



Women's Leadership Roles in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (1891–2020)

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INTRODUCTION

Women's leadership remains a critical challenge to most mainline churches that operate in Zimbabwe, including the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ). The point of departure in analysing women leadership as compared to their male counterparts in the RCZ is that there are few women in the RCZ church's critical leadership positions, which include

Initially, the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe was called the Dutch Reformed Church. In 1977, it adopted the name African Reformed Church. Upon Zimbabwe's attainment of independence in 1980, it adopted the name Reformed Church in Zimbabwe.

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ministers, deacons and elders. Although there has been a rise in women's leadership in the political, economic and social spheres of Zimbabwe, the RCZ still experiences vast gender disparities between men and women in its leadership positions (RCZ Synod Minutes, 1980–1999). The thrust of this chapter envisions reflecting on the need to strike a balance between women and men in leadership structures of the RCZ. In the light of gender equity as enshrined in the feminist tenets, women are not adequately represented in the leadership structures of the RCZ where most influential positions are occupied by men.

Gender imbalances in leadership positions have been prevalent in the RCZ since its establishment in 1891 under the banner of the (then) Dutch Reformed Church. The RCZ has always been characterised by male dominance in its governance, spiritual supervision and guidance (RCZ Synod Minutes, 1980–1999). This is supported by the fact that of the two hundred and nine (209) people trained by the church's only theological training institution, Murray Theological College, from 1936 to 2019, one hundred and ninety (190), which is 90.9%, are males. Only nineteen (19), constituting 9.1% of the total RCZ ministers, are females (RCZ Synodical Committee Minutes, 2019). In addition, of the twenty-nine student ministers under training in 2020, twenty-four (82, 76%) were males and five (17, 24%) were females (Murray Theological College Register, 2020). Furthermore, the offices of elders and deacons in the RCZ were also male dominated during the pioneering phase which stretched from 1891 when the church was established in Zimbabwe until 1983. The gender parity in leadership roles only improved with the advent of the liberal phase which was kick started with the resolution of the 1983 Synod which inaugurated the women elders and deaconesses. According to RCZ Rules and Regulations, elders are RCZ members chosen to supervise the conduct of church members as well as safeguarding church doctrine. In addition, elders are supported by deacons who collect church offerings which they distribute according to the members' needs. Both the elders and deacons convene three times a year in the Church Council meeting chaired by a church minister (RCZ Rules and Regulations, 2010).

In addition, at the time writing, of the one hundred and ten (110) congregations, which are local church assemblies, six (6) congregations were led by female ministers whilst one hundred and four (104) congregations were under the leadership of male ministers. Here, the percentage is 5.45 and 94.55%, respectively. Furthermore, the RCZ had only male

moderators since 1980 to the time of writing. The church's supreme governing body, the Moderature, which consists of eight members, has been male dominated since 1980. This body had one female member in its composition for the 2010 and 2012 committees only. The committee which was in place from 2016 to 2018 had no female representation (RCZ Synod Minutes, 2016). The committee which was running from 2018 to 2020 had one female member and seven male committee members (RCZ Synod Minutes, 2018).

This scenario painted above is not surprising because the RCZ had no single female minister until the first one, namely Reverend Ndakarwirwa Mubwandarikwa, was ordained in 2007. According to the RCZ procedures, elders and deacons serve for a maximum of two years and can be re-elected up to four years when they are to be relieved of their duties for one year (RCZ Constitution, 2010). From 1891 when the RCZ was established in Zimbabwe, the above-mentioned offices were consistently occupied by men until in 1984 when the supreme body revised the resolution. Most women were reluctant to take up the senior posts within the RCZ because of numerous reasons, which include the inferiority complex mentality and gender imbalance, to mention a few (RCZ Synod Minutes, 1981–2016). Today, this inferiority mentality still affects many women and it seems men are propagating the mentality through some covert tendencies that stigmatise women. Given this background, there is a pertinent need to reflect deeply on women's leadership roles in the RCZ. Doing so will present an opportunity for assessing the extent to which women are involved in the church's critical decision-making structures so as to reflect on women, religion and leadership in Zimbabwe. In order to have an effective theoretical framework, the chapter has adopted the perspective of liberal feminism to appreciate the theme of women's leadership in the RCZ.

LIBERAL FEMINISM LENSES ON WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Feminism is a fresh form of theology of liberation which is anchored on the quest for women's emancipation. Feminist theology is a discipline that attempts to describe, explain and analyse the rights of women as human beings (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2005). This is in line with the concerns of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (commonly known as "the Circle") who seek solidarity with all those who suffer marginalisation of every kind and try to understand, analyse and change the

systems of domination and abuse of power (Labeodan, 2016; Phiri & Nadar, 2010). In addition, the theoretical framework proposes strategies for activism and action to ameliorate the conditions in which women live and work. The designation “feminist” is generally used to denote those who seek to eliminate women subordination and marginalisation. Whilst some African women theologians are hesitant to embrace this category due to its close association with white women theologians, this chapter adopts it as it is consistent with its overall objective.

