Chapter

Religion and Climate Change in Africa: A Gendered Perspective

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Abstract

This chapter reflects on the interface of religion, gender, and climate change in Zimbabwe. The writing of this chapter has been ignited by the ongoing climate change induced catastrophes such as cyclones and drought in Southern Africa. Cognizant of the pivotal role of religion in shaping people's worldviews not only in Southern Africa but the rest of the continent, the chapter discusses how religion shapes people's relationship with ecology. Informed by the African feminist theory, the chapter adopts a gendered perspective. It, therefore, discusses the intertwinement between African women's experiences of patriarchy and the earth's exposure to ecological degradation. Acknowledging the efficacy of fulfilling Sustainable Development Goals 4, 5, and 13, the chapter concludes by restating the importance for the church in Zimbabwe to adopt an agenda for gender empowerment and ecological stewardship.

Keywords: climate change, ecology, gender, religion, stewardship, sustainable development goals

1. Introduction

Climate change is the greatest challenge the world is facing today, and it is real in Zimbabwe. The devastation has been unleashed upon areas like Chimanimani and Chipinge, where lives have been lost, injuries sustained, and entire settlements swept away in the wake of Cyclone Idai which made landfall in March 2019. The consequences of climate change are evident through escalating global temperatures, rising sea levels, storm surges, recurrent floods, persistent droughts, heat waves, and the spread of infectious diseases. To combat this crisis, the pursuit of sustainable mitigation strategies has become imperative for both developing and developed nations. Human actions have played a significant role in driving these changes, resulting in profound effects on the environment as well as exacerbating the effects of climate change. This has prompted some to label this era as the Anthropocene epoch.

Given that climate change presents an existential threat, numerous calls have been made to address this issue from various quarters. However, discussions on climate change often overlook the role of religion and the specific impact on women in terms of mitigation and adaptation efforts. Women tend to be marginalized and relegated to a peripheral position when the intersection of religion and climate change is examined. In recent years, there has been increasing research and discussion surrounding

the complex and multifaceted issue of how African women's experiences of patriarchy intertwine with ecological degradation. At its core, this issue revolves around the ways in which gendered power dynamics and environmental deterioration intersect and influence the experiences of African women. This includes their access to resources and their ability to mitigate the effects of climate change.

2. African feminism

This study employs the African feminist approach as a theoretical framework. African feminism falls within the category of global organizations dedicated to dismantling patriarchy in all its manifestations. However, they pursue this goal with an understanding that patriarchy varies across time and space, influenced by factors such as class, race, ethnicity, religion, and global power dynamics [1]. African feminism is an active and dynamic movement that recognizes the diversity of African cultures, the unique historical experiences of African women, and the specific social, cultural, political, and economic contexts they face [1].

African feminism is a discourse that seeks to comprehend the multiple challenges and obstacles faced by African women resulting from sexism, which is a product of patriarchy, poverty, and colonization [2]. This theoretical approach is particularly relevant to this study as it strives to educate, empower, and advance women, not in opposition to men, but alongside them. African feminism does not view African men as adversaries but rather calls upon them to recognize and address the specific forms of women's subjugation that exist alongside the overall oppression experienced by all Africans. It sees men as partners in the struggle against gender oppression [1]. Therefore, the discourse on African gender issues should involve both men and women in challenging oppressive African cultural norms. This characteristic makes this theory especially relevant to this study because, to eliminate the exclusion of women in climate change debates, it is necessary to engage men in the conversation. This theory deviates from conventional feminism that view men as enemies. Drawing from the principles of African feminism, our chapter affirms that involving men in this discourse will contribute to enhancing women's involvement in decision-making concerning the conservation of the environment.

African feminism is an activist movement and a set of ideas that advocate for positive social transformation. This study argues that while men and women may have biological differences, they deserve equal treatment, liberties, and rights, even in climate change issues. The approach acknowledges that gender inequality, discrimination, and oppression are realities in Africa.

