



# Religion, Law and Women's Leadership in Pre-Colonial Zimbabwe: What went wrong?

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## ABSTRACT

Issues of religion, law and leadership in Africa are contentious to the extent that they have become battlefields of power, gender inequalities and social injustices. This article explores the oral provisions of African Traditional Religion to women's leadership in pre-colonial Zimbabwe vis-à-vis the post-colonial legal provisions of leadership in the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment No.20 of 2013, with a view to making an informed comparison between what religion and law say about leadership in general, and women's leadership in particular. The Zimbabwe case study was used as a mirror of the African worldview on religion, law, and leadership. The study adopted documentary review, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and observation to gather data for this study. The findings revealed that African Traditional Religion in pre-colonial Zimbabwe empowered women through rituals and ceremonies. While the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) is clear on traditional and political leadership, women are not given the rights accorded to them by the Constitution. Using an Afro-centric approach, the study argues that while in pre-colonial Zimbabwe women were accorded some substantial powers for leadership, these seem to have waned during colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwe. Yet women's leadership is not only transparent, responsible and accountable, but nurturing. We argue that women's leadership is a cog in the realisation of Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 10.

**Keywords:** Afro-Centric, Law, Religion, Women Leadership, Culture, Zimbabwe.

## INTRODUCTION

Across the world, women make up about half of the population, yet they never come close to holding fifty percent of the positions of power in any government, let alone in any sphere of human life.<sup>1</sup> Recently, a few women in general and African women in particular are making it into positions of power. They are still widely marginalised and are regarded as primary caregivers. Despite Africa being referred to as the Mother Continent, the cradle of humanity, women in Africa are prejudiced by African beliefs and habits that make

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<sup>1</sup> Justina Amina Bitiyong Zemo and Sheriff Ghali Ibrahim, "Role of African Women Leaders in Inspiring Women Participation in Leadership: An Analysis," *African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research* 2, no. 3 (2019): 12–27.

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it virtually impossible for women to hold leadership positions. While this argument persists, there is another school of thought that attributes African women as leaders, especially before the advent of colonisation. This school of thought portrays African women as beacons of good leadership deriving from their feminine virtues such as nurturance, compassion, and motherhood, just to mention a few. The school of thought points to the disenfranchisement African women suffered at colonisation where the white man occupied the uppermost position, followed by his wife and son. Below the structure were the black man and the black woman, who occupied the lowest stratum. There is a dearth of literature in Zimbabwe on religion, law and women's leadership that spans pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe.

This article intends to find out what is responsible for the low numbers of women taking up leadership roles in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Is this to do with colonialism? Does this have to do with African religio-cultural beliefs and practices? Is it to do with leadership inadequacies in women? What then does the law say, given these intricacies surrounding women's leadership in postcolonial Zimbabwe? These are the questions that this article grapples with. In order to answer the questions, this study situated leadership in Africa in general, explored women and leadership in pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwe with a view to finding out what was obtained before colonisation, assessed the role of law in the matrices and then lastly suggested a way forward for religion, law and women's leadership in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Law, in this study, is viewed as either the legislated one from the Constitution and/or customary law enshrined in everyday people's dos and don'ts. By religion, the study focuses on African traditional beliefs and practices in which women's leadership roles can be gleaned.

### **Situating leadership in postcolonial Africa**

According to Chitando, “studies on leadership have been dominated by the image of men as the purported divinely and socially sanctioned leaders.”<sup>2</sup> Although a talk on leadership is a talk about men, it is interesting to note that recent scholarship, especially by women scholars and activists, has taken up the challenge to delink the concept of ‘leadership’ from ‘men.’<sup>3</sup> In other words, leadership has to be ‘rescued’ from the clutches of domineering patriarchy, a vice that is attributed to colonialism, which privileges men at the expense of women. Men are not prepared to let go because of the benefits that accrue to them, given by the patriarchy. The patriarchal dividend is so sweet that men are not prepared to share it with women. This is why Mapuranga suggests ‘bargaining with patriarchy’ for women to access leadership.<sup>4</sup> This has seen women leaders, for those who happen to land it, struggle to match their male counterparts. They are labelled, and if it happens that the woman leader is single, tongues wag. The moment they land leadership roles, the women are either castigated as social misfits or accused of wanting to ‘steal’ other women’s husbands.<sup>5</sup> This resonates with what Zemo and Ibrahim say about female politicians. They are regarded as ‘loose women’ or ‘unfit mothers.’<sup>6</sup> One is compelled to give an example of what was observed in Zimbabwe in 2024 in a certain Christian denomination where a woman reverend was castigated by men as she was vying for the president or vice president post of the denomination. Social media was awash with unwarranted criticisms levelled against her. What was surprising was that all criticisms and derogatory remarks came from men. It would seem that men were rattled by her intentions to lead the denomination, a feat that the male members of the denomination would not stomach. Another surprise in this incident is that women who were supposed to prop their own to the post did not. They became accomplices in denying the woman reverend an opportunity to get to the helm of the church in question.