First and foremost, the feminist theology of liberation has three typologies, which are: radical, conservative and liberal. Nevertheless, the chapter adopts a liberal stance which fosters the discourse towards self-actualisation of women in as far as the church leadership structures are concerned. Liberal feminism, as argued by Kolmar and Bartkowski (2005), propounds for equal rights for women, proportional representation and equal access of females and males, changing attitudes, women’s participation in the public sphere, reorienting women into crucial decision-making positions to foster an end to women discrimination. Haralambos and Holborn (2000) suggest that liberal feminism enjoys greater support than the other perspectives for it is moderate and its views pose less of a challenge to existing values. This is supported by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians who view African women’s theology as a form of liberal feminism which is life affirming, socially sensitive and geared towards dialogue (Fredrick, 2003). They posit inequality as entrenched not only in structures of society but in culture and attitudes of individuals (Labeodan, 2016; Matope et al., 2011) and that is why the author embraced this theory as it is applicable to the overall agenda that he is pursuing. The chapter seeks to forge a way forward in changing people’s mind-sets and the RCZ’s culture relating to women’s leadership roles.

Liberal feminist praxis in conjunction with the Circle methodology regards the notion of patriarchy as a major hindrance to women’s ascendancy to the church’s leadership positions (including those in the RCZ). Patriarchy has different backgrounds, but in Western discourses it can be traced back to the influential Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E) who described the natural organisation of society as a hierarchy of graded subordinations. Aristotle argued that according to nature, it is fitting for the soul to govern the body, the master to govern the slave and the male to govern the female. Patriarchy is a socio-cultural system that propagates male superiority, power and control over the female as

natural to the extent that the female counterpart is exploited (Matope et al., 2011).

In this context, Bazili's (1991: 9) insight is justified when he says that patriarchy is an ideology of male supremacy that results from the social construction of gender which in turn justifies the social, economic and political distinction between men and women. In all patriarchal societies, it must be noted that leadership roles, control of valuable resources and decision-making are a male preserve. This is against the backdrop of the fact that the institution of patriarchy draws a clear demarcation line between males and females. Moreover, patriarchy creates a unique social stratification which favours male chauvinism and deprives women of gender justice and access to "safe spaces" for them to reflect on and discuss diverse issues that are of paramount importance to them (Labeodan, 2016). In the light of Meena (1992)'s observations, even the weakest man has a woman to oppress since women are perceived as perpetual minors. It is, therefore, evident that the RCZ is a patriarchal church fostering male chauvinism at the expense of women who are in turn pushed to the periphery. In this context, when women wish to be promoted to top leadership posts within the RCZ, it represents the yearning feminist voices whose thrust is to emancipate women. Hence, the focus of this chapter resonates with the vision of the Second Republic in Zimbabwe which emphasises that attaining gender parity by 2030 is one of its major goals.

In order to appreciate the challenges at stake, it is important to reflect on how the Bible, a foundational text within the RCZ and many other churches, is read, interpreted and applied. Those who oppose women's leadership often appeal to some biblical texts to support their position, whilst those who endorse women's leadership also have their supporting texts. Therefore, in the following sections, the chapter goes into some detail in analysing various Old and New Testament passages that have a bearing on women's leadership in the RCZ, other denominations and the wider society.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLE AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

This section presents an analysis of both the Old and New Testaments' teachings on women and their place in leadership. The thrust is to discover the extent and instances where women are both esteemed and marginalised.

OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVES

The point of departure is to discover instances in the Bible where women are both esteemed and marginalised. In a number of instances, the Old Testament depicts women as both leaders and servants. First and foremost, the creation story of the Old Testament is pivoted on the fundamental equality between men and women (Gladson, 2017). The creation story records women as equal to men. Humanity's creation in the divine image as male and female can be regarded as laying the basis for equality. Thus, sexuality is not just procreative but a part of what it means to be like the Creator. This notion of gender equality between men and women is further pursued by Nowell (2017) in (www.laici.va/content/dam/laici/document/.../) who views women through three mirrors: firstly, women appear in at least as many different kinds of roles as their counterparts, secondly, women often appear together depicting a bond between them as their lives are woven together and lastly, women play a significant role in the biblical story functioning as an image of God.

WOMEN AS RELIGIOUS LEADERS

The Old Testament presents women as religious leaders, as exemplified by Deborah and Miriam. When the Israelites were crossing the Sea of Reeds, Miriam relived earlier Israelite successive life through leading the song of praise: "Sing to the Lord who is gloriously triumphant; horse and chariot God has cast into the sea" (Exodus 15:21). The preceding song, which has the same refrain, is sung by Moses and the Israelites and Miriam is identified as the leader of the song (Exodus 15:1). Miriam continues in a leadership role in the "wilderness community." The relationship among leaders eventually becomes a problem, especially when Miriam and Aaron challenged Moses' leadership. The ostensible cause is Moses' choice of a wife, as argued by Brueggemann (1997). More so, Miriam's leadership is genuine and her challenge to Moses' leadership is punished. It must be noted that her challenge is not turned back because Miriam is a woman for in the prior event Korah, Dathan, Abiram and their followers were severely punished for speaking against Moses (Numbers 16). God's statement in response to Miriam's challenge does not deny the presence of other prophets for in the wilderness, Moses is the leader and all other leaders are second to him (Brueggemann, 1997).

The second woman who assumed a key religious duty in the Old Testament is Deborah who functioned as both a judge and prophet (Judges 4:4). Within the Israelite society, judges functioned as both religious and political leaders whose responsibility was to free the people from enemies by military means. Deborah managed to fill the role of judge alongside her male counterparts such as Jephthah and Gideon. Deborah was influential to the extent of appointing army generals and would make critical military decisions which would be heeded by Israelite soldiers on the battlefield. In addition, Deborah functioned as a prophet and arbiter of disputes for all the Israelites came to her for judgement (Judges 4:5). During the pre-monarchic period, Israelite prophets functioned as the mouthpieces of Yahweh to his people and vice versa. Prophets were spiritual overseers who maintained justice and moral righteousness in tandem with the Mosaic Law. Deborah played all these roles alongside her male counterparts. Taken together, both Miriam and Deborah functioned in positions of religious leadership, with Miriam as a secondary leader who was responsible to a man in the top position and Deborah as a primary leader with a man responsible to her.

