators. The fact that women are dispossessed of their belongings because of the cultural status of being a woman calls for a cultural cue. Using a deviant theory in the narrative of a tenacious widow in the gospel of Luke 18:1–8 from a sociological dimension, this study provides a critical edge into interpreting the action of this widow who deviated from expected societal customs. The study concludes by calling faith communities to re-read the widow's story through deviant theory spectacles to raise questions on how this widow courageously represented herself from societal margin to undermine the centre (patriarchal standards) and to utilise the text as a resource for addressing the plight of women to be repositioned and be empowered in Zimbabwe.

**Contribution:** This study contributes to the ongoing academic studies on women, pandemics, religion and gender, using the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, Zororo Comfort circuit as a case study. It concludes by an invitation to faith communities to re-read the widow's story using a deviant theory in order to use the text as a resource to alleviate the plight of women and empower them to the position of equilibrium with men.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; deviant theory; faith communities; opportunities; periphery; vulnerability; women.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc in various spectrums of life in Zimbabwe. The lockdown restrictions have made widows and girls to suffer more particularly when pursuing legal recourse as a result of economic and social injustices precipitated during the pandemic. Social media coupled with electronic and print media were awash with news of some prominent and ordinary widows, as well as girls, whose lives automatically became worse during and after the lockdown when some women lost their spouses, and their properties were taken away. Girls, on the other hand, were subjected to rape and child marriages. Unfortunately, they could not access the court of laws for legal processes because of the prolonged lockdown. Some of the stories were not even made known. The laws underpinning inheritance<sup>1</sup> that are there to protect the surviving spouses, especially widows could not do so. Even though wills are written as a stopgap measure, these legal documents are often disregarded by those who seek to hide behind the veil of patriarchy. This is also compounded by the fact that there is a general belief that it is against the African culture to talk about death; let alone writing a will to distribute your estate while you are still living. For

1. Under customary law, the surviving spouse receives the immovable property in which there were living in and one-third of the net estate. In instances where the deceased had more than one wife, one third of the net estate is shared between the two wives with the two-thirds being shared equally among the children (Tavirai 2020 see also Villarreal 2020). These and other articles give Zimbabwe's legal framework and cultural norms which this paper cannot go into details because of space; but for the reader to get a detailed understanding such articles will help.

**Note:** Special Collection: African Women, Pandemics and Religion, sub-edited by Sophia Chirongoma (Midlands State University, Zimbabwe) and Linda Naicker (University of South Africa, South Africa).

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Oduyoye (2001:85), culture becomes the access passage for relatives of the deceased husbands to disenfranchise dowagers of their hard-earned possessions or assets. This article foregrounds how the prolonged COVID-19 lockdown phases made it difficult or impossible to access the courts of law, hence, numerous cases of widows and young girls being disinherited did not receive legal recourse. It also reflects on how the return of some male relatives from where they were working in the diaspora, after they were not able to continue working because of the lockdown, intensified competition on access to land and other natural resources, precipitated women and girls' vulnerability to being disinherited.

Furthermore, the study proposes a deviancy theory as a perspective to motivate Zimbabwean women to fight cultural barriers that always cultivate a fertile ground for husbands' relatives to take away whatever they desire from their deceased relative's estate. It is from the sociological rereading and interpretation of the gospel of Luke 18:1–8 relating to the persistent relict as a divergent that mirrors what Zimbabwean women should do to safeguard their property rights and to pursue legal recourse even if the society deters them. This theory provides tools that help women and girls to take an active role in fighting for land and property particularly against cultural impediments that prevent women from accessing justice through the courts of law.

