

Attitudes towards women in leadership structures in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe¹

ABSTRACT

This article deals with the struggle for women to be included in the policy-making structures of the Reformed Church of Zimbabwe (RCZ). It describes the empirical research, carried out between 2001 and 2003, to fathom the views and attitudes of both men and women on the issue of women in church leadership. The answers received in the interviews were analysed and discussed. As such, arguments presented re cultural, biblical and church tradition came to the fore, as well as related customs in the Shona culture that dehumanize women. This research, amongst others, eventually led to policy changes.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM STATED

This article examines the attitudes of church members towards the inclusion of women in the broader leadership decision-making structures of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ), in particular the negative attitude of men towards women². Understanding the views and underlying attitudes of both men and women (Retief 1958:82) is a first step in coming to grips with the problem that the RCZ faced (De Vos [ed] 1998:64-72; Hendriks 2004:222,227). The research addresses two basic issues: 1) What are women's experiences regarding the men's negative attitudes that almost excluded them from church leadership? 2) What are the views of men on the inclusion of women in the broader church leadership?

The context, within which these questions are asked, is the reality that women play a key role in every single one of the 50 RCZ congregations in Zimbabwe. They represent 60% of the church's membership (Rutoro 2007:211). If the RCZ wishes to embark on a process of becoming a missional church (Guder 1998:3-12; Roxburgh 2005:11-14) that addresses the challenges of Zimbabwe prophetically, they cannot do so without women as part of their leadership at all levels (Adeney 2005:277). Being Reformed implies a continuous process of reforming, of doing theology as a correlational hermeneutical activity in which the Bible is brought into dialogue with the phenomena of an ever-changing world (Hendriks 2004:20-33).

2. FIELD WORK: METHODOLOGY, OPERATIONALISATION AND DATA COLLECTION

To address the problem an exploratory empirical study (Babbie & Mouton 2001:79) was done

¹ This article is based on a chapter in Rutoro's doctoral dissertation (2007:119-142). The co-author of the article was the promoter. The article deals only with the empirical, descriptive part of the research. The dissertation itself deals with the wider theological debate and issues concerning gender and leadership.

² This research is a continuation of Runyowa and Rutoro's work (2001:56-64), in which they researched the social role and opinions of Women's Guild members in the RCZ. 4298 questionnaires were returned and analysed.

that involved quantitative aspects, but which, basically, was qualitative in the interpretation of the data. Informal, basic, individual, and in-depth structured interviews (:289-201) were held with a sample of 120 people (60 men and 60 women). The unit of analysis was groups of individuals of both genders (:84-86).

Informal interviews were preferred to questionnaires, as most interviewees were not accustomed to questionnaires. The methodology had been influenced by a number of scholars (Hendriks 2004:211-234; Mouton 2001:104,143-175,236; Ammerman *et al* 1998:203-210; Finch 1984:24-36; & Phiri 2000:108-113). The researchers agree with Phiri (2000) when she argues that a formal survey-type of interviewing is unsuited for obtaining good qualitative data from women. She prefers (2000:108) "less-structured research strategies that avoid creating a difference between the interviewer and the interviewee." That sort of relationship, she argues, "is inappropriate for feminists doing a research on women, because it means that scholars objectify women."

The interviewer had the Synod's permission to do the research. Therefore, the presbyteries received the researcher with respect. As a minister in the RCZ and as a lecturer at the Murray Theological College he is well-known; all ministers, as well as a number of the interviewees, know him. The interviewer was sensitive about his personal influence on the interviewing process and its ethical dimensions (De Vos [ed] 1998:24-35). The discussion below deals with some of these aspects.

As one who grew up in the Reformed faith and Shona culture, it was easy for the interviewer to mix with both men and women. Some interviewees wanted details about the study before volunteering any information. Others talked freely. Most women expressed their views openly. The interviewer made it clear to all interviewees that there were no right or wrong answers; each view was valued as presented. At first, some men took a defensive stand. They preferred to repeat what other men had said on the issues rather than give their own opinions. In some cases, a view was presented as someone else's, but later was given as their own.

