

African women, religion and pandemics: Collective resilience, responsibility and adaptability

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Introduction

In the wake of the global coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, societies around the world have grappled with unprecedented challenges, calling for collective resilience and adaptability in dealing with this scourge. As the pandemic unfolded, its impact rippled across various aspects of life, affecting global health, economics, politics, food security, issues relating to religion, gender and socio-cultural structures. In this special collection, subedited by Sophia Chirongoma and Linda Naicker, the contributors explore the unique experiences and contributions of African religious women in the face of the overwhelming bane of pandemics that have attacked African societies.

This collection is inspired by the work of the Humboldt Research Hub, which is stirred by the hypothesis that African women in religion have capabilities and wealth of experiences that they have generated in responding to earlier pandemics or epidemics (such as human immunodeficiency virus [HIV] and Ebola), which they are now tapping into to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Cognisant of the fact that academic research, not only in Africa, but the world over, has tended to skate over women's formative roles during times of crisis, this topical collection of articles seeks to add another strand in the tapestry of ongoing research genderising the academy by foregrounding the invaluable role played by African women during pandemics. Additionally, it investigates the extent to which African women draw from the cisterns of religion as a formidable resource in the face of health emergencies, such as HIV and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), Ebola, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, this special collection reflects on the historic responses of African religious women to pandemics. In particular, the collection addresses how such experiences can inform our strategies for responding to future pandemics.

Some of the articles published in this special collection (about 50%) emanate from the July 2022 collaborative conference, co-hosted by the Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR), the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, and the Humboldt Research Hub in Africa on Women, Religion and Pandemics. To facilitate the publication of some of the papers presented at the conference, the Humboldt Research Hub in Africa generously sponsored the payment of a significant portion of the page fees for this collection. As the subeditors of the collection, we wish to express our deep gratitude to the Humboldt Research Hub in Africa, which is stationed at the University of Zimbabwe, and supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in Germany, for making it possible for those without access to funding, to publish their cutting-edge and groundbreaking research.

The Humboldt Research Hub in Africa on women, religion and pandemics

As mentioned prior, the Humboldt Research Hub in Africa on Women, Religion and Pandemics focuses on religion and pandemics and the African women who have been instrumental in inspiring this collection. The Humboldt Research Hub in Africa on Women, Religion and Pandemics plays a crucial role in fostering awareness and understanding of the contributions of African women to addressing the scourge of pandemics. Its mission is to examine the historical and contemporary experiences of African religious women in responding to pandemics and to shed light on their strengths, challenges and achievements. The Hub actively seeks collaborations and partnerships with other research institutions, organisations and scholars across the African continent. It is this dedication to research in the niche area of religious women and pandemics in Africa that provided the impetus for the articles featured in this collection.

Note: Special Collection: African Women and Pandemics and Religion.

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians is a pan-African movement which advocates for the advancement of scholarly research by African women theologians in Africa and the diaspora. Primarily focused on the mentorship of African women theologians, it serves to bridge the gap in academic theological research and literature produced by African women. Comprising of numerous chapters in Africa and the diaspora, the Circle's presence and influence is extensive. The work of the Circle is testament to its commitment to empowering and amplifying the voices of African women theologians in institutions of higher education, especially those offering courses in religion and theology.

The Research Institute for Theology and Religion

The Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR) is at the forefront in promoting cutting-edge research at the intersections of religion, theology and societal dynamics. The Institute is concerned with producing research and research partnerships and collaborations in Africa and internationally. Its central mission is socially engaged scholarship, advocating for justice and Ubuntu. The Institute is an interdisciplinary hub that fosters scholar or activist engagements towards positive societal change and transformation.

Exploring themes in this special collection

This special issue encompasses a diverse array of articles that delve into the essential themes related to African women's experiences of, responses to, and academic examinations of pandemics and their effects on African societies. These themes include:

Cultural interpretations of pandemics

Samiksha Laltha, for example, in her article entitled, '*Creatures in Our Beds: Pandemics, Posthumanism and Predatory Nature in World War Z (2013)*', offers a thought-provoking literary analysis of the film, 'World War Z' (2013), within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Laltha's exploration goes beyond the cinematic realm, delving into cultural anxieties and environmental crises, drawing parallels with contemporary global challenges. Providing literary analysis of a film text, the article drew on cultural studies, popular culture, and religion through the lens of Christianity, with particular focus on the social and cultural anxieties that the figure of the 'zombie' holds as well as cultural interpretations of Mother Earth and nature as female.

Indigenous medicine and gender

Molly Manyonganise's work, *COVID-19, Gender, and Health: Recentring Women in African Indigenous Health Discourses in Zimbabwe for Environmental Conservation*, sheds light on the resurgence of African indigenous medicine (AIM) during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe.

Exploring the intersections of gender and Afrocentric perspectives in healthcare, the article emphasises the need for safeguarding vital plant resources. It is against this backdrop that the article stresses the need for placing women at the centre of both health and environmental discourses. This article makes a significant contribution towards retrieving women's voices in health and Earth discourses, towards sustainable development.