## Methodology and theoretical lenses used to view the African women and girls' vulnerability

This study employed a mixed methodology approach of reviewing existing literature and conducting some interviews. Interviews were conducted using a purposive sampling method from the 15 widows who were able to articulate the subject matter and provide relevant information. African women and girls' voice in terms of their vulnerability is worth listening to in order to hear from the horse's mouth. It is from this perspective that a feminist perspective is an ideal lens to guide this study since the focus is centred on the widows and girls in Zimbabwe. Reid (2013) believes that interpreting Luke 8:1–18 with a thrust on the widow removes hermeneutics of suspicion that are tinted with patriarchal propensities that intentionally put their focus on the Judge who is a male figure head instead of the widow. He further proffered that if the thrust is on the Judge, then the story would end up giving us the impression that one should first and foremost weary God before he responds. But, if the attention is paid to the widow, then the power of God is seen as a liberative act to those that are powerless and weak, those that are at the periphery who are brought to the centre. While using this feminist view is helpful, several questions would be left unanswered in the text. Some of the questions include:

- In what way can we justify the intentional desecration of the customs by the widow?
- Does this action then mean that women's liberation is all about deliberate contravention of social values or set

standards of the community for one to get what she wanted?

- One wonders why the widow voluntarily violated the customs and traditions of the society?

These and other questions are not satisfactorily answered when we interrogate the text using the feminist approach alone hence, a deviant theory becomes ideal and complementary to try and answer some of these questions.

## Option for a deviant theory

The deviant theory was propounded by Robert Merton in 1938 when he wrote on strain theory of deviance that exerts pressure on individuals to accomplish socially accepted goals despite the lack of means to do so. From the text in Luke 18:1–8, there is a projection of a widow who is different from the ordinary woman in society<sup>2</sup> who is supposed to be silent, passive, well-mannered and submissive to the male-controlled society. In this article the focus is on the contrary action that she displayed, that necessitates this study to employ a deviant theory, approached from an honour and/or shame context that will try to answer the character and actions displayed by the widow. The justification for using the deviant theory is that the widow is protesting for courtesy and this attention seeking could be used as a strategy by some Zimbabwean women and girls who face the same predicament.

For one to be regarded as having a deviant character, one would have deviated from set regulations and societal rules given by the society. For Thio (1988):

Deviancy is an action or behaviour that violates social norms, while social norms are rules and expectations which guide members of a society thus deviancy is the absence of conformity to these norms. (p. 31)

This is buttressed by Little (1992:48) who proffers that a deviant is a person who normally performs beyond his or her earmarked or defined societal function to the level that one is characterised in the negative perception. For Malina and Neyrey (1988), deviancy is stated as:

A socially shared interpretation of persons and their behaviour whose violations will not only put them out of place but result in them being defined as socially unfit persons. (p. 33)

Furthermore:

Violations of these social norms threaten the social order, good examples are the interracial marriages that threaten racial purity, illegitimate child bearing threatens the institution of marriage itself, while drug addiction represents the triumph of hedonism. (Adler & Adler 2003:17)

Under normal circumstances, those people who violate more of these norms are regarded as wicked and potentially dangerous to the society where they are given a tag of being deviant. A number of sociological scholars, such as Palmer and Humphrey (1990:13), Gove (1980:10), Orcutt (1983:10), Merton (1938:672–682, 1968) and others wrote extensively

<sup>2</sup>Using the standards of a patriarchal society which some women firmly subscribe to.

about the causes of deviant behaviour. This study will view the behaviour of the widow as being influenced by the failure of lower classes to reach their projected dreams as espoused by Merton (1968) through his anomie theory. For Merton:

If humanity is confronted with a gap amid their dreams and means to accomplish them, be it funds and social standing, consequently stress befalls. The conditions prevailing may limit people to achieve their goals and this creates a gap amongst the projected social goals and the disappointment of genuine cultural means. The gap created will brew a recipe for deviant attitudes and actions. (Merton 1938:673, 1968:187; Thio 1988:36)

It is from this perspective of deviance that this study will explore and examine the persistent dowager in the gospel of Luke 18:1–8 to bring to light the activities and actions of this widow.