The above example gives two insights: Firstly, that women's leadership is not easily acceptable among African men, and secondly, that African women are not yet ready to be led by another woman. Given

<sup>2</sup> Ezra Chitando, “Theorising African Women Leadership: An Overview,” in *Women, Religion and Leadership in Zimbabwe*, ed. Molly Manyonganise, Ezra Chitando, and Sophia Chirongoma, vol. 1 (Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Chitando, “Theorising African Women Leadership: An Overview.”

<sup>4</sup> Tapiwa Mapuranga, “Bargaining with Patriarchy? Women Pentecostal Leaders in Zimbabwe,” *Fieldwork in Religion* 8, no. 1 (2013): 74–91.

<sup>5</sup> Kudzai Biri, “*The Wounded Beast?*”: *Single Women, Tradition, and the Bible in Zimbabwe*, vol. 28 (University of Bamberg Press, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Zemo and Ibrahim, “Role of African Women Leaders in Inspiring Women Participation in Leadership: An Analysis.”

these two truisms, it is prudent to examine why men and women would not accept a woman leader, as was the case in the given scenario above. Is this to do with the experiences of women leaders, or is it how men and women are socialised? These questions lead to a reflection on what women's leadership was like before the colonisation of Africa. The next section, therefore, demonstrates how women's leadership in Africa was viewed before the colonisation and bastardisation of African communities.

### Women's Leadership in Pre-Colonial Africa: What Went Wrong?

Literature has it that before colonisation of Africa, women wielded power and occupied very influential positions in society.<sup>7</sup> Some African societies used to have communities that were matriarchal in nature, where women possessed power and were decision-makers in all spheres of human existence. Women were political, social, religious and even economic leaders of their communities in consultation, of course, with their male counterparts. History has women who excelled in their leadership roles to the satisfaction of their followership. In order to demonstrate this, this study provides some African women who were luminaries during their reign. Amadiume clearly illustrates that some tribes in Nigeria had titled women who wielded enormous power and authority in their communities. Amadiume points a finger at Western education and Christianity and accuses them of eroding African women's power and making them invisible. She compares the pre-colonial and colonial positions of women. She argues that before colonisation African women, Nigerian women in particular, had respectful titles. The title *Ekwe*, for example, was associated with the goddess Idemili.<sup>8</sup> It is a title taken by women, and it has a strong association with a woman's economic abilities and charismatic attributes. Women with these titles were very rich and could 'marry other women', what Amadiume calls 'woman-to-woman marriage'. This may sound lesbian, but far from it. The titled woman would give the married woman to a man of her choice to bear children in the name of the titled woman, hence the 'female husband'. Amadiume points to a number of titled women who had great influence in the communities, and men would take it thus. These establishments seemed to have the blessings of the men. Women had powers such that they could be named 'male' daughters and 'female husbands'. This establishment meant that women could be leaders in their communities without any hiccups. Titled women would officiate at rituals and ceremonies. They were not only found in the preparation of the rituals and ceremonies but also took an active role in the performance of rituals and ceremonies.

