Chapter 13
Gender Transformation and Leadership: On Teaching Gender in Shona Culture
Ester Rutoro

Introduction

According to Nicola Slee human communities are characterised by a basic structural injustice, a distorted relationship between the sexes that affords men as a group power over women. This distorted relationship is also found in Zimbabwean society and translates into challenges of gender-based socialisation, stereotyping, violence and discrimination in almost all spheres of life. This discrimination is not only physical, economic, social, cultural and political but also emotional and spiritual. And, although such discrimination affects women primarily, it also impacts on the well-being of the whole of Zimbabwean society. How this state of affairs can be changed forms the main focus of this essay. First an overview will be given of some international and Zimbabwean instruments to promote the rights and equality of women. This is followed by some reflections on the concept of gender justice, its application in the Zimbabwean church, and some Christological guidelines and suggestions regarding gender, especially with regard to theological education and pastoral leadership as possible ways to address gender injustice within Shona culture in Zimbabwe.

Promoting gender justice: Global initiatives and local challenges

Since the founding of United Nations (UN) in 1945, it has adopted several treaties and conventions aimed at the protection and promotion of women’s rights. The UN Charter affirms fundamental human rights, the dignity of all human persons and equal rights of men and women. As early as 1946, the UN instituted a commission on the status of women. The latter proposed political, economic and social measures needed to address the root causes as well as the consequences of systemic and systematic discrimination against women worldwide. Later, in 1967, the UN adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). According to Benedek et al. CEDAW constitutes the central and most comprehensive bill of human

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5 http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/history.htm (March 9, 2012)

5 Benediek et al. Human rights of women. P.34
rights of women in particular. In its preamble, CEDAW acknowledges the existence of extensive discrimination against women. It defines discrimination as any distinction, exclusive or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, irrespective of their marital status, on the basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres (Article 1).

In Article 2, CEDAW explicitly condemns gender discrimination and obliges signatories to the convention to pursue comprehensive policies and measures to eliminate such discrimination at all levels. According to Benedek et al., the purpose of Article 3 of CEDAW is the full development and advancement of women for the purposes of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on the basis of equality with men.

In Africa, the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (1981) represents a continent wide effort to provide regional mechanisms for protection of human rights. According to a supplement to the African Charter, a protocol on the rights of women in particular had been ratified by fifteen African countries by January 2006.

After gaining independence in 1980, the Zimbabwe government took a proactive approach to addressing women’s issues and problems. Pressure to address gender disparities was a historical product of women’s involvement in the struggle for national liberation in Zimbabwe and throughout Africa. From this it may seem as if the international community, the African continent and the Zimbabwean government take the issue of gender seriously. They have all shown concern with gender justice. But what exactly is gender justice?

**Gender Justice**

According to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) gender justice entails ending the inequalities between women and men that are produced and reproduced in the family, the community, the state and in institutions. Gender justice is often used with reference to emancipatory projects that advance women’s rights through

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7 Benediek et al. *Human rights of women*, p.34.


legal change or that promote women’s interests in social and economic policy\textsuperscript{11} (cf. Goetz, 2007).

Looking at the concept of gender justice from a theological perspective one may say that it entails the comprehensive application of biblical law, love, mercy, justice and equity at the levels of the self, family, community, church and state. According to the report on gender justice tabled at assembly of the World Council of Reformed Churches’ Uniting General Council in Grand Rapids, USA (18 to 28 June 2010), \textsuperscript{12}

\begin{quote}
...gender justice is an on-going journey of praying together, engaging, challenging, always seeking discernment on how God wants us to live as women and men. It involves finding and putting into practice new ways to express and live out the uniqueness of bearing the image of God, fulfilling our responsibility of building and nurturing right, just and equal relationships in our families, churches, communities, regions and the world. We do so by first being open to the promptings of the Spirit of God, challenging us to hold under the scrutiny of God’s justice, all the norms that we have nurtured about the roles and places of men and women in the family, society and church which have resulted in exclusionary practices that pains God and fracture relationships.
\end{quote}

But how does the church, specifically the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe, reflect and live up to these convictions and what challenges remain for it regarding these issues?

