

# THE ROLE OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN ZAMBIA IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AMONG MEMBERS IN SELECTED CONGREGATIONS IN LUSAKA DISTRICT: 2012-2017

Dickson Njobvu and Judith Lubasi Ilubala-Ziwa

*The University of Zambia*  
*Email: judith.ziwa@unza.zm*

## Abstract

*The study examined the measures, challenges and factors that influenced the Reformed Church in Zambia (RCZ) to promote gender equality among their members. A case study design that involved the use of semi-structured interview and focus group discussion (FGD) qualitative methods, was used. Purposive sampling was used to select the 28 participants. The findings revealed that the RCZ played a significant role in promoting gender equality in the church through training religious leaders responsible for counselling young people and couples about to get married. The study concluded that although the RCZ played a significant role in promoting gender equality in Zambia, it concentrated much at the congregational rather than community and national levels.*

**Keywords:** Religion, Church, Congregation, Gender Inequality, Gender Equality

## Introduction

The first missionary to set foot on Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) soil was Frederick Stanley Arnot, a young Brethren missionary who settled at Lealui to work among the Lozi people, in December 1882. According to Ipenburg, the early missionaries perceived the Africans as indigenous and backward heavily covered in ancient traditions and rites, thus, the need to quickly proselytise them.<sup>1</sup> However, this invasion and the demise of the famous Scottish explorer, Dr David Livingstone, opened many doors to what would be a hive of missionaries' activities in Zambia. Among the missionaries were those from the RCZ who emanated from the mission efforts of the Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM) of the Orange Free State in South Africa, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> This century witnessed a mushrooming of mission fields outside the borders of that country since voluminous missionaries, including the DRCM, were all inspired by the opening up of this part of Africa by the great Scottish missionary explorer, David Livingstone in the 1850s.<sup>3</sup> According to Verstraelen-Gilhuis, in 1899, the DRCM arrived in Zambia from Nyasaland

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1 Arie Nicolaas Ipenburg, *The Development of Lumbwa Mission, Chinsali, Zambia 1904-1967* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: ProQuest LLC, 2017), 18.

2 World Council of Churches, 'Final Report of the Seminar on the Role of Religion and Religious Institutions on the Dismantling Apartheid' (Geneva: UNESCO, 2019), 23.

3 Mark Shaw, 'David Livingstone, Missionary Explorer: Recommended Resources,' Accessed 13 December, 2023, <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/uploaded/50cf837ba957f5.93613164.pdf>.

and founded itself in the eastern part of the country at a place called Magwero.<sup>4</sup> According to Ziwa and Simuchimba, religious congregations were organised into small communities and lived among the people they served so that they might understand the people's concerns and try to combat them in their midst.<sup>5</sup> This justifies why the DRCM settled at Magwero, and later, in other areas, among the people they served. Magwero was the first mission station to be opened by the DRCM in Zambia. However, on 23 April 1966, the DRCM changed its name to RCZ.

Mwandayi and Shoresore argued that the RCZ originated from Ancient Near East (ANE) where men considered themselves superior to women. This position was due to the Dutch culture which encouraged women to be homemakers and children caretakers while men were traditionally considered to be breadwinners of their families.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Leigh and Associates stated that women in Dutch societies were regarded as home caretakers and children inculcators of good morals.<sup>7</sup> This culture spread to the DRCM where women were discriminated against and their roles did not involve holding of leadership positions. The Dutch culture had a bearing on the running of the DRCM in Africa, Zambia inclusive. The RCZ as a product of the DRCM seemed to have been influenced by the DRCM approach, which was gender discriminatory in nature. For example, record at Justo Mwale University, a theology training institution affiliated with the Reformed Church of Zambia showed that from around 1960's to 2017, only male ministers were trained and licensed to be ministers in the RCZ.<sup>8</sup>

With regard to ordination of women, the year 2017 marked 16 years since the RCZ accepted the ordination of women as ministers of God's Word in February 2001. Presently, the RCZ has about 42 trained evangelists of which the majority are men; it has also 139 ordained pastors of which 128 are men and 11 are women. The RCZ Synod Executive has 7 members of which 6 are men and 1 is a woman. There are over 154 congregations spread across the country and over one million members. Several of the RCZ members are in the Eastern Province where the Church was first established. These congregations are convened in a cluster called Presbytery and in total, there are 17 presbyteries in Zambia.<sup>9</sup> These statistics showed that there was gender inequality in the RCZ in the period of study.

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4 Foston Dziko Sakala 'A Study of the History of Theological Education in the Dutch Reformed Church Mission in Zambia and its Role in the Life of Zambian Christianity' (Masters diss., University of South Africa, 1996), 4.

5 Judith Lubasi Ilubala-Ziwa and Melvin Simuchimba, 'Contribution of the Holy Cross Sisters to the Educational Empowerment of Women in Western Province of Zambia' *Zambia Journal of Education*, Vol. 5, No.1 (2018): 75.

