

Chifungo, Phoebe Faith

Women Theologies in Malawi : A Theological Narrative of a Matriarch, Isabel Apawo Phiri

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. 307-324. DOI: 10.20378/irb-95198

Beitrag im Sammelwerk - Verlagsversion

DOI des Beitrags: 10.20378/irb-96506

Datum der Veröffentlichung: 18.07.2024

Rechtehinweis:

Dieses Werk ist durch das Urheberrecht und/oder die Angabe einer Lizenz geschützt. Es steht Ihnen frei, dieses Werk auf jede Art und Weise zu nutzen, die durch die für Sie geltende Gesetzgebung zum Urheberrecht und/oder durch die Lizenz erlaubt ist. Für andere Verwendungszwecke müssen Sie die Erlaubnis der Rechteinhaberinnen und Rechteinhaber einholen.

Für dieses Dokument gilt die **Creative-Commons-Lizenz CC BY**.



Die Lizenzinformationen sind online verfügbar:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

17 | Women Theologies in Malawi: A Theological Narrative of a Matriarch, Isabel Apawo Phiri

Phoebe Faith Chifungo

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 women's voice is lacking in most of these theologies. This chapter aims at analysing the theological journey of Isabel Apawo Phiri and how her journey has contributed towards the liberative theologies. The chapter draws on a qualitative narrative research design in which data were collected through oral interviews with the matriarch, storytelling, biographies and literature review. It shows that Phiri has contributed to theologies of liberation through her publications where she has profoundly condemned all kinds of women oppression but also through her sharing of liberating and empowering ways to women by re-reading the Bible from their own perspective. She has also explored a strong theoretical framework on the liberation of women, social inclusion and gender equality. Her profession and academic success as a professor is also a commendable contribution since both men and women have benefited from her liberative theological lecturing.

Keywords: Women theologies, matriarch, Isabel Phiri, social inclusion and gender equality

Introduction

Being a theologian in Malawi is one thing but to be a woman theologian is completely another thing. This is because most parts of Malawi have a patriarchal system where men have more power than women. As such, theology is placed in the categories of men and not women. To the surprise of many, Isabel Apawo Phiri is featured as one of the first women

theologians in Malawi. She overcame the cultural stereotypes ascribed to women, hence it becomes imperative to acknowledge her contributions to African women theologies of liberation. Therefore, this chapter is a critical analysis of the personal journey of one of the founding matriarch Isabel Apawo Phiri whose theological narrative is a big contribution and encouragement to many women who are the victims of oppressive patriarchal systems. The chapter is guided by the following research questions:

1. What were the theological contexts that informed this theological Matriarch's work?
2. How did her theological ideas challenge and transform patriarchy and sexual discrimination?
3. What are the outstanding contributions of her theology to the larger world of knowledge?

Her theological journey serves as an eye opener and source of encouragement to women at the verge of giving up on their careers as professionals and authors due to the unconditional environment of their culture and society.

Additionally, her narrative of how she boldly and steadfastly challenged all the cultural and religious obstacles gives hope to the hopeless women as she stands out to be the voice of many voiceless women who are suffering and dying in silence. Her theology which was instilled in her life beginning from her tender age when she was with her grandparents; where she was taught that she is created in the image of God and therefore can make it in life regardless of sex and gender helped her to sail beyond the cultural norms which looks at a girl child as weak and incapable of achieving great things. Despite being a notable woman theologian in Malawi and beyond, studies have not extensively explored her life story and contributions to women theologies. Hence this chapter seeks to fill this gap.

The chapter is informed by qualitative research methods in which oral interviews, storytelling, biographies (life stories) and literature review were employed. Data was collected from the personal interviews with the matriarch, storytelling, biographies and literature review. This collected data was thereafter categorized according to the emergent themes. These themes are the ones which formed the whole chapter. The chapter will show that her theological journey is comprised of some synopsis of her spiritual, academic, professional, publication and family life which

demonstrate her feminist theological acumen, which equip women. The chapter unfolds by presenting her biography with the view to bring out her contributions to liberative theologies.

