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## 17 Religion, Gender, and Health

### Contemporary Zambian Women Strides in Promoting Healthy Living in the light of Annie Chikanji

Nelly Mwale

#### Abstract

Using the work of Annie Chikanji and her ‘*Ubuntu* learning hub<sup>1</sup>’, the chapter explores the intersection of religion, gender, and health in Zambia in honour of Ezra Chitando’s scholarly contributions on the continent and beyond. The intent is to uphold Chitando’s scholarly work on strides to address patriarchy. Theoretically framed within African ecofeminist theory, the chapter draws on narrative research in which stories of Annie Chikanji and her *Ubuntu* learning hub on promoting healthy living are analysed. The chapter shows that Annie is promoting healthy living through offering herbal courses that retrieve indigenous knowledge for wellness, promoting natural methods of farming and reviving indigenous foods. By going against the dominant trends of farming and health practices, and adopting earth friendly and indigenous practices, Chikanji’s initiatives focus on addressing lifestyle diseases in the context of urban city life. The initiatives are further driven by her religiosity (centred on the love for God, appreciation of God’s gifts of creation and care for humanity); and her quest to retrieve and share indigenous knowledge on healthy living. The chapter argues that narratives such as Chikanji’s easily get overshadowed in the web of patriarchy, hence the need to document such initiatives for posterity. The chapter not only contributes to the broader field of religion, gender, and masculinities from the Zambian perspective but also showcases the strides of women in retrieving indigenous knowledge for the promotion of healthy living in the current century.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ubuntu* Learning Hub is located around Kasisi area, in Chongwe district, Lusaka province and defines self as a community organization centred on imparting practical knowledge on the permaculture way of life. Permaculture, originally permanent agriculture is an innovative framework for creating sustainable ways of living centred on designing a system for ecological and sustainable living, integrating plants, animals, people, buildings, and communities.

**Keywords:** Religion, gender, healthy living, indigenous knowledge, African feminist, *Ubuntu* learning hub

## Introduction

Although women have made strides to rise above patriarchy, scholarship continues to understudy the narratives of such women in different spheres. The common narrative remains that women are under the control of the powers that be. As shown by Rawat (2014), disempowerment of women is linked to the belief and practice of patriarchy which subjugates women at various levels (political, economic, social, and cultural). This is largely a social and ideological construct that imposes masculinity and femininity character stereotypes in society and serves to strengthen the iniquitous power relations between men and women. Patriarchy is not only a preserve of African societies but is present in many other cultures (Weitz, 2003). In Zambia, the subordination of women is compounded by the intersections of colonialism, culture, and socio-economic conditions, but not necessarily by patriarchy as commonly understood, because historically the majority of groups in Zambia are matrilineal (Lwatula, 2019). However, narratives of women who have risen above the legacy of women subordination by being pace setters in different spheres, including health and wellness are often overlooked. For example, in the fields of religion, gender, and health, the contributions of women remain obscured as the focus tends to be on the impact of religion on women's health (Sundararajan et al., 2019; Al-Mujtaba, et al., 2016). This chapter explores this intersection of religion, gender, and health in Zambia through the work of Annie Chikanji and her *Ubuntu* Learning Hub. The intent is to extend Ezra's Chitando's scholarly achievement in paying attention to narratives of women in society. For example, Chitando & Mateveke (2012) uncover the careers of two women to illustrate the challenges and successes that women in Zimbabwean music experience. The duo demonstrates that women contend with patriarchy and its construction of space and at the same time, they exercise their agency to negotiate these challenges. Similarly, women in the fields of religion, gender, and health have navigated patriarchal attributes to make a difference in society. Therefore, the chapter addresses the research question, 'how does Annie Chikanji's work at *Ubuntu* Learning Hub contribute to the promotion of healthy living in Zambia?'