**Gender justice in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe**

The Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ) has for long been quiet on gender issues even though women constitute the majority of its membership. The church has maintained a patriarchal theology that keeps women from – or at least on the periphery of – church leadership. This happens despite the fact that the ministers’ wives’ sororal association and the Women’s League demanded the recognition of the humanity of women in the RCZ – amongst others by including them in church leadership positions – at the League’s biannual meetings from as early as the 1970’s. These women therefore acted as a pressure group for the realisation of women’s rights in the Church despite very negative and sometimes very arrogant responses from the then male-only synod. Only in 1984, ninety-three years after its founding, did the RCZ allow the election of women as elders. And, only in 2002, after Rangarirai Rutoro and Wilbert Runyowa’s report entitled *Resource Development and Women in Leadership Positions in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe* served before the General Synod, were women allowed to be trained as ministers\textsuperscript{13}.


\textsuperscript{12} Follow the meetings discussions from: \url{http://warc.jalb.de/warcajs/p?view_news_id=451&navi=29&part_id=34} (March 9, 2012).

As recent as 2007, however, the same Rangarirai Rutoro wrote a doctoral thesis on *Lay Leadership Development in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe*\(^{14}\) in which special attention is paid to the issue of women and wherein he notes that, “theology in the RCZ needs to interpret the Christian faith tradition in the light of its present realities and also discern what God requires of it.”\(^{15}\) He goes on to say that the inclusion and involvement of women in broader leadership structures will bring transformative development in the church. Despite findings such as these, glaring shortcomings remain in addressing gender issues in the RCZ. The ordination of women has been accepted, implemented and is slowly bearing fruit but much needs to be done within the systems and structures of the RCZ to make it more responsive to gender challenges. It is not enough to simply let women into positions previously occupied by men, what is also needed is a redefinition of the structures to make them less discriminatory, not only for women, but for all people. There is need to address not only the numbers of women in church positions but also the structure of the framework that sustain uneven relationships between men and women in the church. Numerically the current situation is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POSITION</th>
<th>MALES</th>
<th>FEMALES</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ordained ministers</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student ministers</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>On the moderamen</td>
<td>5 (ordained)</td>
<td>2 (not ministers)</td>
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<td>1 (not minister)</td>
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In order to address above discrepancies, the RCZ has to re-examine its views on biblical justice and should find a renewed vision of its role in promoting gender equity in both church and the society. To this end the Church may once more turn to the example of Christ.

**Gender justice: The example of Christ**

**a) Jesus Christ the author of gender justice**

John 8:2-11 tells of the Pharisees who brought to Jesus a woman caught in adultery, in *the act* of adultery. In terms of justice, questions such as the following might have raced through Jesus’ mind, as they perhaps do in our minds today:

- If the woman was caught in *the act*, she was surely not *acting* alone?
- Where, then, was the other party to the adultery? Why did the Pharisees and the teachers of the law not bring the man before Jesus as well?

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\(^{15}\) Rutoro, Lay leadership, p. 18).
• When the Pharisees and the teachers of the law appealed to it and demanded that the stoning of such women, did the same not apply to such men?

• Was this not a blatant case of gender injustice?

Jesus, however, looked beyond the accusation, challenging the accusers: “if anyone of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” Jesus did not transgress the Law of Moses but he was saying that if the woman is to be stoned according to that Law, the latter should not be applied only partially, not only to the woman. Therefore, the woman should be stoned only by those whose lives did not warrant stoning. Jesus the impartial judge saw beyond the accusation and recognised the unfairness of unequal punishment and in this way becomes a champion for gender justice.

