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In:

Manyonganise, Molly ; Gunda, Masiwa Ragies ; Naicker, Linda ; Kügler, Joachim (Eds.), Religion, Gender and Masculinities in Africa : Essays in Honour of Ezra Chitando, Bamberg : University of Bamberg Press, p. 397-419. 2025. DOI: 10.20378/irb-105140

Bookpart - Published Version

DOI of the Article: 10.20378/irb-106056

Date of Publication: 23.01.2025

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21 Systemic Violence

Intersections of gender injustice, racism, sexuality and xenophobia

Masiwa R. Gunda

Abstract

Africa has been battling a myriad of injustices, some are externally originated and influenced, while others are internally originated and influenced. This chapter focuses on gender injustice, racism, sexuality and xenophobia, challenges that do not always attract the most attention especially in the face of persisting conflicts and poverty in Africa. Using an intersectional approach, this chapter acknowledges the role played by Ezra Chitando in drawing attention to the collective contributions of these challenges in increasing the vulnerability of women. The chapter demonstrates that based on the work of Chitando, whether intentionally or unintentionally, an intersectional approach is best suited to address the challenges that have contributed to avoidable deaths of women and men. The intersections have led to the failure to acknowledge the contributions of women to sustainable social transformation and to fragmented quests for diversity, inclusion and belonging for the most vulnerable groups in African societies. To mitigate against the power of intersections, this chapter calls African women theologians to embrace an intersectional approach to confront the intersecting marginalising forces, as well as to guard against inverted patriarchy in the African Women's quest for holistic liberation.

Keywords: Intersectionalities, racism, sexuality, gender, xenophobia

Introduction

Violence in all its manifestations continues to be an ever-present in discussions of many aspects of life on the African continent and African experiences on the continent and in the diaspora. One could speak of political, economic, climatic, religious, social, emotional, psychological or verbal violence and when violence permeates all spheres of life like this, it becomes normalized by the sheer force of its prevalence. Further, violence becomes embedded in policies, laws, norms, values and practices to the

point where it becomes not only structural but also effectively systemic. Systemic violence implies that violence has permeated the entire system, which refers to all the aspects of life including legal and policy frameworks and encompassing education, health, employment and other services. The post-colonial African States inherited and, in some cases, intensified systemic violence.

In order to fully understand and appreciate the workings of systemic violence, it is important also to interrogate the power of intersections and the intersections of power because these intersections have the effect of intensifying the manifestations of violence, which affects those caught up in the intersections more than those that lie outside of the intersections. While some people contend with political violence alone, and others contend with economic violence, their experiences of violence will be significantly different from those who find themselves trapped in the intersection of political and economic violence. Intersectionality can be a critical space of exploration and an instrument for analysing experiences that acknowledge the multiplicity of identities and positionality in different persons. In an attempt to spotlight the power of intersections, the 2017 Women's March proclaimed:

“We believe Gender Justice is Racial Justice is Economic Justice. We must create a society in which women—including Black women, Native women, poor women, immigrant women, disabled women, Muslim women, lesbian queer and trans women—are free and able to care for and nurture their families, however they are formed, in safe and healthy environments free from structural impediments” (Al-Faham, Davis et Ernst 2019).

What these women did was highlight how intersectionality governs and impacts life in general, but especially the life of the most vulnerable groups in society. In the situation represented by the Women's March, it was clear that fighting gender injustice could not be divorced from the quests for other forms of justice because they all intersect thereby creating a grey area where some at-risk-groups could easily be invisibilised as experiences of elites are generalised as representative of all persons.

Ezra Chitando has been one of the most prolific African writers of the past three decades focusing on religion in Africa. With publications covering areas including the study of African Traditional Religions, African Theologies, Religion and Development, his greatest impact has been in the area of HIV & AIDS. His commitment to the eradication of HIV & AIDS made him realise how what was being presented as a medical challenge was

much more than that because the impact of HIV & AIDS was exposing various intersectionalities making the epidemic/pandemic an economic, political, social, religious, gendered and racial challenge over and above its obvious medical status. The epidemic was not only attacking infected bodies; it was attacking family livelihoods and even the right to life of both the infected and affected. Even without using intersectionality explicitly, Chitando was already a scholar committed to an intersectional approach to investigating, unpacking and analysing the impact of HIV & AIDS in Africa. His calls for all sectors and all ideologies to combine forces was also a commitment to intersectionality.

