



RETHINKING MASCULINITY: TRANSFORMING CULTURAL PRACTICES IN THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN ZIMBABWE, (ELCZ) WESTERN DIOCESE

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Abstract: This study explores the cultural practices that shape gender roles and identities within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ), Western Diocese. It aims to identify specific cultural practices requiring transformation, and to propound for new models of masculinity that resonate with the church's core values of compassion, respect, justice, and inclusivity. Advocating for the urgent need to rethink masculinity, the study foregrounds the fact that traditional masculine norms often reinforce restrictive behaviors that limit emotional expression and marginalize diverse voices, adversely affecting individual well-being and communal unity. Employing a qualitative methodological approach, the study draws insights from 20 study participants to understand their lived experiences related to masculinity. The participants are distributed as follows, 10 women from the women's fellowship group, 4 female youths, 3 men in the top Diocesan leadership, and 3 male youths. The findings will guide recommendations for educational initiatives, dialogue forums, and leadership programs aimed at fostering healthier expressions of masculinity. The study adopts transformative masculinities as its theoretical framework. Through the transformative masculinities' lens, the study beckons not only the membership of ELCZ, Western Diocese but all people of faith to be resolute about revisiting their perceptions on masculinity and aspire to cultivate more inclusive faith communities that promote holistic growth for all members, thereby enhancing community dynamics and spiritual development. Thus, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how faith communities can actively participate in redefining gender norms, advocating for a model of masculinity that aligns with values that reflect the love and grace of God.

Keywords: Cultural Practices. Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ) Western Diocese. Rethinking Masculinity. Transformative masculinities.

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INTRODUCTION

The ELCZ, Western Diocese, is at a deciding point where cultural norms and values meet with modern demands for gender justice and equality. Historically, the entire ELCZ has been an upholder of patriarchal norms, often perpetuating rigid definitions of masculinity that marginalize and oppress women and girls¹. However, the current socio-cultural trends necessitate an urgent reevaluation and transformation of these entrenched practices. Through an exploration of the transformative potential of reframing masculinity within the church, our paper uses the ELCZ, Western Diocese as a launching pad for rethinking masculinity in the church, as well as other faith-based communities. It propounds for a more gender-inclusive approach that adheres to the core Christian values of love, justice, and compassion. Through field research, the study uncovers some key factors perpetuating gender disparities within the selected area of study. This undertaking provides resources for critically analyzing cultural constructs of masculinity that influence the position of men and women in the church. Drawing from theological reflections, gender studies, and examples from practice within the ELCZ, Western Diocese, our paper will offer actionable strategies to create a more just and inclusive church environment. Thus, our study is anchored towards contributing to the more general discourse on gender justice within religious institutions that are not only relevant to the ELCZ but also to other faith communities dealing with similar challenges.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes the qualitative methodological approach. Adopting this methodology assists the researchers to engage with participants, facilitating a nuanced understanding of masculinity within the ELCZ, Western Diocese. This also opens an opportunity for fashioning transformative practices that will hopefully lead to positive change in cultural norms. As noted by Creswell², this approach offers several advantages that can enrich research outcomes and provide insights into complex issues. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and purposive sampling was employed to promote diverse views. Cognizant of the statistical fact that there are more women and girls in the

¹ ELCZ Gender Policy. *Church and Community Fight Obstacles to Gender Justice, Equality and Equity*. Funded by Lutheran World Federation in Support of ELCZ Gender Policy, 2015.

² CRESWELL, J. W. *Research Design*. Qualitative, Quantitative, Mixed Methods Approaches. 4. ed. UK: SAGE Publications, 2016.

church than men and boys, the selection of participants also reflects this reality. Consequently, out of the 20 participants, there were 14 females and 6 males. They were distributed in the following categories to represent the views and experiences of different groups on masculinity: 10 women from the women's fellowship group, 4 female youths, 3 male youths, and 3 men in the Diocese's top leadership hierarchy. Furthermore, during data analysis, we adopted a thematic analysis, this made it possible for us to gather recurring responses as themes and uncover the underlying meanings and experiences expressed by the participants.