Women's sexual and reproductive health

Anniegrace Hlatywayo's article, entitled, *COVID-19 Lockdown Containment Measures and Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health in Zimbabwe*, meticulously examines the pandemic's impact on women's sexual and reproductive health. It highlights the gender inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic and the urgent need to address them. The article concludes by restating that the COVID-19 pandemic extensively hindered progress towards the promotion of women's sexual and reproductive health.

Women's role in food security

The collaborative research by Sarah Matanga and Memory Mukurazhizha, entitled, *The Impact of the COVID-19 Restrictions on Women's Responsibility for Domestic Food Provision: The Case of Marondera Urban in Zimbabwe*, explores the pivotal role of church-going women in food provision during the pandemic in Marondera, Zimbabwe. The study emphasises the need to mitigate challenges faced by women in fulfilling the role of food provision and concludes that gender inequalities exacerbated by pandemics result in higher workloads for women. Moreover, the study recommends that women in such communities should form empowerment groups to focus attention on food provision.

Religion, health and poverty

In the article, *COVID-19 Crisis in Relation to religion, Health, and Poverty in Zimbabwe: A Case Study of the Harare Urban Communities*, Joseph Muyangata and Sibiziwe Shumba investigate the pandemic's impact on religion, health and poverty in Harare's urban communities. They shed light on the inequalities in healthcare and socioeconomic disparities exposed by the pandemic. The authors conclude that COVID-19's negative impact on the health, religious and social sectors in Zimbabwe demonstrates the urgent need for maintaining preventative and curative services, especially for the most vulnerable populations such as children, older persons and people living with disabilities.

Domestic violence and the divine feminine

Samiksha Laltha returns with another poignant article, entitled, *The Shadow Pandemic and the Divine Feminine in the Diaspora: An Analysis of Deepa Mehta's Heaven on Earth (2008)*. Laltha's literary analysis delves into the shadow pandemic of

domestic violence within the Indian diaspora and the film's portrayal of the divine feminine as a source of empowerment. The analysis makes use of a cultural lens to discuss both the snake and the androgyny in diasporic Indian culture providing a counter-stance to patriarchy. Laltha utilises a hermeneutic of suspicion, while drawing insights from the field of public theology.

Spirituality as a response to the pandemic

Benson Igboin's article, *An Analysis of COVID-19 and Spirituality among African Christian Women*, explores how African Christian women employed spirituality to respond to the pandemic. Igboin highlights women's passion-driven approach to dealing with the pandemic and its implications for theological discourses. The article affirms the important role of African Christian women's spirituality, which serves as a compassion-driven response to the existential quest for the health of the community.

Biblical interpretation and COVID-19

In the article, *Biblical Interpretation during the Era of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perspectives from Africa*, Daniel Aryeh and Victor Molobi scrutinise various interpretations of COVID-19 within biblical narratives and their impact on contemporary theological discourses. Through the use of narrative research criticism, they explore how biblical texts were used to propound an epideictic rhetorical theory of biblical interpretation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Emphasising the problem-solving approach to biblical interpretation in the African context, the article proposes the application of such an approach in response to the impact of COVID-19.

Women as communal liberators

In his work entitled, *Nyawiras as Communal Liberators: Accounting for the Life Preservation Roles among African Women*, Julius Gathogo, inspired by the work of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's work, explores the role of African Women as 'Nyawiras' in societal sustenance. He examines their contributions, challenges and potential to bring positive change in African

societies by drawing from diverse examples from Africa and beyond. Gathogo's research uses a multidisciplinary approach and engages in dialogue between African literature and Africa's religio-cultural discourses to better understand the complex situations faced by African people, including having to grapple with the devastating effects of pandemics.

Resilience and fortitude

In *Musha Mukadzi: An African Women's Religio-Cultural Resilience Toolkit to Endure Pandemics*, Martin Mujinga highlights how women endure the pain inflicted by some gender-oppressive religio-cultural traditions, imposed by their patriarchal-centred communities, in an endeavour to create decent societies. It is against this backdrop that Mujinga critiques the fact that it is usually women who bear the brunt of burden during times of pandemics as they are often expected to take care of their loved ones who are either affected or infected. In many instances, culture dictates that women should be the burden-bearers of such roles in mothering and motherhood. Mujinga concludes that it is the *Musha Mukadzi* philosophy that embodies both a toolkit for women's resilience during pandemics and an oppressive construct used to manipulate and exploit women within African religio-cultural contexts.

Conclusion

This special collection inspired by the work of the Humboldt Research Hub in Africa on Women, Religion and Pandemics, stationed at the University of Zimbabwe presents an insightful assortment of innovative research that illuminates the fundamental role played by African women in religious settings during pandemics. It underscores the need to recognise and support the contributions of African religious women and the unique challenges they encounter as they navigate life in the context of pandemics. Moreover, it calls for continued research and collaboration to better prepare for future pandemics and foster gender equality, social justice, and sustainable development. In amplifying the voices of African women, this collection serves as testament to the strength, tenacity, resilience, and unwavering commitment of African women to life, community, and faith, in times of crisis.