The names of the interviewees are not disclosed. The interviewer kept the list of names to respect the wishes of most of the interviewees (50) who wanted to remain anonymous. The response of each interview was carefully documented and catalogued. The letter F stands for female and M for male. Hence F1 to F60 represents females interviewed, and M1 to M60 the males.

Sampling (De Vos [ed] 1998:189-200) was done as follows: The women included: ministers' wives, Women's Guild leaders, widows, divorcees, women from polygamous families, single women, women as heads of kraals (*masabhuku echikadzi*), and girls. The men included: ministers, evangelists, church elders, deacons, the church leadership and representatives of different social spheres of society. One could describe this as "probability sampling," portraying elements of random, systematic and stratified sampling. The sample represented members from urban and rural areas, mission stations, growth points and other social communities. The ages for both sexes ranged from 15 to 80 years. The educational qualifications ranged from a Master's degree to no formal education. The interviews covered all of the eight RCZ presbyteries.

After some pilot interviews, the research questions were divided into three sections. The first section dealt with each interviewee's personal and biographical data that included age, marital status, education, occupation, name of congregation and presbytery, and position held in the church, if any. The second section was about views on women being included in the church's leadership structures, the views of men concerning competent women in church

leadership and their presence in theological education centres with the view to their being ordained for ministry. The third section was on Shona culture and women in leadership. Issues, such as the interviewee's view on bride price, child marriage, polygamy, widowhood and property, were raised.

The questions were selected on the basis of the interviewer's personal experience and previous research conducted in 1999 (Runyowa & Rutoro 2001:56-64). The time spent with each person varied. The original plan was to spend about 20 minutes with each interviewee, but this proved to be too optimistic a view!

A month before the visits, letters were written to leaders of the presbyteries to obtain permission to conduct the interviews. In some presbyteries, the visits coincided with presbytery and synod meetings or men's and women's league meetings.

At the beginning of each interview, a self-introduction to each other took place. The interviewer then outlined what was expected of the respondent. Some interviews were tape-recorded to be replayed at home so as to document more precisely what was said. Others did not mind the interviewer taking notes. In some instances, free discussion took place without the presence of a notebook (which, for some interviewees, was a bit intimidating).

3. OUTLINE OF THE ANALYSIS-STRUCTURE

The 120 interviews were systematically analysed and are presented here in four sections. The first section (4 below) deals with the attitudes of men and women to the inclusion of women in the leadership structures of the presbytery and synod. It has four subsections: 4.1 deals with the women's negative views on this issue; 4.2 deals with the men's negative views; 4.3 deals with the men's positive views; and 4.4 deals with the women's positive views. Subsection 4.5 evaluates and concludes.

The second section (5) deals with the men and women's views towards theological education and women being trained as ministers. The third section (6) deals with the views of both men and women towards the Women's Guild. Comparisons between the views of the two gender groups follow. The fourth section (7) deals with the men and women's views regarding women in the Shona culture and their role in leadership, in general. The article closes by drawing conclusions and formulating the men and women's basic views towards women in broader church leadership structures where church policies are formulated.

4. VIEWS ON WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

The men and women gave a variety of reasons why women should be excluded from church policy-making positions. The men's views emphasized church tradition, personal prejudice and culture. The women mentioned gender differences and that they abstain because of an inferiority complex caused by cultural teachings and verbal attacks from men as well as women (confirmed by Ziramba 2004:5).

4.1 Negative responses from women

Only two of the 60 women interviewed rejected the inclusion of women in the broader church structures - echoing the views voiced by men. They based their arguments on gender differences, the poor self-image of women and prejudice against them. Keeping as close as possible to the original Shona formulations used in the interviews, they argued that:

- Men and women are created differently. They have different areas of work in and

outside the church. Women should serve God through their women's guild and by managing the homes while men concentrate on leadership roles (F20, 2001).

- Women cannot take leadership positions as they are not aggressive by nature. In society and church, men should adopt leadership roles if we are to respect our culture (F9, 2002).

These two responses reflect the impact of patriarchal attitudes upon women. They illustrate how women have been indoctrinated over generations. Women have internalized the prejudice against themselves to the extent of not seeking change (Phiri 2000:110). They do not understand the contextual changes and effects of modernism and postmodernism upon society.