History tells of a very powerful and authoritative queen, Nzinga of Congo. She would try cases seated on males lying down.<sup>9</sup> While not condoning the excesses of her power and authority, this study argues that there were once women of influence, and men would cower in their presence. To then argue and say African culture and religion are the main two contributors to women's continued low status in Africa, and form the root of women's oppression, is relegating the history of powerful women like Queen Nzinga to the margins, a narrative meant to denounce African culture and religion by Westerners.<sup>10</sup> The persistent onslaught of African culture and religion as reservoirs of women's oppression in Africa, which female and male scholars and activists have embraced, is quite unfortunate.<sup>11</sup> One must be reminded of the intention of the colonisers, denouncing African culture and replacing it with theirs, what Ndlovu-Gatsheni calls 'culturecide', left many seeing no good in the country's culture. African women, indeed, had power and authority.<sup>12</sup> They occupied very influential positions in communities, such that some people are nostalgic about such periods, as they

<sup>7</sup> Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (Zed Books Ltd., 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*.

<sup>9</sup> Misheck Sibanda, Henry Moyana, and Sam D Gumbo, "The African Heritage: History for Junior Secondary Schools," 1985.

<sup>10</sup> Mercy A Oduyoye and Musimbi R A Kanyoro, *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005); Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995); Rachel Angogo Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2002); Lilian Cheelo Siwila, "Culture, Gender, and HIV and AIDS: United Church of Zambia's Response to Traditional Marriage Practices" (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Oduyoye and Kanyoro, *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*; Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*; Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective*; Siwila, "Culture, Gender, and HIV and AIDS: United Church of Zambia's Response to Traditional Marriage Practices."

<sup>12</sup> Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Interview at the Sidelines of African Studies Association Annual General Meeting* (Boston, 2019).

have come face to face with failed leadership in Africa. Women's leadership competitive advantage is the feminine traits they bring to the positions of power, feminine traits like compassion, kindness, generosity, and motherliness; the list is endless. While their male counterparts may take these virtues as weaknesses, the study argues that women have what it takes to be transformative-servant leaders. Being mothers themselves, women leaders know what hurts, marginalises, excludes, impoverishes, starves and stifles. Getting to positions of leadership would make them serve with distinction if men do not throw spanners into their works. Examples of such women leaders who have excelled and continue to excel include Nkosazana Dhlamini Zuma, of South Africa, who served with aplomb at the African Union Commission, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia and Samia Suluhu Hassan of Tanzania (though she is recently demonised as a autocratic), and the newly inaugurated Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah of Namibia, the last three being at the highest level of leadership, being presidents of their respective countries at one time or another. These are the queen Nzingas of contemporary times. Feminine traits combined with the concept of *Ubuntu*, which is the spirit of embracing, caring, community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness,<sup>13</sup> culminate in what Ndlovu calls '*spirited Ubuntu*' though the study does not agree on anchoring this on Christian faith as alluded by the scholar.<sup>14</sup> A leader with the *spirited ubuntu* is proactive and not reactive, compassionate and transformative. This is anchoring leadership on an indigenous philosophy. The caring dimension of *Ubuntu* is seen as quite strategic for women's leadership.<sup>15</sup>

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopted the Afrocentric theory. Molefi Kete Asante is believed to have been the originator of Afrocentricity. Asante defines Afrocentricity as a manner of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate.<sup>16</sup> It is an intellectual movement, a political view, and/or a historical evolution that stresses the culture and achievements of Africans.<sup>17</sup> This is a theory that stresses 'African centeredness'.<sup>18</sup> In this study, the Afrocentric theory was used as both a lens through which women's leadership used to be in pre-colonial Zimbabwe and as an advocacy tool calling for a change in the way women's leadership is viewed in postcolonial Zimbabwe. It is a theory that this study used to reassess how women's leadership was perceived in pre-colonial and colonial Zimbabwe with a view to re-thinking about women's leadership in Africa embroiled in leadership crises.

## METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study adopted the documentary analysis, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions with the Shona people of Zimbabwe, particularly the Ndauspeaking people of south-eastern Zimbabwe. Five (5) key informants were selected for the study, and three (3) focus group discussions, comprising six (6) members per group, were conducted. The participants' ages ranged from 56 to 70. The five key informants included traditionalists and law experts who provided information on how women leaders were/are viewed from the past to the present. Their consent was sought, and privacy and confidentiality issues were assured. Data collected was thematically analysed.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Women's leadership in the religious sphere

<sup>13</sup> Lisa B Ncube, "Ubuntu: A Transformative Leadership Philosophy," *Journal of Leadership Studies* 4, no. 3 (2010): 77–82.