TRANSFORMATIVE MASCULINITIES THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, we deploy transformative masculinities as our conceptual framework. This approach seeks to disrupt inequality in an endeavor to advance progressive changes towards attaining gender justice³. The inherent gender disparities mainly stem from the deeply entrenched patriarchal social structures and power disparities which disproportionately elevate men and boys, whilst pushing women and girls to the periphery⁴. Thus, the transformative masculinities approach raises questions, encourages discussions, and it emphasizes the urgent need for focusing on the experiences of the marginalized with the goal of promoting gender justice. In concurrence with Chitando and Njoroge⁵, we are optimistic that this framework can serve as a resourceful tool for reframing masculinity in the church. Peering through the transformative masculinities lens enables us to analyze the traditional forms of masculine cultural norms that perpetuate gender injustice as well as detrimental practices in the ELCZ, Western Diocese.

The framework fosters open conversations about masculinity and can empower people to reflect more on their behaviors and beliefs leading to healthier and equitable models of masculinity⁶. Moreover, the approach is consistent with the church's call to build community and compassion. This entails redefining negative and life-diminishing

³ CHITANDO, E.; NJOROGE, N. J. (2013). *Contextual Bible Study Manual on Transformative Masculinity*. Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa (EHAIA), a Programme of the World Council of Churches (EHAIA), Harare Office, 2013.

⁴ DEEPAN, P. *Transforming Masculinities: A Training Manual for Gender Champions*. Scotland: Tearfund, 2017.; MFECANE, S. *The Palgrave Handbook of African Men and Masculinities*, springer, 2024.; MFECANE, S. *The Palgrave Handbook of African Men and Masculinities*, springer, 2024.

⁵ CHITANDO; NJOROGE, 2013.

⁶ DEEPAN, 2017.

masculine perceptions and making room for carving both spiritual and social growth. This framework also creates a platform for critically assessing cultural practices with the goal of ushering in greater equity and justice within the church and larger community.

DEFINING KEY TERMS

Culture

Triandis⁷ notes that culture denotes beliefs, perceptions, values and customs of a society. It contains language, art, religion, food, tradition, and many other aspects of the same fluidity, which help to define individuals and groups, creating and perpetuating certain identities, and the relationships between them. In addition, culture can be understood as a pillar of community bonding, hence it influences people's behavior and actions⁸. It is therefore crucial to note that culture is very key when discussing transformative and progressive masculinities.

Masculinity

Masculinity is a term associated with the characteristics of being male. These attributes might include qualities like strength, toughness, confidence, and leadership, especially in the African context. However, such views are very much criticized in contemporary gender justice spaces because they do not champion gender equity. In this paper, we argue that men should be able to express how they feel, appreciate their weaknesses, and learn from women as well. More so, Deepan⁹ maintains that masculinity is a socially constructed concept though scholars such as Wharton¹⁰ argue that masculinity is influenced by both cultural and biological factors. Therefore, in this study, it is pertinent to explain the term masculinity since it forms the core of our discourse. It is through understanding the community's perceptions on masculinity that we can then embark on the journey of rethinking masculinity, with the goal of fashioning transformative and progressive masculinities.

⁷ TRIANDIS, H. C. *Culture and Social Behavior*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1994.

⁸ TRIANDIS, 1994.

⁹ DEEPAN, 2017.

¹⁰ WHARTON, A. S. *The Sociology of Gender: An Introduction to Theory and Research*. John Wiley and Sons, 2005. p. 29-31.

Gender norms

According to UNFPA and UNICEF, “gender norms are societal expectations about behaviors and roles based on gender.”¹¹ In many African cultures, for example, traditional norms often dictate that men should be providers and protectors, while women are expected to focus on caregiving and household duties. It is therefore important to challenge some of these gender norms because they limit opportunities, with women facing barriers in education, decision-making platforms, and leadership positions. On the other hand, these patriarchal oriented societal expectations tend to overburden men with material responsibilities, as well as denying them the right to express their emotional turmoil because society expects them to ‘man up’ and be ‘a real man’ who neither cries nor seeks counselling services. Hence, it is essential to define the term gender norms because this is a crucial concept in our study.

A Review of Selected Literature on Transformative Masculinities

Many scholars have shaped or informed the theory of transformative masculinities. Among these are Connell and Messerschmidt¹², Chitando¹³, Mfecane¹⁴, Ratele¹⁵, Morrell¹⁶, Hearn¹⁷, Segal¹⁸, Kimmel¹⁹. Thus, the hegemonic masculinity theory by Connell and Messerschmidt²⁰ seeks to analyze the most common kinds of masculinities that maintain gendered power relations. This has assisted in understanding how the cultural practices within institutions sustain or challenge these hegemonic forms. In his work on the transformative forms of masculinities in faith-based organizations, Chitando²¹ foregrounds the pivotal role of religious bodies in the struggle for gender justice. He maintains that religion can redefine its teachings and practices with a leaning

¹¹ UNFPA; UNICEF. *Technical Note on Gender-Transformative Approaches in the Global Programme to End Child Marriage Phase II: A Summary for Practitioners*. New York, 2019. p. 1.