## Social and cultural context of women in the Mediterranean society

Using a social scientific criticism exegetical tool, this study explores the social and cultural context of Luke 18:1–18. An investigation into the religion, geography, economic, historic, society rules and social ethics that operated during early Christian times from a shame and/or honour dimension is worth exploring as given by Elliot (1993). From the Mediterranean biosphere, three human personalities control humanity; these are guilt, shame and honour as illustrated by Malina (1981:12). These three traits are dominant in controlling human behaviour which means they control human actions. Among the three, honour and/or shame play critical roles in the public sphere to influence the standing of people. For Malina (1981:14), the Mediterranean society is characterised by competition among citizens where, each individual is prepared to defend self or family honour. This insinuates that the society had specific rules and regulations to follow. Furthermore, a competition challenge signifies recognition of the honour of other persons. As a result, a challenge to an inferior person without honour brings shame or humiliation (1981:21). The implication will be that the champion of the competition may have safeguarded his or her honour. On the other hand, the one who lost could have been engrossed with shame and one's status in the society will be under scrutiny. As such, people in the community spent much of their lives working to retain honour and avoid shameful acts at all costs.

Under normal circumstances, men compete among themselves in order to preserve their masculinity. The other way men could gain honour and favour was the way they protect women who are vulnerable. Men are not expected to seek revenge against women if ever challenged. This is mainly because women are categorised as weaker vessels and/or species that need protection from men (Malina 1981:25). The honour and/or shame culture is prevalent in African cultures where it is interwoven with patriarchal tendencies. This model fits well and brings insights to how

the story motivates the Zimbabwean widows and girls to become fighters and advocates towards their rights and assets. It also overshadows domineering social barricades and public obsession in diverse African beliefs.

According to Malina (1993):

The boundary lines that make a person's honour included both the individual and the corporate honour that involve family, community and national honour like judges, Kings, Priests and others. The Bible refers to socially defenceless persons, orphans, widows and aliens as people who cannot defend their honour, hence, Kings and judges were expected to defend them. The ability of Kings and Judges to defend them added honour in their own score sheets. (p. 38)

For Jeremias (1972:358), in the public space, Jewish women were restricted by rules such that whenever they leave their houses, they cover their faces by two veils so that their features are not easily identified. Reid 2013 avers that for women who go out in the public space without covering their heads, they have committed a punishable offence which could result in her being divorced by her husband. Furthermore, any woman who dialogues with a stranger specifically men would likely be sent back home without paying lobola or bride price. In other words, women in Jewish culture were forbidden to go out at all, rather they will be confined within household surroundings. When there is a masculine visitor, she remains in the confines of her room (Jeremias 1972:365). In view of the aberrant widow, it could be unthinkable for a woman to obstinately request from the Judge for a judgement defrayal against her. Stiebert (2002:75) suggests that, females were forbidden from acting in any manner that could implicate her and cause her to be regarded as shameful. A woman was not allowed to kiss her fiancé publicly; she was also forbidden from walking or talking to men in the public space on her own or to argue and laugh in public spheres.

The billion-dollar question that continues to linger in one's mind could be: if women were not allowed to behave or act in such manners, how then did the widow in Luke 18:1–18 reveal such behaviour? Furthermore, despite the expected actions considered in Palestine as normative actions, what could be the reason that pushed the widow to go publicly and confront the Judge who is a male figure on her own? Was she not inviting a shameful tag through her actions? In the same vein, why did the Judge resolvedly give in to the widow's demands? These and other questions inform this study in order to explore the widow's deviancy as a starting point for liberation and emancipation of women suffering oppression in the Zimbabwean society. It is interesting to note that one of the feminist African scholars viewed all these rules and regulations in society as a concoction by men when she said:

Most African societies are patriarchal; consequently, societal norms and sex role functions are prescribed by the dominant male sex. Since social cohesiveness is maintained by strict adherence to social roles, appropriate performance brings disapproval. The adjudication exercise is solely confined to men. (Oduyoye 2001:88)

From the above, one can deduce that women are seeking ways to liberate themselves from the standards and norms set by a patriarchal society.

