

# Thorny the paths they tread, Zimbabwean women and the COVID-19 Pandemic: A womanist reflection

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This study investigated the impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on the women of Zimbabwe. Drawing from womanist perspectives, the study reflected on pastoral care, gender equality and proposed new ways of engaging the Bible while recognising the impact of hermeneutics on lived realities. The research examined situational analysis reports from government and nonprofit organisations, journal articles and other academic sources focusing on various aspects of Zimbabwean women's contexts. Womanist perspectives were engaged to provide parameters for the reflection and the recommendation of alternatives that have potential to contribute towards the enhancement of women's lives. The study revealed a significant economic impact on those in the informal sector, which is largely occupied by women. Moreover, during periods of lockdown, there was a significant increase in the cases of gender-based violence (GBV), intimate partner violence (IPV) and child marriages. Churches were also impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted their operations even though many continued in their efforts to make a positive contribution to their members and society at large. While many churches had to discover creative ways to provide pastoral care for their flocks, when it comes to the complex challenges such as GBV, IPV, rape and child marriages, there is a lack of evidence demonstrating the church's practical attempts towards addressing them.

**Contribution:** This paper suggests that gender equality and the employment of gender-sensitive biblical hermeneutics are alternatives that have real potential to contribute towards efforts targeted at safeguarding the liberation, well-being and flourishing of women during the pandemic and beyond. It also introduces *seMadzimai*, a womanist African-Zimbabwean Bible-reading approach.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; women; Zimbabwe; gender-sensitive; Bible; womanist; hermeneutics; *seMadzimai*; gender equality; Africa.

## Introduction

*Toifamba sei nzira*

How do we walk a path

*ine minzwa inobaya?*

which has thorns that prick?

*Pfugama unamate*

Kneel and pray

*Unamate! pfugama unamate*

Pray! kneel and pray

*Unamate! pfugama unamate*<sup>1</sup>

Pray! kneel and pray

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has had a considerable influence on most aspects of life globally, and Zimbabwe has not been immune. Most people were forced to reconsider how to navigate life in light of the pandemic. The chorus *Toifamba sei nzira ine minzwa inobaya*<sup>1</sup> is well known. Zimbabwean women have sung it long before the COVID-19 pandemic emerged to encourage each other through life challenges. This chorus would have found new relevance when the pandemic hit, as a sizeable portion of the Zimbabwean population has been impacted one way or another. Socially, families and communities were isolated, and this challenged many Africans as their cultural worldview of *hunhu* or *ubuntu* and their Christian teachings are both understood in terms of one's connection to others (Chirisa et al. 2021). Culturally, COVID-19 pressed Zimbabwean communities to reconsider some practices that have been deeply embedded in their lives (Women and Law in Southern

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1.A well-known Zimbabwean Christian chorus.

**Note:** Special Collection: Women Theologies, sub-edited by Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale (Midlands State University, Zimbabwe) and Tanya van Wyk (University of Pretoria).

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Africa 2020). The pandemic worsened the economy of Zimbabwe, which was already declining (Matiashe 2020; Murisa 2021). On the religious front, faith communities were also forced to consider alternative ways to remain accessible to their members (Chingwe 2021; Mahiya & Murisi 2022). As the world came to terms with the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, many contracted the virus, and sadly, some of them lost their lives (Murewanhema et al. 2020; Zimbabwe: WHO Coronavirus Disease [COVID-19] Dashboard 2022).

In the early days of the pandemic, it was projected that women, being a marginalised group already, would feel the impact much more acutely than men (Masomera & Chigwanda 2020). This prediction was fulfilled, as statistics would later confirm. Because of their roles as caregivers, both in the home and in the health sector, women were more at risk of being exposed to the virus, especially with the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) (Chamunogwa 2021). Economically, women were disproportionately impacted, as some lost employment and others were unable to trade in the informal sector (Chirisa et al. 2021; Chirume & Kaseke 2020). During the pandemic, it was noted that the number of child brides increased significantly (Shaw, Chigavazira & Tutnjevic 2021). Cases of intimate partner violence (IPV) and gender-based violence (GBV) also increased drastically, not only in numbers but also in levels of brutality (Masomera & Chigwanda 2020; Women and Law in Southern Africa 2020).

This essay is a womanist exposition of the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of Zimbabwean women through a critical lens. It offers suggestions on how the church might respond to improve women's lived experiences during and beyond the pandemic. Womanist theological and hermeneutical critiques seek to position themselves within the perspectives of the oppressed, those on the 'underside', and they seek to take on an emancipatory intent (Kirk-Duggan 2001). Womanist theologians and scholars seek to expose the grim realities black women face and to identify possible avenues within the Christian framework through which to liberate women from abuse and marginality while celebrating their successes and acknowledging their contributions.