<sup>14</sup> Priscilla Mtungwa Ndlovu, *Discovering the Spirit of Ubuntu Leadership: Compassion, Community, and Respect* (Springer, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Sinenhlanhla S Chisale, "Ubuntu as Care: Deconstructing the Gendered Ubuntu," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 39, no.1(2018): 1–8.

<sup>16</sup> Molefi Kofi Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change, (No Title)Chicago, Peoples Publishing Group, 2001* (Chicago: Peoples Publishing Group, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Gerald Early and Wilson J Moses, "Symposium: Historical Roots of Afrocentrism.," *Academic Questions* 7, no. 2 (1994).

<sup>18</sup> J Chidozie Chukwuokolo, "Afrocentrism or Eurocentrism: The Dilemma of African Development," *OGIRISI: A New Journal of African Studies* 6 (2009): 24–39.

Pre-colonial Zimbabwe had women taking a lead in matters of religiosity. They had religious roles that manifested in rituals and ceremonies. Among the Ndau people of south-eastern Zimbabwe, the key informants referred to a female figure, Chapo, who features profoundly in their religious life. Without wanting to get into the controversies surrounding her history due to time and space, the interviewees revealed Chapo's power to bring rain using her *gona remvura* (rain-making charm). She was said to have inherited it from her brother Nyakuimba, who was entrusted, during the Rozvi empire, with keeping the *gona remvura* by the Rozvi king, Shiriyedenga.<sup>19</sup> He then connived with his sister, Chapo, to flee with the charm, and from then on Chapo is associated with bringing rain among the Ndau people of the Musikavanhu chieftaincy. She was interred with such an aura that even up to today her spirit is consulted when it comes to matters of rain-petitioning among the *vaDondo* people of the Musikavanhu chieftaincy. One of the key informants revealed that she was highly respected, and she wielded religious power. She was central in officiating agricultural rituals and ceremonies for abundant rain. She earned herself a religious leadership role that ensured food security among the *vaDondo* people.

Similarly, in colonial Zimbabwe (Rhodesia then), stories of a woman who excelled during Zimbabwe's liberation struggle are told. Mbuya Nehanda is a household name in Zimbabwe, and any talk about the first and second *Chimurenga* without her name in the liberation struggle story is not complete. She is said to have led the fight against the white settlers.<sup>20</sup> She was finally arrested and hanged. Before she died, she is claimed to have uttered these words: *Mapfupa angu achamuka* (My bones shall rise). The statement is said to be referring to many Zimbabweans, male and female, the old and the young, who took up arms and waged a protracted liberation struggle with the white regime. Her words were words of inspiration for the freedom fighters. They were prophetic words, and come 1980, Zimbabwe got its independence. Her courage and astute leadership demonstrate that leadership is not only a preserve of men but of women, too. She is the epitome of the female leaders who participated in the liberation struggle for Zimbabwe. Her political leadership is closely related to her religious one as well. She is highly regarded as both a political and religious figure, and a statue of her has been recently erected by the government of Zimbabwe in Harare. Joyce Mujuru is also a living heroine whose antics during the liberation struggle surprise all. At independence, she became one of the few female ministers of Robert Mugabe's government, and she rose through the ranks to become the first female vice president of the republic. However, due to political shenanigans and the stereotyping of female leaders, she was unceremoniously removed from power.

While the researchers are mindful that socialisation at the family and school level in postcolonial Zimbabwe can derail the upward mobility of women to positions of power, one must be cautious of how that socialisation denies women leadership roles. Admittedly, there could be subtle ways in the socialisation process that portray leadership as a man's domain. But then, to continue to argue and say contemporary fathers and mothers continue to socialise their children, female children in particular, to assume second-class positions in society is unthinkable. The participants interviewed indicated that they socialise their children, girls and boys, to care for each other and treat each other equally. Schools, as well as socialising agents, cannot afford to segregate on gender lines, given how the knowledge economy is behaving in this Fourth Industrial Revolution(4IR). The curriculum in schools is clear on gender issues. Learners are conscientized on gender issues, and the participants conceded to this. People are not only aware of gender issues but are also very responsive to gender inequalities. Categorisation of people came with colonisation, and with its demise, one should revert to the pre-colonial period, where women had power and authority shared responsibly with their male counterparts. The problem of the continued marginalisation of women from positions of leadership lies squarely on those who refuse to unlearn what colonisation taught and relearn what the forebears used to handle positions of leadership.