¹² CONNELL, R. W.; MESSERSCHMIDT, J. W. Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept. *Gender and Society*, [S.l.], vol. 19, n. 6, p. 829-859, 2005.

¹³ CHITANDO, E. The Transformative Masculinities Agenda in Africa: Confessions of an Activist. *The Palgrave Handbook of African Men and Masculinities*. Springer, 2024.

¹⁴ MFECANE, 2024.

¹⁵ RATELE, K. *The World Looks Like This From Here: Thoughts on African Psychology*. Wits University Press, 2019.

¹⁶ MORRELL, R. *Changing Men in Southern Africa*. University of Natal Press, 2001.

¹⁷ HEARN, J. *The Violences of Men*. Sage Publications, 1998.

¹⁸ SEGAL, L. *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*. Rutgers University Press, 1990.

¹⁹ KIMMEL, M. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

²⁰ CONNELL; MESSERSCHMIDT, 2005.

²¹ CHITANDO, 2024.

towards the realization of gender justice. Additionally, Mfecane²² in her recent publication that focuses on hegemonic masculinity in Africa, embraces the African theoretical paradigms of masculinity which are underpinned by spirituality and community values. She finds Eurocentric theories to be problematic and calls for understanding African masculinities from an African perspective. Furthermore, Ratele's²³ contribution is also based on the idea that African masculinities are dynamic and diverse hence he advocates for the dismantling of the current narrow understanding of masculinity. On the other hand, Hearn's²⁴ critical engagement with men and masculinities provides a framework for understanding the varieties of masculinities and how these are shared and re-shaped by local and global forces. His work on men's violence and gender equality initiatives offers useful lessons for understanding the possibilities of a masculinities shift.

Segal's work²⁵ on the postmodern and postcolonial feminist theory of patriarchal culture underlines that radical changes are required for gender equality to be achieved. Adopting a sociological overview of masculinities, Kimmel²⁶ focuses on how culture determines male attitudes and actions. Hence, culture plays a critical role when it comes to discussions on masculinity. In unison with these important contributions in the field, this study seeks to explore the various cultural practices and transformations shaping masculinities within religious establishments like the ELCZ, Western Diocese. The main thrust of our study is to explore the cultural practices that can be changed to promote positive masculinity in the church, using the ELCZ, Western Diocese. It also proffers the adoption of transformative practices that can be adopted with the goal of enhancing gender justice in religious settings. Our study also proposes theoretical and practical recommendations tailored towards mainstreaming transformed and progressive masculinities within faith-based programs.

An Overview of the ELCZ, Western Diocese

The ELCZ was established in 1903 after the Church of Sweden Mission gave a new assignment to Reverends Alex and Helen, who were missionaries in South Africa to

²² MFECANE, 2024.

²³ RATELE, 2019.

²⁴ HEARN, 1998.

²⁵ SEGAL, 1990.

²⁶ KIMMEL, 2006.

go and work in Zimbabwe²⁷. It is important to note that the church was centralized, with one bishop until 2006. Thus, this year (2006) marks the formation of three Dioceses (*Western, Eastern, and Central*) in the history of the ELCZ. The Western Diocese which is the focus of this study covers Matabeleland South and North, stretching from Beitbridge-Chikwarakwara to Victoria Falls. Currently, it is comprised of 24 parishes and 144 congregations, most of them being situated in a rural setup. The Western Diocese is divided into two Deaneries, namely, the Northern and the Southern. Dube²⁸ notes that this Diocese is also known as the rainbow Diocese since it accommodates different languages (Sotho, Venda, Ndebele, Shona, and Shangane). Despite the presence of the church in the area, the patriarchal system remains deeply embedded, consequently entrenching gender-based inequalities, which especially puts women and girls at a disadvantage²⁹. Hence, our study seeks to challenge the church and community to pursue life-giving masculinities, in an endeavor to promote sustainable gender justice.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS: CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF MASCULINITY

Men's Dominance in Decision-Making Platforms

The data collected from field research reveal that men dominate most decision-making platforms in the ELCZ, Western Diocese. This is mainly influenced by the existing cultural practices that reinforce traditional masculinity. Nkomazana argues that “culture plays an influential role in shaping masculinities such that its influence is seen in all spheres such as the political, historical, economic and religious spheres.”³⁰ Hence, the ELCZ Gender Policy³¹ highlights the urgent need for the entire ELCZ to dismantle detrimental cultural practices that hinder women from participating in decision-making platforms in the church. It stresses that women must also have a voice when decisions are being made at all levels. The dominance of males in decision-making forums of the

²⁷ SÖDERSTRÖM, H. *God Gave Growth: The History of the Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (1903-1980)*. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984.