This chapter seeks to unpack how Chitando's works interfaces with the intersectionality of systemic violence, which has increased the vulnerability of women to various forms of violence, chief of which has been sexual and gender-based violence. The subject of violence in Africa is one that a chapter like this cannot engage exhaustively, therefore, in the following sections, this chapter flags some relevant aspects to illustrate the importance of appreciating intersectionality. This introduction is followed by a section seeking to articulate the reality and persistence of systemic violence in Africa and against People of African Descent (PAD) both on the continent and in the diaspora. This section is also followed by a section on intersectionality, seeking to shed light on its emergence and its import for this particular study and how it can be observed in Chitando's works. Two other sections focusing on the intersections of gender, racism, xenophobia and sexuality as well as the importance of an intersectional approach in the work of African women theologians are presented as well. This then leads us into the conclusion of this chapter.

Systemic Violence

If we are to understand systemic violence, it is important to begin by defining violence. Traditionally, violence is the intentional use of physical force to inflict injury and harm on human beings or damage to property. This understanding is sometimes used to cover psychological pressure, intense humiliation and intimidation (Van der Linden 2012). With violent conflicts raging in Sudan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and many other places across the continent and globe, it is true that "we live in a world where all too many people purposefully contribute to the harm of other human beings either by action or inaction"

(Grimsrud 2015). The question of violence is one that constantly finds space in religious circles and experiences – in most religions and in most Christian denominations, “violence is a constant threat in and to religious experience” (Alvis 2019, 213). The general and most propagated Christian faith is one in which God is presented as ‘the violent God of peace’ providing Christians with a template for ‘legitimate violence in the service of the peaceful violent God’, leading to the romanticized idea that religion, especially in Africa, is not dangerous or violent (Chitando & Tarusarira 2017). In these instances, violence is constantly presented as physical, visible and with an identifiable actor or perpetrator.

The problem with this understanding of violence is that it does leave some not so obvious forms of violence untouched. Most of the violence suffered by women and racialized communities would escape censure because of their lack of physical harm. Indeed, John Galtung was right to aver that if this were the exhaustive understanding of violence, then “[h]ighly unacceptable social orders would still be compatible with peace [where peace is seen as the absence of violence]. Hence, *an extended concept of violence is indispensable*” (Galtung 1969, 168). In seeking to make this extension to the meaning of violence, Galtung (1969, 168) writes:

“As a point of departure, let us say that violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations. But first some remarks about the use of the key words above, ‘actual’ and ‘potential’. Violence is here defined as the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is. Violence is that which increases the distance between the potential and the actual, and that which impedes the decrease of this distance.”

This definition of violence by Galtung is critically important in the context of analysing the work and contributions of Chitando to the cause of women in Africa and beyond. Groups of people have lived with the feeling and idea that they cannot thrive because of their physical and biological bodies since they have been influenced to believe that certain bodies are better – female and black bodies have often been presented as inadequate. Similarly, such groups have also been influenced to believe that their mental capacities are inadequate to make any meaningful interventions towards social transformation. These influences are critical in the creation of the gap between the full potential of women, PAD, foreigners and sex-

ual minorities and what they actually achieve because this violence inhibits them from ever realizing their potential. What this attest to, is the existence of overt and covert violence. In most cases, perpetrators of covert violence are quick to magnify overt violence in ways that make covert violence disappear.

Slavoj Žižek helps us in articulating the dichotomy of overt and covert violence when he observes, “when we think about violence we tend to think about criminal acts, acts of terror, civil unrest, and war”, that is, “violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent” (Žižek 2008, 1). The violence that can be linked to an actual person is one that is used to hide from the public gaze the covert violence. According to Žižek this subjective violence is just the most visible portion of a triumvirate that also includes two objective kinds of violence: “symbolic violence - violence embodied in language and its forms,” and “systemic violence - the often-catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” (Žižek 2008, 1). These interventions by Žižek are so instructive for studies on violence, especially where religions are concerned. Religious language and ritual can be laden with violence and as the HIV epidemic was ravaging the African continent, religious language and ritual were so central in engendering another epidemic, that is, stigma (Chitando & Gunda 2007). However, in this chapter, we shall limit our analysis to systemic violence, which appears to be invisible as it is normalised by its powerful sponsors and beneficiaries (Žižek 2008).

When discussing the instances of covert violence, there are sometimes challenges with terminologies, is covert violence best captured by the use of structural, systemic or institutional violence? According to Vincenzo Ruggiero (Ruggiero 2019), “[s]ystemic violence refers to the harm people suffer from the social structure and the institutions sustaining and reproducing it. This type of violence prevents its victims from satisfying their basic needs and is an avoidable impairment of the fundamental means necessary for human existence.” This brings us back to the ‘actual’ and ‘potential’ capacity of persons in that systemic violence is that which undermines the potential and sometimes actively impedes the quest for the realization of the potential. According to Paula A. Braveman, et al. (2022, 172),

“Although systemic racism and structural racism are often used interchangeably, they have somewhat different emphases. Systemic racism emphasizes the involvement of whole systems, and often all systems - for example, political, legal, economic, health

care, school, and criminal justice systems - including the structures that uphold the systems. Structural racism emphasizes the role of the structures (laws, policies, institutional practices, and entrenched norms) that are the systems' scaffolding. Because systemic racism includes structural racism, for brevity we often use systemic racism to refer to both; at times we use both for emphasis. Institutional racism is sometimes used as a synonym for systemic or structural racism, as it captures the involvement of institutional systems and structures in race-based discrimination and oppression; it may also refer specifically to racism within a particular institution."

