

Gender reforms and the perpetuation of patriarchal hegemony in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe

Ezekiel Baloyi

University of the Free State, South Africa
revbaloyi@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9166-7625>

Chiratidzo Zvashura

Reformed Church University, Zimbabwe
chiratidzozvashura@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6938-3755>

Abstract

Gender reforms, feminism and late femocracy have been topical in social and political discourse in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and at the turn of the new millennium. The article seeks to outline and critically analyse gender reforms of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ) considering the predominantly patriarchal mission field in which the Church is ministering. The presentation employed a literature review, documentary reviews such as church magazines, and oral interviews because it is historical in nature. The results of the findings show that the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ) is the preferred institutional setting of the investigation. It is restricted to the geographical frontiers within which the said Church is operational in Zimbabwe. The most reported challenges were that the reforms triggered the unintended consequence of perpetuating patriarchal hegemony by further entrenching congregants in their resistance to gender reforms, and reluctance to accept women's ministry in some of the congregations and involve them in Church administration. It was recommended that the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe should endeavour to capacitate gender reforms and address the perpetuation of patriarchal hegemony. The paper will be of immense value to the fields of oral history and humanities particularly when it comes to the promotion of a harmonious co-existence between patriarchy and gender reforms inclined towards feminism.

Keywords

Gender reforms; patriarchal; hegemony; Reformed Church in Zimbabwe; oral history

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

The dominance of patriarchy in Zimbabwe is apparently laid bare by the inherent norm pointing to male supremacy among all tribal groups historically resident in the country (Peters and Peters 1999:4). The pervasive existence of patriarchy has historical roots since men filled accessible political space and were the caretakers of the means of production, such as land and hunting grounds, in pre-colonial Shona and Ndebele cultures (Peters and Peters 1999:4). Bourdillon (1987:85–89) adds to the notion of patriarchal dominance in pre-colonial Zimbabwe by indicating that women's participation in land distribution and political authority was largely limited to the bearing of male offsprings who the right and responsibility to land allocation and possession will have as they mature into adulthood.

Despite male dominance in land acquisition and distribution, the patriarchal account of land ownership in Zimbabwe has its checks and balances to ensure that women are provided for. Patriarchy guaranteed that women were not rendered landless by patriarchal land ownership systems since they always had access to land through their relationships with male figures who happened to be either their husbands or fathers (Mutangadura 2004:2–4). Women's access to land was, admittedly, constrained by their patriarchal closeness to males. Nonetheless, historians and development mentalists should be wary of being carried away by the viewpoints of human rights authors whose primary goal is to appeal to donors rather than impartially recording patriarchal gender norms. When a marriage fails, divorcees and widows in rural Zimbabwe are entitled to large pieces of land sizeable enough to sustain themselves and their children if they return to paternal families. To achieve that aim, the pre-colonial patriarchal system ensured that women always had access to land, even in the face of male supremacy. Regardless of colonial hegemonic tendencies that pushed females to the margins, such a custom has survived until the post-independence age. The patent reality is that women had access to land as a means of production but through patriarchal windows and opportunities.

Furthermore, the religious space of the patrilineal cosmos was accessible to female practitioners, who used to play significant roles. Tendaji (2018:1-

3) admits that women actively participated in Zimbabwe's form of African Traditional Religion (ATR) serving as spirit mediums, traditional healers, and priestesses. For example, in 1896, a woman named Nehanda Nyakasikana rose to prominence not only as a spirit medium of paramount religious importance in Mutapa state but also as a vital rallying voice that mobilised the Shona people to take up arms against white settlers (Beach 2014:27–30). The construction of Nehanda Charwe's statue in Harare's Central Business District at the corner of Samora Machel and Julius Nyerere is a monumental testament to the assertion that women played a significant role in both religious and political spheres of life of the Shona people in pre-colonial times. Given the aforementioned gender-inclusive religious order of the Shona patriarchal society, it is safe to say that the Shona religious cosmos refrained from excluding or driving women to the periphery. Furthermore to that, women, particularly the elderly were actively involved in rainmaking ceremonies. Cheater (1986:7) has this to say:

Rain is, of course, critical to dry land agriculture, and rainmaking is therefore a source of significant power in society. Where female spirits control rain, they contradict the generally powerless position of ordinary women and provide an alternative model of female capabilities.

The central role of women in rainmaking ceremonies and other ATR rituals becomes clear when one considers the belief that elderly women in post-menopause stages are regarded as ritually clean, so the task of brewing beer is exclusively reserved for them (oral tradition and personal observation). As a result, the mission field into which Dutch Reformed Church missionaries walked was more gender-inclusive in terms of women's religious engagement. It is therefore manifestly unjust to wholly blame patriarchy for the systematic exclusion of women from key religious positions and responsibilities in the DRC's daughter Church, the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe, when pre-missionary patriarchal Shona society witnessed active participation of women in religious processes.

