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30 Religion, Gender, and African Masculinities

Ezra Chitando Speaks

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Abstract

The study of religion, gender and African masculinities has come a long way. The contributions of African scholars of religion and theology are notable in this area. For example, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians commonly referred to as 'the Circle' has done a lot in terms of engagement with discourses on religion and gender as well as challenging heteronormative notions of gender. The Circle has also interrogated the role of sacred texts in shaping gendered attitudes in ways that disenfranchises women. However, the Circle has noted that women's struggles for liberation cannot be realized if men are left behind. Hence, it has always called for a two-winged theology that encompasses both genders. In this respect, the Circle has created space for men (whom it calls 'friends of the Circle') to participate in its activities of researching and publishing on issues of religion/theology and gender. One of the men who has journeyed with the Circle is Ezra Chitando. Throughout his academic journey with the Circle, he has offered moral and academic support to both women and men whose interest is in calling for the liberation of women from the shackles of patriarchy. As such, he has published extensively on issues of religion, gender and African masculinities. Therefore, in this chapter, we endeavor to present Ezra Chitando's views based on an interview we had with him, on how far the study of religion, gender and African masculinities has gone, the achievements realized, lessons learnt and the future of the field. Our intention is to evaluate, critique and provide a way forward for the study of religion, gender and African masculinities.

Keywords: African masculinities, Ezra Chitando, gender, patriarchy, religion, the Circle

Introduction

Ezra Chitando is a man of many talents wearing many hats! For many people, this is recipe for mediocrity and half-hearted commitments, however for Ezra this has been a recipe for immense impact. Ezra is a Professor in the Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy at the University of Zimbabwe and one of the few individuals that became professors very early because of his industry, international recognition and community impact. He also served as a Theology Consultant for the World Council of Churches (WCC) with the task to work with churches in Africa to assist in their responses to HIV & AIDS, through the Ecumenical HIV & AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy (EHAIA) programme. Ezra was one of a group of theologians in Africa, who contributed immensely to the demystification of HIV & AIDS, challenging the initial attempts to quarantine HIV & AIDS in the medical compartment by demonstrating how it intersected with all other spheres of life. In addressing religious leaders in Africa, Ezra became synonymous with life-giving theologies. He challenged faith leaders on the death-dealing theologies and teachings that were increasing the levels of stigmatisation that people living with and personally affected by HIV & AIDS were enduring in society. He advocated alternative theologies, theologies of compassion, of life, of love became the centrepieces of activities driven by EHAIA across Africa.

Ezra's work with the Circle, the WCC and faith leaders and communities in Africa and beyond led him to one of his greatest contributions in this regard. Whereas, many will speak of the elephant in the room, Ezra reasoned that if HIV & AIDS were the elephant in the room, then patriarchy was the room. The problem was not the elephant; the problem was the room. There began his concerted efforts to dismantle the room to free the elephant and the concept of transformative, alternative, redemptive masculinity became a major area of focus for Ezra. HIV & AIDS were wreaking havoc in communities because of the toxicity that was being sowed by patriarchal norms and values in these communities. In this regard, his ally-ship with the Circle was one driven by common interest, the dismantling of toxic masculinities in Africa. No wonder Ezra seamlessly partnered and collaborated with and fitted into the activities of the Circle. Faith communities and women had a stake in the production line that produced men in the different communities, buying into the traditional African idiom, it is easier to build young boys than to repair old and broken men. Ezra advocated a re-think, a re-imagination of masculinity and challenged faith communities to revise, re-do, abandon even, the toxic

masculinity curriculum that had been the basis of socializing young boys into broken and dangerous men who were driving HIV infection rates through the roof in Africa.

The questions that kept knocking in our heads were to do with the intentionality of Ezra's work and commitments, how can a man intentionally seek to dismantle that which gives him unmerited privileges? What motivated him to swim against the current? We were convinced there has to be something in his background that could shed light on the choices that Ezra has made in the past three decades. What follows in this chapter are our findings from talking to Ezra through interviews we had with him, our discussion and analysis. While we have tried to present Ezra's responses *verbatim*, due to space limitations, we have had to paraphrase some parts but at all times with the goal of maintaining the meaning and essence of his words. Twelve questions were put to Ezra and below are the responses.