4.2 Negative responses from men

4.2.1 Church tradition

Of the 60 men interviewed, 20 based their arguments against women in church policy leadership positions on church tradition and conservative theology. They argued:

- It is not our church policy. In fact, since 1891 when the church was founded, it was passed that women should not be included in leadership positions. The chiefs who allowed missionaries to preach in their areas shared the same view (M45, M50, 2001).
- The staunch RCZ Synod needs to follow our conservative Reformed theology. We must protect our Church's reputation. Inclusion of women in broader church leadership destroys our dignity (M1, M26, 2003).
- Human beings, male and female, were created in God's image. In this view, I am obliged not to object to the aspect of women aspiring for leadership. But, as regards my personal view, I have this to say: The RCZ must keep to the rails of its own doctrines and dogmas and should not allow women in broader leadership. It should not compete with the world's demands and campaigns for leadership. I am not a pessimist, but a Reformed conservative (M34, 2004).
- I read about experiences of women in some synods who, after completing theological studies, worked in church offices and became involved in relationships with married ministers. Such stories should warn the RCZ that the presence of women in leadership will constitute a temptation to men (M60, 2003).

These arguments reflect resistance to change. Some male interviewees feel secure in preserving the old traditions, although this does not represent the majority of church members. One also notes that they feel proud about their conservatism and are not open to any new interpretation of Scripture. In the patriarchal tradition, the belief exists that women are morally weak and men are morally strong (confirmed by Phiri 2000:111). Women are viewed as a source of sexual temptation to men. In proclaiming their views, respondents made no mention of *male* sexual weakness in the many known cases where married clergy took advantage of single women!

4.2.2 Prejudice

Of the 60 men interviewed, five were opposed to women in broader church leadership due to what they believe to be the necessity of a division of labour, women's emotional nature and the difference in physiological make-up, as well as the "fact" of women's poor self-image. Some were of two minds. They agreed that God can call women to leadership, but:

- Most women lose their tempers quickly when challenged. They can shout at people in public for no reason. If given these posts, they could boast to other women (M5, M6, 2004).
- Women cannot stand the pressure of hot debates in presbytery and synod meetings (M57, 2003).
- Yes, God can call a woman to a leadership position; but is it not hard to minister if she becomes pregnant? (M7, 2000).
- Some women cannot face the responsibility of leadership. In 1984, they were given an opportunity to preach and act as elders and deacons, but failed to do this (M10, 2001).
- Due to their talkative nature, they cannot keep matters confidential as is necessary in some of our church councils (M17, 2002).

Prejudice or bias against women is clearly reflected in relating patience to men, and temper to women. Another assumption is a biological connection between women and irrational thinking, and men and rational thinking (see also Ziramba 2004:6; Phiri 2000:111).

4.2.3 *Biblical basis*

Here, there were three categories of responses. Of the 60 men, five felt that women should not adopt leadership positions for biblical reasons. They argued that:

- The Bible does not allow women to stand before men and give instructions. It is not necessary to site the passages; many examples are in the Pauline Epistles (M3, M46, M40, M15, M32, 2003).

Three responses argued that women could take some positions, but not others. For example, it was argued that:

- 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 seem to not allow women as ministers and church elders, although the Bible is not against women becoming deaconesses. Nevertheless, if women are deaconesses, should this not be in accordance with what culture has defined as women's behaviour? For instance, women deaconesses should not have authority over men (M47, M55, M57: 2002).

A third category of views subjected married women to their husbands:

- A married woman cannot be a church leader as she is under her husband's authority. The Bible states that she belongs to him, and cannot take an independent decision (M11, M12, 2003).

Ten responses were based on the Bible and reflect two positions. The first regards every biblical precept as a general command from God. There was no differentiation between contextual culture and the Word of God. The stand taken was that the Bible is against women in leadership. The second examined the leadership roles in the Bible and divided them into two sections: roles for men only, and roles that could be shared by women. Among the leadership roles that are practised in the RCZ, the second group felt that the Bible allows the diaconate to be shared by women, but with a qualification: Christianity gave power to men over women which, under no circumstances, should be compromised. The other two positions of elder and minister are considered exclusive male positions, because the Bible gives them that authority.