Isabel Phiri's Background

Isabel Apawo Phiri was born in Zambia on November 8, 1957 from Mr. Alex Chilamba and Mrs. Dorothy Chilamba (Phiri, 2020b). After 6 months from her birth, the parents went back to their home country Malawi. Unfortunately, her father died in a car accident when she was only two years old, leaving behind three children. Being born from the Chewa ethnic group in Malawi, Isabel's roots are from her mother's side because it's a matrilineal society. Her mother's name was Dorothy Namajengo Kazuwa (Phiri, 2020b) and her maternal grandmother was Naphiri Kazuwa. After the death of her father, Isabel was raised up by her step-father, Mr. Gershom Migodi, a son to Rev Damazeke Malembo of Church of Central Africa Presbyterian. Gershom and Dorothy had three children (two girls and one son), making a total of six children. It was until Isabel was 15 years old that she realized that Mr. Gershom Migodi was not her biological father. It was her younger sister who discovered and told them that they had a different biological father from them (Personal interviews with Isabel, 25 August 2022). She took courage to ask her mother who explained to her the whole story. Although Mr. Gershom was a step-father, he raised Dorothy's three daughters from the first husband (including Isabel) as his own and gave them his own surname. They were all raised up as one family hence the reason why Isabel did not know Gershom was his step-father but as her own biological father. This experience has had a very big impact on the theological context that informed part of this theological matriarch's work. She experienced love from her both parents, and was brought up in a very conducive environment where both of her parents loved each other and their children.

Her Spiritual Life

Isabel comes from a family that has a Christian background. She owes her gratitude to her grandmother, Naphiri Kazuwa who every day from 4:00 am, prayed both for her children and grandchildren. Isabel believes God connected her mother to Gershom, a man of love and care who managed to raise up children from another man without any condition as if they were his own biological children. It was from her grandmother that

Isabel learnt the relevance of women praying for their family members. Her maternal grandfather was also a dedicated Christian to the extent that the church deemed it worthy to ordain him as a church elder of Lobi CCAP, Nkhoma Synod, one of the main line churches in Malawi. It was him who helped Isabel when she in 1976 experienced what she calls, “a spiritual crisis”. Her parents entrusted her in none else other than her own grandfather. She acknowledges how the grandfather helped her differentiate between knowing facts about Jesus, memorizing Bible verses and having a personal relationship with Him. She asserts this as the beginning of a deeper spiritual journey which finally, two years later led her to accepting Jesus Christ as her personal Lord and savior. Isabel considers this as the genesis of her theological journey. The historical background of how her both grandparents supported her spiritually led her to find out more about who God is and how she can also in future be a solution provider to those who are oppressed by all kinds of cultural and biblical depressions and more especially her fellow women.

As she grew up, she also joined Malawi Assemblies of God where she enjoyed worshipping God, the only set back was the fact that her parents being Presbyterian wanted her to be baptized as a member of CCAP of which she alluded to in 1967 when she was baptized at the Katimba CCAP, Blantyre Synod (Phiri, 1997:74). This serves us with some characteristics of our Matriarch some of which are:

- a) She was a born-again woman.
- b) She was obedient to her parents.
- c) She was quick to learn from her role models: grandparents and her parents.

This spiritual journey laid a fundamental foundation in as far as liberation theology is concerned because one cannot fight for someone’s’ freedom if herself/himself is not yet set free. So, the fact that the matriarch became born again it means she was liberated hence qualified to be the torch bearer and flag carrier of liberation wherever she went. According to Ackermann (2014:1), salvation has interesting connections with the notions of well-being and health with the vision for ‘abundant life for all’. It is therefore not a surprise seeing her promoting the full humanity of all who suffer and who are oppressed, including women. Again Ackermann (2014:9) says that salvation has to do with both freedom and grace; freedom because it transforms or frees human beings and human society from sin and guilt. She (Ackermann) has described salvation as a “doing

theology” in that it involves in fighting against any form of oppression. On the other hand, salvation has to do also with the unending grace of God which enables us to respond to Him in Christ. This is what Isabel Apawo Phiri did; fighting against oppressive systems; but Phiri managed to do all this because of being born again.