²⁸ DUBE, M. P. *Towards Gender Equality and Inclusivity: Strategies for Promoting Women's Full Participation in Church Ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe*. Bulawayo: Charisma Christian Publishers, 2024.

²⁹ DUBE, 2024.

³⁰ NKOMAZANA, F. Gender Analysis of Bojale and Bogwera Initiation Among Batswana. *Boleswa Journal of Theology, Religion and Philosophy*, [S.l.], vol. 1, n. 1, p. 26-49, 2005. p. 31.

³¹ ELCZ, 2015.

church is a reality and an existential challenge that calls for transformation, with the goal of advancing gender justice in the church. Njeru and Njiru add that “in most societies, men occupy positions of power and authority. They enjoy the privilege of making decisions that affect women, children, and other men.”³² This notion was also reinforced by two participants who noted that:

“Due to cultural constructions of traditional masculinities, women seem to suppress their opinions in the presence of men during decision-making platforms.” (Participant 3).

“The dominance of males in decision-making processes is influenced by cultural norms and beliefs like Umfazi kavunyelwa edaleni (in an African setup, women are not allowed in decision-making platforms).” (Participant 6).

Mwandayi contends that “generally, women tend to be more disadvantaged when compared to their male counterparts.”³³ On the other hand, Muriithi laments that “women keep the church afloat, yet they are excluded in decision-making processes.”³⁴ This patriarchally skewed perspective poses serious changes in the church. It privileges men to continue dominating decision-making platforms, without considering the impact caused by these destructive cultural practices and beliefs.

The Dominance of Men in Key Leadership Positions

Our study also discovered that though women possess good leadership qualities and are the majority in the church, men usually occupy key leadership positions in the ELCZ, Western Diocese. Several participants identified cultural constructions of traditional masculinity as a major hindrance for exercising gender justice and gender balance, especially when it comes to selecting church leaders. For example, many participants indicated that since the establishment of the Diocese in 2006, not even once

³² NJERU, N. M.; NJIRU, P. W. When Men Drunk with Power Make Decisions (Esther 1:1-2:1). In: CHITANDO, E.; NJOROGE, N. J. (ed.). *Contextual Bible Study Manual on Transformative Masculinity*. Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa (EHAIA), a Programme of the World Council of Churches (EHAIA), Harare Office, 2013. p. 23.

³³ MWANDAYI, C. Religio-Cultural ‘Clamps’ on Female Leadership in Zimbabwe: Towards a Liberating Hermeneutic in Mainline Churches and African Initiated Churches (AICs). In: MANYONGANISE, M.; CHITANDO, E.; CHIRONGOMA, S. (ed.). *Women, Religion and Leadership in Zimbabwe Volume 2: Engagement and Activism in Religious Institution*. Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2023. p. 161-182. p. 162.

³⁴ MURIITHI, M. S. *A Critical Study of the Roles in the church leadership in South Africa, with special reference to Scottsville Presbyterian Church, Drakensberg Presbytery*. University-Durban-Westville, South African, 2000. p. 45.

has a woman been ever appointed to become a Bishop or a Dean. Muyambo³⁵ views culture as the breeding ground for such injustices. Thus, societal views on masculinity and femininity greatly influence the selection and appointment of leaders in the church. This is buttressed by Wilson who maintains that “in the field of religion, men tend to dominate the top positions.”³⁶ In addition, Moyo³⁷ discourages the male-dominated structure in the ELCZ, calling for equal representation of men and women in top leadership positions. In concurrence with the above findings, some respondents indicated that:

“Due to the patriarchal society that we are coming from, men are always believed to be better and respected leaders compared to women. This has a huge impact on the members when it comes to selecting leaders in the church.” (Participant 2).

“In our African society, women cannot lead as they are considered to be children.” (Participant 8).