Phiri (2000:13) contends that the argument stating that a woman cannot be called

to church leadership as she is under her husband's authority, assumes that Christian husbands will not show respect and consideration towards a wife in a professional occupation.

4.2.4 Cultural bias

Of the 60 men interviewed, 15 rejected the inclusion of women in broader leadership on cultural grounds. Some argued that:

- In leadership, it is problematic for a man and woman to work together. Culturally it is unacceptable for a married female church elder to accompany a male minister in one vehicle on house visitation or attending meetings without raising suspicions (M13, M14 and M15, 2001).
- If women are brought into church leadership, there will be more cases of church discipline among the leaders, as women will be a constant temptation to men (M16, M17 and M18, 2003).
- Shona culture does not allow a woman to rule over a man as it weakens our culture, compromising it with Western culture (M19, M20 and M21, 2003).
- If a woman becomes a minister, she has two demanding tasks: home, as well as a congregation with several preaching posts. It becomes taxing for her to take charge of children as well as a congregation (M22, M23, and M24, 2003).

Male stereotypes about women are present in all cultures of the world. Here, it states that culture decides what women and men can and should do (Ziramba 2004:14). Cultural demands are interpreted as God's will for women. The place of the woman is at home where she should rear children. Although God can call a woman to a leadership position, these men believe that housework is more important for a woman (Phiri 2000:114).

To exclude women from church leadership positions, the argument about house visitation and travelling to meetings in the company of women in leadership positions was presented at the August 1992 RCZ Synod. Patriarchal Shona culture concerned with preserving the authority of men over women is called upon to withhold women from leadership in the church's policy-making structures. Another assumption is that, in Shona culture, women are responsible for tempting men.

4.3 Positive responses from women

Of the 60 women interviewed, 50 felt that women should be included in church policy-making leadership structures. They based their arguments on secular experiences, the experiences of some women in the Bible, and their own personal experiences.

4.3.1 Secular experience

In view of what is happening in the world around us:

- Women are qualified: headmistresses, medical doctors, engineers, etc. We believe that women are capable of learning and practising the same leadership skills as men (F3, F4, F6, F7, 2004).
- At present, women are dynamic enough for any leadership position in church and society (F60, 2004).
- Coming from a typical Shona background that undermines women's social position, I am convinced that women have a crucial role to play in church leadership (F58, 2004).
- The church should be an instrument in God's hands in which talent, not gender, is dominant (F27, 2004).

- The Old and New Testaments are replete with women leaders. The experiences of some biblical women about whom we read are: Deborah who led the people of Israel; Priscilla and Lydia were Christian businesswomen; Paul noted Euodia and Syntyche because “they worked hard with him to spread the Gospel” (Philippians 4:2) (F10, F11, F12, 2003).
- Biblically, there are no tangible arguments why women should not adopt leadership roles. Despite their original Jewish background that undermined women in society, Scripture creates a platform that allows equal participation for men and women in church leadership. In Galatians 3:28, the apostle Paul wrote: “There is neither ... male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ” (F14, F15, 2003).

4.3.2 Personal Christian faith

The women argued positively about their leadership capabilities based on their personal faith:

- Reading the Bible, it certainly leaves us in no doubt that God regarded women highly. The Saviour of mankind was born of a woman. Women were the first to witness Christ’s resurrection, the core event of Christian faith (F17, F18, 2003).
- In our Guilds, we preach and evangelize. What is the difference between this and preaching during a Sunday service? God, who uses us in our Guilds to strengthen the weak spiritually, can also use us in leadership (F19, F20, F22, 2004).
- A woman can be a church leader in any position if God has genuinely called her and if she receives the right training and is accepted by both men and women (F23, 2004).
- I refuse to accept that men should use cultural reasons to bar women from taking leadership positions in the church. As long as men do not change their attitudes towards women’s inclusion in leadership, there will never be transformation in the RCZ Synod (F24, 2003).

