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Appreciating Ezra Chitando : Husband, Father, Professor – Defender and Promoter of Equality and Equity for All

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1 Appreciating Ezra Chitando¹

Husband, Father, Professor – Defender and Promoter of Equality and Equity for All

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, there has been a growing realisation that gender polarisation does not promote girls' and women's interests. Although critics, especially radical feminists or womanists, have argued that this trend is diluting women's struggles, there are benefits to be gained from girls and women working with boys and men. While there are different, often competing forms of masculinities, it is important to identify and work together with progressive masculinities for positive transformation. This chapter discusses the theme in honour of Ezra Chitando, with particular reference to how his academic work has influenced his family's pathways. Contrary to the past, where family settings were generally the bastions of patriarchy and male privilege, there are progressive men who have questioned old patriarchal traditions. They believe in social justice and transformation. Such men transform, challenge and confront cultural beliefs and practices that stifle social justice and oppress girls and women. They are willing to construct new and alternative masculinities based on equality. This chapter is an appreciation of the distinguished work of the feminist, Ezra Chitando, and an acknowledgement that girls and women need to strategically build alliances with progressive boys and men in order to ensure sustained social transformation.

Keywords: Sustainable transformation, feminist, masculinities, girls, women, boys

¹ Given the number of the Chitandos involved in this essay, we are going to use, "Ezra" to refer to the person who is the focus of this chapter.

² We are grateful to the editors for the opportunity and wish to thank Tinevimbo Chitando for serving as convenor of the writing of this chapter.

Introduction

For many centuries, the story of African girls and women has generally been that of suffering under patriarchy, although outstanding girls and women have emerged. They have mostly been silenced and erased in patriarchal traditions. The vulnerability of girls and women often stemmed from their dependence on men, who had all the privileges in patriarchal social settings. These men often took advantage of the girls' and women's dependence on them and subjected them to various injustices, including child marriages, subservience in society and exclusion from control of family resources. Even in contemporary times, the fight for gender equality remains a thorny and abiding issue. In families and in sites of employment, girls and women in Africa continue to push for their recognition. They have and continue to fight to transform their condition for the better. African women and girls, like their counterparts in other parts of the world, have refused to succumb to the dictates of patriarchy.

This chapter acknowledges that there are positive masculinities that are dedicated to working with girls and women for sustainable social and economic transformation. These 'new men' rewrite approaches to gender dynamics in a way that promotes the emergence and existence of compassionate masculinities that seek to advance girls' and women's causes. We could argue that feminism has generally worked towards the deconstruction of patriarchy without wanting to pay particular attention to ways in which positive masculinities have emerged and the extent to which they share the same concerns as marginalised girls and women. Close scrutiny shows that there are meeting points in the whole discourse. Indeed, there are progressive men who can make a difference in society. They can serve as allies (Dery 2020) who support the struggle for justice by women and girls. This chapter is a note of appreciation of such men as exemplified by Ezra, a feminist and reformist. In his career, he has significantly contributed to the emancipation, empowerment and enlightenment of girls and women, at family, local and international levels.

Identifying Male Champions

There are diverse masculinities, some progressive and others retrogressive. Adverse or toxic masculinities pose a variety of challenges and thrive upon making women abandon their ambitions and dreams. Progressive

masculinities advance girls' and women's causes and fights against unequal structures. Therefore, girls and women need the right strategies to continue to empower themselves to further their cause. One such strategy would be for girls and women to partner with boys and men for sustainable transformation. In one of his presentations, Chitando (2021) notes that while patriarchy promises a lot for boys and men, the same boys and men, the supposed beneficiaries, are also victims of patriarchy. Through a socialization process where they are brought up to dominate and control others, men often struggle to express vulnerability, to listen to women, to work alongside them or to apologize for their own mistakes (Chitando 2021).