## The situation of some widows or the girl child during and after COVID-19 in Zimbabwe

Widowhood is not peculiar in Zimbabwe. The 2012 census recorded that about 14% of women in Zimbabwe are widows (Musiyazviriyi 2017). Basing on an interview conducted, Mamoyo chronicled thus:

'When I became a widow in 2012, I lost, not only my husband. Soon after the death of my husband, my in-laws demanded to take the fields I had tilled for decades. They also harvested the fruits from trees in my orchard and sold the harvest, leaving me stranded without any means of support. The in-laws further hassled, intimidated, calling me all sorts of insults and physically abused me as a way to chase me away.' (Interview with P.M. on 23 February 2023 at Zororo Methodist Church in Harare)

The above situation signifies or represents one among many stories of widows in Zimbabwe who are left homeless, vulnerable and on the margins of the society. In an interview, MaSibanda further elaborated her scenario when her husband died at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. She (MaSibanda 2023) put it across as follows:

When my husband of 20 years passed on, my in-laws declared openly that they no longer wanted me around. After his death, life got worse. They accused me of being the killer. Accusations like '*ndiwe muroyi*' [you are the witch] were castigated against me. I was not allowed to attend the funeral to bury my husband. There was no food on the table, children dropped out of school. The in-laws kept saying that I should leave the house ... This pained me so much and I unwillingly left my matrimonial home. They went further to take away my five cattle and household belongings. When I tried to claim my late husband's pension, the relatives refused to sign the papers hence, I walked out empty handed to start another life. (Interview with P.M. on 23 February 2023 at Zororo Methodist Church in Harare)

Magumbo's story is even worse; she narrated thus:

My husband passed on during COVID-19. I am still traumatised by his death. I was not permitted to bury my husband because I was on quarantine. On my return home, I was not even allowed by the in-laws to step my foot at our matrimonial house in Warren Park D. They accused me of being the one who transmitted the COVID-19 virus to him even if he was the first to be sick. No one would listen to my story. I only survived by the grace of God because I responded to the oxygen support system, otherwise I could have also died. I feel that was even better than what I am facing now. As you can see, everything is gone, my husband is gone, my house is gone, my children are not with me. The eldest girl aged 15 years is staying with an uncle whom I hear is abusing my own child [*sobbing tears*]. I am having to start life afresh. As you can see, I was displaced from my own house to come and stay in this cabin with my mother. Life is not fair; I wish I were also dead. Who knows, maybe they are also coming after this stand to take it again ... (Interview

with P.M. on 23 February 2023 at Zororo Methodist Church in Harare)

Chihera was also interviewed and she narrated her story as follows:

I lost my husband because of COVID-19, since then life has never been the same again to my family. My in-laws came and took everything as you can see I and the children have nothing left in this house. They are also coming for the house which they want to sell. They say if I want to remain as part of the family, I should join them in the rural areas. I declared to them that I will fight tooth and nail for justice to prevail. (Interview with P.M. on 23 February 2023 at Zororo Methodist Church in Harare)

It was Mancube (2023) who also indicated that:

Losing a husband is not easy especially in Zimbabwe. The relatives of the deceased will push you to poverty when they take all the property. These days one has to be educated and look for employment to supplement the husband's salary if you are to survive widowhood. (Interview with P.M. on 23 February 2023 at Zororo Methodist Church in Harare)