4.3.3 God calls women

Some women argued that God, who calls men and women in other parts of the world, can call women in the RCZ:

- I used to think that the exclusion of women in the RCZ leadership was good. But the meeting that I attended in Kenya in 1994 opened my mind. I met women ministers who are in church leadership in Zambia, Kenya and Ghana. I realized that God can call women in the RCZ for ordained ministry (F25, 2000).
- If one regards women in church leadership to be doing God’s work and one concentrates on fixing one’s mind upon God, there should be no problem in the church (F26 and F27, 2001).

On several occasions in the RCZ, women have made their desires known to the Synod through the Women’s Guild National Executive, but male church elders - their representatives in broader decision-making boards - have repeatedly undermined their requests.

4.4 Positive responses from men

Male positive responses were based on the ability that they have observed in women. Of the 60 men that were interviewed, 10 supported a positive view towards the inclusion of women in broader leadership positions. They argued that:

- Some women have the ability of leadership if men give them a chance. In some con-

gregations, women are already preaching and organizing meetings. These congregations benefit from their contributions (M39, M42, 2003).

- Women are good counsellors and caregivers to people in the community. They deal very well with people's problems (M31, 2004).
- In respect of my social background as a man, competent women in any leadership position tend to threaten me. However, I am quick to admit that scriptural revelations have overpowered my contention of God who so loved humanity that he gave gifts to both men and women. Given opportunities to lead, some women can disapprove of men's negative attitudes (M59, 2003).
- In my case, I am concerned with the *ability* of the person who aspires for leadership position, not gender (M33, 2003).
- The question concerning women in broader leadership is directed primarily to men who are the majority in leadership. They must make a major change in their attitudes, support women to become all that God wants them to be, and then accept women as equal co-workers (M34, 2004).

These men viewed women as equally capable as men. They described qualities of leadership and counselling that they had observed in some women. They believed that the Word of God does not exclude women from leadership positions.

4.5 Evaluation

There are an equal number of responses for, and against, the inclusion of women in broader leadership positions. This does not reflect what transpires at presbytery and synod meetings when issues about women are discussed. Those against women acquiring leadership in the church's policy-forming bodies were in the majority until 1984. Since then, the issue has been intensely debated with the outcome oscillating from one Synod to the next.

In this sample drawn from all ranks of RCZ membership, opinions were divided equally. The figures show that 90% of the responses against women in broader leadership were from men, while 90% of the positive responses were from women. This indicates that, if women were present in church meetings and given equal voting power, the discussions would take a different turn. In all probability, the women's voices would influence the decisions in their favour. The 10% of men in favour of women in broader positions indicates how small the support of women is amongst average males.

An analysis of the men's negative responses reveals that their main argument is cultural (33%). The second most quoted argument is their understanding of the Bible (28%), and the third is that of church tradition (22%). This proves that, for cultural reasons, the majority of men in the RCZ are not in favour of women in policy-making positions. It also shows a lack of spiritual depth in this regard. A close examination of the reasons given by those who base their position on church tradition shows that they are similar to the ones presented by those who base their position on biblical views. When these two are combined, they constitute 50% of the negative responses. This may indicate the strength of conservative theology on women's issues in the RCZ.

The negative responses by men and women are based on their patriarchal cultural lenses. The biblical passages quoted in support of their views are Genesis 1 and 3, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12. Some male and female respondents mentioned New Testament passages, in which Paul requires women to remain silent, not participate in leadership, remain in a position of followers and not assume leadership roles (Ephesians 5, 1 Corinthians 11 and others). They adopt a literal approach when interpreting these verses with

no hermeneutical sensitivity for the contextual nature of these passages. Seen through these cultural lenses, this also means that women have no authority over men and, therefore, cannot adopt a position of leadership.

Other arguments were that women are rationally and morally weak; their thinking capabilities are not at the same level of men; they would be a constant temptation to men; they will not cope with men's work, and their sphere of influence should be in the home. The fact that a woman becomes pregnant is associated with being unclean; therefore, she is unfit to minister during this period. God, who is holy, cannot use a pregnant woman because then she is unholy.