In Conversation with Ezra Chitando: The Man, Motivations and Reflections

1. Who is Ezra Chitando both at home and in the field of academia?

The unassuming and humble Prof, began by highlighting that “my personality and socialization do not allow me to talk about myself!” Yet, recognizing the importance of the interview, he said, “Ezra Chitando is a village boy from rural Masvingo, in Zimbabwe, a son of two Christian school teachers and educated at a Christian boarding school. Born during the colonial period, I experienced the ecstasy of independence. An only son in a family of five must count for something in what I have become because I have always been among women.” Christian young man growing up alongside his female siblings. In adulthood and after starting his own nuclear family, two girls were added to the family with an only son coming later down the line. Ezra's life is one mostly spend among women. At home, “Ezra strives to be a loving and caring husband and father, brother, friend and fellow traveler to his immediate and larger families.” In academia, Ezra is the ultimate team player working with colleagues across the Humanities and Social Sciences in a wide variety of areas, especially on the interface of religion and various other spheres of life. “Ezra is an

avid but rational football fan who also enjoys music, particularly acapella gospel music.”

2. What influenced your interest in researching and writing on religion, gender and African masculinities?

Ezra surmised that it was impossible “to pinpoint the exact moment, but I would like to believe that the formative years back home were quite influential. My parents, particularly my mother, was insistent on ensuring that I shared the household chores with my sisters. Thus, I can grind nuts into a paste (*kukuya dovi*), I can use the mortar and pestle (*kutswa*), balance a bucket of water on my head while carrying other items in my hands (multi-tasking) and other ‘typically feminine’ gender roles. You would notice that I did not include cooking in this list! It could be that my competence was limited, so I was scrapped off the cooking duties quite early?! But, when I read what my womanist/feminist friends write, I am learning that ‘feigned incompetence’ is a patriarchal strategy to avoid accomplishing domestic chores!” Ezra speaks of his observations growing up and seeing women accomplishing multiple tasks and providing leadership in their families, community and even in traditional religious rituals and ceremonies. He also was aware of the challenges they faced. The seeds had been sown!

After completing his High School where he studied Divinity, Shona and Economics, he enrolled for a Bachelor’s Degree at the University of Zimbabwe where he studied Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy and then did an Honours Degree in Religious Studies. He recalls a Departmental Seminar in which Rosemary Radford Ruether was the guest presenter, convened by Dr. (now Prof.) Paul¹ Gundani. He says of Ruether, “I was fascinated. She was powerful. I do remember during the Q & A session that I put up my hand and asked, ‘As a man, can I become a feminist?’ Her answer was an unhesitating, ‘Yes’ and she went on to explain that I had to ‘work out my own salvation in fear and trembling’ (my own rendition here), i.e., I had to find out, on my own, how I could participate in the struggle for gender justice as a man.” Further motivation came

¹ While I have referred to my former lecturers and colleagues using their first names, I face the same struggle that I face when requesting my former students who are now colleagues to use my first name. My religio-cultural upbringing does not allow me to use the first name on my mentors, but cultural imperialism allows me to do so. I guess that in the postcolonial condition we have to live with this ambivalence!

through interactions with Isabel Mukonyora, Christianity in Africa lecturer, who emphasized women's roles in the growth of Christianity in Africa and Tabona Shoko's focus on sexual symbolism in Zimbabwean and African traditional religions. Ezra became a Teaching Assistant in the Department and his office mate, Edward Antonio, was a mentor in philosophy, politics and gender, providing him with other lenses. This watered the seed that had been sown in the formative years. This watering and interest in women's issues was further enhanced by the interactions he had with the works of "African women theologians, Mercy Oduyoye, Musimbi Kanyoro, and later on, Musa W. Dube and others."

While Ezra's first focus was on religion and gender (women's issues), the turn to masculinities as part of the focus on gender was a bit late. In fact, he avers, this was inspired "by Musa Dube (2002/3) who conscientised me to the need for men to take up the challenge (HIV & AIDS) more directly, actively and consistently." Adriaan van Klinken (2013) reiterates this observation. Ezra credits the preparatory work for the book, *Africa Praying* (Dube, 2003) for steering him "into religion, gender and masculinities". He singles out "Musa Dube, Isabel Phiri, Tinyiko Maluleke, Sarojini Nadar, Moiserela Prince and Cherly Dibeela, and Gideon Byamugisha", as scholars from whom he learnt a lot. "I was in distinguished company! I have sat at the feet of highly knowledgeable, sharp and effective women and men who have provided insights into the possible roles of men in the quest for a better world."

As the Theology Consultant for the WCC-EHAIA programme, Ezra found "an activist-academic platform to research, reflect, train and engage on religion, gender and masculinities in Africa". He sees as part of his motivation for what remains of his active ministry the mobilization of "men and boys to become partners with women and girls to secure gender justice for the Africa We Want. My awareness of men's challenges and strengths has been deepened by participating in numerous interfaith engagements where many facilitators and activists have highlighted the debt that we men owe to women." Fearing missing some names, Ezra pays homage and tribute to the many fountains of wisdom that have nurtured and mentored him over the decades and speaks fondly "of my many friends, sisters and activists within the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and beyond".

3. In what way did your social background shape your study of the intersections between religion, gender and masculinities?