Today’s society also often “throw stones” at women, yet ignore the indiscretions of men. At times this is even happens in church. Should the church not follow the example of Jesus and be a champion of gender justice in communities? Many physically or emotionally wounded women attend church every Sunday. It is just too easy to urge them to forgive “seventy times seven times” (Matt. 18:21-22) and “to bless those who persecute” (Rom. 12:14) them. Is it really enough to offer them the hope of the crown in heaven when the same people preaching those words might be the perpetrators of injustice? Should the church not go further and correct causes of gender-based injustice?

b) Jesus welcomed women to His Ministry

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared first to a woman, Mary Magdalene (John 20:1–18). Surely, this can be no coincidence. Mary Magdalene was the first to discover the empty tomb and also the one to report the event to the male disciples. After following her to the tomb and finding that she spoke the truth, Mary Magdalene was left alone at the tomb and was also the first to see the resurrected Christ. Not only this, she was also commissioned by Christ to make the fact of his resurrection known to his disciples. Even after his death and resurrection, women were important in Jesus’ ministry. This too is an example that the church should follow in its ministry.

c) The Holy Spirit fills all regardless of sex

Acts 1:14 tells of the disciples waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit: “they all joined together in prayer, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brothers.” When the Holy Spirit is poured out they were all filled with the Spirit, irrespective of their sex. Immediately Peter confirms the prophecy of Joel 2:28: “And in those days I will pour out my spirit on all flesh. Your sons and daughters will prophesy…” Surely this sets another example for the church to follow, to recognise that all believers are the recipients of the Holy Spirit and its gifts and have the right and obligation to use them in and for the benefit of the church and the kingdom of God.

Gender and the plight of women in the Shona culture

In Zimbabwe, as everywhere, people are not only members of churches, but also of communities and cultures. The challenge to churches is exacerbated by the patriarchal
nature of Shona culture and its consequences which include gender-based injustice such as physical, emotional, economic, socio-cultural and spiritual abuse.

It remains an unfortunate fact that women are more often the victims of physical abuse. Not only husbands beat their wives. Unmarried women are sometimes beaten by boyfriends, brothers, fathers and, sometimes, by any male member of the extended family. The latter has a right to beat an unmarried female member of the family if they think that she has misbehaved. Women never “own” their own bodies and are usually seen as having “asked” for a beating by behaving inappropriately. Many women bear their bruises, pain and anger caused by injustice, oppression and many other forms of violence in silence, often caught in abusive relationships for the sakes of their children or because of financial dependence on their partners.

The consequences of physical violence can often be seen in broken bones and wounds. What is much more difficult to see are the wounds inflicted by emotional abuse – anger, disillusioned, fear, self-deprecation, depression and feelings of being worthless or rejected. These women are dehumanised, humiliated, their confidence shattered. They are discouraged from exposing their husbands’ or partners’ transgressions as the Shona proverbs “usafukura hapwa” (“do not open the armpit”) and “chakafukidza dzimba matenga” (“the roofs cover what happen inside homes”) demands of them.

Gender injustice and abuse also has an economic face. Males traditionally own the means of production (land), the symbols of wealth (cattle), the homestead and all it contains – including the children and the wife. Even when the husband dies everything goes to his eldest son and the mother is left without any property of her own and under authority of her own son or male members of the extended family. Because of their economic power men often mistreat women without being challenged by them and, due to their economic dependency, women often remain trapped in very harsh circumstances.

Socio-cultural abuse occurs due to socialisation processes that demean women and do not recognise their value. Decision making is an exclusively male prerogative and women are merely the followers or implementers of the decisions taken by men. Even when taking a major decision that will affect the family, the husband (or son) will not consult with his wife (or mother), but will rather consult other male relatives.

Finally, all the forms of discrimination and abuse mentioned above combine to have a devastating effect on the spirituality of women. Many women come to the church with broken spirits. They sometimes sit, sing, pray and take the sacraments with the very people who wound them daily in the name of culture. Instead of finding places of safety and healing, they sometimes only find ministers who add salt to their wounds with gender insensitive sermons, misinterpretation of Scripture in order to serve other agendas and reminding them to “love thy enemy and forgive those who persecute you”. Can one blame these women for being confused in their faith, for sometimes feeling forsaken, even by God?