Annie Chikanji is Catholic. She is married to Walter Nyika. Having lost her parents at the tender age of 5, Chikanji grew up with her uncle who introduced her to the Catholic faith. During her secondary school days at Chikola Secondary School on Zambia's Copperbelt province, she met an international Catholic religious group of sisters, the Sacred Heart. Having observed the language challenges the sisters encountered in their outreach activities; Annie promised to join the sisterhood. She, thus, became the first Zambian to join the Sacred Heart sisters. She later did a preschool teaching study programme and left for South America in 1996 and later Ireland. She also had an opportunity to go to Uganda where she worked with young people in war torn camps.

Chikanji returned to Zambia from America in 2003, after having lived there for 20 years. For her final profession, she articulates:

I thought about it and said this Catholic life...people don't graduate... I asked the Pope a serious question, I said Pope, do you want to die here? I told him that I had decided to graduate from Catholic religious life: I needed to resign and allow others to take up the vocation. I said I can't die here; I have a lot to give as I am always serving others and that I will continue to serve my people. And within 3 days, I got the letter from the Pope (Personal interview, 2022).

Following her resignation from Catholic religious life, Chikanji did a lot of developmental work in Zambian communities. For example, prior to establishing *Ubuntu* Learning Hub, Chikanji worked as the Schools and Colleges of Permaculture Programme (RESCOPE) network's national coordinator in Zambia from 2018 until her resignation in 2021. The initiative to establish *Ubuntu* Learning hub came to fruition when Chikanji decided to focus on permaculture by way of creating a learning centre given that there was no practical centre where people would appreciate the permaculture way of life in Lusaka. The centre has a special option for young people, women and those living with disabilities. For example, young people are offered life skills and given opportunities to use their skills at the learning centre. Similarly, women are engaged in learning life skills. In the case of those living with disabilities, the learning centre infrastructure is built with them in mind in which case, making it an inclusive centre. Chikanji recalled that her inclusive approach to life was influenced by her uncle who could not use staircases after he survived a locomotive accident while working on the mines (Personal interview, 29 September 2022). The

centre is anchored on the permaculture of life and focusses on offering local practical solutions to ecological problems.

In this chapter I analyse how the *Ubuntu* Learning Hub promotes healthy living through herbal alternatives. I take a biographical approach to narrative research in order to bring to the fore how Chikanji has disrupted the waters of patriarchy or women subordination. The chapter unfolds by conceptualising religion, gender and health and providing a brief review of related literature and approach to theory before showing the ways in which Chikanji's narrative mirrors the intersection of religion, gender, and health.

### **Conceptualising Religion, Gender, and Health**

Although the connectedness of religion, gender and health have been extensively defined, they are not without multiple meanings. In this chapter, the functional understanding of religion is used because the focus on religion is on what religion does for society as opposed to the substantive definition of religion which focuses on how religion is carried out (Rakodi, 2012:638). It is therefore acknowledged that religion produces socio-cultural systems through processes of domination, subordination, inclusion, and exclusion, all spiced with an aura of factuality (Stolz, 2001) and that it also has elements which can address gender and health. As conceptualised by Ter Haar & Busutil (2005:2), religion can be distinguished through four components, namely, religious ideas (the 'content' of faith), religious practices (ritual behaviour), social organisation (the religious community), and religious or spiritual experiences (psychic attitudes). It is assumed that it was through these four components of religion that gender and health interacted through the narrative of Annie Chikanji.

The understanding of gender is informed by the conceptualisation of gender by the Zambia Gender Status Report (2021:12) which defines it as the socially constructed traits attributed to being female or male. These attributes involve the roles and responsibilities assigned to men and women by society. The attributes also include expected, allowed, valued, and accepted behaviour and conduct among men and women. Further, gender is interpreted as the roles, duties and responsibilities which are culturally or socially ascribed to males and females (Gender Equity and Equality Act 22, 2015:463).

