

# Women's theologies challenging the status quo



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The Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR) published by the World Economic Forum (2021) indicated an alarming statistic: the time it will take for the gender gap to close increased by 36 years from the time the 2020 report was published, 12 months earlier. As reported by Haynes (2021), it will take approximately 135.6 years for men and women to achieve parity on a whole range of factors globally. Haynes also indicated that the increase in time it will take to achieve parity marks the largest gain since the GGGRs started in 2006. The report examined data from 156 countries and utilised four key indicators, namely, economic opportunity, political power, education and health. What is clear even from a cursory glance, is that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges faced by women globally and their marginalisation ever further. In this regard, because women face old and accumulating obstacles, a collection like this is well-positioned to provide a conversational space to highlight the diverse and interlinked challenges faced by women and the ongoing research and field work being conducted that is necessary to provide energy to tackle the current challenges. The current collection comprises ten contributions, each in a unique way highlighting the aspects related to the plurality of women's voices and the contributions of women's theologies.

In the contribution titled, *Mission to live: A gendered perspective on the experience of migration in Southern Africa*, Buhle Mpfu reflects on the complex and gendered survival strategies for migrant women in religious communities and highlights the existential importance of this for Christian mission. Linking up with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the contribution highlights how some of the migrant women utilised their situations of deprivation to promote socio-economic transformation through radical doctrines of resistance.

Taking the issue of migration further, Mosiuoa Makhata and Maake Masango explore the struggles of illegal migrant Basotho women in their contribution titled: *Illegal migrant Basotho women in South Africa: Exposure to vulnerability in domestic services*. The authors argued that illegal migration is a pastoral and theological concern. This is because illegal migrants are exposed to the vulnerability that requires the church's praxis to focus on defending their rights in the South African public and domestic workspace. Applying Charles Gerkin's shepherding model, Makhata and Masango argued that the church's leadership should apply Jesus' model of a Good Shepherd in their defence of illegal Basotho women in the domestic sector. This according to the authors requires a prophetic voice and pastoral care that leads to healing, sustaining, nurturing, guiding and reconciling.

The theme of women's resilience and agency emerges in the contribution by Kelebogile Resane, which is titled, *Daughters of Zelophehad – Quest for gender justice in land acquisition and ownership*. Resane focusses on land occupation as a social concern and explains how the patriarchal views marginalising women from owning the land are challenged by the spirit of the daughters of Zelophehad, as recounted in the Book of Numbers. By doing so, Resane's contribution encourages women who are part of the traditional patriarchal African societies to welcome and embrace the spirit of the daughters of Zelophehad by embracing justice education that promotes equality and social justice.

The issue of women resilience and agency in connection to issues of land and sustainable livelihoods are further explored by Macloud Sipeyiye and Tenson Muyambos in their contribution titled: *Gendered small-scale crops and power dynamics: A case of uninga (sesame) production amongst the Ndau of south-eastern Zimbabwe*. The authors highlighted the power and influence of African women in small scale agriculture. Sipeyiye and Muyambo applied African women theology's two-winged theology as conceptualised by Mercy Oduyoye to achieve two objectives. First, to

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

explore the gender dynamics in the allocation and search for pieces of land for the production of *uninga* among Nda women in the rural areas in south-eastern Zimbabwe. Second, to examine the role of women in the valorisation, use and commercialisation of *uninga*. This empirical study draws from data that is collected from people with experiences of producing *uninga*. Findings highlight that although Nda women in rural areas do not necessarily own land, they are in the forefront of initiating for land to farm *uninga* because of the need of feeding their families. The authors argued that the power dynamics in the production of *uninga* are negotiated by women who bypass the patriarchal culture that limits their access to land through marriage. Married women including widows use marriage, joint decision making with husbands and patrilineal kin to access land for their small-scale farming of *uninga* which has transformed livelihoods among the Nda. According to the authors, this has led to the feminisation and valorisation of small-scale farming, particularly for cash crop farming like *uninga* in Zimbabwe.

