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Against the Odds : The story of Rachel Nya Gondwe Fiedler and its theological significance in Malawi

### In:

Nelly Mwale, Rosinah Mmannana Gabaitse, Fundiswa Kobo and Dorothy Tembo (Eds.), Nehanda : Women's Theologies of Liberation in Southern Africa (Circle Jubilee Volume 3), Bamberg : University of Bamberg Press, S. 325-333. DOI: 10.20378/irb-95198

### Beitrag im Sammelwerk - Verlagsversion

DOI des Beitrags: 10.20378/irb-96507

Datum der Veröffentlichung: 18.07.2024

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## 18 | **Against the Odds: The story of Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler and its theological significance in Malawi**

*Chimwemwe Harawa*

### **Abstract**

It is an anomaly and very amazing to talk about the deficiency of women theologians in a nation where almost 80% are Christians and more than half of it are women. This means that the engagement of women in Theology is an endeavor which is not without a history. However, the birth of the Circle for concerned African Women Theologians popularly known as the Circle in 1989 has aided the development of theology and has increased the involvement of women in theology. Through the involvement of different women theologians, the Circle emphasizes on innovative contextual and gender-sensitive interpretative principles of religion and culture, focusing on issues that concern women and children. The first members of the Circle in Malawi were members of the Central African Presbyterian Church. Among these were Isabel Apawo Phiri, Fulata Moyo and Getrude Kapuma. The second wave of Malawi Circle members were from the Evangelical Church. This paper centers on Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler an academician and a social worker, from the evangelical tradition, specifically the Baptist Convention of Malawi. The aim of this chapter is to narrate the life and the contributions of Rachael Fiedler towards Theology and the Circle.

**Keywords:** Theology, Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, contribution, Malawi and patriarchy

### **Introduction**

All her-stories are perspective stories and I have chosen to write the story of Rachel Fiedler from the perspective of what I consider 'out of the ordinary' situations to the majority of women and girls in Malawi that may encourage those aspiring to rise as stars in the Circle. The coming in of the Circle for concerned African Women Theologians has boosted the

participation of women in the field of theology in Malawi. Though women in Malawi have played significant role in theology, their contribution has not been highlighted. This is the problem that this chapter wants to address by looking at the work of Rachel Fiedler. Since theology is viewed as a male dominated domain, deliberate effort has to be made to dig out and analyse the contribution that women have made in Malawi towards theology.

The main research question addressed in the chapter is, “what are the particular themes of Rachel Fiedler’s theology?” In examining her theological themes, I will concentrate on her line of thinking that challenged patriarchy or societal expectations then. The chapter will document some of ‘the out of ordinary’ life experiences and the contributions of Rachel Fiedler towards Theology and the Circle in Malawi and globally. I will discuss how Rachel accessed education, her work in the church, society and the academia. I write this paper as a member of the Circle and of the Central African Presbyterian Church. The chapter is based on the interaction that I have had with Rachel Fielder over the years and examination of her writings.

## **Accessing Education as a Girl in a Patrilineal Culture**

Rachael Nyagondwe Fielder is from a Tumbuka Tribe, born in 1963 in Rumphu District. She grew up in a rural village at a time when it was very difficult for girl children to proceed with education. In her patrilineal culture, it was common for parents to marry off girl children in exchange for bride price. She went against this odd by proceeding with her education.

After completing her Primary Education at Luviri LEA School in 1979, she proceeded to Marymount Girls Secondary School where she got a Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) in 1983. This secondary school was a national school where only ‘above average’ students went to. This was an out of ordinary experience for her as not many children in this area went to such schools. Since she came from poor parents, she could not afford to pay school fees. Her elder sister Alice Mkandawire, paid a third of the fees and the rest was paid by the Malawi Government scholarship fund. Rachel Fiedler became one of the few girls in the area to go to the University of Malawi. She first went to, Bunda College of Agriculture where she attained a Diploma in Agriculture in 1986. This was against her wish as she wanted to be a teacher. After graduation, she

joined Campus Crusade for Christ in 1986, which did not promise a salary but some stipend based on whether Christians had paid the organisation or not. It was also abnormal that after her poor parents expected her to get a job that would bring money to them, she did the contrary.

## **Accessing Higher Education in the Context of Marriage**

Marriage in Malawi has sometimes become a barrier for women in Africa. Rachel Fiedler continued to access education as a married person. In 1987, she got married to Jande Banda, a Chewa from Kasungu. This was flawed upon by her Tumbuka relatives that discouraged girls from marrying from the tribe. He was also employed with the Campus Crusade for Christ. In the same year, Rachel Fiedler (Banda then) did a 6 months theological training in Discipleship. Her parents liked the idea because she did the training in Swaziland. This brought pride to them as there were few in those days who went abroad for training. It is this training that inspired her to do more theological training.