There are numerous ways to intertwine gender and religion or to consider their interplay. For example, some approaches focus on questions regarding religious practices and beliefs, often understood in the sense of (historically grown) religious traditions such as Christianity or Islam. Other approaches are mainly interested in the identification of different gendered systems and constructions of masculinities and femininities to analyse the role of religious beliefs as a constitutive or challenging factor for different constructions of gender (Höpflinger et al., 2012). Additionally, certain approaches address gendered uses and subversions of religious categories, symbols and signs and merge works researching the relationships between men and women in the context of religion, often fighting for more equality between the social groups (Höpflinger et al., 2012). While these approaches share a common interest for the study of the interaction between gendered and religious experiences, the chapter pays attention to how women tap into religious beliefs and practices to foster health. This is because gender and religion are not simply parallels existing independently of each other but are mutually embedded within each other.

The chapter assumes that good health is the outcome of many factors. In the case of many African cultures, the concept of health relates to achieving a harmonious balance between the body and the mind and, importantly, between the individual and the community. Good health and disease are perceived in both individual and communal terms, on the assumption that what is good for the community is good for the individual and vice versa. The above notion of good health is aligned to the concept of *Ubuntu*, often understood as a deep-thinking and religious notion that describes an individual in light of his/her relationship with others. This implies that an individual's relationships with the entire community are considered central. *Ubuntu* has also been described as the capacity in an African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity, and mutuality in the interests of building and maintaining communities with justice and mutual caring (Almond, 2005, 2006:6; Metz, 2009:103; Mandela, 2006; Tutu, 1999:34-35).

## Theoretical lens

Theoretically, the chapter is framed within ecofeminist theory. Believed to have been coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her

book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* in 1974, ecofeminism describes movements and philosophies that link feminism with ecology (Mellor, 1997). According to Baker (2010), eco-feminism refers to a diverse range of women's environmental activities and aims for the liberation of women as women. It takes from the green movement<sup>2</sup> a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit, and oppress women (Fogle, 2012). Ecofeminism is interested in the particular and significant connections between women and nature and seeks to interpret their repression and exploitation in terms of the repression and exploitation of the environment. Women and nature are also united through their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal society. Ecofeminists seem to agree that the domination of women and the domination of nature are fundamentally connected and that environmental efforts are, therefore, integral to the work of overcoming the oppression of women. Women and nature are closely tied together and their role in society is predicated towards a common goal which is to nurture, reproduce and recreate. This role is often ignored, neglected, and exploited in a patriarchal world. Hence the chapter pays attention to women's initiatives such as the initiatives of Annie Chikanji whose contributions must be celebrated. It must be foregrounded that women have been experts in their own right regarding holistic and ecological knowledge of nature's processes.

The chapter employs ecofeminism because ecofeminism is a theoretical link between feminists and environmentalists and emphasises the role of women in environmental protection (Hosseinnezhad, 2017). As such, it pays attention to women who are visible in local grassroots movements aimed at saving the environment and promoting healthy living. This affirms ecofeminism's stance that it is communities of women that are engaged in restoring and preservative work as demonstrated throughout history in different contexts (Kronlid, 2003; Muthuki, 2006; Siwila, 2014; Chirongoma, 2018). The ecofeminist lens is extended to health and wellness as seen in the work of Annie Chikanji which is informed by environmental concerns and demonstrates a direct connection to healthy living.

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<sup>2</sup> It is a scientific, social, conservation, and political movement that forwards the concerns of environmentalists, that is, persons who see the integrity of the non-human world as worthy of preservation both for its own sake and for the sake of human survival.

## **Brief Review of Literature**

The review of related literature is done in relation to how the interconnectedness of religion, gender and health has been studied in different contexts. Globally, studies on religion and health in general have tended to focus on how religious service attendance is strongly associated with lower mortality because of less depression, and lower likelihood of suicide. For example, Ironson & Kremer (2009) show that there was lower mortality among HIV patients who experienced religious transformation due to the use of religious coping in the face of illness. Similarly, Albuena et al. (2013) establish reduced depression incidence for those attending religious services.