In this qualitative study, secondary data were collected in the form of reports from government and nongovernment agencies, news and journal articles and other related academic publications. Churches play a significant role as 'spiritual families' (Chirisa et al. 2021). For the majority of the Zimbabwean population, the church informs and shapes the way people make sense of their world. Hence, when research from academics, government and nongovernment organisations highlight the prevalence of certain issues in society, it is crucial that the church considers its response if it is to remain relevant (Mahiya & Murisi 2022). There are various church denominations in Zimbabwe, which include the African Initiated Churches (AICs), Pentecostal churches and those of Western origins, that is, Catholic and Protestant

(Chitando 2020).<sup>2</sup> For this study, data were analysed with a view to establish the impact of COVID-19 on Zimbabwean women since its emergence in March 2020. The reflection on the church's response to issues impacting Zimbabwean women is informed by womanist perspectives.

This paper begins with a brief overview of the framework guiding this research, womanist theology and hermeneutics. The second section offers a brief summary of the context of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe. As the focus of this study is on the experience of women, the third section discusses the various ways in which women of Zimbabwe were negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The fourth section acknowledges the impact of COVID-19 on the church while surveying some of its response, and the fifth and final section proposes that ensuring gender equality in the church and the engagement of gender-sensitive approaches to reading the Bible are alternatives that have potential to contribute towards alleviating the suffering of women, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

## Womanist theology and hermeneutics

The emergence of womanist theology can be traced back to 1980s when women of African descent, mostly in the United States of America, adopted Alice Walker's definition of a 'womanist' as a prism through which they could critically articulate and foreground the experiences, perspectives and aspirations of black women (Walker 1984). Walker, a renowned writer and the first African American woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, defined a womanist as a courageous and confident black woman whose commitment to the flourishing of communities extends to all people (Walker 1984). While Walker's definition was not set within a religious context, it was picked up by African American female theologians and ethicists as they sought to establish their theological framework, particularly one that could be sensitive to the needs of black women in America (Weems 2003). Womanism emerged partly because of black women's dissatisfaction with the feminist movement, which at the time mostly highlighted issues affecting white women, and partly because of the realisation that while their black male counterparts were putting efforts into fighting racism and classism, they overlooked the sexism experienced by black women (Weems 2003). Similarly, black female theologians noted that black theology, which challenged and resisted racism in the church and society in general, did not consider sexism experienced by black women an equally critical issue to confront (Grant 2003). The works of female theologians and ethicists such as Katie G. Cannon, Emily Townes, Jaqueline Grant, Delores Williams, and Klenora Hudson Weems are among those who made a significant contribution in the establishment of womanist theology (Cannon 2006; Grant 2003; Hudson-Weems 1993; Townes 2015). With its history being outside a religious context, it is important to

<sup>2</sup>'Church' here refers to those institutions that consider themselves churches within the Christian religion.

recognise that not all womanists are Christian; hence, they do not agree on all aspects on womanism (Kirk-Duggan 2001:6). Nevertheless, the one thing they have in common is their commitment to the emancipation of black women from all forms of oppression (Kirk-Duggan 2001). Nigerian novelist Ogunyemi (1985:72) also formulated her strand of the womanist framework, which she asserts 'celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom'. While Ogunyemi's womanist ideas emerged from her African context, they align with those from the African American context in their focus on black women, their healing and wholeness, as well as an acknowledgement of their marginalisation in society (Ogunyemi 1985).

Womanists also acknowledge intersectionality – that often there are several aspects that contribute to the complexities surrounding the marginalisation of women (Townes 2015). In America, womanist theologians and Bible scholars highlight issues of racism, classism, sexism, sexual orientation and the various ways these impinge on African American women in religious and other communities (Weems 2003). Nevertheless, they recognise that they cannot accurately capture the particularities of women of colour globally; therefore, they encourage womanists from other locations to privilege their respective social contexts (Weems 2003). However, they still acknowledge the similarities in the types of experiences black women worldwide endure. Hence, some have called black women to collaborate their efforts in the fight against gender injustice even as they focus on their particular contexts (Weems 2003). African female theologians and scholars also assert similar views on the marginalisation of women; however, their efforts prioritise the needs of African women and their communities (Masenya 2005). In alignment with that, this essay engages womanist theological and hermeneutical perspectives while prioritising the context and experiences of Zimbabwean women during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## COVID-19 and the women of Zimbabwe

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2021), COVID-19 'is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus'. It can result in serious respiratory illness or even death. The majority of those infected have tended to present mild to moderate symptoms, with many recuperating without requiring special medical attention (WHO 2021). However, COVID-19 poses a higher risk of severe symptoms for people with underlying health conditions, such as 'cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, or cancer', as well as the elderly (Coronavirus [who.int] 2022). This contagious zoonotic disease broke out in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, and it rapidly spread to many countries within several weeks (Murewanhema et al. 2020). By the end of January 2020, the WHO had declared COVID-19 a global health emergency, and less than 6 weeks later, on 11 March 2020, it was categorised as a pandemic (WHO 2020).