Beverly Haddad highlighted the complexity of women agency in her contribution titled: *Reframing women's agency in #Blessed sex: Intersectional dilemmas for African women's theologies*. According to Haddad, the emerging phenomenon of the #Blessed community of young women who seek out 'blessers', mainly older men to engage in transactional sex, in order to fund their luxury lifestyles is contrary to the values espoused by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter the Circle). She argued that these young women's form of agency perpetuates 'hetero-patriarchy' which does not liberate them from the patriarchal system that often has economic power critical to meet their economic needs. According to Haddad, these young women are trapped into what she and Gerald West conceptualised as 'econo-patriarchy'. She therefore challenges the Circle that although their theological reflection and praxis affirms the agency of women, the #Blessed community of young women introduces a new phenomenon that calls for an engagement on sustained economic analysis and theological reflection on sexual ethics.

Advancing the issue of women agency, a contribution by Doniwen Pietersen titled: *Reading a few exemplary books or texts in the Pentateuch and comparing how these books or texts portray the theme of violence and disempowerment* addresses the marginalisation of women, specifically related to gender-based violence. In the contribution, Pietersen builds on the work of Phyllis Trible and her classic designation of 'texts of terror' to refer to passages where women suffer especially at the hands of men. Pietersen explored how a gendered feminist lens may be utilised to understand the nature of disempowerment or violence against women in a patriarchal society.

Part of women's resilience is protesting against how women's bodies are objectified and marginalised. This is highlighted by the contribution of Nomatter Sande and Sophia Chirongoma, titled, *Construction of rape culture amongst the*

*Shona indigenous religion and culture: Perspectives from African feminist cultural hermeneutics*. They indicate how the combination of culture, patriarchy, poverty and religion continue to sustain rape culture. In this regard, their focus is on aspects of the Shona indigenous religion and culture and explain how the institution of marriage and some of the entrenched marital rituals embody diverse detrimental and contentious practices, which deprive girls and women of their autonomous rights, particularly their sexual and reproductive rights. They utilised African feminist cultural hermeneutics to interrogate rape culture amongst the Shona people.

Another contribution which focussed on aspects of Shona culture is made by Canisius Mwandayi, titled *Motherhood and biosafety measures: Negotiating a compromise between traditional funeral customs and public health needs in Zimbabwe in the wake of COVID-19*. In this contribution which links gender, feminist perspectives and healthcare, Mwandayi highlights how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated challenges related to the burden of care that is experienced by women who are mothers. Mwandayi offers concrete suggestions on how women's theology can make a unique contribution to both the government and Shona mothers in dealing with the emerging challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the contribution titled, *'Thursdays in Black campaign' and the blackening of the widow's body: A hermeneutic of suspicion to blackening of the body to resist gender-based violence*, Sinenhlanhla Chisale provides a thought-provoking argument about the symbolic connections with black as colour of mourning, resilience and of protest. Utilising an African feminist hermeneutics of suspicion, the contribution challenges preconceived notions about women's bodies at the intersection of race, culture and gender. In reference to the Thursdays in Black (TIB) campaign, Chisale argues that the campaign is contrary to the blackening of the widow's body and attire in their cause and the campaign's wearing of black is emotionally divorced from the struggles of widows who experience distress, sadness and shame by wearing the black attire.

The way in which African women's theology has a commitment to the emancipation of women as a broad theme of a collection like this is provided by Loreen Maseno, in the contribution titled, *African women's theology and the re-imagining of community in Africa*. Maseno argues that it is African women's theology that examines African culture and demonstrates an understanding of women that recognises the distinct experiences of African women in their perspectives while analysing women's subordination. In this regard, utilising African women's theology is the foundation of a re-imagining of community in African theology. African theology has traditionally promoted the need to appreciate African culture and ensure that the integrity of African culture is upheld. However, in so doing, it laid an emphasis only on the positive aspects in African community and

turned a blind eye to what was inherent in African community and not worthy to be reclaimed. Maseno indicates how the quality of community in Africa ought to entail relationships, which promote reciprocity, mutuality, partnership and denounce hierarchies that promote power relations between men and women.

## References

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