3. The influence of religious teachings on gender roles and environmental ethics

Religious teachings play a significant role in shaping gender roles and hierarchies within societies, as well as influencing ethical perspectives on the environment. This section examines how religious teachings and interpretations can reinforce traditional gender roles and hierarchies while also shaping perspectives on stewardship, dominion, and the relationship between humans and the environment.

Many religious traditions have historically upheld patriarchal structures that assign specific roles and responsibilities to men and women. These teachings often

emphasize male authority and female subordination within family and societal contexts [3]. For instance, some interpretations of Christian scriptures have been used to support the subordination of women, citing selected biblical passages such as Ephesians 5:22–24, which instruct wives to submit to their husbands. Similarly, certain interpretations of religious texts in other faith traditions have been used to justify gender inequalities, limiting women's participation and leadership roles within religious institutions [4].

Religious teachings also shape ethical perspectives on environmental stewardship, dominion, and the relationship between humans and the natural world. The concept of stewardship, as mentioned in Christianity, encourages believers to view themselves as caretakers of the Earth and emphasizes responsible care and protection of the environment [5]. However, the interpretation of dominion can vary. Some interpretations promote a responsible exercise of dominion, emphasizing the ethical responsibility to protect and preserve the Earth, while others may interpret dominion as a license for exploitation without considering environmental consequences [6].

The influence of religious teachings on gender roles and environmental ethics is a complex interplay that varies across different religious traditions, denominations, and cultural contexts [7]. It is important to recognize that interpretations of religious texts can be diverse and subject to evolution over time. Some religious communities are re-examining traditional teachings, promoting gender equality, and revisiting interpretations to foster more inclusive and environmentally conscious practices [8]. The intersectionality of gender and environmental ethics within religious contexts requires a nuanced understanding of how religious teachings and cultural norms intersect with ecological values and social justice concerns.

Religious teachings have a profound influence on both gender roles and environmental ethics. While certain interpretations can reinforce traditional gender hierarchies, religious perspectives on stewardship, dominion, and the relationship between humans and the environment provide a framework for understanding our ethical responsibilities toward the natural world. Recognizing the complexities of these influences allows for critical reflection, dialog, and the potential for transformative interpretations that promote gender equality, environmental sustainability, and social justice within religious contexts.

4. Patriarchal dynamics within church structures

Power structures within religious institutions in Africa have long influenced women's agency and participation in environmental decision-making processes. Religious institutions in Africa often reflect patriarchal norms and practices, with male-dominated power structures [4]. Some Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe, like the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe, are patriarchal and are led by a male bloated leadership [9]. Traditional interpretations of religious teachings can reinforce gender inequalities, limiting women's access to leadership roles, and diminishing their voices in environmental discussions. Women may face discrimination and exclusion from decision-making spaces due to societal and religious norms that prioritize male authority and control.

Recognizing and challenging patriarchal power structures within religious institutions is crucial for promoting women's agency and enhancing their involvement in environmental decision-making. Encouraging gender-sensitive interpretations of religious teachings can provide a basis for reimagining women's roles and empowering

them to actively participate in environmental initiatives [9]. Fostering inclusive leadership and decision-making structures within religious institutions can create spaces for women's voices to be heard and influence environmental policies and practices [9]. Engaging religious leaders and communities in dialog and education on gender equality and environmental justice can help to challenge patriarchal norms and promote more equitable and sustainable approaches to environmental stewardship [9].

The lack of female representation in leadership positions within churches can limit women's influence and decision-making power in matters related to the environment [10]. Women are also endowed with indigenous knowledge which helps in preserving the environment and curbing some of the devastating effects of climate change. Women in Africa, just like their male counterparts, are equipped with the knowledge of how nature behaves and what predictions to make, using several observations on natural phenomena. More so, research shows that while the significance of indigenous knowledge has been recognized in the designing and implementation of sustainable development projects, not much has been done to include indigenous knowledge systems in formal climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies, especially in discussions with women, who are largely in touch with the environment in different ways. Regrettably, since very few, if any women sit in decision-making boards, their views are barely heard and their knowledge on ecological preservation is often underutilized [10].