Isabel’s Educational Life

There is a proverb that says, *chabwino chifumira kumadzila* meaning every good thing has its originality. The Isabel we see now is a true reflection of where she comes from, she is a replica of her mother and step- father who raised her up. Isabel talks of her mother Dorothy Migochi as a woman who valued education and who worked so hard to ensure that all her children, (not just few of them) attended good schools. She was a mother who made sure that all her children went to not just a mere school but those which were good for excellent results. This made the mother to work extra hard to have enough money because a good school demanded more school fees. As such the mother worked as a nurse and later as a secretary at Reserve Bank of Malawi. The money earned from here was mainly used to pay school fees for all children. While Dorothy was busy supporting the children with school fees, Gershom Migochi was busy meeting the family expenses for food and basic necessities as he was a teacher. So Isabel had her both parents as her role-models as far as educational life was concerned. She was inspired by her parents’ professional example. Hence, she either wanted to be a nurse like her mother or a teacher like her father Gershom. This means Isabel and the rest of the children had all the support needed from the parents in as far as education is concerned. Coming from the society that deprived a girl child from higher education and confined women to only domestic work, Isabel’s parents proved to excel above the cultural norms by equipping their girl child with the needed education. They knew that the liberation of a woman is the flourishing of a nation’s economy and the betterment of socio-cultural and technological advancements (Kiruki, 2010:7). The way the mother and the father supported each other in providing the necessities for their children helped this matriarch to develop the right theology of how a husband (man) ought to treat his wife (woman) and how together they should raise their children regardless of sex. Hence from childhood, the matriarch knew that a girl child, having being created in the image of God is entitled to good education, from a tender age the matriarch is equipped with the knowledge that both a man (husband) and

a woman (wife) are equal before God therefore each one is to be treated with dignity and honor (Mouton, 2015:19). It is from here that the matriarch's theology of liberation emanates. She had a father who liberated her mother to work as a professional nurse and a father who empowered a girl child to obtain high education. This is going to be reflected in her theological journey from her academic studies, then her professional work up to her publication.

Isabel went to several primary schools, but the most prominent ones were Lilongwe government primary school in the central region, Zomba primary school in the East region, Kanjedza and Limbe primary school in the Southern region. As for secondary school, she went to Providence Secondary School in Mulanje which is also located in the southern region. Thereafter she was selected to Chancellor College in 1977 where she studied Education in Religious Studies and History. One of her lecturers was an English man (John Parrat) and one of her best courses was African Traditional Religion (ATR). She narrates two lessons she learnt from this course:

- (a) That to some extent our religion is controlled and guided by our culture.
- (b) That as an educator she needed to be familiar with religious traditions beyond her because she was among the people who practiced other faiths like her husband's uncle who was an Imam (Phiri, 2015:8).

Isabel graduated from Chancellor College with a Bachelor of Education in Religious Studies and History.

In 1982 Isabel went to Lancaster University in England where she got a Master's in education majoring in religious education and New Testament Studies. She considers her studies at this university as a big breakthrough and opportunity because African women were often discouraged from pursuing degrees in theological colleges and seminaries because they were meant for training ordained ministers and few African churches ordained women (Phiri 2009:6). Since she was not an ordained woman, it means Isabel challenged, defeated and transformed patriarchal system, tribalism, racism and sexism. In as much as this was recorded as historical, it was also a big breakthrough to the family of women who were aspiring studying theology. They affirmed that indeed nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37). She became the role model to many women.

Isabel also had a mentorship course called “Programme on Theological Education” (PTE) under two African mentors and one of them was John Pobe, Ghanaian New Testament scholar, educator and ecumenist. This was a great opportunity because it introduced Phiri to global conversations about the purpose and nature of theological education.

In 1990 she started her PhD studies at the University of Cape Town in South Africa where she was under the supervision of John W. de Gruchy, a professor of Christian Studies and Political theology and a co-signer of the Kairos document (Kairos theologians, 1986:54). Her PhD studies exposed her to new methodologies of how to use the frameworks of feminist theology, ecumenism and African theology to resist racism and sexism (Phiri, 2020a:67). From this she developed her PhD thesis on African Women in Religion and Culture; Chewa Women in the Nkhoma Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian: A critical study from Women’s perspective. Her main research area was on the ritual practices at rain shrines in the indigenous Chewa traditions and the role women served as spiritual leaders. She also looked at how Christian tradition impacted women in the church of Central Africa Presbyterian and in what ways these improved women’s lives or served to marginalize them.