In 1991, she together with her husband left Campus Crusade for Christ and she taught at Zomba Private Primary School. This was not normal for a graduate to teach at primary school but because it took time to get employed with the Ministry of education, she taught at this place to get income for her family. In 1992, she was employed by the Ministry of Education and taught at Mulunguzi Secondary School in Zomba. Her husband joined the Malawi Examination Board in the same District. In 1993, she joined Bwaila Secondary School in Lilongwe, following her husband who joined the Malawi Institute of Education based in the city.

In 1994 she went for a University Certificate of Education (UCE) at the University of Malawi, Chancellor College. It was an out of ordinary experience because, she only could go for this training because the person who was supposed to go, turned down the offer. This was a one-year course to help her in the teaching profession. Her love for theology made her to join Zomba Theological College to study Theology and Religious Studies in 1995. This was out of ordinary because she had three children to look after at this time. She also enrolled in a first level class as a mature student while she already had a diploma in Agriculture. It was also not ordinary for a member of Baptist Convention Church to study Theology in this institution. She became the first private student that was not sent by a church. She was one of the two ladies in her class.

She continued to follow her husband and discontinued her training at Zomba theological College when her husband went to study in Australia. After one and a half academic years, she transferred to Canberra College of Theology to join her husband. It is only at this time when her husband followed her. Her husband finished training in 1997 but she still had 6 months to finish her course. Her husband waited for her until she received her Bachelor of Theology degree in 1998. In the same year, she joined Chancellor College again for a Master's degree programme in Theology and Religious Studies which she obtained in 2001.

### **Accessing education as a Widow and being Remarried**

In 1999, November, her husband Jande Banda died. This was traumatic. She was only 36 years of age and her children were 11, 9, and 5 years old. Here, she also did something out of the ordinary by remarrying to a German, Klaus Fiedler. This was rare for African women and men to marry white people. What was also out of the ordinary was that she married someone 20 years older than her. Again, the family of the late husband did not object to this marriage. She married Klaus in 2001 less than two years after death of her first husband. This was also not ordinary. In African culture a woman is expected to show that she loved her husband by delaying remarriage or preferably by not remarrying. From 2002 to 2007 she started working on her PhD in Church History with Chancellor College, the University of Malawi and then transferred her candidature to University of the Free State in 2008 where she received her PhD in Church history and Polity in 2011.

### **Her Work with the Church**

She planted two Baptist churches but she considers herself not a pastor. Her husband carried out the role of administering the sacraments in the churches. She also served as a leader in the church women group of her local church as regional coordinator in the South East region.

### **Her University Work Experience**

Rachel Fiedler started her career at a university as a part-time lecturer in Church History and New Testament in the University of Malawi, Chancellor College (2002-2007). She also acted as an Undergraduate and Post-

Graduate Research Supervisor. For a year from 2004-2005 she served as Lecturer in Church History (part-time) at Zambezi College of Ministry. From 2008 to date, she is working with Mzuzu University teaching different courses based on needs of the department and the society and holding different responsibilities. In 2008 -2013 she was a Lecturer in Gender Studies and Church History. Then she became a Senior lecturer from 2013. She was promoted to Associate Professorship in 2017, She has also supervised a number of undergraduate and post graduate students' research work locally and internally. This included supervising students from other disciplines such as Education and of Transformative Community Development Studies. Internationally, she has been involved with the University of Carolina as Research Associate on gender and health and the University of the Free State (2011-2013). Outstanding in her research work is the theme of gender studies. Through these research activities she has publications that are not only visible in Malawi but also internationally. This includes publications in South African Based publications, European based publications and American based publications. At local level publications based on her PhD and MA, have found outlet in Kachere Series, a Publishing wing of the Theology and Religious Studies Department of Chancellor College now the University of Malawi and in Mzuzu University Press. Through the African Books Collective (Oxford) these are also available and promoted internationally. At the Mzuzu University among other things, she will be remembered as having developed Gender and Theology Studies Curriculum as follows: BTRS 1202 Religion and Feminist Theology, BTRS 2305 African Feminist Theology, BTRS 3307 Gender and Human Rights and BTRS 4803 Gender and Development. Her expertise has also been enhanced through attending a number of gender conferences both local and internal. She has also served as a Guest Lecturer in 2002 at UNISA, Pretoria, South Africa and Bible Institute of South Africa, Cape Town.