Due to patriarchy, there is uneven access to resources, such as financial resources and education, which further contributes to gender disparities within churches. Limited access to resources can hinder women's capacity to engage in environmental initiatives, advocacy, and community-based projects. The unequal distribution of resources perpetuates gender inequalities and reinforces the exclusion of women from meaningful participation in environmental decision-making processes [10].

5. Gendered impacts of climate change on church-going women

Climate change has profound implications for the daily lives and well-being of church-going women, as they often have close connections to the natural environment and rely on it for their livelihoods. This section will explore the ways in which ecological degradation impacts the lives of church-going African women, considering their roles, responsibilities, and spiritual connections to the environment, with reference to the relevant studies and research.

Climate change manifestations vary across different regions of the world, and they are not globally uniform [11]. The impacts of climate change can be different significantly, with some regions experiencing increased rainfall levels while others face reduced levels, resulting in wetter or drier conditions. In areas with increased rainfall, there is a higher risk of flooding as the ground becomes saturated, rivers and tributaries exceed their carrying capacities, and dams may collapse or fail under excessive water pressure [11]. Zimbabwe serves as an example of a place facing diverse climate change challenges. It has witnessed the adverse effects of climate change including drought, erosion, and frequent flood disasters, impacting various parts of the country, and causing significant loss of life and property damage.

Climate change has significant implications for food security, and women in Zimbabwe are particularly vulnerable to its impacts. Climate change can disrupt agricultural systems, leading to decreased crop yields, shifts in rainfall patterns, increased frequency of extreme weather, and the spread of pests and diseases.

These changes directly affect the availability and accessibility of food, posing a threat to food security [12]. Climate change also has affected the agricultural practices of women in Chimanimani [13]. In Zimbabwe, women play a crucial role in agricultural production, particularly in small-scale farming and subsistence agriculture. They are involved in various activities, such as crop cultivation, and livestock rearing. However, climate change impacts such as prolonged droughts, erratic rainfall, and increased temperatures pose significant challenges to their farming practices. For example, the changing rainfall patterns can result in water scarcity, affecting the irrigation capabilities of women farmers. Reduced water availability hinders crop growth and productivity, leading to lower yields and limited food availability. Additionally, extreme weather events like floods or droughts can destroy crops, leading to food losses and compromising the food security for women and their families. Furthermore, women often have limited access to resources and technologies that can help them to adapt to climate change. They may lack access to improved seeds, irrigation systems, financial services, and information on climate-smart agricultural practices [12]. These limitations further exacerbate the vulnerability of women to climate change impacts on food security. The reduction in food production is a high threat to food security and this aggravates the problem of poverty already in existence. Women contribute 80% of the food in Africa, 60% of the food in Asia, and 40% of the food in Latin America [14]. The burden on women has increased because they are usually the ones who are responsible for finding other sources of food, which most of the time requires them to have some money to buy these alternative sources of food. Due to the ongoing economic challenges in Southern Africa, especially in Zimbabwe, this becomes a mammoth task. This is unlike in the good old days when they were assured of harvesting enough food from their fields.

Women in Africa often have strong spiritual connections to the natural environment, considering it sacred and imbued with spiritual meaning [15]. Ecological degradation has far-reaching consequences for the spiritual cultural practices deeply intertwined with the natural environment, significantly impacting the sense of identity, belonging, and spiritual fulfillment experienced by African women. The loss of biodiversity, destruction of sacred sites, and degradation of natural landscapes undermine the spiritual and cultural significance attributed to the environment, consequently affecting the well-being and resilience of women and their communities. Traditionally, African women have played essential roles as farmers, herbalists, and caretakers of water and fire, forging a profound connection with the land and its resources [16].

Climate change has also led to deforestation. Deforestation disrupts ecosystems and impacts women who heavily rely on forests for fuelwood, food, medicine, and income generation. The loss of forests threatens their livelihoods and exacerbates their vulnerability. Women's dependence on forest resources makes them more susceptible to the adverse effects of deforestation, leading to increased workloads, decreased access to resources, and limited income-generating opportunities. Deforestation also affects women's traditional knowledge and practices, as the destruction of forests erodes cultural and spiritual connections to the natural environment [17].