5. WOMEN IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

In the course of the interviews, the issue of women sharing in church leadership was often linked to theological education. Of the 45 men, the 20 who were against women in broader positions, argued that theological education should be for men only since women are not to be ordained. The other 25 men refused even to consider women receiving theological education. The male view is based on an assumption that women, basically, are uneducated, or have too little education to train as ministers – an assumption that previous research proved to be wrong (Runyowa & Rutoro 2001:56-64).

6. THE WOMENS' GUILD

All the interviewees had something positive to say about the *Sungano Yamadzimai*, the Women's Guild. However, men and women differed on some issues. Men concentrated on what the Guild does for the church, while women focused on what it does for them personally and the church as a whole. The work and influence of the Women's Guild has proved to be one of the strongest factors that led to the gradual transformation in the RCZ decision-making bodies concerning the position of women.

In the research interviews, 20 men rated the Women's Guild as the strongest financial group in the Church and 40 men remarked that they view the Women Guild's main purpose as dealing with women's issues and supporting AIDS patients in homes. The 60 female interviewees argued that the primary purpose of the Women's Guild is evangelism, preaching and fund-raising projects for the entire Church.

Fifty women argued that male elders are biased when representing women's issues to church councils, presbyteries and synod meetings and that the women themselves should do this. Ministers' wives appreciated male elder representatives at the Women's Guild meetings. They argued that women are difficult to control in the absence of men; women quarrel a lot.

Ten women objected to the idea of males representing women in decision-making bodies as they regarded the men as dictators. Their view was that women are now prepared to participate with men at all church levels. They argued that men should cease their verbal threats and attacks on women in the broader decision-making positions.

Another issue was whether the Women's Guild leadership should include only the wives of ministers (as at present), or all women. The policy that only ministers' wives should be in the leadership of the Women's Guild was approved by 35 men and 20 women, while 25 men and 40 women opposed it.

7. WOMEN IN CHURCH AND CULTURE

All of the 60 women interviewed appreciated their culture's good values, but were opposed to some customs that lead to men suppressing women. They opposed high bride prices (*roora*), child marriage, polygamy, the seizure of widows' properties and remarriage. These will be discussed now.

7.1 Bride prices

Of the women interviewed, 50 opposed high bride prices as this promotes the abuse of women. Women should be able to marry out of choice and the custom that a husband pays the bride's family to marry her should not tie her down. They argued that the RCZ must address the issue of an excessively high bride price.

In the discussions, all women interviewees rejected child marriages (*kuzvarira*). They argued that it deprives the girls of their rights as, in Shona custom, they have no say in the decision-making process. Girls become pregnant at such a young age that they have physical and emotional problems during pregnancy and delivery. This results in marriage problems and ultimate divorce. Husbands then demand the bride price to be repaid.

7.2 Polygamy

Some interviewees spoke negatively about polygamy. They acknowledged that the Church opposes it. The main supporters of this custom are traditional chiefs and headmen who give it their blessing, and encourage men to take more than one wife, since this is a sign of power and wealth. The female heads-of-kraal interviewees argued that:

- Christians practise polygamy secretly, as they fear church discipline. In our villages, some church leaders impregnate young girls. We strongly feel this is child abuse that devalues the dignity of women in society (F36, F58, 2002).

About polygamy, 40 women spoke negatively. Spiritually, it causes problems since it is not in accordance with the Bible. Materially, this leads to even greater poverty and deprivation. The responses prove that polygamy is indeed practised among some church members.

7.3 Belief in male supremacy

Of the 60 men interviewed, 40 supported the supremacy of Shona men on cultural grounds. They argued that married women in Shona culture are considered to be the property of their husbands. Some interviewees argued that:

- A typical Shona man used to have numerous wives and was then considered to be a strong man in the community (M34, M35, M36, 2003).
- In his supremacy, the Shona man measured his wealth by his number of wives, children (boys) and cattle. In the past, a traditional Shona girl could be married without her consent and, as a married woman, had no say in decision-making matters (M37, M38, M39, 2003).