Globally, studies have also shown that religion is concerned with health in relation to wholeness or well-being. For example, VanderWeele (2017) demonstrates that religious participation contributes to physical and mental health, and subjective well-being, through shaping behaviour, creating systems of meaning, altering one's outlook on life, building community and social support, supporting moral beliefs, and through an experience of the transcendent. As such, religious communities and persons promote health through caregiving, health-promotion interventions, spiritual care in medical and end-of-life settings, forgiveness interventions, and offering a form of meaningful communal participation. VanderWeele concludes that religious participation was an important determinant of health in that it was strongly associated, over time, with a variety of health outcomes, hence, the need to be included in the analyses of health, as is already common practice for other social determinants of health, race, gender, or income. VanderWeele's conclusions are important for extending the interplay of religion, gender, and health to individual narratives of women.

Other studies have focused on the role of religious institutions in health provision and demonstrate that religious groups and faith-based organizations often have as their mission some health-related goal. Linked to gender, religious groups also often provide material resources and infrastructure for hospitals, clinics, and medical missions. For example, Mwenda (2011) shows that in several African countries, it is estimated that faith-based organizations provide between 30% and 50% of health-related facilities. The link between religion, gender and health is also seen in the sphere of specific health challenges to which religious entities have responded through the provision of a moral message and advocacy (Morris, 1986; Tutu, 2000).

In selected African countries, the focus on religion, health and gender has been on women's rights. For example, Anna Chitando and Ezra Chitando (2022) have shown that the struggle for Zimbabwean women's full rights and dignity is ongoing. Through engaging the concepts of feminism and womanism, the duo showed how Zimbabwean women writers and Zimbabwean women theologians seek to uphold women's dignity and human rights, while questioning coloniality. This is through Zimbabwean women's writing and Zimbabwean women's theology which has covered women's economic empowerment, women's health, and women's leadership. The duo argues that the methodologies adopted by Zimbabwean women writers and theologians are centred on the well-being of Zimbabwean women as they shun patriarchal and colonial nomenclature and place emphasis on Zimbabwean women's autonomy and agency. This analysis demonstrates the strides of women in the sphere of writing and theology and compliments the understanding of how women through the example of Chikanji were turning the tables through the promotion of healthy living.

Religion, gender, and health are also linked through the roles and experiences of women during epidemics and pandemics. In the context of HIV & AIDS, Chitando & Togarasei (2008) bring in a gendered perspective in their call for a contextual reading of John 7:53-8:11. The duo argues that in the context of stigmatisation, there is need for a contextually relevant reading and exegesis of John 7:53-8:11 passage which provides valuable insights regarding de-stigmatisation. In relation to COVID-19 pandemic, scholars like Manyonganise (2023) link religion, gender, and health through her analysis of the role played by women in the utilisation of African Indigenous Medicine within the context of COVID-19. She demonstrates the ways in which women safeguard plants and trees whose leaves, roots and barks were considered effective in dealing with the disease in Zimbabwe. Manyonganise (2022) also explores how religion influenced experiences of women during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe. These studies were significant for showing the ways in which the pandemic became an avenue for remembering the sacred role of women in the promotion of good health.

Chirongoma & Chitando (2021) relate religion and gender to climate change and show the nexus between religion, gender, and climate change by foregrounding the experiences of women and girls affected by Cyclone Idai. The duo shows that 80% of the people who suffered the most during the disaster were women and children, and that the ecological crisis had

a gendered dimension. At the same time, women and girls comprised the bulk of the population heavily impacted by Cyclone Idai in Chimanimani and Chipinge and they were the ones who were in the forefront of mitigating the impact of devastation caused by this ecological catastrophe. Similar studies with a gender and ecological dimension in Zambia include Siwila (2014) who sought to trace the ecological footprints of our foremothers. In linking women with nature, Siwila argues that if eco-feminism was to be effective in responding to ecological issues, discourses around African women's ecological spirituality need to be retrieved and transformed for the liberation of both women and nature. Other studies include Mwale (2021) and Mwale (2022) in which the role of religion in the promotion of ecological well-being is shown from a Catholic perspective. These studies while linked to ecological wellness have ignored the close link between ecology and health.