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<sup>19</sup> Elias Konyana, "When Culture and the Law Meet: An Ethical Analysis of the Interplay between the Domestic Violence Act and the Traditional Beliefs and Cultural Practices of the Ndau People in Zimbabwe" (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> This is a name given to the first and second liberation struggle for independence against the British that started in the early 1960s and ended in 1980 when Zimbabwe attained its independence from British rule.

African traditional religion has a high regard for women as they lead in the social, political and religious lives of the local people. The interviews carried out revealed that most traditional healers in most African communities are women. They officiate on matters of a traditional nature, such as appealing to ancestors for good health, harmony, and good harvests, among many other requests communities make to the world of the departed.

From the many examples given of women leaders, it can safely be said that African women have had and some still have power, but the colonisation of Africa brought in a new dispensation that did not recognise women's power. This disruptive nature of colonisation is also acknowledged by Chitando, who argues that there are, on one hand, theories that confirm the rigid gender patterns that are now dominant in Africa as the product of colonisation.<sup>21</sup> Oduyoye also points to colonisation as she says, “the patriarchal systems *introduced* (emphasis ours) by the British succeeded because they suited the Asante men.”<sup>22</sup> This view suggests that even the patriarchy that African communities are accused of being is not African but was brought by the whites, who see men and women as different, not only biologically but socially. Before colonisation, African men were compatible with women in power, as given by Amadiume in her book and many other examples given above. It is this new dispensation that robbed women of their power. African religion had no issues with elevating women to positions of leadership. It is the new settler regime that brought Christianity, whose founder was male. The new religion had a low regard for women, and it disenfranchised African women to such an extent that African women’s power diminished as the new religion pushed women to the margins of society. The fight for freedom in most African countries was a fight against the values and practices of the white settlers. Regaining freedom from the settler regimes in Africa was supposed to be regaining women's power as well. Alas! The leaders at independence forgot and began to imitate the white’s style of leadership, where women were not accorded leadership roles. It was only after women activists had taken the bull by its horns that the citizens began to see some pieces of legislation being crafted for women’s participation in the political, economic, social, and religious milieus. The next section explores how the law in Zimbabwe enhances and/or inhibits women's leadership and what is amiss for the full participation of women in leadership across the spectrum of human life. It further interrogates whether the law is congruent or incongruent with the reality on the ground.

### **What has the law got to do with women's leadership in Zimbabwe?**

At independence in 1980 and in the subsequent years, Zimbabwe has made strides in putting in place a legal framework meant not only to empower women but to see them in positions of leadership. The new government’s stance on education saw many females enrolling at all levels of the education sector. With the help of parents and other organisations, more young women are found in higher and tertiary education pursuing careers of their choice. There is an increased number of women taking up leadership roles in all spheres of life. What is encouraging to see is that with more women in positions of power, young aspiring women have role models to follow, a feat that enables women to break the glass ceiling. The Constitution of Zimbabwe Chapter 4: Article 4.22 has made education a right for all, and this has enabled most girls to get to school, a feat which was very different under the white settler regime, where a bottleneck type of education left many out of school, thereby failing to realise their career dreams.<sup>23</sup> Education is key to women's empowerment as it gives them access to leadership positions. The law makes it compulsory that all children of school-going age are in school, though stakeholders are aware of the very high attrition rate often referred to as the ‘leaky pipeline.’<sup>24</sup>

According to Eagly and Karau, “A role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders proposes that perceived incongruity between the female gender role and leadership roles leads to two forms of

<sup>21</sup> Chitando, “Theorising African Women Leadership: An Overview.”

<sup>22</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*. 95.

<sup>23</sup> Constitution of Zimbabwe, , Chapter 29:17.