In Zimbabwe, the first COVID-19 case was recorded on 20 March 2020 (Murewanhema et al. 2020). On 27 March, the Zimbabwean government declared the COVID-19 situation a 'national disaster', and following that, the first lockdown was mandated on 30 March; it lasted until 17 May 2020 (Fryatt et al. 2021; Makombe 2021). Since then, the government mandated other lockdowns and travel restrictions in response to the rise in infections. During lockdowns, travel was forbidden except for essential necessities, and people were advised to observe social distancing while practising good hygiene, including wearing face coverings and exercising frequent hand-washing (mohcc.gov.zw: 2020). As at the end of June 2022, Zimbabwe had recorded over 255 000 cases, and of those, 5500 resulted in deaths (Zimbabwe: WHO Coronavirus Disease [COVID-19] Dashboard 2022). While the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic endangered everyone's health worldwide, in Zimbabwe, the pandemic exacerbated the plight of women in various ways (Martin & Ahlenback 2020; OECD 2020). The following section discusses the implications of COVID-19 on women's health and well-being, livelihoods, experiences of GBV and child marriages.

## Women's health and well-being

Poverty is one of the factors that inhibit women from accessing healthcare services in Zimbabwe. It is no wonder that the emergence of the pandemic raised fears over the extent to which it would affect their health and well-being (Masomera & Chigwanda 2020). Several factors put women at higher risk of the coronavirus infection, including pregnancy and the fact that women are primary caregivers for the sick in their homes and in the healthcare sector (Chamunogwa 2021; OECD 2020). It is estimated that women constitute about two-thirds of the health sector worldwide (OECD 2020). Women, who 'form the majority of frontline health workers' in Zimbabwe, suffered from fatigue as hospitals were overwhelmed with an increased number of patients (Chamunogwa 2021:19). In the words of the district medical superintendent of Mutambara Mission Hospital, Dr Emmanuel Ufonna Mefor, 'Health workers are stressed and suffering from fatigue' (Chingwe 2021). Those working from home were faced with increasing demands as they had to attend to their usual home duties as well as assisting children who were now learning from home (Chamunogwa 2021; Chingwe 2021). The unavailability of PPE endangered women as they were forced to attend to the sick while unprotected (Chamunogwa 2021:ii, 14, 19).

In some areas, Zimbabwean women perform cultural roles at funerals that could increase their chances of catching COVID-19. This includes the practice that requires the wife or mother or aunt of the deceased to sit besides the deceased's body during the mourning period while awaiting the burial (Women and Law in Southern Africa 2020). In the early days of the pandemic, when information on the nature of the disease was not yet fully understood, women continued participating in these cultural roles. Older women, who are among those at higher risk of infection, would be called to close the eyes of those who died in the home and to perform

symbolic bathing as well as dressing the corpse in preparation for burial, as these roles are traditionally reserved for the elderly members of the family or community (Chitakure 2020). As noted in the report by Women and Law in Southern Africa (2020:4), 'Women were at higher risks of contracting the [COVID-19] virus as they were in first contact with everyone at these gatherings'. The realities of the COVID-19 pandemic called for a reconsideration of some cultural practices and ways of doing.

## Economic impact on Zimbabwean women

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged at an already difficult time in Zimbabwe. The nation was facing a steep economic decline, increases in the cost of living and high levels of food insecurity because of drought (Murisa 2021). Reports suggest that worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in more job losses compared with the 2008–2009 financial crisis, as work and production was significantly reduced because of lockdowns and other restrictions (Chirisa et al. 2021). The pandemic impacted most Zimbabwean businesses, the small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) and those in the informal sector that employs the majority of the population, about 80% (Chirisa et al. 2021; Chirume & Kaseke 2020; Dzawanda, Matsa & Nicolau 2021). The pandemic affected women disproportionately, as they constitute the majority of those in the informal sector (Zhanda et al. 2022). Lockdowns prevented women from trading at the local markets or engaging in cross-border trading, and finding other alternative means of making a living was difficult (Dzawanda et al. 2021). Many women were retrenched from employment as businesses could no longer afford staffing costs. Women were disproportionately affected as they constitute 'a significant proportion of contract and casual workers' (Chamunogwa 2021:18). Therefore, some resorted to 'prostitution', 'selling their own bodies' to make a living (Matiashe 2020). Matiashe interviewed a sex worker in Mutare, who had to turn to sex work following her retrenchment because of the COVID-19 pandemic. School closures impacted girls from low socio-economic backgrounds, some of whom were forced to resort to 'intergenerational transactional sex' in a bid to assist their families (The Global Fund 2021). Matiashe's report also highlights that a local charity, Roots Africa, reported a significant increase in the number of girls engaged in transactional sex in the Mazowe area (Matiashe 2020). These dire circumstances push some women and girls to engage in transactional sex and 'prostitution', despite the potential risks of sexual abuse, unwanted (teen) pregnancies and increased risk of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection or other sexually transmitted diseases.