Zimbabwean literature provides valuable insights into the importance of boys and men collaborating with girls and women. In *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Tsitsi Dangarembga highlights oppressive patriarchal norms, particularly in the realm of education. Girls are often denied the opportunity to attend school, unlike their male counterparts. For instance, Tambu is forced to leave school, as the family's limited funds are allocated toward her brother Nhamo's education. Tambudzai faces a number of obstacles posed by the patriarchal society in her quest for education, becoming a victim of rigid masculinities that she persistently resists. She, however, does not succeed in the end because the colonial education scheme systematically colludes with patriarchy and does not allow African children equal access to educational opportunities. This, and the fact that traditional patriarchal societies in Africa often favoured the boy-child more than the girl-child, saw institutions of learning in Africa being dominated by boys and men, especially in the 1960s. This, however, changed after independence in most African countries, through the efforts of male champions in the struggle for girls' and women's empowerment. Although Babamukuru (uncle), one such male champion in society, still possesses elements of traditional patriarchy, he relatively represents those more progressive masculinities that realise the value of giving their daughters an education in a swiftly modernising society. Babamukuru thus becomes a role model, a position epitomised in Dangarembga's *The Book of Not*, (2006) where Tambudzai's life continues to be positively shaped by her uncle. Similarly, Ezra has been consistent in his struggle to invest in girls and women for gender equality and justice. In the next section, the chapter reviews and appreciates his efforts as he has sought to promote positive masculinities in Africa. The testimonies are drawn from members of his nuclear family. It was not possible to include the voices

of the many daughters, sons, nieces, nephews, friends and others that he has interacted with across different parts of the continent. The associated descriptive words are not meant to be exhaustive, but illustrative.

Ezra through the eyes and experiences of Anna, life partner and companion

Professor Ezra Chitando's works, and practical engagement show the possibility of males promoting girls' and women's advancement; males mentoring without being paternalistic. This has a positive impact on girls and women's opportunities in life, and in the empowerment of future generations. In this regard, Ezra, you are a true mentor who capacitates others with unsurpassed humility. Having entered academia earlier, you have been willing to recruit new entrants into the field. My debut journal article, *Black Female Identities: The Case of Young Women with Dreadlocks*, that I co-authored with you (Chitando & Chitando 2004), was borne out of this recruitment. Through this entrance article, you have mentored me in the academic journey. You reassured me in times of vacillation by saying, "There is nothing magical. People mystify these things. Do not underestimate yourself." Your encouragement influenced the trajectory. My career path took form from then on. According to Sall (2000), the scenario in institutions of higher learning is a space where women should be able to command respect and equality. However, "the struggle for gender equality within academic life continues to meet strong resistance all around the world. African campuses are no exception." (Sall 2000: Synopsis) Notwithstanding these challenges, you believed in me and encouraged me to accept leadership. I remember one day when I was hesitant to assume a leadership role, you jokingly offered to polish my shoes every day as your way of supporting me. We laughed it off! However, when I reminisce, the symbolism of you polishing my shoes is striking. Considering the way shoes are designed to be in contact with different types of surfaces, not to mention the dirty ones too, the recognisable significance of you, polishing my shoes, thus lies in your unpretentiousness, the same humility that one would expect in a leader, for transformative leadership. You have not hesitated to be supportive while embracing teachable moments from my own journey in the path of professional development.

Having been blessed with two daughters and one son, you have treated our children fairly, without favouring either the girl-child or boy-child.

While traditional African societies have been shaped by patriarchal thought patterns that often disadvantaged African girls and women, such thinking is changing and being challenged in contemporary societies. The discourse shifts from the unappealing view of African men in negative stereotypes to one that tries to capture masculine diversity. Much of the focus on gender relations has been on the inferior and subordinate position of girls and women in relation to boys and men. Yet there has been a constructive change in some masculinities. Positive transformation in masculinity is observed in men who do not subscribe to stereotyped conceptions that undermine girls, boys and women. Progressive men are in favour of girls' and women's emancipation, and they are ready to do all they can to support and mentor girls and women in their quest to advance careers and enjoy the freedom to express themselves. You epitomise this as a humble and sensitive family man. You have steadfastly refused to be a professor at home, in all social spaces and in the neighbourhood. You prefer being incognito but fighting for the rights and dignity of all. You have supported and you continue to motivate your family to pursue their careers, without standing in their way. You have influenced your family in many positive ways. You have made our family consistent practitioners and champions of the "Thursdays in Black: Towards a World without Rape and Violence" campaign³. You have contributed to our collective growth in faith, where we have sought to avoid embracing a stifling religious regime. You have been consistent in questioning and rejecting patriarchy. Your supportive fatherly deportment reminds me of one Sudanese proverb, "We desire to bequeath two things to our children; the first one is roots, the other one is wings." You have sought to empower your family (immediate and broader) with roots and wings.

Why roots and wings? When our children have roots, they will appreciate the struggles that girls and women have undertaken (and continue to undertake) to have their rights and dignity taken seriously. When our children have wings, they will become fearless and fly; fly high to become distinguished leaders even in a world that struggles to accept girls and women as leaders.