Some studies have tended to dwell on health-seeking behaviours of women and the biblical interpretation of texts. For example, Gammelin (2023) examines health-seeking, healing practices, gender, and authority in a charismatic, locally founded church of the International Church for Healing and Glory (ICHG) in Mbeya, Tanzania and showed that the church was led by a male prophet, while membership remained predominantly female. Through the linkage of faith-healing and gender, Gammelin examined the perspectives of people who navigate the markets of healing who were mostly women. Others like Kangwa (2020) focus on the biblical interpretation of texts in their analysis of religion and gender using an African eco-feminist analysis of the Book of Job and shows how resistance against patriarchy and the principle of retribution shapes the theology of the Book (of Job). Kangwa argues that the reality of the current ecological crisis requires the development of biblical hermeneutics that is life-giving to both women and non-human nature and that traditional, patriarchal interpretations of the Book of Job have contributed to the subjugation of women and the natural world.

The foregoing selected studies while clearly pointing to the interconnectedness of religion, gender and health have paid little attention to detailed individual narratives of women who have made a difference to promote healthy living in a holistic manner. Therefore, the chapter seeks to consolidate these studies and contribute to the existing body of knowledge, the perspective that more can be learned from individual women accounts in their journey to foster healthy living through their exploitation of religious and gender resources.

## Disrupting Waters of Women Subordination in Wellness

Chikanji's narrative manifests different ways in which she has disrupted the waters of women subordination through her *Ubuntu* Learning Hub. This is largely seen in the interlinked subthemes which include herbal courses offered, promoting natural methods of farming, and retrieving indigenous knowledge and women's roles as informed by her religious worldview and experiences.

### Herbal courses offered

Chikanji fosters wellness through imparting knowledge on herbal remedies. This is through offering herbal courses. Topics covered included introduction of natural herbs, herbal worldview, practical herbal making of teas, ointments, oil and tinctures, management of community ailments, local healing plants, soap making, and herbal garden designs (13 September 2022, *Ubuntu* Learning Hub). Some of the participants who followed this course affirmed that the course gave them an opportunity to see that plants in their community were not ordinary but medicinal and that they were reminded that food is medicine, and that nature is full of plants for our wellbeing (Personal communication with Chikanji, 30 May 2023).

Offering herbal training was significant not only for raising awareness on how to deal with common community ailments such as malaria, diarrhoea, cancers, and many others, but also for addressing the new COVID-19 pandemic which affected women immensely. Thus, even at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, online herbal trainings were offered which contributed to the wellbeing of the people. Chikanji recalled that many women rushed to her farm which she calls *The Nature Book* to collect medicinal plants during the pandemic. Through this encounter, women were reminded of the forgotten traditional remedies for community ailments.

As concluded by Manyonganise (2023), the harvesting of the herbs became a gendered exercise during the pandemic as it was mostly women who went into the forests and bushes in both rural and urban centres to find the necessary herbs. Moreover, the learning of herbal plants during the pandemic was also gendered as the majority of participants in Chikanji's herbal course classes were women. Chikanji's experiences of having been affected by COVID-19, including the death of her uncle who

brought her up through COVID-19 made her include COVID-19 management in the course in order to share the good practices which had been learnt on how to integrate herbal remedies during the pandemic. Offering herbal training is also seen as a way of reconstructing the role of women in health as shown by Manyonganise (2023:3) that in precolonial Africa, women played critical roles in the health of their families as well as communities. Chikanji's offering of herbal courses also exemplifies the leadership role taken by women in ways which resonate with Chitando's (2023) analysis of African women's exercise of leadership. Additionally, Chikanji's focus on herbal remedies resonates with the ecofeminist view that sees women and nature being connected through the quest to nurture, reproduce and recreate. In this regard, the overall aim of sharing the herbal remedies had the ultimate goal of caring for nature and humanity.

### Promoting Natural methods of farming

Growing food the natural way is also given prominence at *Ubuntu* Learning Hub. In this regard, knowledge of natural farming is shared through different avenues, including training workshops for the well-being of the environment and human beings. For example, during the training in Kitwe, knowledge on natural farming was shared.