Having touched on other relevant factors in previous questions, Ezra reiterated “that the agents of socialisation in my life, including the immediate and larger families, the church, academic study, professional activism, as well as travel and exposure are all most likely relevant factors in informing my interpretation of religion, gender and masculinities (with a special focus on Africa). The Adventist tradition that I was brought up in and with which I identify is inextricably tied to the unique experience of Prophet Ellen G. White², a woman, a messenger.” Ezra pays tribute to his immediate family, where he says he cannot remember ever being “set aside” as special or superior to his sisters. Even though, he was aware and saw women being denigrated and violated in the community, he was raised to respect women and was aware of men who consulted their wives before making important decisions. The community had mechanisms of punishing men that disrespected women. Growing up, there was a bit of everything in the community, it was never a “one-size-fits-all” and that helped a lot, especially when we began focusing on masculinities, instead of just one masculinity.

4. Why, even with so much doubts on the intentions of male allies, did you dedicate your career and life to being in solidarity with women, especially African women?

“I have said on a number of occasions that we should not create heroes out of men who strive to stand, sit, walk, sing, act, etc. in solidarity with women. Thus, I accept the critique by some feminists that the talk of, ‘Male Champions’, ‘He for She’, runs the risk of what we draw attention to in the Introduction to *Redemptive Masculinities* (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012), namely, ‘male saviours!’” Ezra is acutely aware of the danger posed by the ‘male saviour’ complex and challenges himself to “remain hypervigilant in reviewing my positionality as a male scholar activist in the field of gender justice” (Siwila & Kobo, 2021). Without blaming women for mistrusting male-allies, Ezra highlights lessons learned from colleagues and friends, such as Sarojini Nadar, from whom he learned

² Ellen Gould White is one of the co-founders of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, she is regarded as a Prophet and/or messenger of God, and her writings are considered as a secondary companion to the Bible.

“that we should never compete in trauma, where we say, ‘look, my suffering is worse than yours’”, or be engaged in “competitive victimhood.” He affirms the appropriateness of the critique around sincerity and consistency of male allies and asserts, “I am not an angel. But, a human being who, driven by the knowledge that I can become a better version of myself, will continue to try. And try. And try. My former colleague at the WCC, Sue Parry, shared with me the notion that, ‘God does not seek extraordinary people to do ordinary work, but ordinary people to do extraordinary work’.” Getting personal, Ezra speaks eloquently about his resilience in standing in solidarity with women even as some have questioned his motivations, sincerity and consistency:

“First, I am motivated by self-interest. I would like to see a better world for myself, through all the women I am connected to living in a better world. I would like my lifetime partner, Anna, to feel safe, loved and respected in our home, at her workplace and in society. I would like my daughters, Mutsawashe and Tinevimbo, to grow up in a Zimbabwean/African and global context where their many gifts are appreciated. My many sisters, many mothers, many women colleagues, friends, etc., must, in one of the Bible’s most powerful articulations, “have life and life in abundance” (John 10: 10) (we evoked this in the volume in honour of Nyambura (Chitando, Mombo, & Gunda, 2021)). Thus, I participate in this struggle admittedly from vested self-interest. I strongly believe that when the world will have more men endowed with wombs, there is a better fighting chance for all the women in the world.”

“Second, I am an idealist. I have a dream. That one day, women and men, if not in my time, then in the next generation, if not, then in the one to follow, can interact on the basis of equality, dignity and respect. Here, I am a prisoner of hope. I strive to continue to work in weakness, in fear and much trembling. I do know and anticipate that some of my sisters do not quite like Paul (and I am understating their attitude here), but I must concede that there are moments when I find him quite profound. Perhaps it is because although sometimes he pronounces very firm positions, he is painfully aware of his limitations, weaknesses and fallibility. Pauline masculinity is mostly fractured, subordinate and ambivalent.”

5. Considering the development and trajectory of the Circle since 1989 to the present, what in your opinion is the contribution of the Circle of African Women Theologians to the study of theology and religion globally and in Africa?