2. Statement of the problem

Gender changes and male dominance in Zimbabwe's Reformed Church remain a tall order, even though females have been permitted to train as ministers of the Word and Sacraments and to be elected to Church leadership posts. According to the research, even though there has been significant progress in gender reforms in the church in both laity and clergy leadership, some issues remain due to the preservation of patriarchal hegemony (Rutoro 2007:222). Against this backdrop, the study was carried out to draw lessons on how gender reforms and the persistence of patriarchal hegemony in the Reformed Church of Zimbabwe might be addressed to close the gender gap in the church.

3. Gender disparities in the Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM)

The DRCM was the first name given to the daughter Church established by DRC mission efforts before it came to be known as the Shona Reformed Church, African Reformed Church, and Reformed Church in Zimbabwe, respectively (Merwe, 1981:59). This Church was wholly controlled by white missionaries who also happened to be ministers of religion, presiding over councils and departments as chairpersons as well as heads of departments. It is worth noting that all European ministers or missionaries lovingly known as the Muneri which is derived from an Afrikaans etymon (*vana* -Muneri-plural) were men, with Mutumburanzou (1999:89–92) mentioning just two notable ladies. These ladies are Helena and Margretha Hugo, who indefatigably worked among the blind. The two exceptional ladies were not even ministers of the Word and Sacraments, but their outstanding efforts in founding the Copota Schools for the Blind were too great to be disregarded. The Mission Council of 1920 established Local Church Councils presided over by European missionaries (Merwe 1981:79). The elders and deacons who made up the local Church Councils were all men. Merwe (1981:79) adds to the existing status quo of male supremacy by pointing out that elders were intended to be elected by male members of the congregation. The laws and regulations managing gender issues unavoidably mirrored the attitude and views of the leaders, who were all males of European heritage. As previously stated, the mission area in which the DRCM was ministering

featured women in crucial roles and positions where they functioned as spirit mediums, traditional leaders, and priestesses. Furthermore, they were the only beer brewers in rain-making rites and other ATR rituals. In a drastic shift in status, African women found themselves on the outside of the Church's leadership and critical religious functions.

4. Review of related literature on gender

It is critical to situate this inquiry in the academic domains of gender and patriarchy on a global and micro scale. Mutangadura (2004:2–3) has written extensively on gender discrepancies, albeit from the standpoint of a human rights monitor. Mutangadura has criticised gender inequities that deny women equal opportunity when it comes to owning property as a source of production and realising their full potential. Apart from being scholastic documentation, Mutangadura's (2004:2-3) literature looks to be an expressive lamentation whose emotive appeal is an inescapable expression of her proclivity for human rights abuses. Duri and Chikonyora (2018:1) published a new paper in which they critically examined how Grace Mugabe, the former First Lady of Zimbabwe, contributed to the dictatorial tendencies and downfall of Robert Mugabe. Grace Mugabe rode the horse of femocracy to acquire riches and political space for herself and her cronies while brutally outfoxing political opponents. Duri and Chikonyora (2018:1) rightly postulate:

Femocratic antics by some First Ladies are in fact veritable manifestations of patriarchal dominance in politics in many parts of the world where women exploit their husbands' political positions to access state power.

Consequently, it can be asserted that Grace Mugabe used her proximity to state authority not just to outsmart political rivals but also to callously tread on other women, such as former Vice President Joyce Mujuru. In applying this femocratic example to the context of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe, this investigation seeks to determine whether a handful of women who rose to greater heights did so because of their femocratic proximity to powerful men or whether they are genuine beneficiaries of gender reforms. The inquiry selects the doctoral thesis of Rutoro from the literature on the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe relevant to gender. The

thesis takes a theological perspective on gender, as opposed to Mutangadura and Duri's writings, which take a human rights and historical approach. The thesis' principal claim is that the RCZ's leadership and decision-making are controlled by male-ordained clergy, who exclude the laity, most women and youth. Furthermore, ordained male clergy, male governing elders, and male deacons influence the Church's larger hierarchical systems (Rutoro 2007:1-2). The thesis' key findings are that lay leaders are excluded from the Church's broader section of decision-making boards, that women and youth are underrepresented in key Church polity councils ranging from Church Council to Presbytery Council, and that the RCZ leadership structures operate under the influence of a clerical paradigm, the hierarchical Shona culture employed by missionaries (Rutoro 2007:5). The chief recommendation in the thesis of Rutoro (2007:222–233) reads:

The empowerment of women must be developed by training them for ordained ministry. This training must be continued at the seminary. Opportunities must be opened for women to go to universities for further theological studies.