WOMEN AS HERO-SAVIOURS

Another role in which we find women of the Old Testament is the role of the hero-saviour (www.laici.va/content/dam/laici/document/.../). Two such women appear in the book of Judges and the other two appear in post-exilic books. In the book of Judges, two women saved their people by killing the oppressor. Firstly, in the story of Deborah (Judges 4–5) that we considered earlier, the hero is Jael who was the wife of Heber. When Sisera, who was the enemy's general, fled to the tent of Jael after he was defeated by the Israelite army, Jael invited him to come in and she soothed him with extravagant hospitality evidenced by the fact that when Sisera asked for water, Jael gave him milk (Judges 5:25). When Sisera went to sleep, Jael took a tent-peg and hammered it through his head. Thus, the enemy was defeated by the hand of a woman and the Israelites enjoyed peace for forty years (Brueggemann, 1997).

Furthermore, an anonymous woman in the book of Judges also killed the enemy leader. This is traceable when Abimelech, the (illegitimate) son of Gideon, took the kingship at Shechem and began to oppress the people. All the people of the city of Thebez fled into a tower in the middle of the city. The anonymous woman cast the upper part of

a millstone down on Abimelech's head and it fractured his skull. Abimelech immediately called his armour-bearer and instructed him to draw his sword and kill him to avoid being killed by a woman. His attendant ran and pierced him with the sword and Abimelech died (Judges 9:53–54). This event was relived centuries later during David's reign, and after the death of Bathsheba's husband, David's army general Joab commented in his report of Uriah's death that it was a woman who killed Abimelech when she threw a millstone down on him from the wall (2 Samuel 11:21).

In the Old Testament account, Esther is yet another woman who saved her people from genocide (www.laici.va/content/dam/laici/document/.../). She risked her life by approaching the king without being summoned and invited both the king and the archenemy to two banquets (Esther 6–8). At the second banquet, she revealed the enemy's plot to the king. The tables were turned and the enemies suffered what they had planned to inflict on her community (Esther 9:1–19). Thus, Esther functioned as a hero-saviour who saved the Israelites from imminent death.

Nowell (2017) records that there are many other women in the Old Testament who deserve attention and these are: wives and mothers like Eve, Hannah and Moses' mother. In addition, Nowell (2017) is conscious of political leaders like Bathsheba, Jezebel and Athaliah. It is impossible to narrow the vision of the Old Testament to a few images and roles (Nowell, 2017). A few constants should be noted that women appear together for good. In all the mentioned stories, both women and men functioned as images of God. It can be concluded that women were highly valued, extolled and counted as equal partners with men in the Israelite community.

Although the Old Testament has vast portions in itself where women are highly esteemed and regarded at par with their male counterparts, there are also many areas where the same part of the Old Testament view women as inferior to men. This latter insight is illustrated in the section below.

THE INFERIORITY OF WOMEN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT PRESENTATION

In general, the inferiority of women in the Old Testament is precisely captured in the Chinese rule of the three obediences (Gladson, 2017). In part, the rule says: “when young she must obey her father; when married,

she must obey her husband; and when her husband is dead, she must obey her son." In line with the foregoing insight, it is interesting to realise that the patriarchal form of family existence in the Old Testament as argued by Gladson (2017) and Brueggemann (1997) assumes that a woman lived in the "shadows rather than in the light of life." Firstly, the woman lives under the authority of the father. Secondly, the woman lives under the authority of her husband after marriage. Lastly, the woman lives under the authority of her husband's brother or her son after the death of her husband. This subordination of a woman in all aspects of her life symbolises the fact that she lived in that covenant community as a second-class citizen. This notion is supported by the fact that she possessed no sign of it as did the male in circumcision (Jewett, 1975). This inferiority complex, as argued by Gladson (2017), is associated with women in the Old Testament Israelite community which belittled their essence as human beings and perceived them merely as men's companions.

The first subjugation of women in the Old Testament is epitomised in the institution of marriage. To the Israelite woman, marriage was necessary for a complete life (Brueggemann, 1997). The marriage arrangements were made by the father, who had almost absolute authority over his children, and in some instances, this was done by the groom's father in conjunction with the bride's father (Judges 14:1–2). In any case, the girl must have been consulted (Genesis 24:5, 8; Numbers 36:6). The Hebrew terms, *habereth* (wife, consort) and *berith* (covenant), imply a potential closeness between Hebrew men and their wives. More so, Gladson (2017) further argues that marriage meant that the Hebrew woman was essentially possessed by her husband who was called both *oedn* (Lord) in Genesis 18:12 and *bl* (master) in Exodus 21:22. This subordination surfaces in many implicit ways in the Old Testament, like in Isaiah's prophecy of seven women taking hold of one man for support in the day of Yahweh's judgement upon Israel (Isaiah 4:1) and in Jeremiah's prediction of the return from Babylonian captivity (Jeremiah 31:22). Women subjugation is explicit in the practice of polygamy as evidenced by the graphic description of the Persian harem in Esther 2:12–14 where women were regarded as the king's property.