Women also become susceptible to dehumanization and exploitation because of the effects of climatic changes. For instance, in the aftermath of the Cyclone Idai carnage, some of the women who survived this ecological disaster in Chimanimani bemoaned how they were taken advantage of by some unscrupulous humanitarian officers who solicited for sex in exchange for the basic necessities such as food, tents, sanitary ware, which they were supposed to distribute free of charge [13].

An unprecedented increase in household chores is another gendered impact of climate change in Zimbabwe. In many African countries, Zimbabwe included, women are responsible for collecting firewood, fetching water, and growing crops, all of which are activities that are highly dependent on a healthy and sustainable environment [1]. When rains fail, not only do women find their workload doubled as they must walk longer distances to fetch water, but food security is also highly impacted, leading to ill-health and death [17]. Caregiving is another household chore for women, that increases because of climate change. This became apparent in the aftermath of the Cyclone Idai catastrophe which hit hardest in the Chimanimani and Chipinge districts of Zimbabwe. Many people were injured, and women had to take care of the sick and injured, increasing their workload. Women's role as caregivers and the primary providers of healthcare within their families means that environmental degradation and its associated health impacts disproportionately burden them [18].

Climate change has serious implications for human health. Drought also leads to water scarcity and a significant decrease in fresh water. This can compromise hygiene and increase the risk of diarrhea and other waterborne diseases such as typhoid fever, cholera, and river blindness. Floods contaminate freshwater supplies, heighten the risk of waterborne diseases, as well as creating a breeding ground for disease-carrying insects such as mosquitoes. Women are the ones who carry most of the burden for they are the ones who are supposed to maintain cleanliness in such difficult circumstances. Besides, they are the ones who also take care of the sick in the home [19]. Contaminated water sources, air pollution, and exposure to toxic substances can lead to increased health risks, including respiratory diseases, waterborne illnesses, and reproductive health issues. Food insecurity negatively impacts women's health and nutrition, leading to increased vulnerability to malnutrition and related health issues [20].

5.1 Resistance and transformation

Religious communities have got a crucial role to play, in addressing the environmental crisis and climate change. While religion alone may not be sufficient to tackle these challenges, it can serve as a vital partner, alongside fields such as economics, policy, science, and education. Religion has been recognized as a powerful force shaping human behavior and ideology concerning both mitigation and adaptation to environmental and climatic changes [21]. Unfortunately, decision-makers often overlook the religious and social dimensions when considering environmental conservation, climate change mitigation, and adaptation strategies.

Religion plays a pivotal role in shaping people's perceptions, attitudes, and actions toward various goals. It provides a framework through which values and orientations can be derived, potentially fostering world views and environmental ethics that promote the conservation of the environment and climate change adaptation [22]. By engaging with religious teachings and communities, it becomes possible to tap into these values and mobilize them to foster a deeper appreciation for the environment and drive sustainable actions. It is, therefore, apparent that recognizing and harnessing the potential of religion in climate change efforts is crucial. Collaboration between religious communities, policymakers, scientists, educators, and other stakeholders can lead to more holistic and effective approaches. By integrating religious perspectives, values, and practices into environmental initiatives, we can tap into a powerful force for change and promote a more sustainable and resilient future [10].

The church's widespread presence in the country grants it significant social and political influence, positioning it advantageously to make a greater contribution in

mitigating, educating, and preventing climate change. By embracing this role, the church aligns with Christian ethics, which advocates for environmental stewardship, and the traditional African environmental philosophy, which emphasizes the interconnectedness between humans and nature. Leveraging its position and influence, the Church can effectively address climate change concerns and foster a sense of responsibility toward the environment among its followers.