Some churches responded by finding ways to cushion those bearing the brunt of the economic impact of the pandemic, including assisting the poor with food hampers (World Council of Churches 2021). Furthermore, through the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), they raised awareness on the plight of the people by advocating for the government

of Zimbabwe to fulfil its social assistance obligations to vulnerable groups (Chamunogwa 2021:21–22; Zhanda et al. 2022). According to womanists, assisting and advocating for the impoverished is an acknowledgement of God's special preference for the poor and the marginalised in society (Douglas 1994).

## Intimate partner violence and gender-based violence

The Shona phrase *musha mukadzi*, meaning 'a household is anchored by a woman', is often used to speak of the vital role women play (Manyonganise 2015). Yet even in that role of family anchor, often women's lives and well-being are threatened. The government-mandated lockdowns saw a significant increase in reported cases of IPV, GBV and rape (Women and Law in Southern Africa 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, close to 40% of Zimbabwean women between the ages of 15 and 49 years reported experiencing GBV (Martin & Ahlenback 2020). Women's rights organisations recorded as much as a 60% increase in reported cases of violence against women during lockdown periods, and they also noted that the abuse was more severe because of augmented tensions in the home, isolation from extended family and restricted access to government and community safe shelters (Martin & Ahlenback 2020; Masomera & Chigwanda 2020:15). Intimate partner violence occurs when a person is abused verbally, emotionally or physically, whereas GBV is abuse that takes place because of one's gender where the perpetrator is intimately unrelated to the victim (World Health Organization 2009). Women also faced violence at the hands of law enforcement agencies and other men as they sought to access necessities such as water (Martin & Ahlenback 2020:5). While it is acknowledged that in some instances, women are the perpetrators of violence (Chitando & Chirongoma 2013:9), most research on violence indicates that in most circumstances, women are the victims; hence, the focus in those discussions is usually on women (Chamunogwa 2021; Magezi & Manzanga 2021; Ross 2014).

Violence against women can be traced to sociocultural beliefs and perceptions that men are superior to women. Zimbabwe has a cultural, colonial and religious history of regarding women as inferior and as minors; therefore, men disciplining women was, and largely continues to be, regarded as acceptable (Chisale 2016; Nenge 2011). Practices such as *kubvisa roora*, 'paying brideprice', are also considered among those factors contributing to violence against women (Chitakure 2016). On the religious front, within the Christian tradition, interpretations of some biblical texts promote violence against women (Chisale 2018). That the first woman, Eve, was created from Adam's rib is considered to indicate her inferiority, an inferiority that has been extended to all women. Moreover, the fact that Eve is presented as the one who was deceived by the snake (Gn 3) has perpetuated perceptions that the disciplining of women by men is justified (Ross 2014). Texts such as 'spare the rod and spoil the child'

(Pr 13:24; 23:13–14) have also contributed to normalising physical violence as a form of disciplining (Ross 2014). Therefore, Magezi and Manzanga (2021) rightly urge the church to challenge such invalid interpretations. In light of this increase in violence, the Zimbabwean church, as part of the Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP), called the government to institute policies and instruments to end violence against women and children (Chamunogwa 2021). However, the church itself needs to consider how it can play an active part in resolving the issue of violence against women while acknowledging that it has largely been silent on these matters, even though many of the victims sit in its pews and some of the perpetrators even preach from its pulpits (Chisale 2018; Crumpton 2014; Phiri 2002; Ross 2014).

## Increase in child marriages

While Zimbabwean legislation forbids children under the age of 18 years to be married, this practice persists. Religious bodies such as the ZCC, the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) and the Catholic Commission of Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe (CCJPZ), which are member partners of the ZPP, denounce child marriages (Chamunogwa 2021). Nevertheless, child marriages continue to exist in Zimbabwe, both within and outside the church. Since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, government and nongovernment agencies noticed an increase in the number of child marriages (Chamunogwa 2021; Chingwe 2021; Shaw et al. 2021). Research prior to the pandemic indicates that socio-economic, religious and cultural factors are major contributors (Chitakure 2016; Sachiti 2011). Various factors are cited as contributing to the surge in child marriages during the COVID-19 pandemic. These include lack of parental support, as orphans constitute a proportion of child brides interviewed during the pandemic (Shaw et al. 2021). Statistics also suggest that girls from low socio-economic backgrounds, especially those who are unable to complete their education, are prone to end up as child brides (Shaw et al. 2021). Because of poverty, some parents resorted to marrying off their young girls to wealthy older men with the expectation of receiving financial assistance in the form of *roora*, 'bride price' (Chamunogwa 2021). School closures during lockdown also contributed to the increase in child marriages, as girls could not seek protection or assistance from the school (Chamunogwa 2021; Masomera & Chigwanda 2020). Unfortunately, entering marriage is usually only the beginning of the girls' plight, as often they are subject to sexual abuse, and some fall pregnant before their bodies are fully developed to cope with pregnancy and the trauma of childbirth (Thupayagale-Tsheneagae, Phuthi & Ibitoye 2019). Sadly, many lose their babies or their own lives. Other child brides find themselves relegated to a life of poverty, as they are unable to find employment or when they do, they are paid less owing to their lack of education (Shaw et al. 2021). Therefore, the poverty cycle continues for these young women, with their own daughters having increased chances of facing the same fate of becoming child brides.