Participants were reminded that just after harvesting, the land needed to be slashed, mulched and covered by anthill soils if that is locally available. *Bocashi*<sup>3</sup> was introduced and animal liquid manures which were identified as ways of fertilising the soil. We also shared other fertilizers such as rabbit urine, fish, cow fermented and green manures. What is sustainable is for one to grow own fertilizer including through planting trees in the fields such as *Musangu* (*faidherbia albida*), *Lucerna*, *Tephrosia* and many others (Chikanji, 22 August 2022).

The use of local resources in farming, especially in making fertilisers could be seen as turning the tables of subordination and control especially in a context where dominant Western knowledge was perceived as important. For example, organic fertilisers were manufactured using local materials such as charcoal, dried grass or leaves, maize bran, ash, and rocks at *Ubuntu* Learning Hub before being distributed to the farmers.

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<sup>3</sup> Fermented organic material used as fertiliser.

This is in line with Farnworth & Hutchings' (2009) conclusion that women in organic farming are contributing to rewriting the paradigm of ecological wellness from a women's perspective as imprinted with life and spirituality. This went hand in hand with natural ways of keeping livestock. In this regard, Chikanji shared best practices. For example, the stems of the banana are pounded and added to the chicken feed. Knowledge on how to make antibiotics is also shared:

Just to share with my fellow farmers who need antibiotics for their animals and a dewormer. Here is the good news. Pawpaw leaves work wonders. Just chop them and blend them with water. Add brown sugar/molasses/bananas/ any sweet fruit. Bottle the liquid and keep in a cool place for three days for fermentation (Chikanji, 7 March 2022).

*Ubuntu* Learning Hub also promotes local seed, including using natural methods of preserving seeds as shared by participants in the seed coating training session:

Today we were coating popcorn and maize seed using minerals-ash, rock dust, then charcoal dust, termite soil, molasses, and water. Ash is used because it neutralises acid soils. Rock dust is rich in so many minerals such as zinc, which is needed for soil. Charcoal dust is a home for the bacteria.... We learnt the importance of protecting our good seed from diseases and that coating makes our seed to germinate 100%, therefore, giving us more yield. So, we coated with minerals (ash, rock dust, charcoal dust, anthill soil, water and molasses) (*Ubuntu* learning hub, 21 May 2022).

Local seed was not only grown but shared with others, with the understanding that seed comes back. This reflects the *Ubuntu* philosophical principle of sharing and caring for others. The initiative on the promotion of local seed is a way of reclaiming the varieties which had been abandoned in the wake of multinational seed companies. Seeds such as millet and sorghum are also promoted. This is significant because traditionally, many ethnic groups in Zambia use sorghum and finger millet as their staple food. As demonstrated by Chapota et al. (2016), maize in all its varieties has its origins in the Americas, specifically Mexico and was progressively brought to African shores from about 1500 onwards. At that time, millet and sorghum were the cereal staples of African populations. By the 1930s, maize which was often referred to as food for the Europeans became the food of choice for most Zambians by the time of independence in 1964 (McCann, 2001). Therefore, promoting millet and

sorghum is a way in which *Ubuntu* learning hub is addressing the colonial legacy.

The initiative in local seed could also be closely linked to the quest to fight the dominant powers in the promotion of seed from multinational companies at the expense of local indigenous seed. As observed by Farnworth and Hutchings (2009: 25), indigenous communities are being locked into relationships with monopoly driven multi-national seed companies that are forcing dependence on genetically modified seed and chemical fertilisers. As observed by Shiva (2000), the replacement of traditional crops with crops grown for the global markets – and more recently genetically modified crops – is undermining biodiversity, the relationship of indigenous peoples to that biodiversity, and thus the ability to maintain sustainable agricultural practices and retain and use indigenous knowledge, and by extension healthy lifestyles.