³ The idea of the campaign is simple: dress in black on Thursdays. This gesture reminds us all of our responsibility to speak out against sexual and gender-based violence and to ensure that all people, regardless of their gender, are safe from violence in their homes, schools, workplaces and throughout our society. In this campaign Black is used as a colour of resistance and resilience. <https://www.kirkonulkomaanapu.fi/en/thursdaysinblack/>, accessed 5 October 2023.

Powerful Sudanese proverb indeed!

Thank you, Ezra, *baba va* (father of) Mutsawashe, Tinevimbo and Akatendeka, for bestowing roots and wings to your family! Below, the three summarise how you have influenced their career paths and worldviews.

Prioritising Women’s and Girls’ Health and Rights: Mutsawashe (daughter and fellow strategic thinker) Reflects on Ezra’s Crusade

What does it mean to be the first daughter of such a renowned scholar? It means that you are encouraged to dream, fall but not stay down, to occupy spaces, and collaborate on different themes. Above all, it means that you are loved for being the past, present, and future versions of yourself. It should be highlighted that Ezra’s work intersects with the work of so many, the world over. I am privileged to be amongst those whose work intersects with his. As a budding public health researcher, I have benefited immensely from his expansive research on the interaction of public health and religion. Of note is his sound contribution to the body of literature on human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in the African context. The discourse on the need to further the health and rights of women and girls is one that has been ongoing for decades now. It sprouts from the growing realisation that investing in the health of women and girls is crucial to the economic and sustainable development of countries and the world at large. African scholars such as Ezra have celebrated the African continent, while still challenging the cultural norms that strip women of their rights to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health possible. In the words of Ezra, he says:

If someone asks me if Africa is cursed, I will readily refute the notion. Instead, I will challenge them to anticipate Africa’s prosperous future. Despite acknowledging the many traits worth celebrating in the rich tapestry that constitutes the continent, I refuse to gloss over its culture of impunity that characterises sexual and gender-based violence in Africa. I refuse to refute that as a man, I am directly implicated in the heinous crimes against women and children. I am a partaker of the patriarchal dividend, even as I constantly struggle to challenge myself to question my privileges. (Chitando, 2015:272).

Ezra alludes that sexual and gender-based violence is rampant in sub-Saharan Africa and in most instances, it is men perpetrating violence on women. The explanations behind some of these gruesome acts include men exercising dominance and power over women. Ezra has explicitly spoken against sexual gender-based violence in diverse settings. In a presentation focusing on gender-based violence, he said, “If beating up a woman is what would define me as a man, then I will step back and say I do not want to be a man” (Chitando, 2017). The social construct of men being providers and women being helpers creates power imbalances between men and women. These power disproportions deter women from negotiating for safer sex or speaking up when they are sexually abused by their intimate partners. Such practices have derailed progress towards the realisation of global, regional, and local development objectives, specifically on the health outcomes of women and girls.

Ezra has applied the concept of secrecy in a reflexive manner to illuminate the struggle against HIV in Africa. He argues that the lack of access to quality health services, the stigma, and secrecy around HIV exacerbated the disease burden in Africa (Chitando, 2008:173). This reinforces the fact that gender inequalities, particularly in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, lead to sexually transmitted infections being viewed primarily as women's diseases. When the HIV pandemic emerged (even to date in some instances), women infected with HIV were viewed as promiscuous, and often discriminated against. The presence of female sex workers fuels these notions, while there are limited to non-existent conversations on the structural factors that give rise to this phenomenon. Economic hardships are among the drivers of sex work, child marriages, and transactional sex. If stigma, discrimination, and structural inequities remain unaddressed, efforts to mitigate the threat and impact of various health threats are undermined. According to Ezra:

The social and cultural determinants of HIV infection in women are intertwined with the role of women within relationships, families and communities. In Zimbabwe, men generally occupy the dominant positions in various spheres of life. Powerlessness among women has translated to greater exposure to HIV infection. Married women in particular have little or no power to negotiate whether, when or how sex takes place. Most men claim that culture has given them exclusive and permanent access to their wives' sexual and reproductive rights. Tragically, most infected married women in Zimbabwe have been faithful to their husbands. Men are driving the epidemic, taking advantage of their positions in society. (Chitando, 2004:152-53).

To address some of these challenges would require a collaborative approach from various actors. These actors include the religious leaders whose position in society, as Ezra notes, is one which enables them to either promote or impede women's SRHR in the context of Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages) and 5 (Gender Equality). Religion has a strong bearing on people's attitudes and practices. As such, it is imperative for public health practitioners to contend with religious leaders for the realisation of development objectives.