The idea of viewing women as men's property is exemplified in a particular story drawn in the book of Judges 19:22–30 which points to the low estate of concubines. When the man of the house was attacked by base men who were pursuing his overnight guest, the host offered them his virgin daughter and his guest's concubine (Gladson, 2017). When the

intruders failed to accept his offer of a virgin and a concubine, the man then gave them his concubine whom they raped and abused. The base men then left the concubine dead at the host's door step. The fact that the host did not face the mob himself but was rather prepared to offer his daughter and his concubines to satisfy the wild mob shows that women were only expendable property.

Just as marriage was essential to the Hebrew woman, so the bearing of children was even more for it was the basic purpose of wedlock. Human beings are referred to as born of a woman as in Job 14:1; 15:14; 25:4. This notion is an expression which keeps the original forecast in Genesis 3:16. Hebrew women frequently served as midwives (1 Samuel 4:20) and children were so highly regarded that childlessness was considered a curse (Genesis 29:32–30:1–23; 1 Samuel 1:5). In the light of the above, the marriage institution subjugated women in the view that it perceived women as property acquired through payment of *mohar*, the bride price (Exodus 21:32, Leviticus 27:1–7). In addition, the wife was to perceive her husband as her master and her personality was merged into that of her husband (Deuteronomy 12:12, Numbers 18:11, 19) (Gladson, 2017). Therefore, in this context, marriage was a particular institution in the Old Testament which was manipulated by men to marginalise women, and ever since, this is how women have experienced the feminisation of poverty even in the contemporary Christian churches.

Apart from being viewed as property of men in marriage, women were also of aesthetic value in men's lives (Gladson, 2017). This view is supported by the notion that throughout the Old Testament, the woman's beauty is always extolled. Examples in support of this view include: Tamar, the daughter of Absalom who was described as a woman of beautiful appearance (2 Samuel 14:27) and Job's daughters who stood out as more beautiful (*yepheh*) than all the women of the earth (Job 42:15). It is interesting to note that in this regard, the Persian harem in the days of Esther regarded women as sex objects greatly prized for their beauty who were supposed to delight the king (Esther 2:14) and win his favour (Esther 2:9). In addition, the most extensive Old Testament love song in the Song of Solomon has amorous and sensuous tones for lovers to converse and sing of their love for each other. The love song adores the beloved woman with eyes like those of a dove and whose hair is likened to a flock of goats. The beloved woman is further perceived to have teeth which are like shorn ewes engulfed with scarlet thread lips and pomegranate-like cheeks (Song of Songs 4:1–7). The woman is to desire

her lover (Song of Songs 3:1–5) whilst her lover desires her (Song of Songs 4:8–15). Gladson (2017) views this portion of the Old Testament as the highest expression of the male–female relationship where physical attraction and sexual consummation appear as normal and beautiful. This revelation points to Genesis 1:26, 27 understanding which depicts the man as made for the woman and the woman for the man. More so, in Ezra–Nehemiah, the problem of Israelite marriage to foreign women flares up on a mass scale (Ezra 9–10; Nehemiah 13:23ff.). These wives were finally put away together with their children because they had corrupted the purity of the race (Ezra 9:2; 10:11).

Just as the Old Testament in general sees women in both a positive light and a negative light, it presents two types of women in symbolic imagery. This basic ambiguity should not be surprising, because it shows the important effect that both good and bad women had upon society (Brueggemann, 1997). The imagery of the unfaithful and harlotrous wife pointed to Israel as the unfaithful wife of Yahweh. Ideally, the prophetic symbolic use of the woman also took a positive turn in Isaiah where Zion was a desolate and forsaken woman whose fear was allayed by Yahweh her husband (Isaiah 54:5–6). Gladson (2017) views Jeremiah's feminine imagery which perceives Jerusalem as the daughter of Zion who is a comely and delicately bred woman (Isaiah 6:2). Similarly, Micah likens Zion to a daughter in travail facing Babylonian exile of which Yahweh will soon rescue her (Micah 4:9–10). Likewise, the five chapters of Lamentations bring in symbolic voices which are heard lamenting the fate of the fallen city of Jerusalem. In this context, Zion appeared as a desolate woman mourning her fate (Lamentations 1:17). Jewett (1975) points out that the symbol of God as male or female is not to be taken literally. It is rather to be understood analogically since the Old Testament was bequeathed to a patriarchal society which prioritised masculine imagery. However, both male and female characteristics are needed to express the *Imago Dei* although they are ultimately inadequate to fully disclose the hidden nature of God.

It is interesting to note that most references to women in the Old Testament are incidental to the main point in the text, except in instances where women play critical roles in the described action, as in the case of Ruth, Esther and Sarah. This fact, together with specific examination of women's place in Israelite society, has shown that women were regarded as subordinate to men. This subordination of women is to be placed alongside the creation narrative which portrays Eve's equality at

the beginning and then her subsequent fall (Gladson, 2017). Thereafter, women who were regarded as second-class citizens were prized by men for their beauty, virtue and procreative abilities. The polarities of the feminine position are acutely apparent in the wisdom texts. Such polarities are also exemplified by the book of Proverbs which describes women as virtuous, industrious, sinful and evil. More so, prophetic literature demonstrates this feminine ambiguity in its symbolic portrayals of women, as both the faithful and apostate people of God. However, in various Old Testament instances, women's roles are secondary. In most cases, women stood behind their husbands, assisted in worship and handled domestic chores. Only rarely, as in the case of Deborah, did women attract national prominence.