6 Canisius Mwandayi and Itai Shoshore, 'The Woman of Shunem (2Ki 4:8-37) and Reformed Church in Zimbabwe Women: Towards a Recognition of Oft-forgotten Heroes', *In die Skriflig*, Vol. 57, No.1 (2023): 2.

7 Jennifer Leigh and Associates, *Dutch Cultural Profile: An Initiative of HACC Multicultural Advisory Service* (West End: Diversicare, 2012), 14.

8 Jackson Phiri 'Church and Culture? Exploring the Reception of Women's Ministries in the Reformed Church in Zambia in View of 1 Corinthians 14:26-40' (PhD, Diss., Stellenbosch University, 2017), 71.

9 Reformed Family Forum, 'The Reformed Church in Zambia', Accessed 13 December 2023, <https://rff.christians.co.za/the-reformed-church-in-zambia-rcz/>.

## Conceptualising Gender Equality

The word equality means achieving fairness of privileges and representation between women and men.<sup>10</sup> As put by Ella, gender equality is a human right and a foundation for social, religious, political and economic development.<sup>11</sup> This refers to the equal perceptibility and involvement of men and women in all aspects of community and religious life. For the RCZ, women have equal privileges as men, but they may not be elected into positions enabling them to share in these privileges. Though the RCZ practices gender equality in its involvement of women as pastors, there is still gender inequality as women cannot be elected to the highest position (as Synod Moderator) in the church. This is despite the relationship in the first union between Adam and Eve created in God's image, and being equal.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, in this study, gender equality entails that both men and women should be free to hold leadership positions in the church, if they qualify to do so. There is also need for married couples to value each other as humans created by God. This necessitated the need for this study, which explored the role played by the RCZ in promoting gender equality among members of the church.

## Literature Review

Nell argued that women in Africa, like all women world over, experienced a long history of patriarchal leadership not only in the area of politics and economics but also in the area of religion.<sup>13</sup> Women aiming for religious leadership face obstacles from their male counterparts. Likewise, Arce-Valentin argued that the church lost its vision on the equality of women and men. When the church was established in the continent of Africa by the first missionaries, it applied its power like an imperial state. Arce-Valentin further argued that as the church became more famous and powerful in the society, the role of women was completely sidelined and its leadership became dominated by men. This move arose from the missionary approach and patriarchal structural systems which favoured more men than women.<sup>14</sup> Nell and Arce-Valentin's were relevant to the current study but they focused on religion in general. The current study was necessary as it focused on one specific religion and how gender equality was promoted thereby showing how other religions could promote gender equality in their dominations.

The continent of Africa has also been a home of gender inequality, marital conflicts and other social evils erupted due to men's strong bias and unfair treatment of women. In the midst of this marginalisation, the church has the task of bringing the message of hope to the oppressed women. Dreyer argued that in male-dominated communities, women intermingled with men to absorb bad descriptions ascribed to

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10 UNICEF, *Gender Equality: Glossary of Terms and Concepts* (Kathmandu: UNICEF, 2017), 3.

11 Cecilia Toledo, *ELLA Guide: Gender Equality in Latin America, A Regional Commitment to Reducing Gender Gaps*, Accessed 13 December 2023, [https://fundar.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Guide-Gender-Equity-in-Latin-America\\_2014.pdf](https://fundar.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Guide-Gender-Equity-in-Latin-America_2014.pdf).

12 Genesis 1:27, Good News Bible, (Lusaka: The Bible Society of Zambia, 2009).

13 Ian Nell, 'Hitting the Glass Ceiling: Reflections on Women in Leadership through the Lenses of Social Identity'. *International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol.3, No.3 (2014), 40.

14 Dora Arce -Valentin, 'Introduction to the Justice and Partnerships' Work on Gender Justice: The World Communion of Reformed Churches,' Vol. 66, No.2 (2017), 3.

them such as weak, inactive or evil.<sup>15</sup> They accepted such derogatory remarks from their male counterparts not because they were happy but rather to maintain peace and harmony in the community. So due to these tendencies, women may be marginalised even in churches because the majority of the leaders are men who have been brought up considering women to be inferior and not able to take up leadership positions in the church. As such, the current study sought to examine how the RCZ promoted gender equality among their members so that the findings could help strengthen the relationship between men and women in general and married couples, in particular.

Another scholar, Moyo argued that being brought up in a remote area of Zambia and raised up in one of the ethnic groups in Eastern Province at a tender age of her life, she begrudged the position of men in society where they were highly favoured. Male figures were favoured by, for example, the backing they got from society, the type of food they ate, the type of work they did and the type of marriages they came into. This attitude towards women was influenced by the patriarchal system which mostly favoured men rather than women in all aspects of life. As observed by Moyo, the patriarchal system did not accept that women should make contributions during meetings.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, churches tended to practice the patriarchal system which favoured more male than female dominated leadership. In some churches in Zambia, women are the majority of the church membership but the key leadership positions are occupied by their male counterparts. Ndhlovu, asserted that women in the RCZ proved themselves to be the observers of traditions and mentors of children and were also productive in carrying out their fellowship tasks in the church such as, but not limited to helping the most poor and vulnerable people mostly within the boundaries of their congregations.<sup>17</sup> Although women were not appointed or elected to take up certain key decision-making and leadership positions in the RCZ, they contributed in one way or another in the development of the church. It was, therefore, imperative that the current study was carried out so that information could be gathered on how gender equality was promoted in the RCZ, a church with many women and men who might have passed through a patriarchal system.