Within the Shona culture most people believe that women’s subordination is legitimated by socially embedded convictions. These belief systems are assumed to be beyond the realms of justice. Hence the concept of gender justice, which seeks to enhance women’s autonomy and rights in relation to men, are controversial and cause intense debate. It is within this social system that the RCZ is called to make a difference.
A paradigm shift in theological education

Theological education should pave the way towards a gender-responsive Christian ministry in the church. For this to happen, gender issues should be adequately integrated into theological curricula. Unfortunately these issues are often relegated to the periphery where only student ministers’ wives are involved in women’s ministry programmes taught by other ministers’ wives. The RCZ’s theological education system is male oriented. Theological epistemologies are also male centred with female voices absent from theological discourse.

To address this situation a liberative theology, which implies the development of a rights-based and gender-responsive theology is proposed. Such a theology implies:

- Breaking the bonds of silence that bind women and making the voices of women audible in theological discourse.
- Developing a new paradigm by integrating gender studies within the theological education framework.
- Including justice as a central theme in gender sensitive theology.
- Promoting the application of justice because knowing about justice is not enough.
- Developing a theological education of transformation intent on fostering a culture of partnership that fully integrates gender perspectives.

The new paradigm proposed should be people centred, contextual and issue based, preparing students for life in congregations because their theology will be practised in congregations. Therefore, it is imperative to equip prospective ministers with the right type of theology that is sensitive to the contextual realities of gender injustice in Zimbabwe. Since such theology should integrate women’s experiences and voices it should also place women’s experiences at the centre. In his book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*¹⁶, theologian Paulo Freire rightly asks: “who are better equipped than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an unjust society?” Including women in theological discourse will ensure that life experiences of the marginalised are used as the basis for research and for empowering students towards a gender-responsive Christian ministry. It is, therefore, also pertinent to include women in the redefinition of a theological curriculum that facilitates the development of ministers who are gender sensitive and who will contribute towards a gender responsive Christian ministry. Theological education should be in a position to interrogate the system in which it finds itself embedded, to interrogate unjust social practices like gender-based socialisation, patriarchy, stereotyping and violence.

Redefining theological education as gender-inclusive education

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“There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). With the blood of Jesus, God redeemed all of humankind and we are all equal before him. There is need for men and women to work in partnership with the understanding that both were created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), redeemed by Christ (Gal. 3:26-28) and gifted by the Spirit without distinction (Joel 2:28).

Inclusion should not be a marginal issue in theological education but should be central to the achievement of gender sensitivity in the church. Inclusive theological education should ensure that obstacles to attendance of institutions of theological education are removed to ensure that every individual will get the opportunity and necessary support to identify and develop his or her talents to the full. This encompasses the removal of obstacles in the church but also in society.

Substantial progress has been made by the RCZ as far as the training of women into church ministry is concerned. Nevertheless, it remains evident that new strategies and methods must be adopted to change attitudes and perceptions and ensure that theological education is responsive to the gender challenges the church and society are facing.

Theological education should, therefore, lead to the transformation of values through curriculum transformation. Curricula should:

- Build critical awareness to make students aware of the urgency of gender inclusive justice in Christian Ministry.
- Create new spaces for reappraisal and rethinking by interrogating existing discourses and by focusing attention on overlooked possibilities for moving practice forward.
- Find a methodology that makes the familiar unfamiliar and in this way motivate students to find hidden meanings and connotations of often-taken-for-granted actions in a way that stimulates self-questioning and creativity.

In this way ministers will be better equipped with spiritual, academic, social and other skills to prepare them to work in contemporary societies.

**Transforming pastoral leadership styles: Towards a gender-responsive Christian ministry**

For the kind of inclusion and transformation referred to above to occur within the church there should be a shift in leadership style from being authoritative to transformational leadership that, according to Bass and Riggio and Clegg, Kornberger and Pitsis 17, should redefine people’s mission and vision with renewed commitment and the restructuring of systems. Applied to the church it means that leadership and laity as well as the institutional system of the church need transformation. It is obvious our societies discriminate against women with regard to both decision-making processes and positions.