Ezra is quick to set a particular record straight, the Circle is not the totality of African women theologians or religious studies scholars, hence an assessment of the impact of the Circle must not be confused with an assessment of the impact of African women, he acknowledges that Mercy Oduyoye rightly makes this observation in her book, *Re-Membering Me* (2019). Aware of this dichotomy, Ezra summarizes what he considers as highlights of the Circle engagement, without pretending to be exhaustive of the Circle contributions. “The chapters by Musa Dube in *Compassionate Circles* (Chitando and Hadebe, 2009) remain helpful, although many books and articles by the Circle have since followed:

- a) Capturing and representing African women’s experiences and participation in the religions of Africa (African Traditional/ Indigenous Religions, Christianity, Islam, others)
- b) Highlighting the injustices and denial of women’s rights in religion, in Africa but with global implications. Simultaneously, the power of religion to secure women’s rights and liberation.
- c) Emerging from the current grant that I am coordinating (2021-2026), namely, “the Humboldt Research Hub in Africa on Women, Religion and Pandemics,” women’s leadership and activism during pandemics.
- d) Power of mentorship, collaboration and focus in a discipline.
- e) Interpretation and deployment of sacred texts for women’s full liberation, contesting received/inherited/oppressive patriarchal interpretations.
- f) Feminist/womanist approaches and potential for an interfaith women’s liberation, in Africa and globally.
- g) Women’s leadership in religion and society...in Africa and globally.
- h) Wrestling with the lived realities of women and girls in religion and society: violence against women, child marriage, oppressive purity codes, stigma and discrimination on the basis of singlehood, childlessness, etc.

- i) Power of narrative/story telling as effective approaches/ methodologies.
- j) Urgency of two-winged theologies for justice, equality and development, i.e., recognising the need for African women and men to cooperate.
- k) Strategies of resistance in the face of patriarchy...treading softly but firmly, lament, subterranean organising, instituting circles of compassion and care/solidarity...fixing each other's crowns.
- l) Clarifying and living up to the meaning of contextual theology by addressing the existential realities of African women, e.g. HIV & AIDS and now the environment and climate change.
- m) Demonstrating courage and refusing to be disregarded/silenced or ignored. For me, the Circle testifies to the indefatigable human spirit, determination and ongoing courage to defy the odds. Are we women? Yes, so what? Are we African? Indeed, but, is there a problem with that? You don't like us? We see! But, we are not going anywhere soon! Are we facing seemingly insurmountable odds? Of course, but, if God is for us, who then is against us?

6. What is your assessment of African male theologians' embrace of African Women Theology?

Ezra did not shy from acknowledging the tensions between African Theologies and African Women's Theology, noting how the traditional theologies had been male dominated, fully immersed in the patriarchal framework governing Africa in the 1960s. Having enjoyed unparalleled dominance of the field for decades, the emergence of African Women Theology, in particular, the Circle elicited reactions such as, "our African women are well behaved, why are you so militant?" Writings of African Women theologians were oft dismissed as "mere stories narrated by frustrated women". Sadly, this dimension persists among some of us, or, in our moments of weakness, we lapse into this mode." However, Ezra sees some genuine progress, noting a new generation of socially-engaged male scholars, especially those working on the liberation paradigm and in the ecumenical movement, as more positive in their engagement with African Women theologians. He also cites the mainstreaming of African

Women Theology in seminaries and universities as another sign of improvement. In summing up his evaluation of the relationship, Ezra says, “heart-warming initial and subsequent steps, more still to be accomplished”, he challenged his male counterparts to be deliberate and intentional in citing works by African women scholars and to begin to make their own publications intentionally gender sensitive.

7. What is the impact of African Women Theology on African women in general?

Ezra begins his response by being the Professor that he is by exploring the import of this question thus:

This is the abiding question, of course! Are we, the scholar-activists, having any real impact on the lives of the “ordinary people”? Are the ideas cooked in the ivory towers reaching the African townships, villages, valleys and mountaintops? This is the positive side of the question. The more sinister, negative side of the question: Are the Circle activists (and possibly its male accomplices) not endangering the lives of African women by suggesting radical theologies of liberation, only to retreat to their supposedly comfortable bases in the urban areas, far from the coal furnace of the struggle?

Ezra was quick to point out how the question of “impact” has often been used by defenders of patriarchy in their attempts to demonstrate that women activist-scholars and their allies are disconnected from the “real people” hence their intentions are selfish and of no consequence because they lack the *locus standi* (legitimacy to speak on behalf of others). Ezra argues that “it is in fact *not necessary* (the emphasis is intended) for the Circle to be having an impact on African women in general. Why? Because the story of that one, single, solo Circle activist is *itself* worth hearing and responding to.” He also thinks the question of impact need not be bloated in importance in order to negate the contributions of the Circle and African women scholars. Instead, Ezra acknowledges that human beings have the “tendency to resist oppression (Paulo Freire³ is clear on this), African women outside the Circle are taking steps towards challenging their exclusion and pressing for their liberation. This is not to suggest

³ Having cited Freire above, I must now quickly shut up in relation to this dimension of the question. Nobody belonging to the class of the oppressor has the right to spell out the nature/character of the struggle by the oppressed. Those of us who are co-conspirators seeking to be in solidarity with the oppressed must be humble enough to be guided by the oppressed.

