


Implications of the *imago Dei* (Gn 1:26) on gender equality and agrarian land reform in Zimbabwe

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The creation of humanity (Gn 1:26–2:25) marks the climatic point of the creation process because after it, God is said to have rested. A clear marker that humans are the epitome of creation is the fact that they were created in God's image (Gn 1:26). Unlike animals, humans have the capacity to think, act with free will, exert self-control and also have a conscience. These distinctive characteristics earn humanity not only dominion over creation (Gn 1:28), but also the care towards the created order. The fact of having been created in God's image, *imago Dei*, or to be godlike, is therefore associated with certain rights and responsibilities over creation. Further, being created in God's image implies that human life itself is sacred and thus should not be terminated in any way, either by the individual themselves or by any other person(s) (Gn 9:6). Given that human life is so sacred, such a rationale is invoked in the absolute prohibition on murder. Above all, being created in God's image connotes gender equality – 'male and female he created them' (Gn 1:27b). In view of the land reform exercise in Zimbabwe, so much has happened, but the big question which remains is whether women have received a fair share in the land redistribution exercise. Making a womanist contextual reading of Genesis 1:26, this article seeks to reflect on the Zimbabwean land reform exercise, challenging the lack of gender inclusion in the redistribution exercise.

Contribution: Given that women theology is that of liberation, empowerment and affirmation, this research makes a unique contribution to women theologies as it pushes for women's empowerment through fair land redistribution. By tapping into the implications of having been created in God's image, the research has successfully argued that the current situation, whereby gender gaps in land ownership are still quite large, needs to be addressed as stewardship over creation was given to both men and women.

Keywords: creation; *jambanja*; image of God; Zimbabwe; Genesis 1; women.

Introduction

While the agrarian land reform exercise has been a phase of Zimbabwean history, it is equally an exercise in continuity as it continues to have a say on the current and future image of Zimbabwe. As the spectre of land reform remains, self-introspection as a nation in light of our Creator's intentions in forming us in the Divine's own image is a necessity. In view of the *imago Dei*, 'God's image', in which we have been fashioned, this article shall evaluate the land reform exercise in light of its implications for humanity. At least three derived implications of the *imago Dei* shall be used, namely humans' responsibility towards, and rights over, the created world; humans' duty to preserve and care for human life, thus at all costs avoiding human murder; and lastly, the need to promote gender equality at all costs in every sphere of human endeavour, as 'male and female were created in the Divine's own image'. As a follow-up to the third implication in particular, the article zeroes in more on resettled rural women. While this group is often seen on the forefront, dancing to the success of the land grabs from the white colonisers, hardly any of them have the redistributed land registered in their own names but rather those of their husbands or male relatives. Patriarchy remains a stumbling block to their attainment of an equal status with the male counterparts. Before addressing in full the implications of the *imago Dei*, it is perhaps more enlightening to start off with a brief description of the agrarian land reform in Zimbabwe.

Scope

The land reform exercise which took Zimbabwe by storm between 2000 and 2002 has been the subject of much debate and therefore has seen a lot of work being written around it. Some have

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placed emphasis on the *jambanja* [chaotic] manner in which the process was carried out, the new forms of livelihoods it created, its impact on agricultural productivity as well as its relegation of former farm workers into abject poverty (Chaumba, Scoones & Wolmer 2003; Moyo 2000; Sachikonye 2004). Others have focused on the factors that fuelled the land invasions, such as the need of some communities to return to their ancestral homes from which they had been displaced by white settlers (Chakanyuka 2007; Marongwe 2003; Mazarire 2008, 2009). Little, if any, attention has been paid, however, on the need to evaluate the whole exercise of the land reform against God's intentions in creating us in the Divine's own image in the first place. It is the author's conviction that if the exercise had from its start been carried out with God's purposes for humanity in mind, Zimbabwe would have surpassed being the breadbasket of Africa to become the breadbasket of the whole world. The land grabbing exercise would have been a success story with no complaints from any quarter; no stories of bloodshed and no unfair distribution would have occurred; less harm would have been inflicted on our ecology, and women would have equal access to the land.

God's intentions at creation

In order to understand God's intentions in creating humanity in the Divine image, it is critical to have a look at Genesis 1:26 against its Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) context. The archaeological excavations of the 19th and 20th centuries have unearthed great civilisations of the ANE, and it has come to dawn upon the scholarly fraternity that biblical traditions have roots that stretch deep into earlier times and out into surrounding lands and traditions. Ever since, the parallels between the biblical stories and ANE stories have become the subject of rigorous research. What is important, however, is not simply the similarities one can find between biblical traditions and ANE sources; the dissimilarities between them are an important factor to consider too. While biblical writers at times recasted stories that went around everywhere in the Ancient Near East world, they transformed these stories so that they could be vehicles of expressing their values and beliefs in Yahweh.