Similarly, according to Antonio Farfan-Vallespin & Matthew Bonick (2016),

"Recent political and social developments have witnessed an increase in the number of political statements considering that individuals of certain races or ethnic groups have lower moral qualities than members of the racial group of the speaker. Immigrants from other racial or ethnic groups are often declared to be generally dangerous and prone to criminality. Proponents of these views suggest, accordingly, that, since these entire groups are harmful for society, exceptional political measures targeted at these groups, often violating basic human rights, are justified in order to protect the rest of society from these groups."

While the above could be used to articulate 'symbolic violence', it is equally illustrative of the development of systemic, structural or institutional violence. Chitando did begin his prolific career by confronting aspects of symbolic violence manifesting in the manner Western scholars had studied and explained African Traditional Religions (Chitando 1997). What starts off as symbolic violence can quickly evolve into institutional, structural and eventually systemic violence.

Even though the above insights are drawn as specific to racism, the logic and framework works well with violence. Systemic violence includes both structural and institutional forms of violence. Chitando's call for multi-sectoral approaches to HIV & AIDS interventions, inviting religious leaders and believers to join hands with health practitioners, politicians, social workers and industry is in a way an acknowledgment of the systemic violence that was being experienced by those infected and affected by the epidemic. Similarly, in his works endorsing the contributions of African women theologians, Chitando bemoans the systemic violence that women have to contend with including violence in the family, society, politics,

faith communities, legal circles, social and economic spheres. In Chitando's words, "their voices are clearly heard. Refusing to keep quiet until church and society address African women's concerns, women theologians have been militant. They have called the church to account, charging that it has not accompanied women in their struggle against patriarchy" (Chitando 2009, 32). In short, African women theologians have been battling against 'systemic patriarchy' that often saw men from across different social structures coming together to impede the realization of the full potential of women in all spheres inside and outside the home. That various social structures combine forces to inflict violence on targeted groups brings us again to the subject of intersectionality, whether it be women, PAD, foreigners (in Africa, xenophobia or the intense fear and hatred of foreigners has been directed towards fellow black Africans, whether it be in Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya or Zimbabwe) or sexual minorities.

Intersectionality and Intersections

In the preceding section, we have seen how violence, when understood as the influence that inhibits or impedes the realization of an individual's or a specific group's potential, is both physical, psychological and more and is both overt and covert. The preceding section has also demonstrated how violence, especially the covert type, permeates all structures of a society to become systemic – violence becomes the norm as the inhibiting influences are present in politics, religion, education, economics, academia, family and the workplace. While some structures are more prone to overt violence, like in politics, and Africa has not been short of violent episodes during election cycles, some structures use the absence of overt violence to trivialize and negate the existence of covert violence. In this section, we want to focus our attention on intersectionality and intersections. "Originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality has gained popularity and is often discussed as a theory, methodology, paradigm, lens or framework. Many different definitions have been proposed, largely by academics and policymakers, and rarely by those most negatively impacted by it" (UNPRPD; UN Women 2022, 8). Following this analysis are Colfer, Basnett and Ihalainen (2018, 4) who write:

"Although people's multiple identities have been recognized and described in ethnographies over the years, Crenshaw's (1989) work was the first to expand on this observation and label its functioning

intersectionality. Crenshaw is a professor of law at the University of California, Los Angeles, and her professional emphasis is on civil rights in the United States, specifically feminist and antiracist policies. Her ideas on intersectionality emerged from a study of violence against black women in the United States. She found that generally efforts to combat racism there had focused on black men; and efforts to combat sexism had focused on white women; in both cases the most privileged of the marginalized within that category. These emphases rendered black women invisible. Her focus is specifically on the adverse impacts of a combination of marginalizing identities in interaction with related systems of oppression, domination or discrimination.”