With regard to training of women, Phiri defended the position of educating women worldwide by African churches and theological institutions, with the view of promoting togetherness between men and women in religious institutions. The training should be viewed as empowering Christ's servants for the people who were willing to build a community of women and men.<sup>18</sup> The study by Phiri focused on training women but it did not include efforts made by churches, such as the RCZ, to promote gender equality among the members in their everyday occurrences, which the current study endeavoured to do. Additionally, Payne argued that men and women were created by God as equal beings who should exercise authority according to

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15 Yolanda Dreyer, 'Women's Spirituality and Feminist Theology: A Hermeneutic of Suspicion Applied to Patriarchal Marriage'. *AOSIS Open Journals*, Vol. 67, No.3 (2011), 2.

16 Nolipher Jere Moyo, 'The Influence of Cultural Practices on the Spread of HIV and AIDS on Zambia', (PhD Thesis, University of Pretoria, 2010), 2.

17 Japhet Ndhlovu, 'Some Missiological Challenges Facing the Reformed Church in Zambia' (Masters diss., University of South Africa, 1999), 44.

18 Isabel Apawo Phiri 'Major Challenges for African Women Theologians in Theological Education 1989-2008'. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, Vol.34, No. 2 (2008), 15.

God's calling.<sup>19</sup> According to him, the qualifications for the Christian service included obedience to Christ and empowerment by the Holy Spirit. So, regardless of their gender, men and women qualify to take up decision-making positions in the church, thereby promoting gender equality.

Ndhlovu further explored alternative ways of supporting every RCZ member to fully participate in all church activities regardless of their gender. The study showed that church members who had the ability to lead should receive sufficient training in financial management. He also stated that training of the church leadership empowered the church to have energetic vision that embraced any church member regardless of their gender. He further asserted that educational establishment of miscellaneous classes, from ordinary members to those at the Synod level, bestowed the church with information and skills intended to advance understanding of church doctrines and policies.<sup>20</sup> Training is one way of providing answers to the challenges that the church encountered in trying to promote gender equality.

Ndhlovu's study touched on an important aspect of empowering women in the RCZ through training them. However, the study was rather general while the current study was selective and specific so that what prevails in one denomination could be shared to other denominations and churches.

For Ademiluka, Jesus demonstrated that the behaviour of men towards women did not always reflect God's position. This is evidenced by different ways Jesus treated women when he was on earth.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, any ideology born out of the people's selfish ambitions for power and privileges was not part of God's master plan for mankind. According to the Good News Bible, the original relationship between man and woman was to be one, demonstrating His image and likeness and not to be hierarchical. In addition, Genesis 1:26 states that both male and female were created in God's image and likeness.<sup>22</sup> This stance in the Bible further exemplifies that God's original plan for both male and female is the unity of purpose, love, care and respect for each other regardless of their gender and status. Women could, therefore, be afforded the same responsibilities as men. Ademiluka's study makes reference to Biblical teachings on how God, as demonstrated by His son Jesus, values both men and women in general. The current study used Biblical teachings of the RCZ and how these might have influenced the church to promote gender equality, thus, justifying the need for the study.

Further to the reviewed studies above, is the 2019 Republic of Zambia National Gender Report on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the Outcomes of the Twenty-Third Special Session of the General Assembly. This is in the context of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the Adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The National Gender Policy was revised in 2014 to ensure the attainment of gender equality in the development processes by redressing the existing gender imbalances. The policy provides for equal opportunities for women and men to

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19 Philip Barton Payne, 'The Bible Teaches the Equal Standing of Man and Woman.' *Priscilla Papers*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2015), 3.

20 Ndhlovu, 'Some Missiological Challenges', 76.

21 Solomon Olusola Ademiluka, '1 Corinthians 14:33b-36 in Light of Women and Church Leadership in Nigeria', *Verbum et Ecclesia*, Vol.38, No. 1 (2017), 3.