Such is the life of some widows in Zimbabwe; forced by circumstances beyond their control to relinquish all that is dear to them because of the untenable harassment from their in-laws, they end up suffering neglect and social exclusion as well as being pushed into abject poverty. The situation of widows was worsened by COVID-19 in Zimbabwe, where some widows were the ones fending for the family to bring food on the table through informal trading. Few people that who were formally employed lost their source of livelihood when the COVID-19 restrictions were imposed. Hence, the COVID-19 lockdown measures made life difficult for some families to make ends meet. During this period, some of the in-laws who lost their jobs during the peak of COVID-19 were up in arms with widows trying to occupy the spaces left by the deceased. Twisting the patriarchal traditions, some in-laws were seen claiming that they are the rightful owners and beneficiaries to the estate left behind by their departed relative, hence displacing the widow as a non-contributor to the estate. To make matters worse, movement restrictions made it impossible for widows to access the courts of law to seek recourse. This scenario in Zimbabwe calls for a deviant character among widows to break the stringent patriarchal rules that forbid women to be counted among those found at the centre.

## The applicability of Luke 18:1–8 in Zimbabwe context

The previous section focussed on discussing the plight of some widows in Zimbabwe during and after COVID-19 where some women were exposed to abject poverty because of the restrictions imposed on the nations. It is from this background that Luke 18:1–8 is transferable from its deviance perspective to alleviate the situation of women and girls, particularly the widows who are vulnerable to societal vices. The act of deviance exhibited by the widow when she went

out of her confined space of the kitchen to the public space and visited the Judge should speak volumes to women in Zimbabwe for praxis rather than seeking public sympathy from the would-be abusers. As indicated in the definition of deviance mentioned earlier in this article, the term deviance refers to the behaviour that controverts the social order in the society (Merton 1968). In this regard, the widow violated the cultural impediments with the view that her situation will be addressed by the Judge. In the same vein, widows in Zimbabwe should employ the deviance theory to challenge cultural demarcations that are patriarchal and are often manipulated by some greedy members of society to perpetuate the grabbing of properties by in-laws at the death of their husbands. This should be done through the process of unmasking the negative traits of patriarchy as noted by Scot (1990:230). Furthermore, Scot avers that widows have to move from a concealed space to the communal appearance.

From the examples of MaSibanda, Magumbo and Mamoyo mentioned above, one can deduce that when the husband dies, the widow eventually will travel a lonesome existential journey. Bourdillon (1987:217) avers that while the widow may be allowed to be in the company of her brother's elder sister during the time of bereavement, during the ceremony of inheritance, the widow will be alone. Culturally, the widow is expected to be seated on a rug, when the *Muzukuru* [nephew] or sister of the late husband [*Vatete*] will be executing the estate (Bourdillon 1987:217). According to Scot (1990:230), oppressed people sometimes act as if things are normal and well yet inside them, they will be acting differently wearing a private mask. This action is mostly seen among students in colleges and universities where learners may endure difficult learning conditions for some time before they engage in a strike which is the climax of endurance and they will be unveiling the mask. The defiant widow in the text demonstrated bravery when she moved from her secluded place to the Judge's place. Females who suffer oppression and deprivation are called therefore, to remove their concealed facade and start to scrutinise the heavy-handed social and male-controlled systems and throw that to the dust bin through with the help of law enforcement organisations advocates of human rights. One step at a time; and this could be through first of all, moving from their usual domestic territories where they are confined most of the time and demonstrating against oppressive social decrees that are directed to serve masculine desires.

This study, through interviews conducted, as demonstrated elsewhere in this study, discovered that women in Zimbabwe, particularly widows were exposed to difficult situations during the pandemic, hence action is required to alleviate their plight using the deviancy theory. This becomes the first action that precipitates women to disregard all oppressive inheritance traditions that do not treat women as equals to their spouses, with rights to acquire property when the husband dies. This move may drive men to have 'Wills', legal marriage certificates, and include their spouses on legal documents as a way of protecting them in times of unprecedented eventualities such as death.