The experiences of African American women, of which Crenshaw is one, is illustrative of experiences of various other marginalized groups around the world. Focusing on Africa, one could highlight ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, as among many marginalizing identities that can coalesce to intensify the discrimination and violence suffered by some people (as individuals or groups). Similarly, different social structures sometimes combine forces by upholding “social values and norms” that in essence are instruments of violence against targeted groups. Women pursuing a critical appraisal of patriarchy in Africa, among them African women theologians, have found politics and religion coming together to alienate them, sometimes even painting them as perpetrators of violence against the wellbeing of society at large. This systematic attack on women follows different paths, according to (Crenshaw 1991, 1241-1242),

“Over the last two decades, women have organized against the almost routine violence that shapes their lives. Drawing from the strength of shared experience, women have recognized that the political demands of millions speak more powerfully than the pleas of a few isolated voices. This politicization in turn has transformed the way we understand violence against women. For example, battering and rape, once seen as private (family matters) and aberrational (errant sexual aggression), are now largely recognized as part of a broad-scale system of domination that affects women as a class. This process of recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual has also characterized the identity politics of African Americans, other people of color, and gays and lesbians, among others.”

In some ways, the above statement uncovers how systemic violence was hidden in plain sight, by apportioning blame to individuals and in some

instances labelling violence private; the structural, institutional and systemic dimensions of violence were made invisible. The search for solutions to violence, therefore, was directed towards the private and individual and the results were always the same, no respite was experienced because the real forces of violence remained beyond censure, as they were the norms, often understood as sacred. In an attempt to expose the systemic violence that African American women were experiencing, insights were developed to show that effectively, when it comes to violence against women and PAD, African American women did not exist, their experiences did not matter. Crenshaw (Article 8 1989, 139) writes:

“One of the very few Black women’s studies books is entitled *All the Women Are White; All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us are Brave*. I have chosen this title as a point of departure in my efforts to develop a Black feminist criticism because it sets forth a problematic consequence of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis.’ In this talk, I want to examine how this tendency is perpetuated by a single-axis framework that is dominant in antidiscrimination law and that is also reflected in feminist theory and antiracist politics.”

The fragmented or compartmentalized approach to human experience, attempting to put experiences into silos that are exclusive of each other was identified as the greatest attack on vulnerable groups such as women of African descent in the United States of America’s context. The same is true of various spheres of life in Africa, where sometimes, political experience is seen as exclusive of religious violence, where gender-based violence is seen as unrelated to economic and social justice. In the context of HIV & AIDS, the physical wasting away of black bodies as AIDS took over was seen as unrelated to religious teachings and gender norms prevalent in society. Chitando was one of those who embraced an intersectionality approach and framework to champion an impactful response to the HIV & AIDS epidemic in Africa. According to Hankivsky (2014, 2),

“Intersectionality promotes an understanding of human beings as shaped by the interaction of different social locations (e.g. ‘race’/ethnicity, indigeneity, gender, class, sexuality, geography, age, disability/ability, migration status, religion). These interactions occur within a context of connected systems and structures of power (e.g. laws, policies, state governments and other political and economic unions, religious institutions, media). Through such processes, interdependent forms of privilege and oppression

shaped by colonialism, imperialism, racism, homophobia, ableism and patriarchy are created.”

In some ways, intersectionality emerges out of the intersections where seemingly mutually exclusive structures actually overlap, trapping some people in these intersections. The colonial – both political, economic, religious and social – structures have reinforced each other with some traditional structures to create powerful marginalizing forces that have created a “white class” of PAD with all the white privileges from colonial times accruing to this class. At the same time, these structures have been discreetly combining forces to deprive, impede and frustrate the full potential of other classes and groups of persons, among them, women and sexual minorities. Those trapped in the intersections of these structures become invisible as their most privileged group members’ experiences are used as representative of all, when in fact; the experiences from the intersections are not the same. The idea is that intersections and intersectionality is alive to internal diversities in presumably single groups, be they ethnic, gender or sexuality and its goal is to recover the reality of the experiences from the intersections and experiences borne out of intersectionality. According to Crenshaw (1991), there are three types of intersectionality – structural, political and representational. These types are critical lenses through which intersectionality can become a critical instrument in the quest for comprehensive justice in Africa.

Structural intersectionality emerges out of the interactions and interfacing that happens between and among different social structures, such as legal, policy and cultural. Crenshaw explains, “[i]ntersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with pre-existing vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment” (Crenshaw 1991, 1249). In the case of African women theologians, someone could be coming from a culture in which “descent and respectable women” are those that are married and always acquiescing to men. This cultural norm makes silence golden for women. In such a situation, there might emerge a law that criminalises “soliciting for sex”, a law that seems to criminalise commercial sex workers. Such a law again places another burden on women, even if on paper it seems to target a particular group of women. However, the law leads to a policy that “discourages” women from walking alone at night. The combination of these structural prescriptions will create a combined force that could make it difficult or impossible for a professional woman to work late in the office because on her way

home, she could be arrested for “soliciting sex” (Poppendieck & Mavhunga 2012). Even though this intersectionality will not have been intentionally created, it will nonetheless increase the burden that women will have to carry in such a society.