22 Genesis 1: 26, Good News Bible.

actively participate and contribute to national development. The policy further calls for gender equality in the social and other spheres.<sup>23</sup> There is a gap in the policy as it focuses on a broad perspective of promoting gender equality, as opposed to a specific approach, which the current study spearheaded. Furthermore, Ziwa carried out a study in which a New Apostolic pastor said ‘it is our tradition to consider women different from men, women will never be considered equal to men as long as culture remains part of our life’<sup>24</sup>. So, men and women treated each other differently for cultural and religious reasons. Culture influenced the way Christians applied what they learnt in churches; culture might condition women to submit to men and remain silent in order to please the men. Though Ziwa’s study focused on the subject of religion and gender equality, it did not make mention of churches in Zambia, which promoted gender equality, creating a gap that the current study thought to fill.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study was guided by Liberal Feminist Theory (LFT) which was founded by Wollstonecraft. In her study on the vindication of the rights of women, Wollstonecraft questioned the viewpoints about women, which were destructive and discriminatory.<sup>25</sup> Agassi asserted that modern LFT was based on the assumption that in order for women to achieve equal status with men, all stereotyped social roles for men and women had to be abolished.<sup>26</sup> If women’s equality was to be achieved, gender segregation of occupational roles should be abolished. So, Bem stated that Liberal Feminist Theorists believed that men and women could work together to androgenise gender roles and eradicate old-fashioned guidelines and practices that discriminated either of the two sexes.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, LFT was suitable to the current study because it held the view that supported equal, not special, treatment for women and men in society in general and the RCZ, in particular. The theory supported the equal presentation of opportunities for women and men. It was developed with the view that generally, religion discriminated against women even when they were qualified for certain positions. The theory was, therefore, favoured as it propagated that women should be considered for different positions as much as men were. In this regard, it spearheaded for fair play in the provision of opportunities for both sexes in different spheres, religion inclusive. As such, in the context of the church, by including women in leadership positions, they are enabled the opportunity to work hand in glove with their male counterparts and may be liberated from the York of maginalisation they have experienced for centuries.

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23 Government of the Republic of Zambia, ‘Progress Report on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the Outcomes of the Twenty-Third Special Session of the General Assembly (2000), (Nairobi: United Nation, 2019), 3.

24 Ziwa, Judith Lubasi Illubala, ‘The Role of Church and Ecumenical Mission in Gender Emancipation and Equality in Lusaka District, Zambia,’ *Journal of African Interdisciplinary Studies (JAIS)* ISSN 2523-6725, vol. 2, no. 7 (2018), 96.

25 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, accessed 14 December 2023, <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/wollstonecraft1792.pdf>.

26 Judith Buber Agassi, *Theories of Gender Equality: Lessons from the Israeli Kibbutz*. *Gender and Society*, Vol. 3, No.2 (1989),165.

27 Sandra Lipsitz Bem, ‘The Measurement of Psychological Androgyny.’ *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 42, No.1 (1974), 23

## **Methodology**

The study used a qualitative case study design so that the researcher could have an in-depth understanding of the role played by the RCZ in promoting gender equality among the members in Lusaka District. The RCZ was chosen because unlike other churches such as the United Church in Zambia, which had the first-ever ordained woman in Africa who rose to the highest church rank and served on the central control of the World Council of Churches, among other responsibilities, there was not much known about the RCZ. It was necessary to examine what the church was doing to promote gender equality in terms of empowering women by training and involving them in the leadership of the church.

The researcher used interviews and FGD qualitative research methods to gather data from sampled participants in the two selected congregations in the district. The congregations were selected due to their nature and uniqueness as they comprised members who had received formal education and those who had not. Purposive sampling was used to select the 28 participants who were willing to take part in the study, 14 from each congregation. Names of congregations and participants were not revealed; instead, they were given identity letters and numbers. For purposes of this article, 8 responses from 8 participants (4 from each of the two congregations) who were interviewed and took part in the FGD are given to vindicate the findings whose data was collected in 2017. Data was analysed using themes gathered from the common responses of participants.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The results are presented according to the research questions that is: role played by the RCZ in promoting gender equality, challenges faced by the church and factors that influenced the Church to promote gender equality in Lusaka District, 2012-2017. The findings are presented according to the descriptions given by the participants. To vindicate the data, verbatim responses are given. The researcher also presents the findings according to themes identified from the findings.

### **Role Played by the RCZ in Promoting Gender Equality**

In line with Wollstonecraft's LFT theory which questioned the viewpoints about women which were destructive and discriminatory, the first research question sought to examine the role played by the RCZ in promoting gender equality. Participants gave different roles the RCZ was involved in. In the FGD participants generally agreed that the church put up programmes that specifically responded to the needs of church members who were about to get married so that they could understand what marriage was like and work together as couples. This improved family relationships in many homes. A male ordinary member from Congregation B (P6) stated the following:

The Reformed Church in Zambia carries out counselling sessions and teachings that address gender equality in the church family and community; this is especially offered to married couples and those in courtship. This has helped improve relationships among married men and women.<sup>28</sup>

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28 Focus Group Discussion, February 10, 2017.

The reverend from Congregation B (P5) indicated in an interview that the church was responsible for providing guidance for people to live in harmony and peace. She added that the RCZ sensitised its members about the importance of men and women respecting each other as humans created by God. She concluded, “We have also established desks for women to discuss issues related to their gender. The church also trains female preachers at Justo Mwaile University as a way of promoting gender equality and reducing prejudices that are associated with being female”. The initiative taken by the RCZ to train women reverends encouraged them to participate in key decision-making processes. It also motivated other women to be trained and participate in leadership positions. This is what was promoted in Liberal Feminist theory that for women’s equality to be achieved, gender segregation of occupational roles should be abolished. This point was emphasised by the reverend from Congregation A (P2) who said:

The church conducts activities to spread the news about gender equality. As a church, we sensitise, teach and conduct workshops and preaching activities. Fellowships are also held among couples in which topics on relationships are discussed. This helps to create awareness on gender issues among the members.<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, in an interview, the researcher held with the First Treasurer from Congregation A (P4) indicated that the church endeavoured to bring men and women together through workshops to sensitise them on the importance of working together. He said, “As a church, we ensure that women are involved in leadership roles at different levels, this has helped improve gender equality in the church and community”.