The above excerpts reveal the embeddedness of stereotypical views on masculinity and femininity, consequently putting men at a higher pedestal when it comes to being selected for church leadership. On the other hand, women who have been pushed to the periphery find it extremely difficult to garner the support of most church members, many of whom believe that women are incompetent leaders. This is an unfortunate status quo, which needs urgent redress. It is against such a backdrop that Chitando and Biri lamented that “numerous religious and cultural institutions in Africa promote male dominance through structuring their organization to allow exclusive male leadership while pushing women to the domestic arena.”³⁸ In the same vein, Njeru and Njiru³⁹ bemoaned that most African men are drunk with power such that they will tenaciously lean towards culture and church tradition to defend their dominance in key

³⁵ MUYAMBO, A. Women’s Leadership in the Guta Ra Jehovha Church: Towards the Construction of ‘Soft Masculinities. In: MANYONGANISE, M.; CHITANDO, E.; CHIRONGOMA, S. (ed.). *Women, Religion and Leadership in Zimbabwe Volume 2: Engagement and Activism in Religious Institution*. Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2023. p. 161-182.

³⁶ WILSON, A. B. Jesus: A Man Who Challenged Stigma and Discrimination Matthew (15:21-28). In: CHITANDO, E.; NJOROGUE, N. J. (ed.). *Contextual Bible Study Manual on Transformative Masculinity*. Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa (EHAIA), a Programme of the World Council of Churches (EHAIA), Harare Office, 2013. p. 51.

³⁷ MOYO, E. *Gender Inequality Among Ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ): A Pastoral Womanist Critique of the Exclusion of Female Clergy from Top/Senior Leadership of the ELCZ*. University of South Africa, 2021.

³⁸ CHITANDO, E.; BIRI, K. Faithful Men of a Faithful God? Masculinities in the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa. *Exchange*, vol. 43, p. 34-50, 2013. p. 36.

³⁹ NJERU; NJIRU, 2013.



leadership and decision-making forums. Likewise, Mupangwa and Chirongoma⁴⁰, and Chirongoma and Mupangwa⁴¹ critique a male-bloated church leadership which is akin to a one-winged bird, negatively impacting its capacity to function effectively and efficiently.

Stereotypical Gender Roles in the Church

From the study's outcomes, it became clear that stereotypical gender roles in the ELCZ, Western Diocese reinforce traditional masculinity. Several participants emphasized that to a greater extent, our African churches are a mirror of our traditional societal beliefs and practices. For instance, a study conducted in the ELCZ, Western Diocese by Dube⁴² indicates that due to traditional cultural customs, a bigger number of Sunday school educators are women. This is a cultural influence that upholds that women are naturally good caregivers and men dominate in the so-called '*masculine roles*,' holding all the pivotal church leadership posts. During interviews, three participants commented that:

"Men should also take the responsibility of teaching Sunday school children just like their female counterparts." (Participant 10).

"During church gatherings, women volunteer and spend the whole conference cooking outside while no man misses not even one church service." (Participant 5).

"The church should not shun the idea of men helping out, be it in the cleaning of the church or preparing food during conferences". (Participant 11).

Oduyoye upholds that "to a greater extent, the church is part of the oppressive culture."⁴³ Undisputedly, the above discussion reflects the challenges posed by cultural constructions of traditional masculinity in the ELCZ, Western Diocese. The gender stereotypes burdening women with traditionally feminine roles and responsibilities barricade them from actively participating in key leadership and decision-making forums. Whilst women are busy teaching children and preparing meals, their male counterparts

⁴⁰ MUPANGWA, T.; CHIRONGOMA, S. The challenges of being a female pastor: A case of the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (AFMZ). *HTS Theological Studies*, vol. 6, n. 2, a5838, 2020. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i2.5838>.

⁴¹ CHIRONGOMA, S.; MUPANGWA, T. The quest for good governance and gender justice in the postcolonial church: A case study of the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe. In: DUBE, B. (ed.). *Postcolonial Religio political and Religious Education in Crisis: The Case of Zimbabwe, South Africa and Tanzania*. Cluster Publications: Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, 2021. p. 313-352.

⁴² DUBE, M. P. *Investigating the Church's Role in Fostering Sustainable Gender Justice Through Investment in Childhood Development*. The Case Study of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe, Western Diocese. Tsumani University Makumira, Tanzania: Unpublished Research, 2023.