By actively engaging in climate change initiatives, the church can fulfill its moral and ethical obligations while also leveraging its broad reach and influence to raise awareness, build capacity, and mobilize action. Emphasizing environmental stewardship and promoting sustainable practices, the Church can contribute to creating a more resilient and environmentally conscious society. Through its focus on women, youth, and local communities, the Church can address the specific vulnerabilities and challenges they face, ensuring a more inclusive and equitable approach to climate change mitigation and adaptation. Such efforts are crucial for addressing the urgent challenges posed by climate change and creating a more sustainable and just future for all [23].

The church has the potential to be a powerful space for resistance and transformation, challenging patriarchal norms and promoting ecological stewardship which will, in turn, benefit women in the long run. First, churches can actively work toward confronting and changing patriarchal traditions that perpetuate gender inequalities within religious communities. Such initiatives will promote gender equality, challenge traditional gender roles, and create spaces for women's leadership and participation [9]. For instance, the Church can start taking steps toward gender justice by ordaining women as priests and bishops and dismantling the male-bloated leadership structures within the church. By addressing gender inequalities within religious contexts and advocating for ecological stewardship, these initiatives contribute to a more holistic approach to justice, recognizing the interdependence of human well-being and the health of the planet. Church-based initiatives that prioritize gender equality and environmental justice contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable future, bridging the gap between religious teachings and social environmental action.

6. Overcoming barriers and empowering women

In sync with the principles of African feminism, which emphasizes women's empowerment as a cog for human development in Africa, the church can engage in a number of activities in empowering women to participate in climate change deliberations. First, education plays a pivotal role in empowering women within religious contexts. Providing access to quality education equips women with knowledge, skills and critical thinking abilities for challenging gender inequalities and promoting their agency [9]. Educational initiatives can focus on gender-responsive curricula, leadership development, and vocational training, enabling women to actively participate in decision-making processes and contribute to sustainable development efforts [9]. This dovetails with the UN Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5, which are among the priority Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) shaping Zimbabwe's development agenda. Sustainable Development Goal 4 is targeted toward ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. On the other hand, Sustainable Development Goal 5 is tailored toward achieving gender equality as well as empowering all women and girls. Hence, by addressing these two SDGs, the church will be making an immense contribution toward the attainment of the overall goal of the 17 SDGs, which is to ensure that no one is left behind in the development agenda.

Theological re-interpretation can be a powerful tool in empowering church-going-women for them to participate in climate change debates. Re-examining religious texts and theological frameworks is crucial for promoting gender equality within religious institutions. Embracing the principles of African feminism and biblical interpretation helps to challenge patriarchal interpretations that reinforce gender disparities [24]. By highlighting women's agency, leadership roles, and contributions to religious narratives, theological reinterpretation promotes inclusive religious practices and fosters gender equality within churches. The main tenets of African women's theology can also provide a platform for feminist theological dialog and interpretation, facilitating transformative practices within religious communities [9].

More so, the church can engage in leadership and capacity building by supporting women's leadership development by creating opportunities for women to hold leadership positions in the church and environmental committees within the church. Capacity-building programs can be organized to enhance women's skills in key areas such as sustainable agriculture, natural resource management, and climate change [12].

Engaging women in community–based initiatives and grassroots activism is essential for empowering church-going women. Community participation also allows women to contribute their perspectives, knowledge, and skills to address social, economic, and environmental challenges [13]. Women's groups within religious communities can foster solidarity, organize advocacy campaigns, and implement sustainable projects that promote gender equality, environmental stewardship, and social justice [25]. Insights can be derived from the Green Anglicans movement, mentioned earlier in this chapter, which actively engages church communities in environmental activism and encourages women's leadership in ecological justice initiatives [5].

Furthermore, economic empowerment is crucial if ever women should participate fully in conserving the environment and preventing the drastic changes taking place in the climate. The church can facilitate income-generating activities for women that align with sustainable practices. For instance, women can be supported in starting eco-friendly businesses, such as organic farming, renewable energy enterprises, or sustainable crafts [26]. By promoting economic empowerment, the church can enable women to have a greater say in decision-making processes related to environmental conservation [12].