<sup>24</sup> Steven Martin Turnbull et al., “A Leaky Pipe Dream? A Study of Gender Differences in Undergraduate Physics,” *ArXiv Preprint ArXiv:1702.06249*, 2017.

prejudice: (a) perceiving women less favorably than men as potential occupants of leadership roles and (b) evaluating behaviour that fulfills the prescriptions of a leader role less favorably when it is enacted by a woman. One consequence is that attitudes are less positive toward female than male leaders and potential leaders. Other consequences are that it is more difficult for women to become leaders and to achieve success in leadership roles. Evidence from varied research paradigms substantiates that these consequences occur, especially in situations that heighten perceptions of incongruity between the female gender role and leadership roles.”<sup>25</sup>

The law has a mandate to correct such incongruities by the establishment of legislation and policies, which ensure gender reconciliation and balance. In Zimbabwe, such a mandate is regulated by the Constitution of Zimbabwe, which, under section 2 of the supreme law of the land, holds other laws under its thumb. Under section 17 of the Constitution, the state is given an obligation to promote full gender balance in Zimbabwe, which includes the promotion of the full participation of women in all spheres of Zimbabwean society based on equality with men.

Customarily, the institution of traditional leadership is predominantly male-centered. This can be attributed to the patriarchal history of the ethnic groups of Zimbabwe, such as the Shona and Ndebele, where the leaders are male. Chapter 15 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe recognizes the traditional leadership institution. The Traditional Leaders Act [Chapter 29:17] implements the traditional norms of the community in question in the appointment of chiefs. Section 2 of the aforementioned Act defines a community as a community of persons who, according to customary law, fall under the jurisdiction of the chief. This means that the regulation of such conduct is undertaken under the customary beliefs of the “community”. Section 3 of the Traditional Leaders Act states that the President shall give due consideration to the prevailing customary principles of succession. It is imperative to acknowledge that, under customary principles, women are/were regarded as inferior as compared to their male counterparts; attaining a chieftainship role was out of the question. During colonisation, women, no matter how old, were regarded as minors by law. One law expert interviewee revealed that a woman could not stand on her own in court but would require a male to stand in for her. This colonial legislation stereotyped women to such an extent that they could not be leaders. Women are denied the right to inherit their father’s chieftainship. In the absence of a male heir, the chieftainship can be given to a male relative. This all emanates from the long-held views brought by colonisation and its sister religion, Christianity, that leadership is and must be the preserve of men.

Thanks to some enabling legislation that has tried to correct the anomaly where a right female heir could not inherit her father’s chieftainship merely on gender lines. The communities have, at times, corrected such a lacuna through judicial activism and the changing perspectives of women. For instance, such activism and change can be found in the legal case of *Shilubana v Nwamita*.<sup>26</sup> The changing perspectives on women are also evident in Zimbabwe, as according to the SADC Gender Protocol Barometer of 2018, there are 6 female chiefs and 15 headmen. Therefore, judicial activism and the changing perspectives of the communities allow the retrogressive perspective of women to change. Politically, there is a need for recognition of women's representation for women by women. In Zimbabwe, the Parliament has the prerogative of creating and introducing new laws and policies in the country. The creation of an opportunity for women to be among the lawmakers enables the plights and needs of women to be heard. Affirmative action is the doctrine that ensures that women are among the parliamentarians. Section 124 (b) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe establishes a reservation of 60 seats for women. The establishment of such a provision enables the preservation of leadership roles for women.

During the 2011 United Nations Resolution on women’s political participation, it was noted that “women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of

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<sup>25</sup> Alice H Eagly and Steven J Karau, “Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice toward Female Leaders..” *Psychological Review* 109, no. 3 (2002): 573.