⁴³ ODUYOYE, M. A. *Introducing African Women's Theologies*. Sheffield Academic Press, 2001. p. 86.



will be busy sitting on the church governing boards, making decisions on behalf of women and children.

TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICES AND MOVEMENTS

Role Modelling of Male Leaders

Results from the study disclosed that the journey towards rethinking masculinities would require role modeling of male leaders in the church. It calls for the Bishop, Deans, and other male leaders in the ELCZ, Western Diocese to lead by example when it comes to the promotion of positive masculinities. This view was amplified by one male respondent who alluded that:

“There is lack of male role models in the church leadership who champion issues of gender justice, thus it becomes difficult for ordinary Christian men to take the lead when it comes to gender justice matters.” (Participant 16).

The above citation foregrounds the fact that rethinking masculinities in the ELCZ, Western Diocese will require transformational practices and intentional efforts by the male leadership to change the status quo. This resonates with the views raised by Chitando and Njoroge, who proffered that,

Religious leaders have a role of leading lives that demonstrate the values of transformative masculinity. This is so because leaders have the power to influence their followers hence many men can be transformed when they see leaders actively engage in the journey towards transformative masculinity.⁴⁴

Organizing a Platform for Transformed and Progressive Men and Boys

Findings from the research also gathered that in rethinking masculinities, the church must be resolute about organizing circles of solidarity for molding men and boys who are committed towards embracing transformed and progressive masculinities. Some participants emphasized that organizing such a platform could play a significant role in undertaking the journey of rethinking masculinities. For instance, the ELCZ, Western Diocese requires men and boys who will stand to support women and girls in an endeavor to promote gender justice. These will be dedicated and fearless male figures who are ready to advocate for women’s leadership and equal representation in decision-making platforms. Acknowledging that challenging or destabilizing patriarchy requires a lot of

⁴⁴ CHITANDO; NJOROGE, 2013, p. 8.

courage, as doing so is often regarded as defecting from the masculine camp, some participants noted that:

“The journey towards transformative masculinities will require transformed men and boys who believe in the capability of women and girls to lead and make major decisions for the church.” (Participant 12).

“We look forward to bold and courage men and boys who will nominate women into leadership positions.” (Participant 7).

“My idea of a transformed man is one who is willing to take views from women and girls.” (Participant 9).

“For me, a transformed man should be able to accept the leadership of women.” (Participant 14).

The above views reiterate the fact that through its leadership, the ELCZ, Western Diocese can consider mobilizing dedicated men and boys to form circles of solidarity where they rally together towards realizing the goal of transforming the church into a gender inclusive and gender empowering space. It is without doubt that such an approach could become a resourceful tool in advancing positive masculinities in the church and beyond. This ricochets the views raised by Chitando and Njoroge⁴⁵ who noted that transformed men should respect women, be caring and sensitive, challenge gender-based violence against women and girls, be faithful in relationships, avail opportunities to women, and promote women’s leadership.

Capacitation and Empowerment of Women to Take Significant Roles

In the process of rethinking masculinity, findings from the participants underline the necessity to capacitate and empower women to take significant roles in the ELCZ, Western Diocese. Due to cultural practices that exist in our African societies, most men have had the privilege of being capacitated by participating leadership empowerment programs, yet women have been left in the peripheries for a long time⁴⁶. This has widened the gender gap when it comes to church leadership as most women aspiring to take up pivotal roles will be found unqualified. This point was poignantly noted by one of the respondents as follows:

⁴⁵ CHITANDO; NJOROGE, 2013, p. 8.

⁴⁶ DUBE, 2024.



“The church should assist women in removing obstacles that limit them by deliberately empowering and mentoring them for leadership roles in the church so that women can be able to lead competently.” (Participant 15).

As noted in the above citation, this gender gap raises a clarion call to the leadership of the ELCZ, Western Diocese to consciously develop programs that are aimed at training and capacitating women to competently and competitively take up significant tasks, key leadership and decision-making roles in the church. This reverberates the point raised by Moyo, bewailing that “women are struggling to grow in leadership due to unending patriarchal obstacles on their pathways.”⁴⁷ Similarly, Muriithi⁴⁸ emphasized the fact that women are supposed to be part of the ministry of the church and contribute meaningfully, and yet they are contending with countless barriers. Lacking adequate skills and training for aspirant female church leaders is a major barrier that needs to be redressing if the persistent masculine dominated church leadership structures are to be genuinely and effectively revamped.