The findings revealed that the RCZ played a role in promoting gender equality in Lusaka District. This was done through the sermons which were conducted by the reverends during Sunday worship. The reverends preached the importance of family ties as it was the backbone of the church. This move by the RCZ to promote gender equality through preaching and teaching of God’s word was in line with the findings of Townshed who argued that the word of God was a basis of power because it had a positive influence in the lives of numerous people and it was so powerful that it could control people’s behaviour.<sup>30</sup> In addition, the findings gathered from Congregation A and B’s top leadership showed that the RCZ played a significant role in promoting gender equality through seminars and counselling held among couples who faced marital problems and those who were about to get married. Unlike Ziwa’s study in which she stated that culture might influence the way Christians applied what they learnt in churches; and might condition women to submit to men and remain silent in order to please the men<sup>31</sup>. In the current study, church members were also encouraged to worship together in fellowship groups. These acted as small Christian communities similar to those practiced by the Catholic Church. It was possible that

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29 Focus Group Discussion, February 10, 2017.

30 Patricia Olwyn Townshed, ‘A Gender-Critical Approach to the Pauline Material and the Zimbabwe Context with Specific References to the Position and Role of Women in Selected Denominations,’ (Masters diss., University of South Africa, 2008), 148.

31 Ziwa-Illubala, ‘The Role of Church and Ecumenical Mission in Gender Emancipation’, 97.



as the members worshipped together in small groups, they discussed and understood Biblical teachings better than when they were in a congregation.

Bem stated that Liberal Feminist Theorists believed that men and women could work together to eradicate old-fashioned guidelines and practices that discriminated either of the two sexes.<sup>32</sup> In this vein, the RCZ allowed women to occupy key leadership positions such as being reverends and moderators. In order to achieve this, women were offered training at Justo Mwale University. The number of women in leadership positions was a good example to other women, and, indeed, men. It could be argued that apart from the theological training women received while at the theological institutions, they also interacted with their fellow students, socially. During their interactions, ideas were shared, some of which included the promotion of gender equality in the church. Phiri defended the position taken by African churches to educate women globally, with the view to enhance the attitude of working together between men and women.<sup>33</sup> This demonstrated that the church acknowledged the gifts from God to His children to develop the church. Additionally, the RCZ leadership conducted meetings, seminars and other training to discuss the challenges that affected the church, such as gender inequality.

When asked if there were any improvements in the way adherents viewed gender equality, P6 noted:

There is a big difference because our church leaders get involved from the family level. When we tell our reverend that we were having problems in our homes, she takes keen interest in counselling us as couples. This never used to happen but now since our leaders show interest in our general wellbeing, things have changed in the way we now treat each other as couples. However, some members of the church are too shy to approach our leaders. They do not trust their leaders and feel that they might disclose the issues discussed in confidence.<sup>34</sup>

The response by P6 showed that the RCZ leadership were interested in the affairs of their members. As they visited their homes, they sensitised them on gender equality. This was supported by the findings gathered from the FGD in which members generally agreed that there were improvements in the way church members viewed gender equality as women could contribute to the affairs of the church. Women could also be elected to top-most leadership positions. However, P2, the reverend from Congregation A, noted that respect for each other as couples should be encouraged. Respect is a virtue which can enhance unity and cooperation among couples, families and communities. Without respect, couples may lose the stamina to love each other, the family, the church and community. Although the RCZ made strides in promoting gender equality in Lusaka District, some adherents were rather too shy to approach the elders for counselling services because they thought that if they did so, their marital problems might be disclosed to other members of the church. This was in agreement with Dreyer who argued that in male-dominated communities, women intermingled with men to absorb bad descriptions ascribed to them such as weak and

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32 Bem, 'The Measurement of Psychological Androgyny', 23.

33 Phiri, 'Major Challenges for African Women Theologians', 14.

34 Focus Group Discussion, February 10, 2017.

inactive, which might influence them to avoid sharing their problems with the church leadership.<sup>35</sup> According to the views by P6, these members might not trust their leaders as providers of counselling services related to gender equality. There were no measures put in place to help these members use the counselling services. This negated this group of people from making use of the services. From the responses of the women who took part in the FGD, it was established that a lot more needed to be done in order to help all church members to have confidence in their leaders.

When asked to pin point the specific activities the RCZ had done to improve gender equality, the First Secretary from Congregation B (P7) said in a FGD:

As a church, we have not tried to promote gender equality among our members: This is because we only preach about gender on Sundays. We do not have seminars or workshops meant to sensitise the members on gender equality. If we are to reach out to a bigger crowd, we need to conduct workshops and seminars both in the church and community, but so far, this has not been happening.<sup>36</sup>

Some participants expressed lack of knowledge whether the church held seminars at which gender equality was discussed. This showed that seminars might not have been conducted in all RCZ congregations or that some members were not willing or not available to attend the seminars. Whatever the case, the study revealed that during church services, the RCZ religious leaders disseminate information on gender equality. This was a good platform as church members usually attended congregation meetings. So, members had information on gender equality if they paid attention to the sermons.