Forcing girls to become child brides hinders them from enjoying their childhood and developing into adults who have agency on matters impacting their lives and who can meaningfully contribute to society (Chamunogwa 2021:8). From a womanist perspective, practices that deny the wholeness and well-being of girls and women should be challenged and resisted (Weems 2003). Therefore, it is crucial that the church continues to condemn this practice while raising awareness on its prevalence and the damage that early marriages pose to girls. Furthermore, the church should continue to challenge the government to institute adequate laws and policies that protect vulnerable girls (Shaw et al. 2021).

## Intersectionality

The pandemic has impacted women in various ways and for some in more ways than others. It is crucial to recognise that various systemic or underlying factors are at play. Intersectionality is an analytic metatheory that can aid the investigation into the way multiple factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, ability, nationality, sexual orientation and other factors contribute to the development and perpetuation of systemic social inequalities (Ramsay 2018; Townes 2015). According to Chimhanda (2014), intersectionality highlights that at the nexus of these various and, at times, seemingly unrelated factors, the exacerbation of the oppression of women is most evident. Following are a few examples from the Zimbabwean context. Martin and Ahlenback's (2020) research revealed that:

[P]oor women, rural women, women and girls with disabilities, adolescent girls and young women, older women, LBTQI+ women, women and girls with HIV, migrant women and women in quarantine facilities, and refugee women are disproportionately affected. Sex workers, women human rights defenders, women politicians and women essential workers have also faced increased risks of violence in their work. (p. 5)

Therefore, it is critical that the church recognises the complexities surrounding the lived experiences of Zimbabwean women and the need for effective pastoral care approaches (Ramsay 2018). In doing so, the ongoing examination of causes and consequences of complex issues is neither attributed to isolated events nor does it present simple solutions. Instead, the intricacies of these issues are acknowledged and so too the need for critically considered solutions.

## COVID-19 and the church in Zimbabwe

While this study focuses on the church's response to issues facing women in the wake of the pandemic, churches themselves were not exempt from the effects of the COVID-19 (Masomera & Chigwanda 2020:11). The sudden ceasing of church meetings when the country went into lockdown forced leaders to reconsider their usual ways of worshipping, which was usually face to face, and to adopt virtual services (Chirisa et al. 2021). Social media platforms such as Facebook,

Zoom and WhatsApp became the tools used for communication with parishioners. However, church leaders worried that the poor and those in the rural areas who lacked the necessary technology remained isolated (Chingwe 2021; Mahiya & Murisi 2022). The church was faced with the dilemma on how to respond to the vaccine mandates by the government that came without much consultation or their input. Some church leaders advised their congregants against vaccination, as their faith would protect them, but many encouraged it (Chingwe 2021). Furthermore, lockdowns resulted in the decline of church offerings; hence, some pastors had to find alternative means of supplementing their incomes, thus making them less available to offer pastoral care to their communities (Mahiya & Murisi 2022). With such realities, it became evident and important to acknowledge that pastoral care is not only for Christian ministers; members of the extended family, community leaders, government and other civic agencies can also play a role in supporting vulnerable members of society.

The issues Zimbabwean women are facing in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic have intensified and are ongoing. The women themselves are acutely aware of these challenges, *minzwa ino baya munzira dzavo*, 'prickly thorns in their paths'. As women pray and encourage each other, *pfugama unamate*, 'kneel and pray', the church must join them in prayer, but equally important, the church must actively work at removing the challenges women continue to encounter.

The economic issues and violence faced by women call for renewed efforts by the church to prioritise work on the emancipation of women. The church plays a pivotal role in shaping the way Zimbabwean women make sense of themselves and their experiences in life (Chisale 2018). Therefore, it is well placed to effect significant influence in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with regard to the challenges Zimbabwean women encounter. Drawing from womanist theology and hermeneutics, the following section reflects on pastoral care, gender equality and liberative hermeneutics as avenues that can offer valuable possibilities as the church considers its response to the plight of Zimbabwean women during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

## Pastoral care

Pastoral care is most crucial in times of crisis. Therefore, it cannot be over commended for women facing challenges such as violence and other socio-economic issues. According to Magezi (2016:1), pastoral care is 'the caring ministry of religious communities ...'. It incorporates many aspects, including healing, sustaining, guiding, reconciling, nurturing, liberating and empowering (Chisale 2018). However, approaches to practising these various aspects differ from context to context. Magezi (2016) is among those who strongly argue that pastoral care efforts should respond to issues within their individual contexts. The various issues facing women in the wake of COVID-19 require the church in Zimbabwe to carefully consider its pastoral care response

strategy to ensure that it is sensitive and relevant to these women. With the Shona context in mind, Mucherera (2017) offers a warning:

For counsellors and pastors who will serve in the Shona context, education and training in counselling, care and pastoral theology must incorporate the totality of life, culture, and world-views of the people who are served. (p. 16)

An understanding of the context enables pastoral care practitioners to tailor their approaches for effective engagement with the communities they serve.