that the Circle should not strive to uphold its conscientizing role, but that we must accept that there are multiple roles available in the struggle for women's liberation." The Circle's major focus was challenging their exclusion and non-recognition by male theologians and many other women are doing the same in various other spheres. To round off this question, Ezra happily declares:

"The Circle has had an impact on African women more generally. The issues raised so creatively and 'with passion and compassion' by the Circle are permeating society at various levels. Mothers Unions within the churches have heard the clarion call for women's inclusion in leadership. Male leaders in the different religions are being challenged to respond to the Circle's call for women's rights to be upheld and to stop stigma and discrimination against women. I have encountered the message of the Circle deep in Kajo Keji in rural South Sudan, as I have in Matsapha, an urban area in Eswatini. Graduates of African theology and religious studies have been carrying the Circle message of equality, justice, inclusion and solidarity far and wide. The Circle, therefore, continues to influence women in diverse faith communities in Africa and beyond."

8. How would you characterise the contributions of African Women Theology to the evolution of theological curriculum in Africa?

A more rounded and holistic African (nay, any other) theological curriculum must now necessarily include African women's theologies. Thus, the Circle has done exceedingly well in tabling gender on the agenda of African theology. The "irruption within an irruption" has been impossible to ignore for a while now. Of course, there are some who would still like to relegate African Women Theologies to a footnote, but, all those teachers, administrators, quality assurance managers who are serious about maintaining quality are ensuring that African Women's Theologies feature prominently in theological curricula in Africa. Thankfully, the Circle's significant theological output and collaboration with different ecumenical partners have contributed to the mainstreaming of women's issues and perspectives in the theological curricula in Africa. I have been privileged to have been actively involved in this area for many years now and can confirm that noteworthy progress has been made in theological institutions, private and church-based universities, as well as in the Arts and Humanities in some instances. This is also due to the fact that the Circle publications have addressed themes that are cross-cutting and hence interdisciplinary.

9. In your opinion, has the Circle's critique of religion and the many ways it interacts with gender and patriarchy resulted in changed perceptions towards women in particular?

Yes, I would link this to the earlier question about the impact of the Circle on African women more generally. To remind ourselves of a significant text in African liberation theology, the Circle has precipitated a "Farewell to Innocence" (Boesak, 2015). Thus, there has been the realisation and acknowledgement of 'HerStory' in religion and society. Women are not objects to be acted upon, but subjects exercising agency. The Circle's focus on women's experiences have brought out women's many talents, gifts and contributions to the fore. "No longer silent" is a slogan that has been taken up across the regions of Africa, with society reassessing its minimisation of women. I would say that the Circle has reaffirmed the importance of appreciating women's stories and accepting women's leadership in religion and society.

10. Can you comment on how far the study of religion, gender and African Masculinities has gone? Explain what still needs to be done.

Religion, gender and African Masculinities is a relatively new area of study beginning in earnest at the turn of the millennium, yet Ezra sees notable progress seen through the researches and publications that are coming through and the inclusion of this subject area in some universities and colleges. He also noted, "Some students have submitted theses on Transformative Masculinities at various levels and many faith-based organisations have embraced Transformative Masculinities in their programming and interventions. In fact, working with men and boys has become integral to many gender programmes and projects." However, he identifies work that still needs to be done:

1. We have not begun the task of mining/recovering indigenous values/concepts/practices that are relevant to the Transformative Masculinities agenda.
2. There is a lot of scope for interfaith Transformative Masculinities initiatives.
3. There is more work to be done around theorising religion, men and masculinities in Africa. I am convinced that there is scope for decolonisation and Africanisation in this space.

4. We need to be more intentional about applying the theories to particular religious individuals (see e.g. male religious leaders) and groups (see e.g. younger, middle aged, older, men with disabilities, types of religion, etc.).
 5. Explore the role of women in religion and their potential to influence masculinities.
 6. Reflect and explore how Transformative Masculinities in Africa can contribute to better health for women and more robust and sustainable development, including addressing issues of governance/corruption, peacebuilding and violent extremism, climate change, etc. In other words, virtually ensuring that all the contemporary popular/topical issues are approached from a Transformative Masculinities perspective (while continually interrogating the assumptions of and approaches to Transformative Masculinities).
- 11. What critical insight can you offer the Circle in terms of growth and development going forward?**

“Having cautioned myself regarding the importance of acute self-awareness in solidarity and drawing from the emerging reflections in pedagogies of solidarity, I am quite wary of prescribing the way forward to the Circle. However, in a number of writings on Africanisation of religious studies in Africa I have argued that it would be patronising for Global North (or any other) scholars to refuse to critique the work of African scholars due to inherited guilt. Similarly, it would be condescending for me to refuse to interact with my sisters in the Circle on the basis that I am an “outsider.” While there is an African proverb that says, “[I]t is the one who lives in the house who knows where the roof leaks,” it is also possible for a visitor to notice it ahead of the one who lives in the house. However, visitors need to keep calm and trust the process!”