Other than structural intersectionality, political intersectionality is yet another. All people are political insofar as they engage with the burdens placed on them by the various social structures in their society. Political intersectionality emerges out of the interaction of multiple facets of identity placing different demands on the one body of multiple identities – woman, African descent, theologian, lesbian or trans-. How is one to spread their energies? A similar situation can be detected when one considers the fight for independence from colonisation where one is – man, African descent, gay, trans-, ethnic minority. Which battle does one choose? According to Crenshaw (1991, 1252),

“The need to split one's political energies between two sometimes opposing groups is a dimension of intersectional disempowerment that men of color and white women seldom confront. Indeed, their specific raced and gendered experiences, although intersectional, often define as well as confine the interests of the entire group. For example, racism as experienced by people of color who are of a particular gender –male - tends to determine the parameters of anti-racist strategies, just as sexism as experienced by women who are of a particular race – white - tends to ground the women's movement. The problem is not simply that both discourses fail women of color by not acknowledging the “additional” issue of race or of patriarchy but that the discourses are often inadequate even to the discrete tasks of articulating the full dimensions of racism and sexism. Because women of color experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color and sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of white women, antiracism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms. This is because feminism and the anti-patriarchy movement have been spear-headed by white women's interests, whereas antiracism has focused on inequalities experienced by black men.”

Taking a cue from Crenshaw, it can be argued that the fight against colonialism, including the quest for religious independence by Christians in the post-colonial states were determined largely by interests of African men, with male experiences of colonialism being used as standard experiences for all Africans. Lost in this was the gendered dimension of colonisation and the cultural dimension of patriarchy, which meant that the

experiences of African women under colonisation were not exactly the same as those of men. Similarly, gay African men fought alongside their brothers against colonisation yet their own experiences of being gay were overshadowed by the heteronormativity shared by both colonisers and colonised African men.

Finally, we have to briefly highlight the contributions of representational intersectionality, which emerges out of the manner in which some groups are represented or misrepresented in their cultural construction. In this regard, representational intersectionality focuses on the populist narratives and stereotypes that are used as representative of either “ideal” or “rebellious” persons according to social expectations. Such narratives and stereotypes are especially lethal as they merge to create marginalizing forces against the targeted groups and individuals.

“But when one discourse fails to acknowledge the significance of the other, the power relations that each attempts to challenge are strengthened. For example, when feminists fail to acknowledge the role that race played in the public response to the rape of the Central Park jogger¹, feminism contributes to the forces that produce disproportionate punishment for Black men who rape white women, and when antiracists represent the case solely in terms of racial domination, they belittle the fact that women particularly, and all people generally, should be outraged by the gender violence the case represented. Perhaps the devaluation of women of color implicit here is linked to how women of color are represented in cultural imagery” (Crenshaw 1991, 1282).

African discourses have popularised and valorised the ideal African woman as one who is pliant, with loads of patience and endurance, without a breaking point. When African women theologians stand up to challenge and to demand that they be listened to; structures and systems conspire in various ways including stigmatisation, social exclusion and frustrating all efforts, no matter the good intentions. Valorised women are those that accept being invisible even when they are present. Those that

¹ The Central-Park-Jogger case also known as the Central Park Five case and after the convicted youths were eventually exonerated, The Exonerated Five case refers to the physical and sexual attack on a 29-year-old white female in Central Park in New York. The arrested youths were African-American and Latino, both racialized communities in the USA. Refer to Looking back at the 1989 Central Park jogger rape case that led to 5 teens' conviction, later vacated - ABC News (go.com) accessed on 19/05/2023.

seek to be visible will then be represented as marital failures, bad mothers, horrible role models to be quarantined from girls and other women and their words are not to be listened to and their advice not to be sought. Non-conforming women end up as social outcasts. While intersectionality emerged as a reaction to the invisibilisation of African American women in the critical appraisals of sexism and racism in the American society where the experiences of white women and black men were given precedence, the same could be true of experiences of African women.

Gender, Race, Sexuality and Ethnicity: the intersections

Pre-colonial African life cannot be described as having been perfect, but it had its positives and negatives, had its communally held conventions as well as those that were contested or were not spoken about. However, fundamental changes occurred with the racist enslavement of Africans that saw millions of Africans trafficked across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas and the Caribbean and some to Europe. The idea that one ethnic group was permanently meant to dominate and rule others simply because of their ethnic identity was now well established. This enslavement was subsequently followed by the colonisation of the majority of the African continent by Western European powers. While gender, ethnicity and to a certain extent sexuality were categories that were present obviously without these specific names, race was unknown. Contests among different ethnicities were based on circumstances, the group that had various factors aligning for them could rise to be the dominant group in a geographical area and this saw several kingdoms emerge, thrive and then fall, as new ones emerged (McDougal 2009). Dominance in pre-colonial times was fluid and by chance and luck whereas the enslavement period and colonisation brought with them the possibility of a permanent class of conquerors and a permanent class of the conquered. Initially, this separation was a “black and white” case, with white Europeans being the conquerors divinely ordained to rule and black Africans being the conquered, divinely ordained to be ruled by whites.² The main instruments for achieving this was the white supremacist ideology and the culture of whiteness