The impact of her spirituality she got from her grandparents, the moral and financial support she received from her parents helped the matriarch to proceed to university where out of all the courses which were offered there, she chose religious studies and history. This was not just a coincidence, but it was due to the theology which was building up in her since she was young. The Bible says, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.” (Proverbs 22:6).

Isabel’s Academic Papers

Isabel has contributed to scholarship which is liberative in many ways. Among the notable publications is the first book to be written by a women theologian (Phiri, I.A. 2007. *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy: Religious experience of Chewa women in central Malawi*. Kachere Press, Malawi). The book is an interpretation by an African woman in matrilineal society of how “woman” is constructed by patriarchy in African church and culture. Isabel paints in bold strokes that the construction of a woman by patriarchy is one of the central issues for feminist theologians globally and particularly in Africa because it has influenced the way

women and the roles that women can play in the African church and society are imaged. The book's intention is to criticize all that oppresses African women. Her main argument is that the coming in of Christianity to matrilineal societies meant a transfer of religious power from women to men. Originally matrilineal traditional culture included both elements in which the dignity of women was affirmed but also elements which were oppressive. Unfortunately, argues Isabel that the coming of Christianity promised liberation from some oppressive matrilineal traditional culture but the promise was not fulfilled, instead the missionaries introduced teachings and practices which placed women in subordinate positions in society and reinforced some of the negative cultural elements. All this affirms the author, was legitimized by reference to Biblical texts. This has resulted in having African women experiencing oppression at various levels and in various ways rather than the full liberation which the gospel of Jesus Christ offers.

Isabel's interpretive focus here is on exposing what Ackermann (1989:55), calls, "Clericalism" encoded in the biblical text in view of the fact that it is texts like these, *inter alia*, that have been used over the ages by the church to rule against women's ordination. Clericalism has been defined as that which expropriates ministry from the community of women and men into a separate clergy caste and is built on a patriarchal world view.

Building around a schematic framework to structure her analysis, Isabel goes on to share the liberating and empowering ways to women.

- (i) Re-reading the Bible from their own perspective.
- (ii) Interacting with other women in continental Christian women's organizations like Circle.
- (iii) Recognizing the need for appropriate theological education which will enable them to retrieve the positive elements in their culture and the liberating elements within the Christian tradition.

Isabel's contribution to women theologies has also been through her work on theoretical frameworks for African women theologies (Phiri, I.A. and Nadar, S. 2006. What's in a Name? -Forging a Theoretical Framework of African Women's Theologies. *Journal of Constructive Theology* 12, 2. December 2006, 5-24). In this article Isabel and her co-author explore a strong theoretical framework on the liberation of women; critic of patriarchy from a religious and theological perspective. Committed to gender

equality as well as social inclusion in general, the duo exposes the disproportionate portrayal of the male and female in some of the biblical passages and point out the gender implications of these skewed passages. For instance, Galatians 3:27-28 is cited (which says, "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Another passage is Genesis 1:27 which says, "So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them: male and female He created them.") The main theological argument emanating from the above passages is that these are women liberating passages which are deliberately being ignored by the androcentric mentality. The equality of both male and female are clearly depicted in these passages, as such Isabel strongly abhors any sexism form. Instead, she encourages the full liberation of women from such antagonistic patriarchal system.

Additionally, Isabel analyses the writing of African women theologians (Phiri, I.A. and Nadar, S. 2009. *Going Through the fire with eyes wide open: African Women's perspectives on Indigenous knowledge, patriarchy and sexuality*. In *Journal for the study of religion* 22 (2) 2009, 5-21). In this article, Isabel goes beyond a description of African women's theology, and offers a critical analysis of what African women theologians are writing about and how they are doing it. Isabel's purpose in this paper was to present the unique contribution that women theologians are making into the study of theology. She analyses how women have for a long time being hindered not only from publishing books and articles but even from studying theology. Theology was meant only for men; this is a true reflection of patriarch system where roles are assigned according to gender. This is well articulated in her first book (2007) where she narrates that many men argue that African culture does not allow a woman to have power and authority over men because the African culture is patriarchal. This serves as the reason why the construction of women by patriarchy is one of the central issues for feminist theologians globally and particularly in Africa because it has influenced the way women and the roles that women can play in the African church and society are imaged.