Having said this, Ezra went on to spotlight some elements he considers critical for the Circle, such as, “mentorship for upcoming African women scholars in theology, religious studies and generally in Arts and Humanities (broaden the reach) who need guidance, support and accompaniment. Strengthen its synergies with the broader African women’s movement in its diversity.” He also implores the Circle to “be more intentional about interacting with interfaith initiatives that promote gender justice and collaborate with them for mutual growth and development.” He calls

on “the Circle to countenance the idea of income generation involving women within faith communities. Alongside its potential for consultancy, it could imagine according, for example, young African women in the ICT sector the opportunity to use their talents and gifts to do Circle-backed start-ups in agriculture, mining, tourism, etc. across the region.” Finally, Ezra calls on “retired Circle stalwarts with knowledge and experience in business development, leadership and management, resource mobilisation and other areas to come through to assist.”

12. Where do you see the Circle in 2030?

The tricky thing about the years is that they gallop at a frightening pace. When I was younger, everything was pinned on the magical year of 2000, then 2020, now 2030! The African Union is working with Agenda 2063. I do appreciate the importance of target years for strategic planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning. But, for me, every mini/second, minute, hour, day, etc., is a moment of reckoning. The Circle must continue to deliver today, for it to be able to deliver in 2030, 2063 and the years that lie ahead. In the ideal world, Transformative Masculinities would be actualised soon and very soon and the cause for which the Circle was formed would be rendered unnecessary. However, we live in a real world and, as Gideon Byamugisha has cogently argued, “bringing change is not easy.” Thus, to cut short my roundabout way of responding, I anticipate a strong, vibrant, creative and productive Circle that will, like a tortoise that must move, stick out its head and continue to act to transform the world. It is also my hope and prayer that in 2030, the Circle will be like the chameleon; one eye looking back to celebrate and process what has gone before. Simultaneously, one eye would also look forward to a future full of hope, promise and conviction that African women of faith will experience the abundant life promised them in the religions.

Ezra Chitando: Discussion and Analysis

Professor Ezra Chitando is a dedicated scholar/activist whose personal experiences, cultural and religious influences, and commitment to justice and partnership, shape his work on religion, gender, and African masculinities. Chitando has made meaningful contributions to social justice and academic scholarship in various disciplines. In working towards social justice, he demonstrates and embodies commitment to equity, inclusivity,

ethical engagement, and the importance of mutual respect and understanding. His scholarship transcends the confines of academia, bringing about positive change and cementing lasting impact in Church and society. Chitando remains attuned to the values of solidarity and cooperation, recognizing their transformative potential in shaping a more just, equitable and interconnected world. Shaped by his background, upbringing, and scholarship, Chitando embodies a keen sense of self that is committed to community relationships, participation, and collaborative activism and research. This is evidenced through his involvement with various organizations and partnerships dedicated to working collectively towards social justice. His collaborative engagements with feminist/womanist and masculinities studies scholars, institutions and communities are a demonstration of his commitment to addressing gender related challenges within religious and societal contexts including the impact of patriarchy and HIV & AIDS on women and all subjugated peoples. As an activist/scholar, Chitando's approach to doing theology in the context of social justice is intersectional, recognizing the interconnectedness of various identities and experiences in shaping individuals and communities. In challenging patriarchal norms and advocating for gender equality and women's rights, Chitando stands in solidarity with women and all oppressed people. Hailing from rural Zimbabwe, Chitando's upbringing, family relationships, experiences growing up in colonial Zimbabwe, his education in a Christian boarding school, and his colleagues in academia all influence, shape and reshape the man he is today. Chitando has a deep commitment to community relationships, and community partnerships. His scholarly career boasts far-reaching professional, academic, research, publications and activist interests and accomplishments. Chitando's lived reality, scholarship, activism, and theological engagements is testament to the growth and development of the study of religion, gender and African masculinities and points the way towards how we should continue to align theological community engagement, activism and research in a praxis driven way.