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of leadership. Women’s experiences are often not valued at all, making them invisible in most areas of social, political, economic and, at times, religious life. A leadership style is needed that will empower women and transform the church into a gender responsive church. According to Chalou Asares\textsuperscript{18} the goals of transformational leadership is to transform people and organisations by changing their minds and hearts, by broadening their perspectives, deepening their insight and understanding, by clarifying aims, by making behaviour congruent with beliefs, principles and values and by bring about changes that are permanent, self-perpetuating and momentum-building. Theological curricula should empower students with skills to be transformational leaders in congregations so that they may reorient belief systems, foster tolerance and promote human rights as a tool in transcending cultural, gender and other differences.

A thorough understanding of the organisational structures and cultures of churches is of course very important in order to transform them\textsuperscript{19}. However, for relevant action to transform these structures and cultures with a view to gender justice, the problem should put in its correct perspective. Ministers themselves should have a thorough understanding of gender problems in the church. An in-depth macro analysis of gender challenges using a participatory approach may prove especially useful. This may also provide a broader perspective of how gender justice challenges are related to wider societal issues. It is the transformational minister who can impart the same attitudes in congregations that will ensure that the church will eventually become gender responsive.

According to Munroe\textsuperscript{20} the incorporation of women into male-dominated spheres comes at a cost as it may require downplaying of elements of how women define themselves. In this regard many female ministers have had the experience that, in order to be assimilated into prevailing institutional church structures, they had to forsake some of their distinctive female identity markers. However, it is crucial that women recognise the importance of their unique experiences and attributes in order to empower them and to promote gender inclusive justice in the church.

The changed attitude of the minister will influence those of the congregants. In this sense the minister will be an inspiration and motivator of the congregants. In this regard Hay’s list\textsuperscript{21} of motivational devices may prove useful also with regard to the promotion of gender inclusive justice:

- Motivational speeches, conversations and sermons.
- Public displays of optimism and enthusiasm.
- Highlighting positive outcomes.
- Stimulating teamwork.

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\textsuperscript{19} Yean-Sub Lim. 2001. *Transformational Leadership: Organisational Culture and Organisational Effectiveness in Sports Organisations*: USA, Northern State University.
\textsuperscript{21} Hay, I. 2009. *Transformational leadership: Characteristics and criticisms*. School of Geography, Population and Environmental Management, Flinders University. P. 8
• Encouraging women to contribute to the development of an attractive, alternative future.

In this way the minister may:

• Promote a critical awareness of the urgency of gender responsive justice in the church and may set in motion dialogue with the church members who should also be agents of change.

• Through teamwork, facilitated by him/her, teach church members to work together and, while respecting each other irrespective of gender, to confront these gender issues together and to accept shared goals.

• Enhance participation to help overcome resistance and encourage understanding of the need for gender responsiveness.

• Establish external networks to help the church in the process of establishing gender responsive justice.

At the same time this will create opportunities for resocialisation and for the creation of alternative value systems. There is also need for what I want to call reculturalisation (the gradual process of instilling of an alternative culture by gradually doing away with the ingrained gender insensitive beliefs, attitudes, values and ideologies). This can be done through:

• Gender conscientisation workshops.

• Gender education.

• Gender days (awareness campaigns to build awareness that there is no alternative but to address the gender problem).

• Gender memorial sessions (where inspirational speeches, sermons, poems, songs to be prepared for the sessions).

Finally, the segregation between gender-based groupings in the church – for example, the men’s, women’s, boys’ and girls’ leagues – should be challenged. One way is by establishing gender forums in the church in which both male and female congregants can participate. However, this should not be limited to the congregational level, but should also take place at presbyterial and synodical levels. These too will be ideal platforms to inspire members of the church to consider their actions, attitudes, perceptions and discourses with regard to gender. These will, therefore, also be forums of conscientisation, sensitisation, awareness-building and education.

**Conclusion**

In this essay it was argued that, in the face of gender injustice found in the church, there is a clear need for transformational pastoral leaders. However, to achieve this requires an honest reflection on the theological education prospective church leaders receive. It requires vision, initiative, patience, integrity, courage and persistence. In this way the fruits of such education will also be seen in congregations, church membership and in
church structures, realising the vision of a church in which gender inclusive justice will be found and which will truly be a home for all.