Accordingly, the RCZ has continued to train women as ministers and to create possibilities for women to participate in critical leadership roles, as indicated by Rutoro's thesis (2007:222–23). Subsequently, this article seeks to supplement the thesis by determining whether the introduced gender reforms have succeeded in providing women with equal opportunities to take on critical leadership positions or whether they have hardened patriarchal hegemonic opposition to female participation in the RCZ, despite the observation that ATR, which is practised in the same context, is gender inclusive.

5. Methodology

4.1 Research designs

The study adopted a descriptive approach through a literature review because the research was historical in nature. The primary sources with information about the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe and African history concerning Zimbabwe were selected. Research instruments were face-to-

face oral interviews; semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used to collect data for the paper.

4.2 Participants and setting

Participants in the study consisted of two senior pastors and one woman who is the wife of a retired pastor of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe. The participants were selected based on their long service history in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe. They were chosen based on their services as leaders and their knowledge of the historical governance of the church over many years.

4.3 Instrumentation

Researchers solicited qualitative responses using a semi-structured interview. From 1980 to 2020, the research instrument elicited participants' perspectives on gender reforms and the maintenance of patriarchal hegemony in Zimbabwe's Reformed Church. The face-to-face interview allowed researchers to connect with participants, following up on intriguing comments and looking into underlying reasons (Munamati 2023:8).

4.4 Procedure

Three people were interviewed face-to-face at their residences. Face-to-face interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. The interview data was recorded and used to further the study's objectives.

4.5 Documents analysis

When we discuss documents, we're talking about a wide range of textual resources that researchers may use to generate qualitative data. As minutes, mission statements, or policy documents, they can be distributed. The two different types of documents are primary papers and secondary documents (Munamati 2023:9). For the goal of this study, primary materials such as meeting minutes, books, and dissertations were used to evaluate the gender reform movements within the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe.

4.6 Ethical considerations

Interview subjects were informed of their right to freely and willingly participate in this research as well as their freedom to revoke their consent

at any moment if they so desired. The respondents were informed that their identities were shielded from prying eyes by the study's use of numbers. Additionally, it was made clear to the participants that the collected data would be held in the strictest secrecy and utilised solely for the current study.

6. Findings

In this study, gender reforms and the maintenance of patriarchal hegemony in Zimbabwe's Reformed Church from 1980 to 2020 were the main points of investigation. The following important aspects of the recorded data were organised as follows, after a perusal of the researched data and replies to numerous times: The church underwent two reforms: the first was the admission of women as elders and deacons followed by the training of female clergy in a setting where male authorities predominated.

7. Reforms introduced

As previously explained, the Mother Church's patriarchal norms, practices and institutions were passed down to the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe. The preceding section has pushed for the idea that women, especially those in the post-menopause phase, had important roles in officiating priestly and sacred rites of African Traditional Religion, even though Shona societies were intrinsically patrilineal in character. According to Schmidt (Schmidt 1992:4), African women in Southern Rhodesia were treated as fourth-class citizens below European males, European women and African men. She (Schmidt 1992:4) captures the sentiments of colonial administrators as indicated below:

If European women only recently acquired the ability to conduct their own affairs, then African women are certainly in need of male guidance for generations to come.

An assertion that the colonial establishment ushered in an intensified and accelerated displacement of women from the epicentre to the periphery of critical religious leadership in churches with European roots is exposed by the colonial confinement of African women to the fringes of the social strata. Therefore, taking a page from the macro-political status quo, the

Dutch Reformed Church Mission, whose managers were of European heritage, only allowed males to hold important positions in ecclesiastical leadership. As such, when complete autonomy was granted in 1977, male dominance was the defining characteristic of leadership (Merwe 1981:192). Considering the predominance of men in church management, the RCZ started implementing stringent gender reforms, which will be deliberated in more detail below.

8. Training of women to serve as elders and deacons

The Synod's decision to permit women to serve as elders and deacons was the first significant gender reform. It was a significant development since, although males made up a very small portion of the church membership, women who constituted the majority had hitherto been excluded from the vestry and the Church Council (Oral Interview # 01).