A look at the creation story in Genesis allows one to make a justifiable assumption that the writer of the Priestly story of creation was familiar with the Babylonian story of creation, *Enuma Elish*. While similarities abound between the two stories, one can already see the redactor's hand in the Genesis account. In contrast to the *Enuma Elish* account, which views the creation of humans just as an afterthought by the gods or simply as less important beings, in the biblical account humans are viewed highly. They are not helpless victims of blind forces but rather a special creation of God. The creation of man and woman is actually the climatic divine act, after which God took a rest. The unique position and dignity of humanity is demonstrated by the fact that out of all the creatures God created, it is only humans who are said to have been created in God's image. What this therefore implies is that there is a value that has been attached to humanity from creation.

Having considered God's intentions in creating humanity in the Divine's own image, it is worthwhile now to assess how the land redistribution exercise has been carried out in Zimbabwe in light of God's purposes for humanity.

Responsibility over the created order

As one progresses in reading Genesis 1:26, one sees that it was not just out of sheer interest that God created humanity in the Divine image; it was rather to make humans assume godlike qualities and responsibilities. Both man and woman are charged with 'dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, over all wild animals and all creatures that crawl on the ground'. Thus, in short, the basic primary responsibility that God entrusted to both was care of the environment. God's intention was that the humans were supposed to respect and take good care of the environment in order that it could support both them and all the other living things that had been created. To aid humanity in the task, God allowed both the man and woman a share in the Divine image through their capacity to act rationally, act with free will, have self-control and follow the dictates of conscience.

Scanning the land reform exercise in Zimbabwe, one can appreciate some aspects of it while being forced to raise eyebrows at other aspects in terms of how we have been (un)mindful of our primary responsibility over the environment entrusted to us by God. On a positive note, one may argue that the land reform exercise has in some way managed to curb the plundering of mineral resources in Zimbabwe by foreigners who pretended to be just concerned about farming, yet they had some unaccounted-for mining areas on their farms. Such illegal dealings were alluded to by the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF) member of Parliament Simbanetwa Mudarikwa, who said that Zimbabwe was losing a great deal of revenue in mining operations disguised as agri-businesses (Mudarikwa cited in *New Zimbabwe* 11 September 2016). Although his salvo of accusations was in reference to some Chinese farmers of our time, it appears that most colonial farmers in Zimbabwe were carrying out mining operations on their farms under the disguise of agri-business. Passing a comment on an article published in *Newsday*, 'New diamond deposits found in Chimanimani, Zimbabwe' (Mangudhla cited in *Newsday* 13 December 2013), one commentator known by the pseudonym Samson alleges that Roy Bennet had been mining diamonds since time immemorial at his farm, and that is why Gushungo (Robert Mugabe) refused to appoint him a minister that time. Inasmuch as mineral resources remained in the hands of the treacherous few, it was a clear violation of the order of God, who, since the time of creation, has wanted the environment to support both humans and all other living things.

Another positive result of the land reform is that it brought about individual entitlement to the pieces of land that were taken over from the white settlers. This is not to turn a blind

eye to the fact that most beneficiaries of the land reform were those affiliated to the ruling party ZANU–PF, especially the elite classes, and little, if any, came the way of ordinary Zimbabweans. Whether the new landowner was a ZANU–PF stalwart or not, the good that this brought about is that locals began to have a sense of responsibility for the environment, as they felt ownership of the pieces of land placed in their care, unlike in the times past when people cruelly destroyed forests and recklessly killed wild animals in the white people’s protected safaris as a way of trying to retaliate against the white people who owned a bigger share of these natural resources. Where some resources fell outside the jurisdiction of particular individuals, people had the habit of vandalising, arguing *ndezeve povo* [it belongs to the public]; hence, there was no need to worry about accountability issues. As new owners, locals after the land reform exercise began to jealously guard the properties that were now under their ownership.

While the positive effects of the land reform in regard to the environment may be noted, the darker side of it is a cause of more concern. Individual entitlement to pieces of land has, for some, meant total liberty to do whatever they want to the environment within their area of jurisdiction. The country has witnessed an unprecedented cutting down of trees in the name of creating new fields for agriculture. Fuelled by the desire to make ‘quick money’, some have resorted to the haphazard cutting down of trees so as to sell the firewood. As one drives across the country, it has almost become a common sight to see packs of firewood staked by the roadside for sale to passers-by or to meet people with excessive loads of firewood on their bicycles for sale in town locations.