Religion, Gender, and African Masculinities: A Collaborative Approach to Gender Justice

In recent years, the intersections of religion, gender, and African masculinities have been the subject of increasing scholarly and activist attention. Through collaborative activism, Ezra Chitando has actively engaged in

promoting gender justice and women's rights. Chitando advocates for the inclusion of men in the struggle for gender equality and challenges patriarchal norms that perpetuate harmful expressions of masculinity. For Chitando, religious beliefs and practices play a key role in shaping notions of masculinity. Chitando argues that religion in Africa and its contemporary expressions merge with cultural expectations and practices to cement gendered roles, male hegemony, and oppression of women (Chitando, 2016). Notwithstanding this position regarding religion in Africa, Chitando avers that religion can be a powerful tool for promoting gender justice. In engaging religious communities in dialogue and raising awareness, there is potential for religious institutions to be agents of positive change in the pursuit of gender equality (Chitando, 2015). For Chitando, it is imperative that efforts towards gender justice actively engage women's rights organizations, gender activists and religious leaders. This level of collaboration has the potential for the creation of dynamic platforms that foster open dialogue and understanding (Chitando & Mawire, 2018). In the struggle for gender justice, Chitando opines that it is imperative that men become involved and participate actively. This, argues Chitando, will go a long way in the creation of more inclusive approaches that challenge harmful expressions of masculinity (Chitando, 2016). Underlining the significance of culturally sensitive approaches, Chitando advocates for critical reflection on cultural norms that hinder gender justice (Chitando, 2015). Moreover, Chitando (2016) contends that religious teachings should be critically examined and interpreted to support gender justice. Importantly, Chitando's work foregrounds how socialization processes influence types of masculinities that emerge within different cultural contexts and highlights the importance of collaborative engagements in challenging and transforming harmful gender norms.

The Role of Socialization in Shaping African Masculinities

Socialization or the process through which individuals learn and internalize societal norms, values, and behaviours significantly influences various expressions of African masculinities (Sokfa, 2013:20). Chitando's work on African masculinities highlights how socialization plays a crucial role in shaping the various expressions of masculinity in Africa. Cultural norms and traditions, avers Chitando, is a key aspect in the construction of mas-

culinities. Chitando's familiarity with men's roles in various religious contexts, including African Traditional Religions, African Independent Churches, Pentecostal Churches, mainline Churches, and Islam all point toward a hegemonic conception of masculinities that need to be decried and transformed. Hence the dire need to engage in activism and research that challenges patriarchal structures and promote partnership, equality, and justice within religious spaces. Chitando & Togarasei (2017) point out that religion plays a significant role in shaping masculinities in Africa. Religious beliefs and practices provide models of ideal masculinity and significantly influences how men perceive, construct, and carry out gendered roles. In some religious traditions, ideals of sacrificial and nurturing masculinities are foregrounded while more authoritarian and patriarchal forms of masculinity are foregrounded in others.

The promotion and valorisation of roles, behaviours, and characteristics considered essential for men, lead to the development of cultural scripting or forms of masculinity that emphasise traits such as strength, stoicism, and dominance as indicators of traditional masculinity (Chitando, 2008) (Chirovamavi, 2012). Chitando & Mawire (2018) elucidate that socialization within the family unit significantly impacts the development of forms of masculinity. This is corroborated by Manyonganise (2023:72) who argues that the family context is significant for gender development. It is here that gendered expectations for children are developed and enforced and ideas of what it means to be a man is inculcated. Ezra Chitando's own experiences during his formative years further exemplifies the impact of socialization on shaping African masculinities. Growing up in a household where women were in the majority, Chitando observed women holding leadership roles and actively participating in traditional rituals. Such observations likely contributed to his understanding of gender dynamics and presented a challenge to traditional gender norms that limit women's participation in specific roles and activities. It can be argued then that the absence of male privilege or the absence of being favoured or exalted because he is male led to the development of more egalitarian perspectives. The recognition that being male does not confer superiority or special privilege imbued in him a sense of equality among men and women, suggesting the potential for socialization to challenge and reshape traditional gender assumptions and expectations.

Understanding the role of socialization in the development of African masculinities is essential for the development of more inclusive, transformative, and egalitarian ways of being and fostering equitable gender

relations. From a theological perspective, how hegemonic masculinities are shaped at the level of ecclesia must be taken seriously. It cannot be denied that the socialization of both men and women within the Church shapes their social reality, and in particular the values, traits, and traditions they instil in their children. Tonono (2018:5) notes that the ways in which churches interpret biblical texts create a platform for skewed gender relations. In co-opting biblical texts to affirm the superiority of men over women, female subordination as God ordained is entrenched and toxic hegemonic masculinities are subtly endorsed. Tonono (2018:8) elucidates that while there are some measures instituted by faith-based organizations such as the World Council of Churches' Thursdays in Black Campaign and the We Will Speak Out coalition in South Africa, much more can and must be done. We contend that programs geared towards combating gender-based violence in churches must be accompanied by programmes geared toward addressing issues of African masculinities in churches. Such efforts must be collaborative, and praxis driven, creating action and reflection cycles that culminate in cutting edge research which leads to tangible transformation in the way men and women are socialized in churches and communities.