This involvement in ecological wellness through promoting the growing of food naturally suggests that the creation of the *Ubuntu* Learning Hub is a way of empowering communities through offering natural wellness education services and growing organic food. In a context where the liberation of the economy in the 1990s partly contributed to the environmental crisis by way of increased use of chemicals in the agricultural sector to increase yields, championing organic farming for the good of the environment and health is significant. For example, Sinyangwe et al. (2016) found an average of 98.6mg/kg of organophosphates<sup>4</sup> for vegetables tested in Lusaka while the maximum residue limit (MRL) was .05mg/kg. Based on this, Sinyangwe et al concluded that locally grown vegetables from around Lusaka had higher than maximum acceptable limits which could have implications on human health as the cumulative effect of organophosphates in the human body had potential to cause long term health problems.

The natural ways of farming also contributed to the wellbeing of the environment. This is because *Ubuntu* Learning Hub grew in a context which had experienced climate change. Chikanji stated:

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<sup>4</sup> Organophosphates (OP) are chemical substances produced by the process of esterification between phosphoric acid and alcohol and are the main components of herbicides, pesticides, and insecticides. Acute or chronic exposure to OPs can produce varying toxicity levels in humans, animals, plants, and insects (Sinyangwe et al., 2016)

It never rains here; all the trees have been cut for charcoal. We only had one month of rain and literally three years of drought. So, we bought this land so that we bring its story back to the land of life. So, we do water harvesting by slowing, stopping, spreading, and storing the water using natural simple means such as making swells, planting trees and practicing syntropic farming (Personal Interview with Chikanji, September 2022).

As such, Chikanji emphasises that there is need to work more with nature than against nature by managing natural elements, and utilising available resources from a permaculture perspective in order to promote healthy living. The understanding was that good health was largely a by-product of one's environment. As stressed in the Catholic Social Teachings (Compendium of the social doctrine of the church, 2005), the goods of the earth should be used for the benefit of all, not exclusively from an economic perspective, but from a balanced social, cultural, and community standpoint. This concern to care for nature in order to promote the common good also resonates with the ecofeminist stance that emphasizes the interdependence of all life, humanity's role as part of the earth's ecosystem, and the non-hierarchical nature of a system in which all parts affect each other are emphasized to counteract relationships dominated by values of control and oppression (Baker, 2010). Chikanji's narrative extends the observation that religious traditions can make a positive contribution to climate change by influencing worldviews and actions of their adherents (Chitando et al., 2022).

## **Retrieving Indigenous knowledge and reclaiming lost role of women as custodians of knowledge**

Chikanji retrieves indigenous knowledge in ways which reclaimed the lost role of women as custodians of knowledge in diverse ways. This is not only through going back to natural ways of farming and health, but also opting for women as marginalised groups in the community. Her passion is also for young people, including persons with disabilities:

I always uplift young people, their mothers, and children because young people understand any situation better, and if you want to bring any change, target the young people, they are change agents. The gap I see in young people is how they can be enabled to understand real issues and how to support themselves. For women, it is

because of vulnerability. When I see them, they have no control, so I usually teach them to be in control of the situation, not to depend on their husbands. For people with disabilities, I have been inspired by my own uncle (Personal interview with Chikanji, 2022).

Chikanji's option for marginalized groups especially women points to retrieving the inherent potential and skills in these groups and closely resonates with the observation by Rocheleau (1991), that the marginalization of indigenous women's skills, needs and knowledge in agriculture is directly related to the unequal power relations inherent within the ideologies of colonization, capitalism and globalization. Most importantly, Chikanji draws on her religiosity as a Catholic and the social teachings which opt for the poor and vulnerable. The principle of the option of the poor and vulnerable derives from the Gospel admonitions of Jesus to love one's neighbour and to be at the service of others (Komakoma, 2003).

Chikanji also recalls that she was motivated to do what she is doing because of her experiences with the Church which enabled her to reach out and serve the community with passion:

As a religious sister, I was also given groups to work with... I have worked with different groups, as was the case in South America and Uganda where I tried to offer solutions to problematic situations (Personal interview with Chikanji, 2022).