Isabel cites her own example of how she broke down this patriarchal norm when she became the first Malawian woman to become an author of a theological book. She further considers her studies at Lancaster University as a big breakthrough and opportunity because African women were often discouraged from pursuing degrees in theological colleges

and seminaries because they were meant for training ordained ministers and few African churches ordained women (Phiri, 2009:6).

Isabel's critical analysis of African women's writing depicts a big breakthrough in African history of women liberation from just being housewives to being great authors.

In another publication (Phiri, I.A. et al. 2017. HIV and AIDS, Gender Violence and Masculinities: A Case of South Africa. *Journal Article*, 2017, 74-86), Isabel examines an adapted Stepping-Stones curriculum, which is used on church going couples. The purpose was to see if it promotes behavioural change in the area of communication about sexuality, fidelity and gender-based violence. The findings of this study confirmed a significant increase in communication among couples about their sexuality and a decrease in gender-based violence. It raised concerns about issues of fidelity in monogamous and polygamous relationships. It also confirmed the need to re-examine the theology of marriage in the context of African Instituted Churches. Isabel also examined African women's theologies in Southern Africa (Phiri, I.A. 2011. African women's theologies in the new millennium. *Journal Article 18, ISS. 61*, 16-24). In this article, she traces the development of African women's theologies in Southern Africa since its inception at a continental level in 1989, through the Circle of African Women Theologians, and analyses the methodologies and the content of this theology from the perspective of African theology. She further highlights the urgent need for theological and practical response to the issue of HIV/AIDS from a gendered perspective and concludes by suggesting issues that women theologians need to grapple with in Southern Africa.

In summary her publications have contributed a lot toward the theologies of liberations. For example, through her publication she has explored a strong theoretical framework on the liberation of women; she has openly criticized any form of patriarchy from a religious and theological perspective. Her publications have influenced the way women and the roles that women can play in the African church and society are imaged. She further highlighted the urgent need for theological and practical response to the issue of HIV/AIDS from a gendered perspective.

Isabel's Professional Life

It is very encouraging to see that while other people were struggling to secure jobs, Isabel had a different story to share. She narrates that she was hired by the Religious Studies Department at Chancellor College,

Malawi as a staff associate soon after her graduation. This is very outstanding because to be employed by your own lecturers is a good indicator of someone's hard working spirit, trust, good behaviour, intelligence and integrity. It is not always easy to be employed by your own lecturers because they know you very well. She later after getting her Master's in education was appointed as a lecturer in African theology, New Testament and religious education from 1983 to 1986. In 1987 she joined the editorial board of the *Journal of Religion in Malawi*. She for five years served in a very senior and influential position as the Moderator for Bible Knowledge for the Malawi School Certificate of Education examinations. Little by little she was becoming a Biblical Scholar and educator.

As she was on a Sabbatical leave from Chancellor College (Phiri, 2007a:117) she went to Namibia where she became a senior lecturer in African theology at the University of Namibia from 1996, May to 1997 August. In 1997 she became an associate professor in theological studies in Durban at School of Religion and Culture at the University of Durban Westville. In 2001 she became a lecturer at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal where she later became a professor in 2003. As a professor, she lectured classes in African Women's theology, African Instituted churches and theology in the African Context. While serving at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN) she was honored with two positions. In 2005 she was the Head of the School of Religion and Theology and two years later, in 2007 she became the Dean of the same faculty. The appointment of these two positions were a significant milestone not only to her but to every African woman because African women were and continue to be under-presented in the faculties (Doerrer, 2015). The knowledge that she gained through lecturing these courses helped her to develop the theology of liberation.