While at times this can be seen as a mitigating measure to assist people who often find themselves stranded because of erratic power cuts, as well as possibly the only means through which one can put bread on the table for the family because of high unemployment in the country, one wonders if this meets up to the care for the environment that God entrusted to humanity. As some recklessly cut down trees, others are causing land degradation as they mould bricks for sale, while others engage in *chikorokoza* [illegal gold mining]. It appears most people have become ‘quick money’ oriented, such that there is hardly any thought about tomorrow, nor for the wildlife that also need to benefit from the environment as originally intended by God at creation. Taringa and Sipeyiye (2013) are quite right when they argue that the redressing of the thorny land issue should have been gradually undertaken with the utmost caution to avoid destroying the communal and traditional socioreligious ways of relating to the land, as opposed to individual ownership, which breeds a capitalist mentality. Not only is humanity going contrary to God’s intentions at creation by claiming the environment for itself only at the expense of other creatures, but most resettled farmers after the land grabs have gone on a massive drive to hunt down wild animals such that very little wildlife can still be found outside of game reserves.

During the Second Chimurenga, guerrillas immensely respected the animal life as well as vegetation. As often narrated by ex-combatants, there was a cementing partnership between guerrillas with animal life to such an extent that animals could give warning to guerrillas about impending danger. On the contrary, the Third Chimurenga ushered in a different scenario: some communal lands and forests that had been revered as sacred fell victim to land-hungry peasants, and animals were butchered at will (Taringa & Sipeyiye 2013).

Duty to preserve and care for human life

Apart from the right to have the dominion over creation and the subsequent responsibility to care for the Earth, the very *imago Dei* nature of humanity connotes a further implication for humans. God intended to inculcate in humanity a deeper understanding that human life is sacred, hence deserving of special care and protection. Such a call to respect human life is well articulated in Genesis 9:6, which reads, ‘If anyone sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has man been made’. As is plainly clear, to God, there is no other way of compensating or punishing someone for human slaughter except forfeiture of one’s own life. Such a rationale is invoked in the absolute prohibition on murder.

The biblical conception of humans carrying the divine image is a complete opposite to ANE conceptions. Whereas, for example, the *Enuma Elish* story pictures humans as the menials of the gods, taking care of them, in the biblical account one finds an antithesis of this; it is actually God who takes the responsibility to care for humans. The very first communication to Adam and Eve shows God’s loving concern for their needs and welfare. As captured well in Genesis 1, God blessed them saying:

Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth. (vv. 28-29)

To further demonstrate God’s care for humanity, Adam and Eve were instructed: ‘You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge’ (Gn 2:16). In short, one may say that unlike in Ancient Near East stories, humans according to the biblical account are objects of God’s concern; hence, they carry with them majesty and dignity. Having majesty and dignity as a result of having been created in God’s image does not, however, mean that humans are equal to God, who can freely determine the end of a person’s life.

Taking a look at the land reform in Zimbabwe against the charge that was given to humanity by God to preserve and care for human life, one cannot fail to at least appreciate that the spirit with which the exercise was conducted was to try and enhance life for many Zimbabweans who felt disadvantaged by the colonial land distribution. After settlers came, between 1945 and 1960, local inhabitants were

pushed from their ancestral homes to 'native reserves' (Palmer & Birch 1992), which were less productive. The best half of the land with good soil and better rainfall had been taken over by a few white farmers (Chung 2006), while a majority of black farmers were forced to eke out a living in rocky and mountainous places, where they acted as buffer zones to marauding animals, thus protecting the white person's fields from such animals as baboons, elephants, monkeys, pigs and so on. In such conditions, it was indeed a tough task to provide the best care for one's children and family, as most were reduced from being providers to beggars, begging for work and at times food for their families from the same white people who had chased them off their land. The correction of this gross injustice through the land reform exercise can thus be regarded as a positive move that helped local inhabitants to fulfil their God-given mandate to care for human life.

While a correction to an earlier injustice of land dispossession by the white people was indeed very noble and worthy to pursue, the means to achieve that at times tended to go to extremes. As the heat of the land reform escalated, there were numerous reports in the media on the upsurge of violence against white farmers. One such report, covered by BBC News, was that of the murder of a Norton farmer, Terry Ford. According to the BBC report, Terry Ford was tied up and shot dead on his farm near Norton, about 40 km (25 miles) west of Harare, and was the 10th white farmer at that time who had been murdered since the start of the controversial land seizures (BBC News 19 March 2002).