Advocacy and policy engagement is another strategy that the church can utilize in empowering women. The church can advocate for gender-responsive environmental policies and regulations that address the specific needs and priorities of women [27]. This can involve engaging with policymakers, participating in policy dialogs, and highlighting the importance of women's involvement in decision-making processes related to climate change and environmental issues [12]. Such an undertaking would feed into the main goals of Sustainable Development Goal 13 whose main target is to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.

The church can also foster partnerships with other organizations, both within and outside the religious sector, as another way of amplifying its efforts in empowering women in the conservation of the environment. Collaborative initiatives can include joint projects, knowledge-sharing platforms, and resource mobilization for women-led environmental initiatives [12].

These strategies work synergistically to empower church-going Zimbabwean women, enabling them to challenge gender inequalities, promote sustainable practices, and contribute to social transformation within religious contexts. By implementing these strategies, the church can create an enabling environment for women to actively participate in environmental conservation and climate change prevention.

It can promote women's agency, leadership, and meaningful engagement in decision-making processes, ultimately contributing to sustainable development and a more equitable society.

7. Ways women can conserve the environment

There are several ways in which women can contribute toward the conservation of the environment. Advocating for environmental protection: Women can use their voices to advocate for environmental protection and raise awareness about the importance of conservation. For instance, Greta Thunberg, a young environmental activist, has been using her platform to raise awareness about climate change and inspire action to reduce carbon emissions [28]. The Chipko movement in India which is being led by women stopped the cutting of trees by physically surrounding the trees in the 1970s. Women around the world, through advocacy, continue to fight against climate change [29].

Women can support sustainable practices by using eco-friendly products, reducing waste, and choosing sustainable transportation options. A poignant example is the ecologically friendly practice by most rural women in the Democratic Republic of Congo, who use locally built energy-saving stoves for cooking. By doing, so they preserve the Virunga Park forests in Congo. In India, Vandana Shiva, an environmental activist and eco-feminist, has been advocating for sustainable agricultural practices that protect the environment and empower local communities [30].

Women can also engage in conservation efforts by volunteering for environmental organizations or participating in community-based conservation projects. The Nobel laureate and leading Kenyan environmentalist activist Wangari Maathai, founded the Green Belt Movement, which has planted over 50 million trees in Kenya and empowered women to participate in conservation efforts [31].

Women can also develop innovative solutions to environmental challenges. Aisa Mijeno, a Filipino engineer, invented a lamp that runs on saltwater, providing a sustainable and renewable source of light for communities without access to electricity [32]. In India, women also use homemade solar cookers to boil water. By so doing, they avoid trees, thus preserving the forests [29]. Other women from around the world can draw a leaf from these ecologically sensitive practices and domesticate such practices in their context. Together, men and women can work together to preserve and nurture Mother Earth.

8. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the intertwinement between church-going African women's experiences of patriarchy and ecological degradation, highlighting the significant impact that religious teachings and institutions have on gender roles, environmental ethics, and women's agency in environmental decision-making. The examination of patriarchal power structures in African religious institutions has revealed the ways in which women's participation and leadership are often limited, contributing to gender disparities in decision-making and resource access. Additionally, the analysis of specific environmental challenges faced by women, such as water scarcity, deforestation, and food insecurity, has underscored the need for gender-sensitive approaches to environmental conservation and sustainable development.

Despite these challenges, church-based initiatives have emerged as a space for resistance and transformation, challenging patriarchal norms and promoting ecological stewardship. Women's roles in environmental activism, conservation projects, and sustainable development efforts within religious contexts have been increasingly recognized, reflecting the potential for empowering women as agents of change.

To promote gender equality and women's agency within religious institutions, strategies such as education, theological reinterpretation, and community engagement are necessary. These strategies can foster sustainable practices that prioritize environmental stewardship and gender justice. Further research, interfaith dialog, and action are needed to continue advancing this important work.

In conclusion, addressing the intertwinement between patriarchy and ecological degradation within religious contexts requires a multifaceted approach that acknowledges the diverse experiences and perspectives of church-going African women. By working toward gender equality and ecological sustainability, we can create a more just and equitable world for all.

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