The *Sungano yeMadzimai* (Women's Fellowship) is credited for initiating that reform agenda. The Women's League escalated this divisive subject to the Synod Assembly leading to the eventual acceptance of women's ordination as elders and deacons (Synod Minutes 1982:32). The charismatic and oratory expertise of a certain woman married to a senior minister of the RCZ who was assigned to escalate the issue to the Synod was instrumental in overcoming the reluctance of the predominantly male Synod Assembly. As it were, despite some noisy and protesting voices, the august Synod Assembly of 1982 agreed to the proposition that women might be chosen to be elders and deacons in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (Oral interview #02). This decision stood out as a groundbreaking transformation because the Church Council and vestry had been exclusively the realm of males for over a century, beginning with the founding of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe and its forerunner, the Dutch Reformed Church Mission, in 1891. Such a decision was far from being seen as a patchwork accomplishment; rather, it was a landmark change that sent shockwaves and tremors across hegemonic patriarchal systems supported by persistent colonial discrimination against women.

9. Training of female pastors

Training women to become ordained spiritual workers, notably as ministers of the Word and Sacraments, was another significant gender change implemented by the RCZ. Following a lengthy discussion on this contentious topic, the Synod of 1990 adopted a resolution endorsing the education of women for full-time ordained ministry (Synod Minutes 1990:26). One senior male clergyman vowed to leave pastoral work once the Church began to train women as pastors (Oral Interview #01). The passage of this highly contentious matter was motivated, and it ended up being riddled with notable utterances of intransigent sentiments to such an extent that it led to the passage of this highly contentious matter. Given the emotional conflict that surfaced during discussion and decision-making, it is not surprising that the gender reform was put on hold for years because the Church took its time implementing it after the first woman was enrolled by the Church (Oral Interview #03). In 2004, Murray Theological College admitted Miss Tanatsiwa Tasiya as the first female student for training as a pastor (Oral Interview #03). The Reformed Church of Zimbabwe now has twenty female ministers who have been ordained; however, the yearly enrolment has often been under 10% (Synod Minutes 2016:15). The ground was prepared to expect a very unfavourable response given the sensitivity of the subject, as previously noted. This reform process has always encountered subliminal opposition and reluctance during its execution. The problem of gender reforms and the continued patriarchal hegemony in Zimbabwe's Reformed Church from 1980 to 2020 was discussed by participants, who shared their historical perspectives on the subject. According to the opinions of all three participants, the church's system of church administration needs to change and stop discriminating against people based on their gender. Interviewees also alluded to the need for the church to capacitate gender reforms employing increasing opportunities for women's participation and coming up with ways of evading patriarchal hegemonic resistance. Some participants also attributed the rise of some women to their femocratic proximity to dominant male figures (Oral Interviews 2# & 3 #). In a way, such a cancerous corrupt habit undermines the gender reforms' principal objective of affording equal opportunity for women to progress based on ability rather than femocratic nepotism.

10. Discussion

The insistence of this study is to examine the gender reforms and the maintenance of patriarchal hegemony in Zimbabwe's Reformed Church between 1980 and 2020. The Reformed Church of Zimbabwe introduced and implemented two significant gender-inclusive transformations which had a bearing on worship practices and organisational structure. The problem of patriarchal dominance in the national leadership of the church and even at the level of government was raised by the participants. Munamati transcripts that the church's national executive committee which consists of eight officeholders may occasionally be entirely made up of males (Munamati 2023:26). As the participants have hinted, it can be pointed out that the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe has implemented these gender reforms to enhance her service to all Christians regardless of gender. Nevertheless, the national executive committee and other key decision-making committees of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe continue to be chauvinist establishments. All the participants are generally of the consensus that the church has made substantial progress in allowing women to serve in pastoral ministry and church leadership. A quick survey of recorded minutes on gender would suggest that the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe usually embarks on a lackadaisical pace when gender reforms are being instituted. When it comes to gender equality in the church, the Bible must be the last arbiter. The infallible Word should be allowed to have the final say. The importance of gender changes in any organisation is underscored by the proposition that such reforms enable every member of the organisation or church to take responsibility for what is happening on the ground. The leadership style of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe, which is made up primarily of Shona speakers, reflects Shona philosophy (Munamati 2023:27). There's a consensus among theologians of reformed persuasion that the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe implemented gender changes after conducting a variety of studies and dialogues (Mutumburanzou 1999:42; Rutoro and Runyowa 2001:56–60; Rutoro 2007:188; Munamati, 2023:27). It is noteworthy that a paradigm shift has been experienced as the Church instituted gender reforms. Women now constitute an overwhelming majority of elders and deacons. Nevertheless, only a tiny percentage of women serve as ministers of the Word and Sacraments. This snail-paced enrolment of females as ministers of the Word and Sacraments doesn't

imply that they are incapable of serving in that capacity. By and large, the limited space availed to women's participation at the ministerial fora exposes both the fear that patriarchy can be unreceptive to accommodate a large number of females and the subtle patriarchal reluctance of councils to call them.