NEW TESTAMENT NUANCES OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Women are given preference which is at par with their male counterparts in the New Testament. Jesus sets the pace of women's liberation in the book of Luke 4 verse 18–19 where he says that: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people." This pericope of the New Testament is cardinal in the mission of the universal church. The mission of the church to the world according to Luke 4:18–19 postulates nuances of liberation of all humanity. Many Christian churches, with the RCZ included, fall short of the essence of mission as prescribed in this command of Jesus Christ despite the fact that the need to promote women in the leadership circles of churches is inevitable.

More so, on a related note, the nuances of the liberation of women in the church are recorded by Luke who is conscious of this notion. This insight can be exemplified in Luke's writings to Theophilus as presented in the book of Acts of the Apostles. During the Pentecost event (Acts of the Apostles 2:12), the Holy Spirit entered all people present, women and men included. Again in Acts of the Apostles 9:36, Paul refers to a woman called *Tabitha* as a Christian disciple. This incident is helpful to illustrate that women also had critical positions in the structure of the early church period (www.religiontolerance.org/nfe^bibl.htm). Furthermore, the foregoing insight can also be nuanced when Paul picks a couple, Priscilla and Acquilla, who both acted as pastors to Apollos (Acts of the

Apostles 18:24–26). As far as we can tell, the position of women in the structure of the early church period is almost clear in Paul's writings to the church in Rome. Again, in Acts of the Apostles 16:3, Priscilla is a fellow worker of Paul in Christ. In addition, Paul picks Andronicus and Lunia as some of the male and female apostles of the early church period. Finally, no one has a superior status to the other, which gives the impression that both had equal responsibilities. It must be noted that in these examples, there is no discrimination based on either sex or gender.

Other instances in the New Testament where women are promoted to critical leadership positions are found in Paul's letters to the churches in Corinth, Galatia and Philippi. In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul relays the message that the Holy Spirit gives both men and women its fruits (1 Corinthians 12:4–7). More so, in 2 Corinthians 5:17, anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The reference to “anyone” is meant for both men and women together. Furthermore, in Galatians 3:28, Paul says that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” In this text, Paul views both men and women as equal in the church of God. In the light of this notion of equality between men and women, as recorded in Philippians 4:2, Paul refers to two women, namely Euodia and Syntyche, as his co-workers in the ministry. These two women were active evangelists who partnered Paul in the spreading of the gospel of Jesus Christ during the early church period (www.religioustolerance.org/nfe^bibl.htm). However, other passages have been used to justify the exclusion of women in leadership in church. We turn to these below.

INFERIORITY OF WOMEN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament has many texts which undermine women's liberation and freedom. Such texts include: 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, 1 Corinthians 14:33–36, 1 Timothy 2:8–15 and Ephesians 5:22–24. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul exhorts women to wear head gear when leading in worship (1 Corinthians 11:2–16). This pericope inhibits the right of women to lead in the worship of God (Scroggs, 1977: 44). More so, this text seems to be regulating the conduct of women dressing in worship services. In addition, Paul seems not to enforce a rigid distinction between male and female roles in worship services (Fiorenza, 1983: 223). Women subjugation comes in verse 3 where Christ is referred to as the head of men and men are depicted as heads of women. In this context, the head

points to the ruler which is *kephale* in Greek which means creator or source of something and this implies that Christ is the source of man whilst the man is the source of the woman, argues Fiorenza (1983). God is the source of life for both men and women. It fails to balance if the latter creation which is woman is to submit to an earlier creation, which is man.

Another New Testament pericope which subordinates women is 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 where Paul exhorts women not to speak in church meetings. Like in the previous exhortation, Paul is prohibiting women from active participation in public church gatherings. Although Preagent (1995: 47) and Sroggs (1977: 406) argue that this text is an editor's later interpolation into the original text, it continues to silence women at public church meetings. Furthermore, Paul subordinates wives as subjects to their husbands in Ephesians 5:22–24. In this text, Paul is exhorting wives to submit to their husbands. This wife-husband relationship is also ascribed to Christ-Church relationship and the exhortation is only for women, not for men.

CONTESTED INTERPRETATIONS OF THE BIBLE AND WOMEN

To some extent, the Bible has been engaged within the church or mainstream society as a tool of either oppression or liberation. All societal and ecclesiastical instances where women are oppressed or are at par with their male counterparts have biblical justification. This notion is complemented by Rodney (1981: 29) who envisaged that both the Old and New Testaments advocate for the traditional and subservient role of women as supported by Ephesians 5:22–24, 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 and 1 Corinthians 14:33–36. However, as alluded to earlier, there are other texts in the Bible that support the inclusion of women in critical leadership roles like Deborah who was a female judge as mentioned in Judges 4:4–24 and Miriam who led the Israelites with Moses as recorded in Micah 6:3–4. This notion of women's involvement in critical leadership positions is echoed by Loades (1990) who recorded women as critical leaders during the first four centuries of Christianity on earth.

More so, even if the Bible has mixed views on the status and role of women in the church, some church groups adopt the selective use, as is the case in the RCZ (Keener, 1992: 11). Some churches appeal to selected biblical passages which support women's subordination ignoring texts which advocate for the equality of all humankind. In addition, Paul

seems to oppose the norm when he appointed Phoebe as a deaconess in 1 Corinthians 16 and preached the universality of the gospel as envisaged in the acceptance of gentiles in the church. These gentiles were both male and female. Biblical authors were chauvinistic, coloured by masculine prejudice and ignorance. This tendency was Jewish; hence, the RCZ is propagating the Jewish culture to its members which was heavily patriarchal. Having examined the status of women in the Bible, the following section examines leadership trends in the RCZ. These trends have been influenced by the dominant interpretive paradigms at specific historical junctures.