7.3.1 Resentment of equating women to men

Within the modern Shona society, there are many influential Women's Rights Organizations that reach out to change men's attitudes towards women. Nevertheless, there is considerable resentment to the idea of equating women to men. The traditional Shona men still question:

- How can a woman be the legal inheritor of property in the event of her father or

husband's death? How can a woman inherit the chieftainship of a clan? How can a woman justifiably lead men in politics and any organization in society? How can the church appoint a woman to be an elder, deacon, lay preacher, evangelist or pastor? (M21, M5, M36, M38, 2003).

Usually, a traditional Shona man does not want to listen to female preachers. This does not mean that they are not good preachers, but male listeners dismiss everything by virtue of it having been preached by a woman (Ziramba 2004:13).

7.3.2 Supremacy of male Christians

The interviews proved that the average Christian male Shona believes that his wife cannot be a leader in church or society. The prevailing view was that the church took ages to involve women in its structures, as they are inferior to men. The breakthrough in the Shona cultural attitude towards women in leadership happened during the political shift in the country that gave women leadership positions (Ziramba 2004:13). Some Christians remarked openly that the Church was going wild in following this trend.

- Co-education introduced in many schools of Zimbabwe after independence in 1980 improved the position of women in society (M59, M41, 2004).

7.4 Widowhood, property and remarriage

Of the women interviewed, 12 were widowed between 1980 and 2000. Some of the causes that they identified for the suffering of widows are: large families, low levels of education, unemployment, seizure of property by the deceased husband's relatives, and economic hardship.

The widows were left with between four and six children. Three widows were employed when their husbands died; five had some or other certificate of qualifications; four had been married to RCZ ministers. The RCZ employed them in some of its institutions soon after their husbands had died because of their lack of a pension fund. Four of the 12 widows lost their property to their deceased husband's relatives. They could not seek help from the church as some church men are also involved in seizing widows' properties.

The interviews proved that degrading widows by dispossessing them of their properties is a reality in the Shona culture and church. The Christian men, especially church leaders, seem to send out a silent message that they do not care what will happen to their wives and children if they are the first to die. In this regard, women must be empowered to argue their case against men who do not respect their human rights. Taking property from widows should be condemned even if it is considered to be part of the Shona culture; taking widows' property is theft (Phiri 2000:133).

CONCLUSION

This article set out to understand church members' views and underlying attitudes on the inclusion of women in the RCZ's broader policy-making leadership structures. The empirical qualitative study worked with a probability sample of 60 men and 60 women.

Opinions were divided equally: 90% of the responses opposing women in leadership were from men, while 90% of women were in favour of it. The underlying cultural (the main motive), biblical and traditional church views and attitudes became clear from the answers received and discussed during the interviews. The same pattern of divided opinions was

evident when people were asked whether women should be trained to become ministers.

Opinions on the Women's Guild surfaced in the interviews. Nobody could deny the outstanding role of this organisation in the RCZ. It is clear that the Women's Guild is the forum where women address issues that concern themselves and from which they advocate their cause. It is from this forum that cultural issues, such as paying for your bride, polygamy, male supremacy, widowhood, property and marriage are fiercely debated.

The researchers argue that the inclusion of women in broader leadership will transform the leadership structures of the RZC. In turn, this will ultimately influence men's negative attitudes towards women in policy-making positions. In congregations, the empowerment of women should be introduced by means of Theological Education by Extension. Most of all, an alliance of women in the Synod would present an excellent opportunity for women to argue their case.

This research had a positive result. After a debate lasting at least 20 years (Rutoro 2007:112-116), the Synod decided in 2002 that women may become ministers (Synod 2002:32/6). At present, five women (2006 & 2007) are doing theological training at Murray Theological College at Morgenster. Two have completed their training. In 2005, the first woman, Mrs Ndakarwirwa Mubwandarikwa, was ordained in the RCZ. In 2006, she became the pastor of the Hatfield congregation, Harare (Rutoro 2007:213). Miss T Tasiya completed her studies in 2006 and was ordained as the Teachers' College Chaplain in June 2007 - a breakthrough! However, the underlying attitudes of a large percentage of church members are by no means to be ignored.

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