Isabel also worked for six years (1984-1990) as a Youth commissioner for the program on Theological Education. She later served on the advisory board for the Bossey Ecumenical Institute from 2004-2005 and was also the moderator of World Council of Churches' Commissioning Education and Ecumenical Formation from 2006-2009. She is currently part of the Pan-African Women's Ecumenical Empowerment Network (PAWEEN) which was launched in 2015 (Phiri, 2019). It is not a surprise to see God calling her into a position of Associate General Secretary responsible for public witness and diakonia program for the World Council of Churches, a position she accepted in 2012. With this new position, she had to move from South Africa to Switzerland. She later in 2017 became the Deputy

General Secretary for the same program and she was the first African Woman to hold this position (Personal Interviews, 2022, 24th August). Her main focus area of work is the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace which was the main theme at the 10th World Council of Churches Assembly in Busan, South Korea in 2013 (2020a:62)

Isabel's work with the World council of Churches is seen as an extended version of her work within the church and the academy where she is able to connect faith and social justice. Her background as a scholar is what has helped her to deepen her work in Biblical and theological reflection and this is consistent with the World Council of Churches' emphasis on theology. She asserts that faith requires action as such she says, "Being an ecumenical church requires all of us to share together our spirituality and to act together because it is these two which make the presence of Jesus Christ visible among us and in our witness in the world credible," (Phiri, 2015:5). Her position as the Deputy General Secretary serves two purposes: First, it highlights her main strength and contribution to the world and also to women liberation. Secondly, it serves as a potential reference to the future world and work that it is possible to be an African woman and be able to hold a such high position of power.

The nature of the matriarch's job exposed her to interacting with both, the perpetrators and victims of liberation. Therefore, she had all the opportunity to share with them what liberation theology is all about either in classrooms or conference rooms. As such many changed positively due to her profession. Again, the courses and the positions which the matriarch possessed helped her to easily address the issues of patriarchy. For instance, courses like religious studies, New Testament, African women theology, etc. New Testament gives us a good example of Jesus Christ who fought for the rights of women. Again, the position she had in Pan-African Women's Ecumenical Empowerment Network (PAWEEN but also as the deputy general Secretary responsible for public witness and diakonia program for the World Council of Churches was and remains a big inspiration to many women. Just seeing an African woman holding such positions is liberative on its own. It brings a message of hope to hopeless women and it also defeats all oppressive patriarchal systems.

Isabel's Family Life

As Isabel's life was blossoming and excelling academically and professionally, there was one outstanding area which was lacking behind. This was nothing else other than having "the love of her heart and life partner". This was realized through her trip to England where she specifically went to attend the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. This trip turned out to be an opportunity of meeting her man. There is a local proverb which says, *Okawona Nyanja anakawona ndi mvuwu yomwe* meaning those who went to specifically see the lake fortunately ended up seeing the hippo as well. Another proverb goes like this, *Kupha mbalame ziwiri ndi mwala umodzi* meaning killing two birds with one stone. All these local proverbs are just an expression of how blessed and lucky Isabel was to have a double blessing from the conference. She went to the conference single but came back with a fiancée whom she will spend the rest of her life. This man was none else other than a Zambian Pentecostal Christian by the name of Maxwell Agabu. It was encouraging to learn from Isabel that apart from love, another thing that bought them very close to each other was their faith in Jesus Christ. The two love birds exchanged their marriage vows in Malawi on 21st December, 1985 at Lilongwe Pentecostal Church (Phiri, 2020b).

Together they have one biological son by the name of Chisomo (Grace) who was born in 1988. They have also adopted two children by the name Kuleza who was born in 1989 and Cynthia born in 1990. Their first-born son Chisomo is still studying at University of Cape Town where he is pursuing PhD in Architecture. He also intends to pursue a teaching career as his own business. Their second born son Kuleza is also in Cape Town teaching at a private college in digital art and design. While their last-born daughter is in Malawi still searching for an opportunity of work (Personal Interviews with Phiri, 25 August 2022).