Women pastors ministering in congregations have relatively fared well. For a period of about two decades spanning from 2002–2020, no single female pastor has been subjected to church discipline on account of immorality or as a penalty for having transgressed church protocols, rules and regulations. Despite that remarkable record, women have been afforded minimal opportunity to take critical roles as chairpersons of national executive committees or boards. In instances where a plebiscite decides who gets into executive committees, it is apparent that most of the electorate comprising of predominantly male clergy are inclined to vote for fellow men. Considering the prevalent scenario mentioned above, it is posited that the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe can grow and mentor women into leadership, but the patriarchal environment is restricting the church thereby acting as an albatross to women with capacity and skills. However, it's patently unfair for scholars to solely blame men for the manifestation of patriarchal resistance since the reluctance can also be exhibited even in instances where females dominate at congregational Church Councils. Female-dominated councils can be heard pronouncing patriarchal resistance to the idea of calling a female pastor to their congregation (Oral interview#2). Subsequently, patriarchal hegemony can hardly be restricted to male resistance but it's more to do with inherent belief and acceptance between both sexes that males are ordained to dominate and lead society. Admittedly, male figures are dominant as leaders in the Bible. Taking a dogmatic approach of critically debating whether the gender reforms are either biblically sound or unsound is beyond the scope of this investigation. It can be briefly highlighted in passing that God bestows leadership gifts and spiritual gifts on all people regardless of gender. To that end, being a man does not define what makes a person a good leader. God indiscriminately bestows leadership gifts on all believers (Eph 4:11–12). The current situation in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe deprives women of the all-important right to equal opportunity to progress on the grounds of ability. Female clergies are more restricted than female laity.

As such, a more comprehensive approach to gender issues is needed. The Church's gender norms, traditions and practices are largely regulated by patriarchal hegemony to the extent that she robs herself and the society of significant and useful leadership. Such able leadership is systematically side-lined by patriarchal gender perceptions which tend to overlook the abilities and capabilities of female contenders.

11. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of gender reforms in the context of patriarchal hegemony which prevails in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe. The election of women as elders and deacons and their training as ministers of the Word and Sacraments are the two significant gender reforms accomplished by the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe. The gender reforms were a significant milestone for the Reformed in Zimbabwe in the twenty-first century and at the turn of the new millennium. The gender reforms were implemented to usher in inclusivity and diversity in the church. Nonetheless, the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe still has tremendous work to be done when it comes to addressing gender disparities rampant in national committees and the national executive committee of the church. Such committees are still dominated by men. By her being a Church dominated by the Karanga dialect of the Shona tribe, the RCZ's leadership style and preference is guided and regulated by patriarchal norms and values. In the final analysis, this article reaffirms the long-standing affirmation that colonialism presided over an intensified entrenchment of patriarchy. The prevalence of patriarchal hegemonic resistance to gender reforms in the RCZ is largely a legacy of colonial male chauvinistic discriminations imposed upon the Shona people by colonial administrators and managers of the mother church. This proposition is augmented and bullet proofed by the undisputed fact that the pre-colonial patriarchal order allowed women to play critical religious roles as practitioners in African Traditional Religion. As such, the apparent marginalisation of women in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe and other main-line Christian denominations of European origin is essentially a symptomatic manifestation of colonial hegemonic side-lining of Shona women who were systematically confined to menial and marginal roles.

12. Recommendations

In a bid to proffer remedies to the discourse of gender reforms and the maintenance of patriarchal hegemony in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe, the authors suggest the underlying actions based on the findings of this paper:

1. To avoid a patriarchal dominance of male officeholders, the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe must strike a balance between men and women in leadership while striving to uphold tenets of merit and suitability.
2. To avoid falling into the trap of managing the church in the Karanga style of leadership, where males are viewed as natural leaders. Congregants from all cultural backgrounds should be afforded equal opportunity to contend for available posts and vacancies.
3. To avert gender abuses and discrimination, proper gender policies should be crafted in pursuance of the equality of all believers regardless of their gender status.
4. The Church needs to get free of herself from the religious patriarchal hegemonic tendencies which the mother church adopted from the macro colonial context in which she was operational.
5. Influential patriarchal figures should desist from propelling their female relatives to influential posts in a way that deprives other less connected women of their charitable right to equal opportunity.

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Oral interviews

Oral interview 1

Oral interview 2

Oral interview 3

Oral tradition

Historical stories frequently narrated by old congregants

Personal observation by authors