Mukonoweshuro (2012) puts to light how Misihairambwi, despite being a legislator, opted to discarding the lawful direction and ended up giving everything to the family of her deceased husband. Though she was a woman of influence and power, culture did not permit her to manoeuvre swiftly because she was just a woman. For Gelfand (1962:67), while the inheritance process looks like a fair deal to widows, the reason that it is administered and governed by men, it therefore remains oppressive. Under such circumstances, the writer is of the view that women need to re-construct the composition of the inheritance ceremony and call for equal representation that is active and not passive, only to rely on the executor's benevolence. The two widows referred to above were both stripped off their belongings and they were evicted from their properties because of culture that was used to spearhead individual interests. It is from the similar temperament where the deviant woman in the gospel text utilised the minority nonconformity stimulus where she took it upon herself as a poor inferior widow from the periphery of society, and manoeuvred her way to the territory of the esteemed judge and emerged a victor. This kind of nonconformity is premised on the attributes of an inferior and low-ranked fellow of a society provoking the one with a developed, affluent and influential position in society thereby upsetting the powers that be. This, therefore, challenges Zimbabwean women to address tyrannical cultural manacles through inspiring one another never to throw in the towel and give male chauvinists room to manipulate and abuse women.

Females must build in themselves self-confidence that motivates them to consider themselves as equal associates with their male counterparts and as such they must also contribute their shared tasks and rights of these possessions directly or indirectly. Women are therefore challenged to be courageous enough to claim their rightful places in society and they should never remain silent under oppression. The level of deviance portrayed by the widow is necessary for women to recover their rights that were ceded to the in-laws specifically through culture.

Be that as it may, if their marriages are registered, widows can take the legal route. Unfortunately, the legal system was also difficult to access particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Gelfand (1962) accentuates that:

For widows who decide to take a legal recourse to keep their property, they face many procedural and practical impediments. The long distances travelled by widows to access government agencies and courts during the shutdown, only to find that they were closed until further notice, meant that the plight of widows could not be addressed. Most of the widows were forced to give-up before even the process starts. (pp. 65, 67)

Furthermore, the communication procedure is continuously focussed towards the departed's household members who share the same surname with him; they are the ones communicated to approve the legitimacy of the widow. This process poses challenges in that the family may be reluctant to share with the widow and may choose to keep the

communication to themselves and never facilitate the process. Some would even deny the widow outrightly. Additionally, court fees charged are out of the reach for most of the ordinary widows and this poses a hindrance towards starting or continuing the legal process. Most ordinary widows find it difficult to source these fees for court settlements. Last but not least, there are some cultural hurdles that denied access of the widow to the courts because it is believed that such an act will backfire and render curses to the household (Gelfand 1962:131).

## Findings from the study and conclusion

It has been noted in this study that African women, specifically Zimbabweans are prone to possible disenfranchisement of assets after the demise of their loved ones. Through sources consulted during the study, it has been revealed that land and assets grabbing in Zimbabwe is taking place and it has been authenticated by retelling the stories of some public figures as well as ordinary women who were dispossessed and forced to leave their matrimonial homes. There are numerous incidences in Zimbabwe whereby women have been evicted, leaving behind everything that they worked for. As such, the deviance theory is needed to change the women's mindset so that they can begin to fight for what is rightfully theirs in terms of land and property rights. The study also deduced that there are societal tendencies that promote men over women that also empowers the families of the deceased men with armoury to dispossess the widow of everything which she would have laboured for. Such cultural negations should be revoked. As a way of recommendation, the Church and other stakeholders are therefore urged to create awareness to their members on the legal framework of inheritance laws in Zimbabwe. It is also recommended that the Church and society should monitor the government of Zimbabwe and bring it to task when it fails to uphold its mandate through its representatives in parliament. In conclusion, this study has managed to motivate Zimbabwean females to use the nonconformity theory to wage war in contradiction of being dispossessed of their assets from their spouse's relatives. The nonconformity theory, when interpreted together with the text under study, empowers women and girls to revisit their situation from a biblical point of view. The deviance theory suggested in this study can be useful as a tool to emancipate women today.

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## Authors' contributions

P.M. is the sole author of this research article.

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## Data availability

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## Disclaimer

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