² Genesis 9 tells a story of drunkenness and etiquette and the power to curse. In the story a father, Noah feeling offended and violated by his son, Ham, decides to place a curse on Ham’s son, Canaan. Ham’s descendants were to be servants or slaves to their brothers. It was then suggested that Ham meant black or dark

that undergirded it. This ideology and culture, however, were imparted in all spheres of life that they became instruments not only for the self-understanding of Europeans, but they became the basis upon which Africans came to understand themselves as well. That means in post-colonial contexts the same ideology and culture have been internalized and are being deployed in post-white contexts.

Relations between men and women in pre-colonial times cannot be said to have been perfect, the intersection of these cultural and traditional practices with Christian influenced Western European ideas of gender relations had the effect of increasing the burden on African women. While African men owned land, the main means of production, African women had control of produce that came from the land giving them some economic leverage in their relationship with men, especially when they were married. The introduction of a cash economy with the advent of commercial farms and industries changed the dynamics. Africans were moved into communal reserves as they were moved away from fertile lands to pave way for the establishment of commercial farms and urban and industrial centres. The early days of this shift in the economies of Africa, saw men being targeted as employees who would earn cash and with many services now needing cash, including hut and cattle taxes. With women left in charge of tired land, their productivity went down thereby giving men more dominant roles than they had previously enjoyed and making women even more dependent on men than they had done previously. This structural intersectionality was worsening the situation of women. Even though African men were experiencing the impact of the racist structures, African women's experiences were fundamentally different from those of African men (Parpart et Staudt 1988).

On human sexuality, Africa like all other continents was predominantly heterosexual, even though this word is Western. The reality was that Africans valued procreation, because in most cases, families had to produce their own labour. Labour was critical for the pre-colonial African economies, the more labour a family could master the better their productivity. While rich families could afford to hire extra-hands, this was not common, most families had to produce their own labour in the form of children. Even though the majority of the people would directly and indirectly contribute to this social duty to grow the family, the idea of mutually exclusive

hence dark-skinned people or Africans were cursed and divinely obliged to be slaves and servants.

sexual identities was unknown or if known, was never spoken about. There is evidence of men having sex with other men without them understanding themselves as having a sexuality identity that precluded the obligation to grow the family or be socially obligated to be involved in heterosexual relationships for the purposes of having children. In some communities, there were practices that were meant to cover-up the failure of a man to have children, such as *kupindira*³ (to go in to a relative's wife) among some Shona communities in Zimbabwe. The idea of mutually exclusive sexuality identities appears to have emerged in post-colonial contexts but being dependent on colonial influences. This, however, must not be mistaken for the absence of sexual minorities in pre-colonial times; there is a lot of evidence to suggest otherwise. In polygamous situations and with extended families living together, there are suspicions of women sexually satisfying each other (Gunda 2010). The situation would have been worsened when men had to migrate to commercial farms and urban centres to take up jobs and where they would live for long periods during the year leaving women alone in the villages. In most cases, such women would not have understood themselves as having a sexuality identity that was exclusive of their heterosexual social obligations.

Following an intersectional approach, it is apparent that while gender, race/ethnicity and sexuality can and have been treated as mutually exclusive categories, they actually intersect in ways that empower and disempower some groups. With our focus tilting more on African women in general and African women theologians in particular, it is clear that these dimensions of their lives expose the structural, political and representational intersectionalities to the detriment of their wellbeing and their ability to realise their full potential. For starters, the colonial and post-colonial African states in which African women theologians begin to demand and assert their right to be visible already had in place laws, policies and norms

³ *Kupindira* was a practice in which a married couple could not have children and where the family of the man strongly suspected it was the man who was not able to impregnate his wife. In such cases, the family would ask a brother or another relative to have sexual relations with the wife in order to produce children for the man. The children would belong to the man and the relative was sworn to an oath of secrecy, never to divulge this to the man and the arrangement was kept between a few elders in the family. While the reason for not having children could have been infertility, there is a possibility that sexual orientation might have also been a reason.