Ezra highlights an often-overlooked area, that of religion, SRHR, and the youth. The general cultural and religious assumption is that the youth must be asexual. However, the challenge of teen pregnancies, child marriages and child sexual abuse should bring us into that space where we examine the intersections of religion, gender, and SRHR. Ezra argues that the proposed action should be one where religious leaders are mobilised to partner with adolescent boys and girls, young men and women to achieve Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 5. He also asserts that religious leaders could also utilise the existing youth groups within their congregations and communities to provide health education. The role of religious leaders in addressing public health concerns was also noted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some religious leaders were seen working with their communities to respond to the coronavirus. For example, the leadership across the Christian denominations moved to suspend public religious events and moved to online services. Globally, even one of the most important Muslim rites, namely, the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) was suspended for 2020. On the other hand, there were some religious leaders who did not promote safe practices in preventing the spread of the coronavirus. Nevertheless, religious leaders are an important resource to sensitise and empower their communities for improved health outcomes.

Ezra has also examined the role of African governments in creating environments where men, boys, women, and girls enjoy the same opportunities. In some of the policy briefs he has developed, he notes how structural and economic barriers impede adolescent girls and young women from accessing SRHR services. Adolescent boys and girls often lack an independent source of income and may be unable to request money to access SRHR services from their caregivers due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Another layer he addresses is that of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). In many contexts, adolescent boys and girls do not have access to CSE to understand their sexual and reproductive health needs.

They are not equipped to take measures to prevent unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. CSE is integral in informing adolescent girls and young women about their rights to sexuality and reproduction.

The empowerment of women is another theme that Ezra speaks on. He has examined some of the challenges and opportunities faced by some of the female artists in Zimbabwe in navigating their careers. Culturally and historically, women were supposed to be homemakers while men were breadwinners. This was predominantly a pre-colonial construct that was reinforced by the twin injection of colonial and Christian patriarchal ideologies and became readily accepted in society. The girl-child is socialised in some communities to regard marriage as the highest achievement, one which would grant them dignity and respect. Unfortunately, these doctrines expose girls to harmful practices. In addition, some of the religious dogmas encourage women to persevere in marriage, even in abusive ones. Despite all this, Ezra believes that women have the capacity to succeed in various spaces regardless of the patriarchal construction of spaces.

Thank you, Ezra (“EC” for us), for tirelessly challenging the norms that stifle the rights of girls and women.

What a Role Model! Ruminations by Akatendeka Ethiel (son and justice-seeker)

Imagine a person whom you can rely on, gain inspiration from, and a person who strives for change, a progressive man. My father, Professor Ezra Chitando is someone I seek to emulate. In my greatest moments, as well as my lowest, he is always there to encourage me to keep on keeping on. Every morning, as he accompanies me to school, we talk about various relevant themes in life, discussing different matters in society, football included! As we reflect on contemporary issues such as racism, gender inequality, religion, and discrimination, I cannot help but notice his passion to improve humanity. Hearing him point out the injustices faced by millions of people all over the globe enriches me with the knowledge of how to be a better male individual, a better member of society.

He always strives to aid me in improving in whatever I do. Before we leave home in the morning, he is often the first one to finish preparing. This is because he has a strong belief that getting to school on time is not the best

one can do, but getting to school earlier than the normal time is the best. Through such exemplary good time management exhibited by Prof Dad, I have learnt to be always time conscious. Life is lived in time. Therefore, she/he who wastes time, wastes life.

I am confident that the values that my activist father is sharing with me are equipping me to become a gender-sensitive boy, young man and man. He insists that as boys and men, we should be partners with girls and women. From an early age, I learned the importance of the Thursdays in Black campaign. I am a young advocate, and I am committed to a life of non-violence and gender equality. Even as I am currently a learner at a school dominated by boys, I am always sensitive to issues relating to the equality of girls and boys in all spheres of life.

My father is a keen football fan, and as a result, I also developed a passion, not only for watching, but for playing the beautiful game. When I first showed passion for the sport, he did not hesitate to promote my ambition. He started to take me to a local football academy, where he would attend my practice sessions, encourage me and he would always remind me to rest afterwards, as he knew that I would probably neglect taking a breather.

EC is a justice-seeking man and I look up to him.

I thank him for the man he is, and the man he is shaping me into.

I thank you Dad for being my biggest fan!

Girls and Young Women Matters Matter: Testimonial by Tinevimbo (daughter and friend)

Professor Ezra Chitando, Professor Dad is truly a remarkable man. My interactions with Professor Dad range from, which outfit to wear, to how technology, particularly how ChatGPT, is changing the world. What I find interesting about my Dad is how open-minded he is. Whenever something seems insurmountable or unachievable, he provides great assurance and demystifies what seems very formidable and foreboding. I can proudly say I am a daughter of this great academic giant. What an honour it is to contribute to this book that celebrates my Dad. Whilst most of you know Ezra as a colleague and mentor, I am blessed to know him as a Dad and best friend.