Chikanji also reminds women of the traditional ways of preserving food and the value of common plants. For example, she actively promotes indigenous wild vegetables and plants by highlighting the value of these long-forgotten plants such as BlackJack (*Bidens Pilosa*) which happens to be one of Chikanji's favourite weeds. Often called *kanuka*, it is a common plant on farms and is often looked at as a weed. It has numerous health benefits for different diseases such as diabetes, respiratory conditions and lupus and is also believed to fight off bacterial and fungal infections (Personal communication with Chikanji, 22 September 2022).

Food is preserved by tapping into the traditional ways of drying food. Therefore, fruits, vegetables, herbs, and other foods are dried using solar dryers. Women are also taught to make simple solar dryers for value addition purposes:

We use local available materials. We teach how to dry in a simple solar dryer. A box, black plastic on the bottom, then covered with white plastic. We leave some space for outlet of vapour (Personal communication with Chikanji, 22 August 2022).

By retrieving indigenous values and practices of *Ubuntu* through a special option for women, *Ubuntu* Learning Hub demonstrates Chikanji's care for humanity and strides to uplift others, especially women whose work, interests and knowledge are often obscured. As emphasised in the Catholic Social Teachings (Compendium of the social doctrine of the church, 2005), all persons created in the image of God have inherent worth regardless of race, colour, or creed, and dignity is not earned but rather it is always a given right to be accorded to all persons in all circumstances. Chikanji's quest to impart knowledge and skills on traditional foods resonates with the assertion that women as custodians of indigenous food and their work must be seen as a fundamental duty to future generations. For example, Hosken (2013) observes that the stories shared by women from Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, Uganda and Benin in their own words of how they were actively working with their local communities, reviving seed diversity, and regaining their leadership role reflected how they saw their work as a duty to future generations and a responsibility that brought with it much joy. Ibnouf (2012) argues that women in rural Sudan employ a variety of methods based on Indigenous knowledge in the processing and preservation of agricultural and animal raw materials, wild food products to acquire alternative food sources, and to relieve the stress of seasonal food scarcity particularly during the shortage of rainfall or drought thereby achieve household food security.

From the foregoing, Chikanji's work which focuses on sharing knowledge for the promotion of good health is conveyed or carried out through different avenues such as onsite and virtual training workshops:

Farmers learn life skills as they spend time at *Ubuntu* Learning Hub. Sometimes they come and are given space to practice making *bocashi* at *Ubuntu* farm or *Ubuthu* reaches them where they are (Personal communication with Chikanji, 22 September 2022).

*Ubuntu* Learning Hub also offers learning opportunities to rural communities and other interested persons through workshops and online sessions.

We share what we know because knowledge is power. Every month we try to share on agro-ecology on different topics. As a small-scale farmer, I believe that we have a lot to share ... (Chikanji, 22 June 2022).

Chikanji's efforts to foster good health affirms the observation by Jiggins (1994) that the concern of some women for the health of the environment is closely connected to their perception as sustainers and nurturers of life, as embedded in their distinctive knowledge, demonstrated in their daily lives, experiences, interactions, and perceptions of reality. Ultimately, the interconnectedness of religion, gender, and health in Chikanji's narrative brings to the fore lessons on how a woman can contribute to the well-being of the earth and humanity. This affirms the assertion that despite being the most affected by the climate crisis, women are also at the forefront of mitigating the impact of devastation caused by the ecological crisis (Chirongoma and Chitando, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

The chapter trailed the contributions of Annie Chikanji in the promotion of healthy living through her work at *Ubuntu* Learning Hub. The chapter concludes that Chikanji's offering of herbal courses to rural communities and other interested persons in the urban setting are ways of not only fighting the dominant legacy of women subordination but also an avenue for retrieving indigenous knowledge for wellness, natural methods of farming and indigenous foods. The chapter also concludes that Chikanji's adoption of earth friendly and indigenous practices in dealing with wellness in the context of both rural and urban life intersected religion, gender and health in constructive ways. Given that narratives of women such as Annie Chikanji's easily got overshadowed in the web of patriarchy, the chapter calls for the documentation of such grassroot initiatives for posterity in ways which affirm Ezra Chitando's strides to bring to the fore the narratives of women in his scholarship.

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