While the exact number of those killed during the land reform exercise, as well as the motives behind the killings, may be hard to establish, it is a fact that there was loss of human life through murders during the process. Although the land takeovers were in themselves a noble idea, since they largely were a correction of the colonial injustice, there is, however, no way one may justify the killings that accompanied them. The moment one takes into cognisance the mandate we derive from having been created in God's image, the more it dawns on our consciousness that somehow we derailed in our land reform exercise. Genesis 9:6, as we saw, unequivocally stated that '[i]f anyone sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has man been made'. Regardless of the reason, God does not permit anyone to terminate the life of the other.

The duty to ensure equality between men and women

The final, climactic act of creation was the creation of the woman from the man. That is actually the peak of creation, not an afterthought. Just as God had created a man (first creation story), there is also an imprint of the Divine in the creation of the woman (second creation story). Just as God first breathed life into the nostrils of Adam, God did the same with Eve. Thus, the idea that the human being is formed from

dust but given life by God captures that paradoxical mix of earthly and Divine elements, dependence and freedom, that characterises humans as unique from other creations (Hayes 2012).

Regarding the creation of human beings, thus far one finds no suggestion whatever of an unequal relationship between the man and the woman before God. In fact, the Hebrew term אָדָם [Adam] referring to the person formed from the dust by God is actually not a proper name; it needs rather to be seen as a generic term which just means 'human' or simply 'people'. To be more precise, it is derived from the Hebrew word *adamah*, which means earth; hence, Adam could simply be translated as earthling. The term thus encompasses both the man and woman created in God's image, which points back to their equality before God.

Even if one were to take the second creation account, whereby the woman is formed from the bone (rib) of Adam, again, the text does not imply that the woman is therefore subordinate to the man. Although we are in the 21st century, there are some important seminal works which are hard to ignore; otherwise, it would be an injustice to not give credit to such works. Some mediaeval Jewish commentators, for example, are known for having provided some memorable observations regarding the creation of the first woman, Eve. Matthew Henry (cited in Kutilek 2009) usually gets the credit for having said:

The woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be loved. (n.p.)

Picking up from Henry, a later commentator, John Gill (1697–1771) (cited in Kutilek 2009), rephrased much of Henry's statement when he said:

It is commonly observed, and pertinently enough, that the woman was not made from the superior part of man, that she might not be thought to be above him, and have power over him; nor from any inferior part, as being below him, and to be trampled on by him; but out of his side, and from one of his ribs, that she might appear equal to him; and from a part near his heart, and under his arms, to show that she should be affectionately loved by him; and always under his care and protection. (n.p.)

While many associate Matthew Henry with the above memorable comment, it appears there is no proof that he was the originator of it. In a work which was published posthumously in 1683, Matthew Poole (1624–1679), cited in Kutilek (2009), is said to have earlier made a similar comment saying:

The woman was taken out of this part [*i.e. the side*], not out of the higher or lower parts, to show that she is neither to be her husband's mistress [*i.e. dominator*], to usurp authority over him, I Timothy 2:12; nor yet to be his slave to be abused, despised, or trampled under his feet; but to be kindly treated, and used like a companion, with moderation, respect, and affection. (n.p.)

With the creation of the woman, the whole of God's creative work had now been completed. A look at both creation stories in Genesis thus portrays both the male and female persons as the epitome of God's creation. Godlike in nature through possession of unique capabilities, both humans, regardless of gender, were equipped for stewardship over the created world.

Women and the land reform exercise in Zimbabwe

In line with the above biblical imperative to view women as equal to men, the land reform exercise in Zimbabwe in consequence should have been seen championing the idea of equality of gender in the land distribution. When the agrarian land seizures began, it was basically the men who were on the forefront in instilling terror in the white farmers, parcelling out the seized pieces of land and setting up temporal shelters on the occupied land. By their nature, therefore, the land invasions were gender exclusive, as most women were considered too weak-natured to withstand the challenges which were associated with the invasions. In affirmation of this, Gaidzanwa (2011:8) argues: 'The fast track land reform in Zimbabwe did not manifestly target gender equity but racial parity, the most pressing socio-economic and political issue of the time'. Women were only later to join their male counterparts in the temporary shelters once indicators of a successful invasion had been noted. Since the invasions were happening against the background of violating the constitutional provisions safeguarding the white farmers' right to the land, many were initially not sure if they were or were not to be moved away by the law enforcement agents. Prior to the constitutional amendment that saw the nationalisation of all agricultural land in Zimbabwe, the government had no legal leeway to transfer land ownership to the new land beneficiaries (Murisa 2017). During the initial phases of the invasions, the white commercial farmers enjoyed the false hope that the courts would continue to stand on their side and hence logged several appeals in the courts against the setting aside of particular farms for compulsory acquisition by the government (Gaidzanwa 2011).