Chisale (2018), who writes from the African context, highlights the silence of women on issues around IPV and other forms of abuse. Such silences are sometimes because of cultural beliefs and the shame that victims may feel, as they may blame themselves for the perpetrator's actions. In a culture that discourages the 'airing of one's dirty laundry', which is evidenced by Shona phrases such as *munhu ane hunhu haasimudzi hapwa pese pese*, meaning 'a person with hunhu [or ubuntu] does not arbitrarily reveal their armpits', it often feels wrong and inappropriate for women to speak up about domestic violence (Chisale 2018). In this idiom, 'armpits' represent those negative things that may be taking place in one's household. Another common phrase that must be challenged is *kunyarara kunokunda zvese*, 'keeping quiet trumps everything'. It silences women, particularly those living with violence and abuse. Instead, another Shona idiom that can help counter those mentioned above states that *mwana asingachemi anofira mumbereko*, meaning 'a child that does not cry out [in distress] will die in the baby carrier [strapped on the mother's back]'. This idiom encourages women to share about their challenging experiences. Pastoral care is not only about listening to the victims as they share about their experiences of abuse, but it is also about acknowledging their perspectives on what they find helpful or hindering as they seek liberation (Crumpton 2014). Pastoral care is about actively creating safe spaces for women to voice their experiences, and usually it is ideal where there are other women (Chisale 2020). In womanist theology, acts of healing are possible through God's empowering Spirit. As Baker-Fletcher and Baker-Fletcher (1997) articulate:

To work for the healing and wholeness of community is to act in harmony with God, who as the strength of life is the source of healing and wholeness. (p. 39)

In all this, focus should centre on the well-being and wholeness of women while acknowledging that the prioritisation of women's needs has a positive impact on the well-being of families and communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the dire circumstances Zimbabwean women encounter, thereby stimulating theological reflection and a re-examination of the church's role (Mahiya & Murisi 2022). The church has endeavoured to journey with vulnerable individuals, families and groups amid anxiety, fear and confusion through various ways, including advocacy activities, distribution of food hampers

to the needy, pastoral visits, prayer and the proclamation of the message of hope (Mahiya & Murisi 2022). Nevertheless, more work remains. The pandemic has exposed the need for multifaceted alternative approaches to responding to issues affecting women. It is proposed here that ensuring gender equality in the church will enhance the work of pastoral care. Moreover, the use of gender-sensitive biblical hermeneutics has the potential to contribute towards changing perceptions on women and leadership in the church and society at large.

## Gender equality and women's empowerment

While women constitute as much as 80% of the church in Zimbabwe, they are disproportionately under-represented in church leadership (Chisale 2020). Thus, the church has been blamed for marginalising women and for being silent about their plight (Mapuranga 2020). For a long time, African female theologians have championed the ordination of women, a call many denominations are yet to heed (Chisale 2020). Androcentric Bible interpretations have contributed to the exclusion of women from church leadership, thus denying them the opportunity to put issues of concern to women on the agenda, such as those that emerged with the COVID-19 pandemic (Chisale 2020). Literal interpretations of texts such as 1 Timothy 2:11–15, 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 and Ephesians 5:22–24, which speak of the submission and subordination of women, are often used to justify the inferiority of women to men in families, in church and in society in general (Mapuranga 2020). Hence, in villages, churches and government offices, women are overtly excluded from leadership positions (Chitando & Chirongoma 2013). According to the WHO (2009), promoting gender equality can significantly aid in counteracting violence. Therefore, they consider it a core element in the prevention of violence against women. Writing on her denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa, Chisale (2020) rightly articulates why women should occupy pastoral leadership roles in the church. She asserts that:

[M]en cannot honestly address issues that explicitly affect women. The concerns of women, which include the struggle against domestic and gender-based violence, domestic abuse, gynaecological problems, motherhood, child abuse, incest, poverty and the many other ills that affect women and girls, require a pastoral caregiver to sensitively understand implications for these to the dignity of women from an insider's perspective. (p. 8)

The inclusion of women in leadership can have a significant positive impact in several ways. Firstly, it is only when women are adequately represented in leadership structures that their concerns are prioritised on the church's agenda. Secondly, it bolsters pastoral care efforts, especially those targeted towards women. The increase in cases of GBV, child marriages and other social issues impacting women during the COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the need for more women, not only in pastoral care but in church leadership. Thirdly, having women in leadership demonstrates the church's commitment to gender equality

and women's empowerment, which with time will then spill into wider society (Chisale 2020). Overall, having women in leadership will contribute towards those efforts targeted at addressing the ongoing fight against the abuse, oppression and marginalisation of Zimbabwean women. It is vital that the church puts gender equality and the empowerment of women on its agenda, recognising that such efforts are long overdue. Given that the Bible has been used to justify the exclusion of women in church leadership and violence against women (Chisale 2018; Chitando & Chirongoma 2013; Mapuranga 2020), it is crucial that the church considers emerging African gender-sensitive approaches to reading biblical texts.