The findings further showed that in order to promote the welfare of women in the church, the RCZ had a women's desk at the Synod office. In the same vein, P6 narrated the following:

It is good to see female reverends in the church. This is advantageous for us women as we can share our personal problems with fellow women. We are happy that Justo Mwale University admits and trains a number of female students as reverends, which was not the case in the past.<sup>37</sup>

The results showed that the number of women reverends kept increasing each year. The acceptance of women to train in theological universities was indicative enough that the promotion of gender equality the RCZ endeavoured to achieve, bore fruitful results. In this regard, Kasomo stated that women were highly recognised and appreciated in the church since they participated as deacons, companions of Paul and other apostles and as apostles themselves.<sup>38</sup>

However, the highest positions in the church were held by men due to cultural trends, which compelled men to aspire for positions while women remained in the background, as was the case during the time of the early Christians. It is for this reason that Nell asserted that women in Africa experienced a long history of

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35 Dreyer, 'Women's Spirituality and Feminist', 2.

36 Focus Group Discussion, February 10, 2017.

37 Focus Group Discussion, February 10, 2017.

38 Romans 16:1, 3-5, 7, Good News Bible.

patriarchal leadership not only in the area of politics, economics and culture but also in the area of religion.<sup>39</sup> In addition, women targeting for spiritual leadership might encounter hindrances for them to achieve their intended goals. Men continue to take advantage of women in order to gratify their own goals which might be for selfish gains. Although the RCZ ordain women to ministerial positions as reverends and evangelists, the church structure has continued to be patriarchal. The church should take into consideration Agassi's assertion that modern LFT was based on the assumption that in order for women to achieve equal status with men, all stereotyped social roles for men and women had to be abolished.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the church endeavoured to promote gender equality amidst challenges for the transformation of church members' attitudes and behaviour in bringing about change among the members in Lusaka District.

## Challenges

When asked if the church was financially capable of running programmes related to gender equality, an ordinary member from Congregation A (P1) indicated the following in a focus group discussion:

The Church should source for funds that can be used in the dissemination of information. As at now, there are not sufficient funds reserved for this noble cause. Otherwise, the Synod would have notified all congregations regarding the issue.<sup>41</sup>

Financial constraint was the major hindrance to promoting gender equality in the RCZ. Without sufficient funds, it was difficult to hold sensitisation workshops on the importance of members practicing gender equality. Nevertheless, participants who took part in the study expressed confidence in the church's effort to promote gender equality in the church and community. However, without funds, the efforts made by the church might prove to be futile.

At this juncture, it is worth quoting the views by P5, the reverend from Congregation B, captured in an interview:

On special Sundays, we raise enough money to contribute to all needy areas such as evangelism and helping the vulnerable. We also have partners at the headquarters supporting gender desks. Our learning institution, Justo Mwale University, has also received funds to train female reverends. All this is a way of supporting the gender desk.<sup>42</sup>

The findings gathered from the FGDs were similar to what was collected in the interviews. Generally, the members who took part in the FGD agreed that funding was a major issue that had negatively affected the activities of the church. For example, P1 noted that if there was more funding, outreach programmes and workshops would be held to sensitise church members on gender equality. Similarly, the findings from the Deputy Secretary from Congregation A (P3), showed that in the RCZ leadership positions were dominated by men. Some leaders were elected to leadership positions

39 Nell, 'Hitting the Glass Ceiling', 40.

40 Agassi, 'Theories of Gender Equality', 165.

41 Focus Group Discussion, February 10, 2017.

42 Focus Group Discussion, February 10, 2017.

on the basis of their gender and not on merit, thereby causing an imbalance between women and men in leadership positions. As Wollstonecraft's LFT theory propagated, women should be considered for different positions as much as men were. P3 had this to say on this matter, 'No wonder as a church we have never had a female Synod Moderator. The solution to this problem is to ensure that people are elected or appointed into leadership positions on merit. Nevertheless, I still believe that one day, things will change for the better.' The Reformed Family Forum shows that the number of male evangelists, reverends and Synod Executive in the RCZ is much higher than that of women. This is the case in many churches in Zambia.<sup>43</sup> It will require much more effort and strategies to have a balance between female and male religious leaders.