As the Robert Mugabe government of the time appeared to condone these invasions, the land invaders gained confidence that the newly occupied spaces were now rightfully theirs. The government, as observed by Gaidzanwa (2011:7), 'was not in a position to halt these occupations through the use of riot police in the face of the impending 2000 parliamentary elections'. Adding to the smiles of the land invaders was the *Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 17) Act*, which was signed into law on 12 September 2005, nationalising land acquired through the fast-track process and depriving original owners of the right to challenge the expropriation action in court (Constitution History of Zimbabwe 2016). In 2006, the government of Zimbabwe, as noted by Murisa (2017), committed itself to a new tenure system of permits held in

perpetuity for A1 plots and 99-year leases for A2 plots. In the case of married couples, the user permit for A1 plots was to be registered in the names of both spouses and offered in perpetuity to the beneficiary.

With the law now backing the invasions, land invaders began calling in their families to the new lands. This, however, accounts for how most women failed to secure individual land ownership of the resettled spaces, as much of the land was already in the possession of their pioneering male counterparts. Although the land rights stated on the user permit given to the newly resettled families in A1 plots showed some cosmetic changes in recognising both spouses, the land rights hardly differed from those existing in customary tenure areas, whereby land access and user rights are based on belonging and membership to a lineage group. Although the user permits empowered women to also use the land, they were denied the right to possess the land in their individual capacities, save for few in single-parent households. It was an even worse situation for women when it came to A2 plots. Such plots were given after a clear demonstration of one's capability to finance the farming activities on the farm, having a sound knowledge about farming and proving beyond reasonable doubt the ability to use the land as well as the financial muscle to hire a farm manager (Gaidzanwa 2011). This saw a number of women failing to meet this eligibility bar, save for a few who were politically connected, and what this meant is that men, by virtue of having family assets and savings registered in their names, ended up being beneficiaries of more A2 plots compared with women.

While some may want to argue that following the agrarian land reform, there are now at least about 20% women landowners and leaseholders in Zimbabwe (IRIN 2014), it is evidently clear that they still lag far behind. This finds support from an observation made by Allison Goebel (2005), who noted that the 'fast-track' practices privileged men as the primary recipients of the land reform exercise, and women continue to be marginalised given the emerging roles of traditional authorities in the reform process, as well as weak legal provisions which cannot help them in their struggles for change. Such a scenario is not that different from what is prevailing across the African continent. Although a research paper that was published by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI 2013) paints a fuzzy picture concerning women and land in Africa through unverified statements like 'less than 2 percent of the world's land is owned by women' or 'women possess approximately 15% of agricultural land in Africa', it largely remains true that despite a lack of adequate information, the trend that women possess less land than their male counterparts, regardless of how land ownership is conceptualised, is remarkably quite consistent. Further to that, in a number of cases, the gender gaps in land ownership are too pronounced to turn a blind eye (IFPRI cited in IRIN 2014). Such gaps need to be addressed if humanity is to live according to the Creator's intentions. Stewardship over

creation was granted to both the man and the woman, so neither of them should think themselves more privileged than the other.

Conclusion

So much has been written and debated about the land reform in Zimbabwe. Concerns, however, regarding the equity of land access between men and women created in God's image have barely been adequately addressed, and quite often is there hardly a connection of this discourse to God, the owner of the land. It has been the task of this research to evaluate the land reform exercise in Zimbabwe against the Creator's intentions of creating humanity in the Divine's own image. It has been observed that the manner in which the exercise has been conducted falls short of God's will in that no proper care has been given to the flora and fauna, no care for human life and gender differences between humanity have not received adequate attention, with the womenfolk continuing to be disadvantaged. Although women constitute the majority of the rural population in Zimbabwe and are more extensively involved in agricultural activities, which are the dominant livelihood strategy of rural areas, their share in the land distribution exercise was largely ignored. There is thus need for Zimbabwe to rethink and revisit the whole exercise, correcting and compensating where need be the loss of life and unfair practices witnessed during the redistribution exercise, in accordance with the Creator's intentions.

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Author's contributions

C.M. is the sole author of this article.

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