that upheld the disempowerment of women. The multiple identity markers of African women also saw them torn apart as they fought for holistic recognition. Their loyalties were split between their gender, race/ethnicity and sexuality. They had to join hands with African men to overthrow the colonial yoke, yet they had to stand up to African men as they also sought to overthrow the patriarchal yoke and for some of them, they also had to contend with other women as they sought to relieve themselves of the heteronormative yoke. Even then, urban and rural women had diverse experiences inasmuch as professional women and homemakers also had different experiences. As noted above, the representation of women in colonial and post-colonial African states, relying on traditional, Christian and Western norms that had intersected in these communities created a further hurdle for women, especially those that dared stand up to the excesses of patriarchy. Chitando, in his analysis of the emergence of African theologies in colonial and post-colonial African states writes:

“It must be borne in mind that African nationalists and theologians have a lot in common. Firstly, both are the product of the mission school. Secondly, both had to fight institutional racism. While African nationalists were “seeking the political kingdom”, African theologians sought to ensure that blacks were fairly represented in church structures. Thirdly, African nationalists and African theologians shared common ideological ground. They were convinced that Africans were in no way inferior to Europeans and had the mandate to assert their autonomy. Fourthly, some of the publications of African nationalists, such as Jomo Kenyatta on ATRs, were adopted by African theologians. The search for “lost ancestral values” united African nationalists and African theologians” (Chitando 2009, 14).

What is instructive and possibly missing in this assessment by Chitando is the fact that African nationalists and theologians also shared something, that is, they were mostly men and the women who participated were not seen as autonomous beings whose experiences of colonisation and racism were compounded by their experiences of patriarchal injustice. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, churches were accused of not speaking out against the spike in domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. According to Mombo & Joziassse (2022, 2), “it appears that churches, through teaching, preaching, and counselling, contributed to this disaster. Through patriarchal structures, cultural and doctrinal teachings, violence against women and girls is perpetuated, silencing the voices of women.” The patriarchal nature of the church in Africa makes the experiences of

women different from those of men. The focus on racism, religious, economic, social and political domination had blurred the diversities that affected the experiences of different groups of Africans. To illustrate this point, we again listen to Crenshaw (1991, 1242), who writes:

“The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite - that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences. In the context of violence against women, this elision of difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. Moreover, ignoring difference within groups contributes to tension among groups, another problem of identity politics that bears on efforts to politicize violence against women. Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices.”

While it is possible to speak of African women or African women theologians, it is critical to appreciate the intra-group diversities, such as, African lesbian women, African lesbian women theologians, African women homemakers or housewives. Their experiences are different at some specific points as they are caught up or trapped in some intersections of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, faith and so on. African churches have largely remained patriarchal, thereby making them both a refuge and an abattoir for women. Mombo & Joziassé (2022) write, “Why did churches and their leaders hardly speak out against the spike in domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence accompanying the COVID-19 pandemic and why did they not adequately protect the most vulnerable? ... In particular, the churches’ failure to address the causes of GBV is highlighted in the present article, pointing to its rootedness in culture, a particular interpretation of Biblical texts, and the lack of training of clergy to address GBV.” These are echoes of Chitando’s observations on the strategic positionality of the church in tackling HIV & AIDS, especially in the early days of the epidemic. Then, the church was fuelling the rising stigma and discrimination based on theological rigidity, insensitivity to gender issues, and negative attitudes towards sexuality (Chitando 2007).

There can be no doubt as to the reality of intersectionality in the experiences of different people, and in particular in the experiences of African

women in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial communities and states. The intersectionality of these experiences is not simply between those of men and women but also between and among women themselves. Acknowledging intragroup diversities is critical for the realisation of the full potential of all women. The strength of African women theologians lies in their ability to acknowledge these intragroup diverse experiences so that as they fight against patriarchy, they are similarly guarding against elitism or inverted patriarchy becoming another marginalizing force among women.

An Intersectionality approach for sustainable transformation

Intersectionality refers to the interactions between several identity markers that can all be fractions of one whole identity, as well as the interactions of various social structures that influence the lives of people. The interactions of structures create in their wake a widespread situation of unmerited privileges and injustice. As eloquently put by Hankivsky (2014), “intersectionality conceptualizes social categories as interacting with and constituting one another to create unique social locations that vary according to time and place. These intersections and their effects are what matter in an intersectional analysis.” The power of intersectionality can best be challenged and undermined by an intersectionality approach to analysis and response. One of the critical interventions of African women theologians and by extension Chitando has been to realise that African theologies were in essence African masculine theologies (Chitando 2009, 31-32). At the heart of the emergence of African Women’s Theology must have been the invisibility of African women in the supposed theological discourses purporting to be African. According to Al-Faham et. al. (2019, 250-251),

“Central to understanding this discourse are concerns about implications: What processes or persons are rendered visible and/or invisible? Collins termed this intersectionality’s “definitional dilemma” of “defining the field neither so narrowly that it reflects the interests of any one segment nor so broadly that its very popularity causes it to lose meaning.” According to Collins, “[i]ntersectionality’s travels from social movements into the academy enable some dimensions of intersectionality to flourish, leaving others to languish, if not disappear.”