## Gender-sensitive biblical hermeneutics

The Bible has been used to rationalise evil actions such as the slave trade and violence against women (Weems 2003). It is with acknowledgment of this reality that womanists employ a variety of approaches in interrogating biblical texts that portray the marginalisation of women in the biblical world. They do so while engaging in conversation with comparable issues facing black women. They call for reinterpretation of biblical texts with a view to foreground the experiences and interpretive interests of black women. Their approaches acknowledge that the Bible has the potential to help emancipate women from oppressive elements; however, that same text, depending on how it is interpreted, can rationalise the abuse, oppression and marginalisation of women (Weems 2003). Oduyeyo (1995) echoes this sentiment when she articulates from African women's context:

The Bible is seen by African women as a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it is used to support women's alleged inferiority, polygamy, levirate marriage, the focus on sons, the silence of women, and so on. On the other hand, that same book is seen as source of resistance of sexual violence and the promotion of the dignity of the women. (p. 43)

Hence, the double jeopardy for African women remains because of those cultural and religious perspectives that render them second-class persons. Violence against women is documented in the Bible, where it is targeted at female characters. As such, the church needs to consider its stance on interpretations of those biblical passages (Bowen 2006). Such texts wield enormous power in normalising the abuse and marginalisation of women, especially when they are read literally. Hence, fresh approaches to reading the biblical text ethically and responsibly in ways that emancipate women from domestic violence and other forms of abuse, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, are critically important.

Several beliefs or perspectives perpetuate the abuse of women and support its acceptance in society in general. Among them is the view that women are sinful and inferior to men, and hence, male domination is God's mandate (Phiri 2002). Among the Shona, *mukadzi mutadzi*, meaning 'a woman is a sinner', is a phrase that is commonly used to

describe women by drawing from Genesis 3, which narrates the first fall and the pronouncement of the punishment of Adam and Eve by God. The similarities of these two terms, which are differentiated by only one letter, *mukadzi* meaning 'woman' and *mutadzi* meaning 'sinner', are considered by some to be a divine linguistic feature that perfectly captures and places the root cause of the fall on a woman. This is despite the reality that in other languages, such a feature does not exist.

That a woman is presented as a 'helper' in the creation narrative (Gn 2:18), and the man is presented as the 'head' to whom the wife must submit (Eph 5:22–24) undergird patriarchy in the Christian tradition (Magezi & Manzanga 2021). Literal interpretations of these texts, invalid and erroneous as they are, continue to shape social relations in Christian families in Africa (Magezi & Manzanga 2021; Phiri 2002). In the same way, invalid and erroneous interpretations of some biblical texts (Gn 9:26; Lv 25:44–46) were used to justify the slave trade (Douglas 1994); interpretations that justify and perpetuate the marginalisation of women should be confronted, challenged and resisted. To do so, womanists insist on the rereading of biblical texts for the liberation of women and their communities (Weems 2003). Otherwise, abuse and violence against women will continue while women are expected to prematurely forgive and reconcile with their abusers (Magezi & Manzanga 2021; Phiri 2002). Chisale's study discovered that some women silently endure abuse from their husbands lest they be labeled 'quarrelsome' (Pr 21:9), and in some instances, their silence is 'an effort to protect their husbands' dignity as well as their own' (Chisale 2018:5). While there was an increase in the numbers of women who reported their experiences of violence during the COVID-19 lockdown periods, there are others who do not report their husbands, as they are mindful of the supposed superior position men occupy (Women and Law in Southern Africa 2020). Furthermore, when women are abused, their suffering is often overlooked, as it is deemed as just another characteristic of the Christian life that they must learn to live with – 'they should carry their cross and follow Christ', so to speak (Mt 16:24–26) (Phiri 2002).

Such perceptions on the value and place of women within the church and in society underscore the necessity for hermeneutical approaches that are liberative and gender-sensitive to inform the reading of biblical texts. Womanist theologians are aware of the pivotal role the biblical text plays in the lives of black women, as well as in the construction of their theology. Hence, they bring a range of approaches, including 'hermeneutics of resistance, interrogation, suspicion, and imagination as they encounter texts, histories of interpretations, and the ethical implications of every reading' (Bridgeman 2016:483). Where womanists are skeptical of the validity of some interpretations, they interrogate them – carefully teasing out some aspects and outright rejecting others, all the while prioritising the interpretive interests of women (Mitchem 2002).