<sup>26</sup> (CCT 03/07) [2008] ZACC 9; 2008 (9) BCLR 914 (CC); 2009 (2) SA 66 (CC) (4 June 2008).

access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women.” This could be explained by the Victorian era, where women had no spaces to meaningfully contribute towards development. To then address this inadequacy, international conventions and treaties are recognized as establishing a space for eliminating discrimination against women in all spheres of leadership. International treaties guide international organisations such as the United Nations, Women’s leadership and political participation programmes. Treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) were enacted to ensure equal representation of women in all spheres of life. International conventions have a binding force on state parties as regulated under the Geneva Convention on the Law of Treaties of 1969. Article 26 of the aforementioned Act establishes the maxim *pacta sunt servanda*, which binds the parties to the conventions and treaties to which they are a party. Article 2 of the Maputo Protocol and CEDAW establishes the doctrine of non-discrimination in all spectrums of a woman’s life, including matters of leadership.

The few pieces of legislation given above are a testimony that, indeed, Zimbabwe has the legal framework to ensure that women take leadership positions. Being a member state and signatory to several UN treaties, Zimbabwe has an enabling environment for women's leadership, but what accounts for the low numbers of women taking leadership could be attributable to enforcers and the implementers of the law, who, unfortunately, are men. The men with the power to enforce the law are, unfortunately, products of colonisation, which relegated the position of women to the margins of society. At independence, the leaders who took over the reins of power used the colonial template to govern their countries. What this means is that the low regard for women brought by colonisation persisted and continues to persist.

Despite the clarity in the National Gender Policy (2013-2017) on a 50-50% women representation and participation in all spheres of society,<sup>27</sup> the reality is that women still remain marginalised in terms of accessing leadership roles. One law expert interviewee noted that the policy of the 50-50% directive falls far too short of the target, as there still exist disparities in a number of areas. The reasons for the persistent disparities have to do with the political will of those in the echelons of power as well as the unwillingness of women to take up leadership positions, especially in politics, for doing so means they must ‘budget for the various forms of violence that they will encounter.’<sup>28</sup> The foregoing points to the fact that there is a legal framework meant to make women occupy positions of leadership, but the implementation of the legal framework is half-hearted. Whether this half-heartedness by men leaders is because of how they were socialised remains everyone’s guess. The reality is that very few women are making it into leadership positions despite the legal framework in place. There is a discrepancy between what the law requires and what is on the ground. This is the incongruence that characterises women's leadership in Zimbabwe.

In African traditional religion, there is a common saying, *Musha Mukadzi* (loosely translated as a home is a home because of a woman). Inasmuch as people take this saying to mean that women possess power and authority in the home, the saying is also taken to mean the domestication of women. The saying is double-barreled, where women, on one hand, are the healers of society, while on the other, they are wounded by the system that gives space when there are problems and displaces them whenever there are opportunities.<sup>29</sup> Women are said to be healers of society through their feminine traits, such as tolerance, compassion, resilience, gentleness, dedication, and patience when dealing with everyday life. This qualifies them as leaders, but men take these traits as weaknesses and argue that leadership requires hardheartedness, masculine toughness, and a certain level of physicality in approaching issues. For men, leadership is not for the soft-hearted, not for the motherly, but the reality is that women, as was the case during the precolonial era, are leaders. This leadership role was even extended to the colonial era when men left the rural areas for

<sup>27</sup> The National Gender Policy (2013-2017), 3.

<sup>28</sup> Chitando, “Theorising African Women Leadership: An Overview.”

<sup>29</sup> Martin Mujinga, “Musha Mukadzi: An African Women’s Religio-Cultural Resilience Toolkit to Endure Pandemics,” *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79, no. 3 (2023): 8977.

employment in the cities. Alone in the rural home, women would take full responsibility for the home (*musha*). They would play the dual role of being a father and mother, what Mujinga calls ‘multitasking,’ which involved herding cattle, ploughing, gathering firewood, milking cattle, and taking care of the children.<sup>30</sup> This called for some degree of independence and decision-making. Doing all this is no mean achievement for the women, and denying them leadership roles for flimsy reasons is irrational. The saying points to the indispensability of women.