Isabel asserts that the secret behind their successful marriage is their willingness to grow together, support and inspire each other to grow to their fullest potential. It has been a mutually supportive marriage; spiritually they regularly pray together; academically they both have excelled well and professionally are all professors. (Phiri, 2020b:2). Hence, she (Phiri, 2020b) proudly says that it has been an "Iron sharpening an Iron in every area of our lives..." This statement reveals that the secret of Isabel's success in her theological journey. Being together spiritually, academically and professionally plays a vital contribution towards her work.

When she was given an opportunity to study PhD at the University of Cape Town, she made sure to take with her, her husband and Chisomo. Her husband is currently still a professor of Business Administration at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal in South Africa. She is still in Geneva but they regularly visit each other more especially with the nature of her job, she frequently visits Africa giving her an opportunity to see her family.

Isabel is retiring this year (2023) and will settle in Malawi and Zambia where her husband comes from hoping to be visiting their children and a grandchild often in South Africa. She thinks the husband might retire together with her despite the fact that he still has some more years to work if he wants to.

Isabel's involvement with CIRCLE

Circle is a group of concerned African Women Theologian comprised of all religions although the majority are Christians. (Phiri, 2000:106). Isabel's involvement goes as early as 1996 when she was in Namibia. She started this group there which was mainly comprised of Lutheran church women (Kanyoro, 1997). She utilized each and every opportunity to establish circle wherever she lived. For example, in South Africa, she established two chapters of circle. According to Fieldler, one was established in Durban (2017:72) and another one in Pietermaritzburg (2017:75). The Durban circle had at a certain point a membership of 200 and their main purpose was to theologically reflect on their lived experience, choose a research topic relevant to their experience, choose a research topic relevant to their context and empowered each other to publish. Her zeal for circle was so strong to the extent of even encouraging male scholars to present papers on transforming masculinity at the Cameroon continental circle gathering in 2007.

Through her leadership as the General coordinator from 2002 to 2007, Isabel made a huge contribution to the circle of concerned African theologian women including organizing the circle at the continental level. Through her skilful management, circle became highly productive by producing more books than ever. She made sure research topics depicted circles priorities for example Circle selected HIV & AIDS as a five-year research focus (Phiri, 2010). Through her, circle also received financial support which in long ran helped in publishing regional activities in a newspaper.

Regardless of all the above positive contributions by Isabel, she still received some resistance and discouragements from her fellow circle women. During the continental conference in Cameroon, some critics complained that the circle was only for the academicians from universities. This was a direct attack on Isabel because she was the one who encouraged both female and male on writing and publishing. It was emphasized at the conference that the circle should be made accessible to women even those outside academics. The goals were also re-emphasized. The accusations made Isabel, after her term of office as the General coordinator expired to withdrawal for some time from circle activities. She was succeeded by Fulata Moyo (from Malawi) (Fieldler, 2017:44). Her withdrawal affected the circle financially because the World Council of Churches which was the main donor withdrew their support.

Regardless of this setback, it is clear that both Isabel and circle itself benefited from each other. For instance, Isabel openly acknowledges that her growth and success in academics was mainly as a result of her active participation in the circle. Equally the same, many women and men from the circle have been mentored and supported by Isabel especially in the area of research and writing. She has been providing opportunities for collaborations.

CONCLUSION

The chapter has explored the contributions of Isabel Apawo Phiri to theologies of liberation. For instance, her story has explained how her spiritual life, her publications and her professional life has contributed towards the liberation theologies. She concludes by acknowledging the impact of working with the International church organization (WCC). She says such an organization offers an opportunity one has to contribute from an African Woman's perspective which is not known by many people both in church and society. She says her understanding of the concept of justice for all has been broadened in that you realize that there is strength when all the marginalized people stand together in solidarity. You develop a holistic approach to the fullness of life in Christ Jesus. You grow into a broader understanding of controversial issues that the church deals with and your understanding of who God is becomes broader. She further says she sees God more as a creator of human kind than just as God of the Christian. She wraps up by narrating some of the challenges she

has encountered in her professional walk. She says that opposition of justice for all is real even from within Christian family because we live with contradictions where one experience intense hate from those who see themselves as defenders of God and traditions of the church. However, she says that such intense opposition and marginalization from the inside Christian faith itself should energize us to continue fighting the good fight of faith and justice for all. This is a true reflection of who Isabel Apawo Phiri is; she has really fought a good fight of liberating women from the oppressive patriarchal systems and her theology is a true reflection of her life story. Her spiritual life back home with her both grandparents guided her to choose religious studies and history courses in college. It is not a surprise to see that all her publications and courses she lectured were a true depiction of her theological background. It is therefore clear and straightforward that her historical background at home, her cultural environment, her academic and professional achievements have formed Isabel's theology of liberation.