Similarly, African female scholars and theologians have for a long time called for reading approaches that are attentive to the needs of African women. Thus, some have proposed Bible-reading approaches from their respective contexts, approaches aimed at foregrounding the various challenges facing women while seeking to liberate them. Dube (2000) proposed 'postcolonial feminist' hermeneutics, which encourage readers to critically consider the power and influence of patriarchal systems and Empire in biblical interpretation discourse. Masenya (2005), from the South African context, developed the *Bosadi* approach, which brings a female lens to rereading biblical texts for the liberation of women in her context. Similarly, Kanyoro (2002), from the Kenyan context, formulated 'feminist cultural hermeneutics'. Kanyoro (2002:38) is cautious about entirely adopting feminist and womanist perspectives, citing that their 'hermeneutics are highly dependent on individual experiences and are void of the experiences of the communal living of Africa'. For Kanyoro, the fact that African experiences were initially not considered in these theoretical movements should inspire African women to formulate their own hermeneutic approaches that prioritise their respective contexts. Kanyoro (2002:55–57) is right in her assertion, however, that much as African theologians and scholars engage with other gender-sensitive approaches, they must critically engage the African culture, both affirming and critiquing it.

Elsewhere, this author also proposes *seMadzimai*, a womanist African-Zimbabwean Bible-reading approach.<sup>3</sup> The term *seMadzimai* in the Shona language can have several meanings, including 'as women', 'like women', 'with other women', 'on behalf of women' or 'from women's perspective'. *SeMadzimai* is a gender-sensitive approach to reading the Bible, which acknowledges the ancient contexts of the biblical text while engaging in dialogue with and being sensitive to Zimbabwean contexts. The starting point for reading the Bible following the *seMadzimai* approach is an acknowledgment that both the biblical text as well as patriarchal Zimbabwean cultures have aspects that, on one hand, are life enhancing and, on the other, life diminishing (Chimhanda 2014). The *seMadzimai* approach is undergirded by womanist hermeneutics, which as Weems aptly notes, assert that 'every marginalized group has a right and duty to name its own reality and to find a language for mapping out its own vision for liberation' (Weems 2003:24). Aligning with this vision, the *seMadzimai* approach champions the rereading of biblical texts in conversation with modern Zimbabwean contexts with a view towards the liberation and empowerment of women.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Zimbabwean women and girls was highlighted as requiring a multisectoral approach because of its complex nature (Masomera & Chigwanda 2020; Shaw et al. 2021). The church has a part to contribute. As the church wrestles with erroneous Bible interpretations, particularly of those passages that are known

<sup>3</sup>*SeMadzimai* is an African-Zimbabwean Bible-reading approach that is currently under formulation as part of the author's doctoral research under the supervision of Dr Yael Klangwisani and Dr Tim Meadowcroft.



to contribute to issues of violence against women, and the exclusion of women from leadership, African gender-sensitive approaches can present fresh perspectives (Dube 2000; Kanyoro 2002; Masenya 2005). Such reading approaches can contribute towards shifting societal perceptions from regarding women as inferior to men and instead uphold the dignity of both women and men as equally created in God's image (Magezi & Manzanga 2021).

## Conclusion

This study explored the various ways COVID-19 has affected, and continues to affect, the lives of Zimbabwean women. Drawing from womanist perspectives, this paper advocates for the well-being and wholeness of women. The aims of womanist perspectives include the exposition of various forms of abuse and marginalisation of women and a commitment to their survival and empowerment for the betterment of the communities they belong to (Kirk-Duggan 2001). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Zimbabwean women were disproportionately affected, as livelihoods were impacted with dwindling or vanishing incomes following job losses. During periods of lockdowns, government and nongovernment agencies recorded increased reporting of IPV, GBV, rape and child marriage cases. This research challenges the church, given its influential role in Zimbabwean society, to reconsider its response to the plight of women. This research suggests that in addition to pastoral care and advocacy efforts, the church should consider other avenues for lasting change. Gender equality is proposed as a crucial factor to consider if the church is to adequately respond to the challenges facing women. Moreover, rereading of biblical texts using gender-sensitive hermeneutics will unearth fresh liberative insights, particularly on those texts that present violence against women. Ensuring gender equality in the church and drawing from gender-sensitive approaches to reading the Bible are alternatives that have real potential to contribute towards those efforts aimed at the ongoing fight against the abuse, oppression and marginalisation of Zimbabwean women, which in recent years have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

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## Competing interests

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<sup>4</sup>This essay was written in memory of *vamwene wangu*, the author's mother-in-law, Beatrice Chataira (*Mukunda Mbirimi*) 1947–2021, a wonderful woman who faithfully served her community of Highfields in Harare, Zimbabwe, as a health worker until her untimely death on 02 December 2021. For several decades she worked, educating and supporting families, through various disease outbreaks and epidemics, including the current COVID-19 pandemic.

## Author's contributions

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

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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