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP TRENDS IN THE REFORMED CHURCH IN ZIMBABWE

In this section, we analyse the two main phases in the development of women's leadership in the RCZ. We begin with the pioneering phase.

The Pioneering Phase: 1891–1983

When Andrew Louw and the seven evangelists landed on Chief Mugabe's Mountain on the 9th of September 1891, it took them three years to have their first convert who was a woman (Van der Merwe, 1981). As the numbers grew, congregations were established at Jichidza, Alheit, Makumbe and Pamushana missions as recorded by Van der Merwe (1981). At these earliest DRC mission stations, for instance in 1925, out of a membership of 695 at Morgenster Mission, 426 were women whilst 269 were men (Morgenster Mission Church Register, 1925). More so, out of a membership of 476 at Pamushana Mission in 1930, 317 were women whilst 159 were men (Pamushana Mission Church Register, 1930). Since the majority of the members at various mission stations were women, the church's male ministers and evangelists could not meet their spiritual guidance and teaching demands.

Although women were instrumental in the spiritual and financial development of the RCZ, they were excluded from the church's critical decision-making structures. This spiritual yearning of women led to the formation of a women's association in 1933 which was called "*Sungano Yemadzimai*" under the leadership of Mrs Cinie Louw, the wife of a white missionary (Mutumburanzou, 1999: 59). The women's association was actively involved in the activities of the RCZ and later spread from

Morgenster Mission to other congregations with leadership structures at congregation, presbytery and national level. The association nurtured its members for spiritual counsel and stewardship in their homes and families. More so, the association, in wider context taught poverty alleviation skills to women for them to embark on income-generating projects. The main focus of the association was to allow women to share the word of God as well as life experiences for their spiritual edification. The current author observed that *Sungano Yemadzimai* was led by women who were wives of the white missionaries. This development promoted white monopoly which deprived black women the taste of leadership.

It has to be noted that women never functioned as either elders or deacons in the RCZ during the period 1891 to 1983. The conservative interpretation of the Bible, which we referred to in an earlier section, contributed to this state of affairs. This trend was supported by most respondents to the questionnaire and interview questions. Some interviewees went to the extent of referring to women leadership as "...a taboo which cannot be incorporated in the church structures." In addition, women were not trained for ministerial duties; hence, their training focused on duties which cater for spiritual care of children who were still in the catechism classes. Women functioned only as youth counsellors who are inferior to ministers in the governance of the RCZ. This practice of subordinating women to their male counterparts within the RCZ leadership structures is in tandem with the tenets of their Shona culture which is replicated in the church. The idea of perpetuating the Shona culture in the RCZ was mainly echoed by most female and male respondents in the interview schedules administered by the researcher. Most female interviewees made it clear that the RCZ church is a replica of the Shona culture, particularly in terms of how they relegate women to the less influential duties of the church governance. Some even said, "RCZ is like a Shona society institution.....," implying that females in the RCZ view their church as an extension of the Shona culture. Perpetuating this rigid tradition not only has a direct negative impact on the church's growth in securing new female converts, but it threatens the national goals of attaining gender equity by 2030 in Zimbabwe.

LEADERSHIP POSITIONS WHICH RCZ WOMEN WERE DENIED DURING THE RCZ'S PIONEERING PHASE

It has to be noted that during this pioneering phase, RCZ women could not be elected as elders and deaconesses and they were not accepted to train as ministers of the Word of God.

The Office of the Elders

The RCZ has the office of the elder accountable to each and every ward (Vischer, 1992: 23–25). Elders in the RCZ have a threefold function which includes: governing and disciplining of the members, supervision of fellow office bearers and conducting regular house visitation in the ward they are in charge of (RCZ Rules and Regulations, 2010: 41). From 1891 to 1983, no woman was mandated with the eldership duties in the RCZ. These duties were only ascribed to men, a tendency which is in tandem with the Shona culture and supported by the ambiguity of some scriptures of the Bible, as discussed previously.

The Office of the Deacon

The office of the deacon in the RCZ encompasses collection and distribution of gifts (RCZ Rules and Regulations, 2010: 42). Deacons have to do their duties of gathering gifts for the church and distribute them accordingly. In distributing the gifts offered by church members, their focus has to be on those church members who are in real need. This fosters the prevention of poverty among the church members. The current author has observed quite clearly that since the RCZ was implanted in 1891 until 1983, no woman was mandated to carry out deaconate duties in the church.

MINISTERIAL TRAINING

The RCZ believes that ministers of the Word are called by God. After their call, such people will receive theological training which is offered by the church at its theological college which is based at Morgenster Mission. Ministers of the Word in the RCZ preach the Word, administer baptism and Holy Communion, carry out house visitation and exercise discipline over the members under their jurisdiction (RCZ Rules and Regulations,

2010: 40). In addition, ministers of the Word in the RCZ preside at church council meetings, solemnise marriages and conduct funerals for the church members. Nevertheless, the observation noted is that from 1891 to 1983, no woman was trained as a minister, a tendency which is justified by some of the biblical texts, as mentioned earlier on in this chapter.

The yearning of women in the RCZ to assume leadership roles was witnessed when they requested to be elected as elders and deacons in the church as well as to train as ministers, but their requests were rejected at the 1978 and the 1981 Synod Sessions (RCZ Synod Minutes, 1981: 432).