The first secretary from Congregation B (P7) indicated that couples who belonged to different denominations also posed a challenge in promoting gender equality in RCZ. When there were marital disputes, it was difficult to counsel them because they held different beliefs and doctrines. 'You will find the wife congregates with the RCZ whereas the husband belongs to a totally different church or he does not even fellowship anywhere,' said P7. This showed that it was a challenge to sensitise some couples because they attended different churches and had different doctrines that were not compatible with the teachings of the RCZ. It would be easy to discuss gender equality if both spouses belonged to the same denomination sharing the same beliefs. To the contrary, in the RCZ, as might be the case in other churches, it was common to find a wife who was RCZ member while the husband attended a different denomination with different doctrines. If either spouse did not belong to any church, it was easier to convince him or her to attend the sessions on gender equality. This is a problem the church leadership should try to solve at the initial stage of the marriage relationship. Since the doctrine of the RCZ puts emphasis on Biblical teachings, members who wish to marry should be encouraged to select partners from their church or other religious denominations who understand Christian principles. As the newly married couples worship together, their marriage relationship is strengthened. This should, however, not be part of the church policy, but it should be left to individuals to make their own decisions.

Additionally, the findings gathered from the ordinary member of Congregation A (P1) revealed that the majority of women in the RCZ were not willing to participate in the top leadership because of their busy schedules at home, and the leadership roles came with responsibilities that might require them to spend time in meetings or at seminars as facilitators. Furthermore, P8, Deputy Secretary from Congregation B, indicated that women usually refused to take up leadership roles since traditionally, women were treated as helpers and if a woman was chosen to take up a leadership role, she might not accept the responsibility because her husband did not permit her, especially if he was not a member of the church. Ziwa attributed this to culture which influenced the way Christians applied what they learnt in churches.<sup>44</sup> P8 added that some husbands did not allow their wives to take up leadership positions and the wives obeyed them. P1 summarised the challenges as follows:

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43 Reformed Family Forum, accessed 14 December 2023 <https://rff.christians.co.za/the-reformed-church-in-zambia-rcz/>.

44 Ziwa-Illubala, 'The Role of Church and Ecumenical Mission in Gender Emancipation', 97.

Nowadays in our Congregation, the number of women taking up leadership positions is growing. For instance, our first treasurer is a female and our choir chorister is also a female. But the problem is at Synod level because as the RCZ, we have never had a female moderator. For example, the Synod executive is composed of 6 men and 1 woman. This clearly shows that we are still very far from achieving gender equality. Our church leadership should, therefore, acknowledge that change should start from the top leadership.<sup>45</sup>

Though the church faced challenges, participants expressed confidence in its ability to transform people's attitudes and behaviour in bringing about gender equality among the members in Lusaka District and the Zambian society at large. Strides have been made by the RCZ to try and promote gender equality by including women as leaders. The church's efforts were influenced by the factors discussed below.

### **Influential Factors**

With regard to the factors that influenced the RCZ to promote gender equality in Lusaka District, the findings showed that the driving force was the increase in the gender based violence (GBV) cases that were noticed in the church. Furthermore, the responses gathered from the participants who took part in the interviews indicated that the word of God (the Bible) helped to strengthen gender equality. P6 cited Genesis 1: 26 as one of the scriptures that influenced the church's efforts:

And now, we will make human beings; they will be like us and resemble us. They will have power over the fish, the birds, and all animals, domestic and wild, large and small. So, God created human beings, making them to be like himself. He created them male and female.<sup>46</sup>

Similar to this point of view, P9 indicated that the Word of God in the book of Genesis Chapter 1: 26, taught Christians that both male and female were equal. Biblical teachings compelled the religious leaders to enhance gender equality among church members and society, at large. Biblical teachings also required both men and women to preach the gospel to everyone. This was the stance taken by the RCZ. Some churches had not yet started allowing women to preach but the RCZ had done so. From Munroe's point of view, men and women were created in the image and likeness of their God who invested in them with inestimable worth, dignity, and importance. Human dignity was, therefore, embedded in creation and this implied that both women and men were intrinsically worthy of respect.<sup>47</sup> This respect is derived from being part of God's creation and particularly being made in God's image. So, both women and men could preach God's message and hold leadership positions.

Another influential factor was gathered from P2 who indicated that cultural values and cases of gender based violence compelled the RCZ to promote gender equality among church and community members. P2 said, 'Some traditions perceive women as unequal to men; some oppressive tendencies have also pushed us to work on issues to do with gender equality. Members who have no formal education do not

45 Focus Group Discussion, February 10, 2017.

46 Genesis 1:26, Good News Bible.

47 Myles Munroe, *Understanding the Purpose and Power of Men: A Book for Men and the Women Who Love them* (Nassau, Bahamas: Bahamas Faith Ministries International, 2002): 91.

understand the value of gender equality. They need to be taught in their communities'. In Ochieng's view, women were models of the Church and the general public, not only in times of conflicts, but also in times of peace.<sup>48</sup> With or without education, women continue to show allegiance to Christ and his church. Male dominance of the positions in the RCZ has resulted in women remaining observers in both the church and the society in general. Ochieng further stated that patriarchal systems that supported male dominance in African societies had influenced gender imbalance.<sup>49</sup> In a similar manner, traditional practices that marginalised women influenced the RCZ to promote gender equality in the church.