Collaborative Engagements

Transforming harmful gender norms requires collective efforts and diverse perspectives (Gabaitse, 2012). Collaborative engagement is a central aspect of Chitando's work. Throughout his scholarship and activism, Chitando emphasises the importance of working together with diverse stakeholders to address the complexities and challenges surrounding the construction of gender roles and masculinities in Africa. Collaborative engagement that promotes transformative masculinities cannot be limited to academic and activist partnerships but must extend to community involvement. Collaboration with local communities will address the contextual dynamics at play in the construction of masculinities and take seriously the value of lived experience and community knowledge in understanding African masculinities. Through direct engagement with communities, research and activism becomes contextually relevant and responsive to the specific challenges faced by individuals and families in different locals in Africa, promoting more equitable expressions of African masculinities. Oduyoye (2001) notes that collaborative engagements

are essential not only for academic growth but also for personal and spiritual growth and promotes professional capacity that is relevant, contextual, and empowering. Such collaborations often cut across national and denominational boundaries and help generate new ideas, expand research networks, and build collective knowledge. Furthermore, professional collaborations provide opportunities to amplify one's voice and engage interculturally and interreligiously, enabling unique perspectives and experiences to enhance one's activism, scholarship, and professional experience. These professional collaborations are rooted in social justice and transformative praxis and together with community engagement, form the bedrock of cutting-edge research and advocacy that addresses issues of gender, patriarchy, and other social concerns (Dube, 2006).

To gain diverse perspectives on African masculinities and to comprehensively address the scourge of hegemonic masculinities, interdisciplinary and intersectionality collaborations are essential. Working in partnership with gender scholars, sociologists, psychologists, and activists, will facilitate a broader understanding on the root causes and manifestations of hegemonic and toxic masculinities and how they manifest in various contexts. Drawing on insights from various fields can lead to the development of transformative strategies that challenge toxic notions of masculinity (Dube, 2006). Building partnerships with both men and women in various fields who recognize the need to challenge and deconstruct hegemonic masculinities is crucial in the work of transforming toxic masculinities in Africa. This level of collaboration and partnership promotes the idea of shared responsibility in dismantling oppressive gender norms and facilitate the engagement of critical dialogue and initiatives that seek alternative and more positive expressions of masculinity that is grounded in gender equality (Dube, 2006).

Collaborative engagement is essential for empowering grassroots activism that takes seriously the perspectives of women and men, community leaders and clergy in working towards challenging hegemonic masculinities and creating more equitable societies. At this level of collaborative engagement, support groups, workshops, community dialogues and the use of religious resources such as Contextual Bible Study should be encouraged to address the harmful impact of male hegemony, toxic masculinities and women's complicity in the promoting and sustain this level of societal and familial oppression (Mwaura & Onyango, 2020). Adopting intersectional approaches to understanding the issues of religion, gender

and masculinities will consider the complex layers of oppression and recognize the intersectional nature of patriarchy, hegemonic masculinities, race, class, sexuality, and religion. The examination of the multi-dimensional nature of oppression will facilitate the development of inclusive and contextually relevant strategies to challenge hegemonic norms and promote more diverse and accepting expressions of gender (Dube, 2006).

In working collaboratively, we must take seriously the involvement and participation of religious institutions in transforming patriarchal structures and promoting gender justice. Inclusive religious leadership must be advocated for in all decision-making processes within religious institutions. It is in this context that patriarchal interpretations of sacred texts will be challenged and advocacy for more the promotion of inclusive and affirming religious traditions will take place (Mwaura & Onyango, 2020). Such collaborations must extend beyond national boundaries to foster transnational solidarity in our work on gender justice and transformation. It is in this context that shared experiences, strategies and resources can shape and reshape initiatives towards building a more just and equitable world and strengthen the collective voice against oppression (Dube, 2006).

Conclusion

While no one can take away the work that has been done by the Circle, not even the male allies, there are some male allies of the Circle, who have made instrumental interventions in promoting the work of the Circle members and Ezra Chitando is one of the male allies that have been standing in solidarity with the Circle. The importance of socialization in shaping young boys is aptly demonstrated in the formative years of Ezra Chitando when he was raised without the unmerited privileges of traditional masculinities by a mother who was keen to raise an ally for her daughters, Chitando's sisters. Socialisation is not a one-off event but a lifelong learning process, Chitando benefited from encountering female and male scholars who were open to discussing gender injustice in Africa and has himself turned out to be a prolific mentor to young and budding African scholars. His embrace of collaborative work has seen him publish co-authored articles and co-edited books. Many young female African scholars of religion and theology proudly cite Ezra Chitando among their mentors and these are the present and the future of the Circle. In Ezra Chitando, the Circle has had and continues to have a humble and self-critical ally who fully understands that he is not a 'male saviour' for African women, but a proud son of an African woman, a husband, brother and father who

wishes a better world for all the women around him and all women in general.

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