REFERENCES

- Ackermann, D.M. & M. Armour et al. (1989). Differing Theories, some old praxis, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, December 1989, 55.
- Doerrer, Sarah (2015). "Gender Equity Requires Higher Education Equity: A Discussion with African Women about the Barriers. They Face to Participation as Students, Faculty, and in Academic Leadership." *Planning and Changing* 46, no. 3&4, 294-310.
- Fiedler, Rachel NyaGondwe (2017). *A History of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians 1989–2007*. Oxford: African Books Collective.
- Kairos Theologians (1986). *Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa: The Kairos Document*.
- Kanyoro, Musimbi (2002). "Beads and Strands: Threading More Beads in the Story of the Circle." In *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*. Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster.
- Kiruti, Joseph (2010). *Women's Liberation: A Paradigm shift for development*. Limuru, Kenya: Kolbe Press.

- Mouton, Elna, Getrude Kapuma, Len Hansen, and Thomas Togom. (2015). *Living with dignity: African Perspectives on Gender Equality*. Cape Town, South Africa: Sun Press.
- Parratt, John. (1993). "What is Asia? What is Africa?" *Modern Churchman* 34, no. 1, 1-7.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo (2000). "Empowerment of Women through the Centre for Constructive Theology." *International Review of Mission* 89, no. 354, 329-337. doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.2000.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo (2005a). "Healing from the Traumas of Crime in South Africa: Interaction of African Religion with Christianity as Perceived by African Female Traditional Healers." In Ingo Wulffhorst (ed.), *Ancestors, Spirits and Healing in Africa and Asia: A Challenge to the Church*. Geneva: Lutheran World Federation. 25-40.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo (2005b). "The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians: Its Contribution to Ecumenical Formation." *Ecumenical Review* 57, no. 1, 34-41. doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.2005.tb00216. x.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo (2007a). "Marching, Suspended and Stoned: Christian Women in Malawi." In Kenneth R. Ross (ed.), *God, People and Power in Malawi: Democratization in Theological Perspectives*. Zomba: Kachere Series, 74-122.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo (2007b). *Women, Patriarchy and Presbyterianism: Religious Experience of Chewa Women in Central Malawi*. Zomba: Kachere Monographs.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo (2009). "Major Challenges for African Women Theologians in Theological Education (1989–2008)." *International Review of Mission* 98, no. 1, 105-119. doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.2009.00009. x.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo, and S. Nadar (2009). Going Through the fire with eyes wide open: African Women's on perspectives on Indigenous knowledge, patriarchy and sexuality. *Journal for the study of religion* 22 (2), 5-21.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo (2010). "HIV/AIDS: An African Theological Response in Mission." In Kwok Pui Lan (ed.), *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology*, 219-228.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo (2011). African women's theologies in the new millennium. *Agenda* 18, Iss 61, 16-24.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo (2015). "Living Together in the Household of God: A Theological Reflection." Paper presented at the D. T. Niles Memorial.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo (2017). HIV and AIDS, Gender Violence and Masculinities: A Case of South Africa. *Journal Article*, 74-86.

- Phiri, Isabel Apawo (2019). "The Imperative of Diakonia for the Church and Theological Education." *Ecumenical Review* 71, no. 4, 482-491. doi.org/10.1111/erev.12443.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo (2020a). "Reaching the Champions of Social Justice: Blind Spots in the Ecumenical Racial and Gender Response." *Ecumenical Review* 72, no. 1, 62-72. doi.org/10.1111/erev12492.
- Phiri, Isabel Apawo (2020b). "Women in Church." Interview by Lucia Cuocci. *Protestantesimo, Rai 2*, February 27, 2020. www.raiplay.it/ricerca.html?q=Phiri