The findings gathered from P2 also revealed that in some families, violence and verbal abuse against women was prevalent in Zambia. Violence against women and men could have detrimental effects to the family, especially if the woman was injured physically. She might spend time meant for the development of the family in hospital nursing wounds resulting from her husband's uncaring attitude. This is not to say that men cannot be injured by their wives and/or other relatives. The point is, in Zambia there are more women than men afflicted with abuse. Generally, women are verbally and physically abused by their spouses. This might also cause psychological harm to the physically abused spouse.

The findings further showed that women were still lagging behind their male counterparts due to some patriarchal structures which were introduced in the church. This is in line with the findings of Moyo who asserted that gender discrimination against women emanated from selfish traditional rulers who wanted to stick to power for their own advantage and selfish motives.<sup>50</sup> In striving to achieve their goals, they came up with rules which prevented women from getting involved in the top management of the church. An interview held with P8 showed that women were still affected by the rules introduced in the DRCM that marginalised women. He said:

Being one of the members of the RCZ, I am grateful to God because there is a great change. Currently, the church has women in leadership positions.

The findings also revealed that some of the female reverends in the RCZ preached better than male reverends. So, male members of the church should humble themselves and appreciate the good work done by their female counterparts.

Furthermore, P5 indicated that the church doctrine influenced how women were treated. She further stated that the church doctrine supported the involvement and fair treatment of female members. When asked what posed a challenge to the formulation of a policy on gender equality, P7 indicated that people were still complacent about gender equality and, therefore, were not interested in coming up with a policy on gender equality which the RCZ could adopt. P7 suggested that the RCZ should further treat women as equal to men by continuing to encourage and sensitise members to elect a female Synod moderator if the church's role in promoting gender equality not only in Lusaka District but also other districts in Zambia and beyond, might bear more fruits. The tradition of placing women under a man's leadership is long gone.

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48 Merab Ochieng, 'Role of Women in Peacebuilding and Post-Conflict Transformation Africa: A Catholic Church Perspective', *International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol 1. No. 2 (2019), 1.

49 Ochieng, 'Role of Women in Peacebuilding', 6.

50 Moyo, 'The Influence of Cultural Practices', 5.

In concluding this section, it is worth noting Ziwa's sentiments that the wrestle against harmful cultural practices is not for one church or ecumenical mission alone. Ecumenical missions are urged to help society understand that culture is simply a product of human imagination. Thus, each generation of Africans has the right to uphold, transform or reject any cultural beliefs and practices that marginalise women. Ziwa also asserted that culture should not be presented as a fixed and 'compulsory' package; each generation has the mandate to critique what the previous generation bequeathed to it.<sup>51</sup> In order to win this battle, there is need for efforts from African ecumenism, African Christians, African Muslims, followers of other religions and ideologies, and secularists to engage in an open reevaluation of African cultures in the context of gender equality. To do this is to approve Wollstonecraft's Liberal Feminist Theory (LFT) in which she vindicated the rights of women by disapproving viewpoints about women which were destructive and discriminatory.<sup>52</sup> To this end, LFT seeks no special privileges for women but demands that everyone (including female church members) receives equal considerations without discrimination on the basis of gender. LFT further seeks to achieve women's equality through abolishing gender segregation of occupational roles, enabling men and women to work together, androgenise gender roles and eradicate old-fashioned guidelines and practices that discriminated either of the two sexes. This is what the current study endeavoured to achieve.

## **Conclusion**

The study has shown that the RCZ played a significant role in the promotion of gender equality in Lusaka District. This was done through preaching, counselling, training of women and seminars that were mostly held at the Synod level. Additionally, a desk was established at the Synod office for the needs of women. The RCZ also had female reverends in some of the Congregations in the country. In order to have representation in the leadership of the church, Justo Mwale University increased the number of women who were trained to become reverends. The female reverends acted as role models to other women and, as such, more female members of the RCZ served as church leaders.

On the challenges faced by the RCZ in their endeavour to promote gender equality in the church, financial constraints were top on the list. Due to lack of funds, the religious leaders could hardly organise congregation members to meet together and share information on the importance of gender equality. The study also established that promotion of gender equality was challenging because many members of the church were not knowledgeable about the issue as they lacked formal education and were not sensitised enough on the importance of gender equality among married couples. In addition, cultural practices that hindered women from contesting the leadership positions continued to pose a challenge and discouraged women from participating in the running of the church. Currently, women worked side by side with men and sometimes, did the work better than men. This helped women to get recognised as equal partners in the ministry of teaching and preaching God's word. However, attainment of the highest position in the church was still a preserve of men.

51 See Ziwa Judith Lubasi Illubala, 2018.

52 See Wollstonecraft 1975.

The study further examined the church doctrine and how it influenced the church to promote gender equality. The doctrine of the RCZ supported the inclusion of women in the leadership of the church. However, the RCZ did not have a clear policy on gender equality. Due to lack of a policy, the RCZ might not allocate funds for the promotion of gender equality. The study recommended that the church should formulate a policy on gender equality. It further recommended that workshops and seminars should be held at both the Synod and congregational level so that members could acquire knowledge and understanding on the importance of gender equality. In order to help women, build confidence and compete for topmost positions in the church, the RCZ should ensure that capacity-building workshops are held in all congregations.

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