The invisibility of African women was not limited to theology or religious leadership; they were invisible in politics, in industry and economies, in education and various other spheres. Therein lies the dangers associated with too narrow or too wide delimitations of what intersectionality can or should embrace. The reality is that all these spheres of life influence the experiences of African women and unless they are taken into account, African women will fight in a fragmented manner, in which they might end up fighting against each other gifting victory to the marginalizing forces and structures that actually impede their ability to realize their full potential. In many instances, women in religion have considered themselves as mutually exclusive of women in politics or industry because the representation of women in politics and industry has been one that sees them as threats to the stability of the home. Only an intentional intersectional approach can create the necessary infrastructure to bridge the supposed differences between these aspects of womanhood in Africa. While politics, religion, industry and academia might appear separate and autonomous spheres, it is most likely that one woman is politically invested in all these spheres.

Other than identifying those that are invisible, as African women theologians did in their analysis of African theologies, an intersectional approach must also engender the skills to actually identify the experiences that are being used as standard or the norm. It is the creation or adoption of one experience as representative of all, irrespective of their positionality. The experiences of an educated, politically empowered African woman cannot be representative of the experiences of a woman living in rural areas, with no education, no political agency of their own and entirely dependent on handouts by political predators. In short, intersectionality must disrupt the idea of the norm. Crenshaw (Article 8 1989) articulates this point as follows;

“I argue that Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender. These problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. Thus, for feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women,

the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating "women's experience" or "the Black experience" into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast."

Expanding on the insights above, it is not enough to disrupt the norm, in terms of the determinative experience that is being used as representative of African women's experiences, but intersectionality must seek to disrupt the framework of understanding and translating women's experiences in Africa. It is important to interrogate and question the persistence of racist ideologies in the frameworks that decides which female experience is to be prioritized and which experiences are to be invisibilised. The prioritization of experiences that conform to a Western European standard of ideal female experience is a challenge that African women will need to engage and grapple with.

An intersectional approach at the hands of African women theologians can play a critical dual function, which sees it performing an outward looking duty addressing the systemic violence that disproportionately affect African women more than it affects African men. This will not be enough, it will also need to be inward looking, the necessary instrument for self-introspection that allows for African women theologians to always critically engage with the diversities that exist among women in order to not end up with inverted patriarchy. African women theologians need not shy away from exposing structural intersectionality that goes beyond religion because their experiences are holistic, influenced by all structures that govern their lives. To this end, Chitando's (2009, 42-43) words become instructive:

"At the heart of African theology is the conviction that the church must respond to the actual, lived realities of African converts and communities. The existential needs of Africans must constitute the core business of the church."

This realisation is critical because at the heart of an intersectional approach is the desire to understand the actual experiences of individuals and groups, in our case, African women, sexual minorities as well as ethnic minorities. If injustice and discrimination are to be eliminated and equity achieved, then actual as opposed to representational experiences should be the basis of recasting the framework of thought and policy formulation. Policies and structures based on representational experiences are prone to making the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups disappear because such experiences are drawn from the privileged in each

group, the “white women and black men” type of disadvantaged persons. African women theologians are indeed a vulnerable and disadvantaged group, but their experiences as educated, professionally grounded African women mean their experiences, unless intentionally checked, can easily become representational and thereby working to overshadow other experiences by African women.

Conclusion

The strides that have been taken by African women theologians in the past three decades have been phenomenal, but the reality of life in Africa with the myriad of problems and challenges means a lot more still needs to be done. The major mistake of the nationalism era from the 1950s was its failure to acknowledge the possibility of multiple African experiences of the colonial era and its resort to using African male experiences, even at that, African educated male experiences as representational of the totality of African experience of colonisation. An intersectional approach would have assisted in the realisation of holistic decolonisation, justice and equity. Ezra Chitando’s main contribution to the women’s cause is that he has intentionally chosen to challenge the intersectionality that has privileged him as a man. He represents men that have come to the realisation that some of the things they feel entitled to, are unmerited privileges that are produced by the intersectionality of structures, institutions and systems.

The future of African women’s theologies lies in women theologians taking a leaf from the steps taken by Chitando, wherein insiders commit themselves to take a stand against injustice even if it means losing some of the privileges that we become accustomed to. The critical questions moving forward, for African women theologies could be: which structures are impeding women’s ability to realise their full potential? Whose experiences are being presented as representational of all women in our context? How can we politicize (mobilise women to create a movement whose voice will be heard far and wide) systemic violence without invisibilising some women in the process? Who is missing or invisible on the table of African women theologians? Three decades gone by, a lot has been achieved but more still needs to be done, including theologically confronting the widespread embrace of whiteness theoretically and physically by African women.

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