I am an Artificial Intelligence (AI) enthusiast and through constant support from my parents, I am making my mark in technology. Gender biases are imbued in the field of technology. We often hear of the ‘Fathers of Science’, but what about the great ‘Mothers of Science’? In Zimbabwe and generally, women (me included) have been made to believe that they cannot excel in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), subjects that (allegedly) were not built for women. Ezra, the progressive man, continues to challenge this very notion in my life. Whenever something seems daunting, he provides a great assurance and says, “You’ve got this TC, go for it!” Through investing in my education and supporting my dreams, there has been a paradigm shift in the climate of technology and my career path.

Whenever there is a call for applications, or when the inferiority complex or self-doubt hits, Dad’s words always echo, “You can only get something if you give it a shot. Never disqualify yourself.” Therefore, as I face this journey called life, I continuously draw motivation, and inspiration from Ezra. Sometimes we all need someone who believes in us, even just a little. That is my family. We are each other’s cheerleaders.

Commenting on patriarchy and the political economy of the biblical culture, Ezra argues that:

It is important to bear in mind that the overall patriarchal context shapes attitudes towards human sexuality. When men have been socialised to be dominant and to regard their desires as paramount, there is a likelihood of sexual abuse... Men must forego the privileges that patriarchy and gender injustice bring them (Chitando, 2010:28).

With a biblical reference, he maintains that:

Jesus does not bow to social pressure and conventions...he ignores what the man was saying. If men are to effect social transformation, they need to have the courage to ignore social pressure and proceed to challenge oppressive beliefs and practices (Chitando, 2010:30).

The above quotations are a testament to Ezra’s life. Through his life, his influence on his family and his academic work, he has fought for positive social transformation and effected it. We continue to cherish his simplicity and cheerfulness. We laugh at and with him when his favourite football teams lose. Against patriarchy’s construction of football as the game for “real men,” in collaboration with him, we have acquired full knowledge of the sport from an early age. Every year, alongside other moments, Ezra takes me out for a birthday lunch and rest assured, he will be cracking

jokes all the time. In 2021, my siblings also joined our lunch, and he shared a story of how two ladies ('slay queens') had to wash dishes because their date had a 'call' and to date, that man is still on that call. He never went back to pay the bill.

Fast forward!

Towards the end of that lunch, Ezra stood up and said that he had identified a colleague and he wanted to have a quick chat. I laughed and asked for his wallet - I was not going to fall for that one! We did not have to do the dishes. Ezra still came back, paid the bill, and tipped the waiter. That is the kind of man my Dad is. He shows up, he does not run away from responsibilities or make excuses for them. I also learnt another lesson from this joke. Unlike the 'slay queens' in question, I always carry money to pay for my lunch when I go out!

In Chitando (2021), Ezra argues that if independent, assertive, and non-submissive women are "bad news" to patriarchy, then they must be "good news" to women. This highlights that Ezra stands firmly for the emancipation and empowerment of girls and women. Our family is "bad news" to patriarchy. We were raised to be assertive, and in our respective walks, we are the embodiment of what Ezra believes, what he tirelessly fights for. When you look at my siblings, you see world leaders. My sister and I are making our marks in health and technology respectively. When you look at our brother, you see a progressive young man, one standing on Dad's shoulders, becoming a feminist and the best version of himself.

We celebrate you, your work, and your influence.

We thank you Dad, for being our unassuming hero!

*We are convinced that the roots and wings
you selflessly bequeath to us remain our enablers!*

Conclusion

Men who are sensitive to girls' and women's cause challenge patriarchal oppressive practices. They emphasise the need for a more gender-inclusive and egalitarian society where children, women and men thrive. They advocate that retrogressive and toxic masculinities move beyond ideas that

demean girls and women, as well as stereotyped discourses which do little to advance girls and women. They seek strategies that influence women-men partnerships in various ways. This chapter has honoured Ezra as a gender-sensitive advocate. The chapter also acknowledges that it remains strategic to nurture gender-sensitive boys and men within societies, as they truly make a difference. They believe in girls and women and their empowerment. Such boys and men would transform, challenge and confront cultural beliefs and practices that oppress women and children. They are willing to construct new and alternative masculinities based on equality and equity and are indeed pathfinders and originators who recognise the worth of empowering girls and women.

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