Mentorship Programs for Male Gender Champions

The study’s findings highlight the importance of transformative practices and movements such as mentorship programs for male gender champions in the ELCZ, Western Diocese. For instance, the leadership of the church can design a mentorship program for male gender champions that aims to equip men to be able to collaborate with women in the ministry of the church, value women, and respect their voices hence becoming an example to other men in the church and beyond. The church should think of investing in intensive gender programs that seek to capacitate and groom men and boys to become informed male gender justice champions in the church and community. This point was buttressed by one of the participants who noted that:

“Through a well-thought-out and designed program for grooming male gender justice champions, the church can raise men and boys who can redefine masculine identities.” (Participant 18).

The above views are reaffirmed by Chitando and Njoroge⁴⁹ who uphold that “Transformative Masculinity” seeks to challenge boys and men to contribute towards more helpful and life-giving ideas about what it means to be men. Likewise, Chitando and

⁴⁷ MOYO, 2021, p. 185.

⁴⁸ MURIITHI, 2000.

⁴⁹ CHITANDO; NJOROGE, 2013, p. 7.



Chirongoma⁵⁰ also proffer that men can change or be born again and become liberative. Hence, the active participation of men and boys in the fight against gender inequalities in the church and community will become a clear declaration that matters of gender justice are not women's issues only, but a human rights issue, a God-given responsibility anchored towards the betterment of society. Through such life-affirming programs, the ELCZ, Western Diocese will become a good example to other religious institutions/denominations, especially in Zimbabwe where most men are still under the bondage of toxic masculinities.

Mainstreaming Teachings on Transformative Masculinities

At the heart of rethinking masculinity, outcomes from the research gathered that mainstreaming teachings on gender transformative masculinity is critical in the advancement of gender justice in the ELCZ, Western Diocese. For instance, the gender justice desk should fortify teachings that promote positive masculinity in the church. This entails critiquing and rethinking retrogressive and hegemonic masculinities that have tainted the grooming of boys and men in the church and community to perceive themselves as superior, whilst treating women as inferior and incapable. For Chitando and Njoroge, "the idea is to challenge negative and harmful ideas of what a real man is."⁵¹ They further noted that, regrettably, in many cultures, ideas relating to a real man suggest that a real man uses force and violence in relationships, is rough, tough, insensitive, and does not recognize the human rights of women. In trying to inculcate a positive and transformed understanding of the concept of a real man, the church must deliberately include topics on transformative masculinities during church revivals, Bible study sessions, and even on the Almanac/lectionary of the church so that the subject can be discussed in depth at all levels. One respondent mentioned that:

"When rethinking the concept of masculinity in our church, we should consider mainstreaming teaching on transformative masculinities in all our religious activities." (Participant 9).

The above views resonate with contemporary gender scholars such as Moyo⁵² who advocate for gender mainstreaming in the entire ELCZ.

⁵⁰ CHITANDO, E.; CHIRONGOMA, S. *Redemptive Masculinities, Men, HIV and Men, HIV and Religion*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2012.

⁵¹ CHITANDO; NJOROGE, 2013, p. 7.

⁵² MOYO, 2021.



CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED IN REDEFINING MASCULINE IDENTITIES

Pressure to Conform to Traditional Norms

One of the challenges that men encounter in the church while trying to redefine masculine identities is the societal pressure to conform to traditional norms. Findings reveal that due to the patriarchal environment, men always find it hard to totally detach from traditional norms and practices. One participant aptly noted that:

“Men surely face challenges such as fear of being labeled to be weak while they are trying to redefine their masculine identity.” (Participant 13).

As noted above, the journey of men trying to redefine their identities is not an easy one, particularly in an environment where patriarchy is thriving. More so, peer pressure from other men can be a hindrance in the process of transformation, hence most men are hindered by the pressure to conform to traditional norms. The same point was mentioned by Chitando and Chirongoma⁵³ who noted that culture presents a major barrier for some men who feel entrapped in the throes of patriarchy.

Status/Ego Built Over Years

Results from our study reveal that it is not easy for most men to abandon their status built over years. This emerged as a major hindrance as to why most men find it challenging to redefine their masculine identities within the ELCZ, Western Diocese. The biggest challenge is that men have been feeding from the poisoned well of patriarchy for a long time. Parry notes that “in general, men find it difficult to be humble. Men have been socialized to regard themselves as heads of families and institutions.”⁵⁴ As a result, it can take a while before men transform. In line with the above sentiments, two participants noted that:

“It is a difficult process for most men to redefine their masculine identity because societal beliefs have been ingrained in their heads from the time when they were young”. (Participant 3).