### **Civic or Public Engagement**

Rachael NyaGondwe Fielder as a social worker, her involvement with the community is visible in her life. She has served as an Honorary Director of Lydia Project in Zomba since 1998. This project has given birth to Lydia Action in 2021. It has implemented a number of projects within the community such as sewing and tailoring, home based care, caring for the elderly, offering bursaries to secondary school students and taking

care of Baptist pastors' widows across the nation of Malawi and the aged pastors. Another area of engagement has been in the field of producing teaching resources for gender, health and education advocacy. The following are examples:

(a) Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *Chenjerani. Nthenda ya Edzi Ilikodi*, Zomba: Lydia Pr, 2006, 2007. Translated from the original Chichewa into English as: *Be Careful. Aids is Real*, Zomba: Lydia Pr, 2006, and into Chitumbuka as: *Tichenjere! Edzi Yiriko Nadi*, Zomba: Lydia Pr, 2007.

(b) Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *Tipewe kwa Azamba, Tinke ku Chipatala*, Zomba: Lydia Pr, 2008. This booklet is used to educated people to use hospitals and clinics for maternity services and not traditional birth attendants. It shows further the concern that Rachel has on issues that affect women.

Studies have shown that maternal deaths was more likely with deliveries conducted by traditional birth attendants than with a skilled attendant at a health facility. The Malawi Government changed its policy in 2007 on the roles of traditional birth attendants that they are to refer mothers to the nearest hospital or clinic. Her writing is further complementing government effort to bring awareness of the benefits of using health facilities.

## Publications

An important aspect of university life and for academicians is publication. Actually, promotion in most Universities is based on publication. There is even a saying which goes Publish or Perish, popularly known in Malawi as PP. Rachael NyaGondwe Fielder has researched and published widely and her work appears in form of books, articles and booklets. This is a legacy that will stay with the World for ever and is a big contribution to knowledge. A list of her research and publication is provided in the reference section and will help us to understand her theology, area of interest and contribution in the Circle.

## Stepping Stones for Circle Stars

Doing theology should be born out of experience. Rachel Fiedler has concentrated on issues that concern women. As a woman who has come against many odds, her story inspires women theologians to take their

context seriously in building theologies. This is consistent with the aim of the Circle. The idea is to expose and advocate issues that affect women as a way of improving their situation. Two major themes that can be captured in her publications are women and culture. Some of the issues that she has highlighted include the following: challenges for theological education for women, Pastors wives and Patriarchy; Women pastors, Initiation ceremonies and girls' rights. Her writing is a typical example of African Women's theologies, distinct type of theology but belonging to a wider family of feminist theology which is a branch of Liberation theology. One characteristic of liberation theology and more so of African Women's' theology is its commitment to the emancipation of women both in the church and in the society.

Centering on the theme of Women and culture, Rachel Fiedler understands that the freedoms that women enjoy in the community are affected by the traditional culture, they live in among different exciting Christian cultures which also have various biblical interpretations regarding the position of women in the church and in the society. It is also true that freedoms that women enjoy have progressed over time, in tune with increased understanding of church polity and doctrine influenced by local and global changes. She made this observation in her book *Women of the Bible and Culture. Baptist Convention Women in Southern Malawi*. She has also contributed to the writing up of the History of the Circle in Africa as well as the Circle chapter in Malawi. She begins the history with Mercy Amba Oduyoye as a mother and leader of the Circle. However, Rachel Fiedler acknowledges that the Circle as an African Baby was born in an ecumenical surrounding, whereby other liberation movements have contributed and coloured the theology of the Circle.

The lesson from Rachel's story is that if one has a passion for higher theological training, she must use barriers as stepping stones towards excellence. Rachel Fiedler, went far with theological training regardless of the odds that were against her. She earned education in an environment that did not promote education of girl children. She continued with education regardless that she lost a husband and went through culturally ridden barriers of getting remarried. She also was not shy to expose herself to new horizons of reflections. She did not only research and write within the discipline of Theology but in conversation with others as well. We belong to a global world and we must embrace this reality by developing theologies that do not only speak to our discipline but beyond.

## CONCLUSION

Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler has taught at different levels: primary, secondary and tertiary. This has enriched her teaching experience. The lady has also published widely. of special significance is her PhD research which has resulted in to a book; "A History of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (1989-2007), Mzuzu: Mzuni Press, 2017. She has also made a big impact in the Institution that she is teaching Theology by engineering the development of courses on gender studies and Theology and for their inclusion in the Theology and Religious Studies Curriculum such as Religion and Feminist Theology, African Feminist Theology, Gender and Human Rights and Gender and Development, The chapter has outlined the particular themes of Rachel Fiedler's theology by highlighting her line of thinking that challenged patriarchy or societal expectations then.

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