It is gratifying to note that women have recently positioned themselves into leadership roles and that those who lead do so expertly. The church, as another gendered space, is slowly warming towards women's leadership. Manyonganise, Chitando, and Chirongoma have edited two volumes of *Women, Religion and Leadership in Zimbabwe Volume 1 & 2* where the main preoccupation of the contributors is to demonstrate that despite men's (mis) use of sacred texts such as the Christian bible and the Muslim Quran, to suppress women and exclude them from leadership positions, women seem to be breaking the glass ceiling as they assume leadership roles in the church.<sup>31</sup> There are churches whose religious policies are empowering women to take leadership roles side by side with men. For example, some Pentecostal movements in Zimbabwe have both male and female elders and deacons of the church. Arguments are that the religions have made it possible for women to subvert patriarchy and exercise agency, which they may not be able to do outside the religious space.<sup>32</sup> Religion, in this regard, is seen as empowering women to take up positions of leadership. There are churches that recognise women as bishops and archbishops, a feat that used to be impossible if one were a woman. For example, Eunor Guti of the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA) is a very influential leader of the church. There is a need to state that although some women are making it into religious leadership positions, the number is small, and more still need to be made leaders.

### **The Way Forward: Tying The Loose Ends**

While some women have made it on the leadership ladder across all sectors, the daunting task is that they are never taken seriously. Another challenge is that when women break the ‘glass ceiling’ in leadership, they cease to be themselves as they emulate and carbon copy what male leaders do. This results in wasted efforts. Women who make it in leadership need to realise that they have made it not because of men's benevolence but out of their sheer determination, dedication and commitment. Having made it, they should create pathways for other women to join them. They need to be role models who, using the acquired power, create an enabling environment for fellow women to participate in positions of power, be it at the community, national and international levels. There is a need for mentorship, where women leaders mentor fellow women so that the number of women leaders increases. Coupled with enabling legal frameworks such as CEDAW, the Constitution, and the National Gender Policy, just to mention a few, Zimbabwean women leaders must nurture young women through advocacy. They need to explode the myth that leadership is exclusively for men.<sup>33</sup> Chitando becomes instructive when he argues that African women scholars and activists are at the forefront of research and publication on African women's leadership. His view is informed by Freire's principle of liberation, namely, that the oppressed must be actively involved (lead) in their own liberation.<sup>34</sup> They need to tell their own story and take the initiative to get into positions of leadership, for no one will do that on their behalf. While religion and law can be at variance regarding women's leadership, the two can be made partners in promoting women's leadership through negotiation and modifications for them to make women's leadership an agency towards sustainable development.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

<sup>30</sup> Mujinga, “Musha Mukadzi: An African Women's Religio-Cultural Resilience Toolkit to Endure Pandemics.”2.

<sup>31</sup> Molly Manyonganise, Ezra Chitando, and Sophia Chirongoma, *Women, Religion and Leadership in Zimbabwe*, vol. 2 (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023).3.

<sup>32</sup> Angela P Cheater, “The Role and Position of Women in Pre-Colonial and Colonial Zimbabwe,” *Zambezia* 13, no. 2 (1986): 65–79.

<sup>33</sup> Chitando, “Theorising African Women Leadership: An Overview.”31.

<sup>34</sup> Paulo Freire, “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” in *Toward a Sociology of Education* (New York: Continuum, 2020), 374–86.

To ensure that women's leadership finds traction in Zimbabwe and Africa by extension, this study recommends that communities need to synchronise what religion and law stipulate, and as they do that, they need to consider the contexts. The binary view on humanity as ushered in by colonisation must be revisited if women's mobility back into social, political and religious leadership roles is to be achieved for all humanity to flourish and for the full realisation of Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 10.

## CONCLUSION

The article has demonstrated that women used to have power, which was eroded during colonisation. It has been argued that impactful leadership that results in transformation is not possible if women continue to be excluded from positions of power and authority. Equally significant is that if African women are to effectively occupy positions of influence in their communities, they must be daring to lead. They need to unchain themselves from the colonial understanding of women and challenge patriarchy and religion (Christianity and Islam) brought by colonisation. The article has also outlined how women used to exercise power during the precolonial period and demonstrated what went wrong during the colonial period into the postcolonial period, for them to lose that power. It has been argued that having legislation in place for women's leadership is one thing and having women in those positions is quite another. The article ends by urging women to be actively involved in ensuring that they occupy leadership positions in all sectors of human life. They need to continue to break the glass ceiling as the future looks bright in their fight for positions of leadership, evident in some religions and enabling legislation that begins to treat women as able leaders like their male counterparts, if not even better.

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