⁵³ CHITANDO; CHIRONGOMA, 2012.

⁵⁴ PARRY, S. (2013). Naaman: The Man who had to Face his Pride in Order to Find Healing (Kings 5:1-27). In: CHITANDO, E.; NJOROGI, N. J. (ed.). *Contextual Bible Study Manual on Transformative Masculinity*. Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa (EHAIA), a Programme of the World Council of Churches (EHAIA). Harare Office, 2013. p. 27.



“It will be challenging for most men to embrace positive masculinities because it will not be easy to let go of some of the privileges given to them by the patriarchal society.” (Participant 8).

It is therefore important for the church to accompany men in the journey of redefining their masculine identities because they are surrounded by many traditional pressures. The above citations also reveal that power is sweet, hence, most men in positions of power and influence will jealously guard their territory, making it difficult to accommodate women to sit on the same church leadership boards with them.

Uncertainty about New Roles and Expectations

The other challenge that emerged from the study that men encounter when trying to redefine their masculine identities within the ELCZ, Western Diocese is the uncertainty about new roles and expectations. This makes it apparent that the church needs to be innovative and find ways of supporting and capacitating men to envision that there is still life, peace and harmony after transforming the church structures into gender equitable and gender inclusive spaces. It is key that men can define their new identities and expectations after they redefine their masculine identities. One of the respondents explained this point as follows:

“Many men fear to think about redefining their masculine identities because they are not sure if the church will accompany them throughout the process.” (Participant 7).

The journey of men redefining their masculine identities is critical because it involves the fear of being labeled weak, hence the church through its leadership should devise ways of dealing with uncertainties that men have about their new roles and expectations. Thus, the ELCZ, Western Diocese should be ready to accompany men to the point where they can define their new roles and expectations after transformation. This resonates with Chitando and Njoroge⁵⁵ who emphasize the pivotal role of religious leaders in promoting transformative masculinities.

Absence of Safe Spaces for Men

Findings from the study also highlight a huge gap in the process of rethinking masculinity in the church. The absence of safe spaces for men seems to be a concern for most men when trying to define their masculine identities. It will be noble for the church

⁵⁵ CHITANDO; NJOROGE, 2013.



through its gender justice desk to consider coming up with safe spaces for men where they can speak out and walk through the journey of transformation. As reiterated by Chitando and Njoroge, “It is vital for men to be empowered and liberated from oppressive notions of what it means to be a man.”⁵⁶ Therefore, the process of rethinking masculinity is not complete when men do not have safe spaces. One respondent emphasized that:

“In the journey of men trying to redefine their masculine identities, it is very important for the church to consider having safe spaces for men.” (Participant 4).

Indeed, the absence of safe spaces for men is a barrier when it comes to the subject of rethinking masculinity in the ELCZ, Western Diocese.

Recommendations

Promoting Inclusive Theology: The ELCZ, Western Diocese should ensure that its theology promotes gender equality both in teaching and practice. Hence, it should denounce traditional cultural practices and beliefs that maintain toxic masculinities.

Educate on Gender Justice: The ELCZ, Western Diocese should develop educational programs that facilitate sustainable gender justice in the church. These programs can deliberately major in teaching about transformative masculinities.

Engage Men in Dialogue: The ELCZ, Western Diocese needs to create safe spaces where men can freely talk. Sometimes, men do not talk because they are not provided with a conducive environment. Therefore, creating safe spaces for them is important because it will encourage positive masculinities.

Challenge Harmful Cultural Practices: The ELCZ, Western Diocese, can deliberately focus on tailor-made programs that aim to dismantle cultural practices that promote toxic masculinities and gender inequalities.

CONCLUSION

Using the ELCZ, Western Diocese as a case study, the main thrust of our study was on rethinking masculinity through challenging traditional practices. It utilized transformative masculinities as its theoretical framework to challenge men and boys to redefine their oft skewed masculine identities. This allowed the researchers to examine

⁵⁶ CHITANDO; NJOROGE, 2013, p. 7.



existing harmful cultural practices in the church, discover new ways of promoting positive masculinities amid challenges posed by diverse factors, and offer recommendations for advancing gender justice. It is our sincere hope and prayer that this study will become a resourceful tool leading to the transformation of men and boys in the ELCZ, Western Diocese and beyond.

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