The Liberal Phase: 1984–2020

The liberal phase witnessed unique experiences in relation to the involvement of women in leadership roles within the RCZ. The church became both liberal and proactive to some of the demands of their women membership. At the 1984 Synod Session, women tabled their request for inclusion in the church's leadership structures for the third time. Their demands on leadership opportunities were in line with the national cry of women inclusion in leadership roles which the new black government was also facing (Rutoro, 2007: 112). At this 1984 Synod, for the first time, it was eventually accepted that women could be elected for leadership roles in the RCZ. For example, they were now allowed to lead Sunday worship services, read the liturgy, be elected as deacons and elders, as well as train as ministers (RCZ Synod Minutes, 1981: 631). The 1984 Synod resolution of including women in the RCZ's critical decision-making structures was attacked by men for they thought that it was not acceptable in their Shona culture. Men verbally attacked such women who wanted to train for ministerial posts. On the other hand, in many congregations, women were chosen as elders and deacons, but no woman trained as a minister until 2006 when the first one, Reverend Ndakarwirwa Mubwandarikwa, was trained and ordained in 2007 at the Hatcliffe Congregation in Harare.

Table 4.1 shows us that the number of women who were elected to posts of deacons and elders was lower than that of men. The table shows that from 1984 to 1990, only 20% of the elders and deacons for the whole of the RCZ church were women, whilst 79% were men. The low number of women in the "1984–1990" period might be attributed to

the fact that it was a transition period where women were first included in the church leadership structures. Moreover, although the 1984 Synod resolution of allowing women to be elected as elders and deacons was now effective, most men were reluctant to choose them to such posts because of the effects of the Shona culture and their selective use of the Bible which to some extent promoted patriarchy. In addition, as gleaned from most of the female and male respondents, some women could not vote for women since they looked down upon themselves as inferior to men. It can be observed that women in the RCZ were victims of the labelling theory which stereotyped them to view men as superior than women in all facets of life. The labelling theory posited women as weak beings who cannot take up life challenges to an extent which is at par with men.

The current author also observed that the number of women elected to the posts of eldership and deaconate increased from 20 to 37% in 1991–2000. More so, the findings reveal that the number of men chosen to eldership and deaconate posts was reduced from 79% in 1984–1990 to 62% in the 1991–2000. The improvement in women involvement can be attributed to various reasons which include: societal adaptation to women leadership as proved by government departments, increase of women membership in the church and growth in trusting women leaders. It has to be noted that the Zimbabwean government has supported massive training of women as teachers, doctors, lawyers and nurses and the church could not afford to be left behind in the promotion of women leadership.

Furthermore, the number of women elected as deacons and elders increased from 37% in 1991–2000 to 46% in 2001–2020. Similarly, the number of men elected to eldership and deaconate posts was reduced from 62% in 1991–2000 to 54% in 2001–2020. The twist in leadership structures of the RCZ in terms of eldership and deaconate posts can be attributed to feminist pressure which the world agreed to. The

Table 4.1 Number of women and men elected as elders and deacons in the RCZ from 1984 to 2020

| <i>Sex</i> | <i>1984–1990</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>1991–2000</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>2001–2020</i> | <i>%</i> |
|------------|------------------|----------|------------------|----------|------------------|----------|
| Female | 1302 | 20,66 | 4500 | 37,45 | 9200 | 46 |
| Male | 4998 | 79,34 | 7500 | 62,55 | 10,800 | 54 |
| Total | 6300 | 100 | 12,000 | 100 | 20,000 | 100 |

Source RCZ Congregational Minutes (1984–2020)

government of Zimbabwe had female ministers and a female vice president. Women had also penetrated various pockets of society in education, health, law and agriculture, to mention a few. Here, the current author is making reference to these insights to illustrate the fact that developments within the church in general and the RCZ in particular were in sync with national developments in civil society in Zimbabwe.

WOMEN IN MINISTERIAL TRAINING

The 1984 RCZ Synod resolution which allowed women to train as ministers was never implemented until in 2006 when the first female minister, Reverend Ndakarwirwa Mubwandarikwa, was accepted for ministerial training.

From Table 4.2, it can be noted that out of 209 ministers trained by Murray Theological College from 1936 to 2020, only 19 (9, 09%) were women and 190 (90, 91%) were men. It can be deduced that this is so because only male ministers were trained by the church for ministerial work since 1936. The training of women for ministerial work commenced in 2006. In addition, it has to be noted that most women who complete theological training take more time than their male counterparts to be called by congregations to take up the ministerial position. In the light of this, some congregations would take up to three years or more without a minister if they are left with female candidate ministers of which to call from. Furthermore, some congregations have more women elders and deaconesses than men but will not opt to call women ministers. This might be so because women at times are their own enemies, due to their socialisation which makes them to envisage leadership as a preserve for men; some female congregants are the ones in the forefront to resist female leaders.

Table 4.2 Number of men and women who were trained as ministers at Murray Theological College from 1936 to 2020

| <i>Sex</i> | <i>1936–2020</i> | <i>%</i> |
|------------|------------------|----------|
| Female | 19 | 9, 09 |
| Male | 190 | 90, 91 |
| Total | 209 | 100 |

Source RCZ Ministers' Register (1936–2020)

Women in Church Boards

The RCZ has eleven boards which are elected at each and every synod session. These boards help the church in superintending various RCZ departments. These are: Evangelism Board, Murray Theological College Board, Reformed Church University Board, Education Board, Health Service and Community Development Board, Audit, Business Units, Youth, Music, Human Resources and Finance Board. Women involvement in these boards is insignificant, as shown by the following table.

As shown by Table 4.3, out of 110 board members of the RCZ's 11 boards from 2000 to 2010, 5 (4, 55%) were women and 105 (95, 45%) were men. This can be attributed to various reasons which may include: Shona culture, selective use of the Bible and lack of confidence in women leadership capabilities by both women and men. This tendency of subdued women participation in critical leadership structures for the period 2000 to 2020 in the RCZ is in tandem with the leadership trends in Zimbabwe for the same period where women were yearning for participation but they were side-lined. The notion is supported by the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation News item of 1 May 2017 which reported that out of 350 members of the Zimbabwean parliament, 125 (35, 7%) were women whilst 225 (64, 3%) were men. More so, out of 1635 ward councillors in Zimbabwe's rural and urban councils, 323 (19, 75%) were women whilst 1312 (80, 25%) were men. The promotion of the institution of patriarchy in the RCZ is replicated in Zimbabwe's government departments of Zimbabwe where critical ministerial and decision-making posts are occupied by men. In this light, the inferiority of women pertaining in the Zimbabwean nation is cascading to its churches. Ideally, fighting this cannot be the duty of the church alone but needs concerted effort of the government and civil society as well.

Table 4.3 Number of women and men in the RCZ's eleven boards from 2000 to 2020

| <i>Sex</i> | <i>2000–2010</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>2011–2020</i> | <i>%</i> |
|------------|------------------|----------|------------------|----------|
| Female | 5 | 4, 55 | 12 | 10, 9 |
| Male | 105 | 95, 45 | 98 | 89, 1 |
| Total | 110 | 100 | 110 | 100 |

Source RCZ Synod Minutes (2000–2020)

WOMEN IN THE MODERATURE OF THE RCZ

The Moderature of the RCZ is the church's highest decision-making board which exercises the duties of the Synodical Committee when it is not in session. The Moderature is constituted by eight members who are: moderator (minister), vice-moderator (minister), general secretary (minister), vice-general secretary (minister), actuary (minister), synod secretary (lay person), vice-synod secretary (lay person) and treasurer (lay person) (RCZ Rules and Regulations, 2010: 7–8). Since 1952 when the RCZ Synod was weaned from the DRC of the Cape Synod, men were chosen as Moderature members up to 2010. It was only at the 2010 and 2012 synod sessions when one woman was elected at each of the sessions to be part of the RCZ's top decision-making board as shown in the following table.

Table 4.4 is clear testimony of the lack of instruments which support promotion of women leadership in the RCZ. This notion is supported by the fact that because of lack of women empowering instruments in the RCZ, the 2016 synod session elected only eight males into the Moderature. The overarching question arising from such a status quo is as follows, "Why are women not elected into this top decision making board?" The answer to this question demands a closer look at a wide spectrum of issues relating to women's leadership in the RCZ and in Zimbabwe. At the 2018 Synod Session, one woman was elected into the Moderature which proved that the RCZ lacks gender empowering instruments in all its policies covering election of elders, deacons, ministers for training, members to the church's boards as well as the Moderature, which is the church's top decision-making board.

Table 4.4 Number of women and men in the moderature of the RCZ from 1952 to 2020

| <i>Sex</i> | <i>1952–2020</i> | <i>%</i> |
|------------|------------------|----------|
| Female | 3 | 1, 22 |
| Male | 244 | 98, 78 |
| Total | 247 | 100 |

Source RCZ Synodical Minutes/Reports (1952–2020)

THE FUTURE OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN THE REFORMED CHURCH IN ZIMBABWE

The future of women leadership in the RCZ lies in the following five basic principles, namely gender-balanced biblical interpretation which puts men and women at par, leadership formation for women membership, as well as creation of leadership spaces for women to have improved access to the church's leadership structures, men-women solidarity in the quest for women's participation in the RCZ leadership structures and women-women unity in the gender-balanced leadership representation of both women and men in the church structures.

Gender-balanced biblical interpretation points to use of gender-balanced lenses in exegesis, hermeneutics and worship. If gender-balanced lenses become the status quo of the church's life, then women will enjoy all the church privileges which men have been monopolising since the RCZ was formed in Zimbabwe, in 1891. More so, RCZ women need to be exposed to rigorous leadership formation trainings for them to be motivated to take up strategic leadership positions in their church. In addition, the RCZ as an institution should open up leadership space for their female membership. This can be so through creating women quota system whereby some leadership posts will be reserved for women membership which can also be achieved through creation of proportional representative posts which might end up giving more posts to women than men for the women are more than the men in terms of numbers in the church. In the same perspective, men and women should work together in the quest for improved women involvement in church leadership. The ultimate game changer, though, is solidarity among women themselves in lobbying for improved women involvement in the church's leadership structures.

CONCLUSION

Women's participation in leadership roles in the RCZ is a phenomenon which has evolved for decades since the church's inception in Zimbabwe in 1891. It started with the Pioneering Stage (1891–1983) whereby no women had an opportunity to attain any leadership position in the church. The trend, however, shifted during the next phase which I referred to as the Liberal Phase (1984–2020) which witnessed tremendous transformation of the church's theology which brought in gender-balanced

understanding of God's Word. The period witnessed women assuming numerous positions such as: eldership, deaconate, board membership as well as some positions in the Moderature which is the church's highest decision-making executive of the Synod. However, I believe that the future of women's leadership in the RCZ church is a mixed bag which includes: declaration, acceleration, as well as static changes. It is my sincere hope and prayer that as Zimbabwe's Second Republic works towards the realisation of Vision 2030 couched with promises for gender equity on the national political arena, the RCZ will also continue to implement changes in its leadership policies to ensure that women are equally and fairly represented in all sectors of the church's leadership hierarchy.

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