

# Barriers to Women's Full Engagement in Church Ministry: A Case Study of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ), Western Diocese

Mbongeni Proud Dube

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ)

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines impediments to the full participation of women in church ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ), Western Diocese. Although gender equality is being achieved, women still experience serious obstacles that restrict their involvement in leadership and ministry. The study cites obstacles such as institutionalized cultural norms that support male leadership, restrictive theological interpretations, insufficient access to education and training, and a lack of institutional support. Using qualitative analysis, this paper indicates the burning necessity of strategic interventions to empower women and enhance inclusivity in the church. Among the recommendations is revising church policies, leadership training of women, and dealing with cultural biases within the ELCZ, Western Diocese. The results, therefore, underline the significance of focusing on these obstacles to strengthen the spiritual and developmental life of the church and advance gender justice within the Western Diocese.

**Keywords:** Challenges, Women, Church Ministry, ELCZ, Western Diocese

## INTRODUCTION

The active involvement of women in church ministry is a contested reality in many Christian denominations in Africa in spite of theological affirmations of gender equality. In the context of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ), Western Diocese, women still experience systemic barriers when it comes to full participation and accessing top leadership roles. The study argues that these barriers are deeply rooted in patriarchal cultural norms, theological interpretations that uphold male authority, and institutional structures that fail to adequately support the empowerment of women (Jini, 2023; Ngunjiri and Christo-Baker, 2012). Globally, the metaphor of the "stained glass ceiling" has been applied to these invisible yet pervasive barriers impeding women's rise to leadership positions in religious spaces or institutions (Ngunjiri and Christo-Baker, 2012). In African settings, such a ceiling is often reinforced through socio-cultural expectations where women's roles are defined as subordinate, domestic, and supportive rather than authoritative or public (Chanda and Ngulube, 2024). These dynamics are especially evident in mainline churches such as the ELCZ, where the legacies of historical missionary work and traditional African patriarchies overlap to marginalize women's voices in ecclesial space. Scholars such as Dube (2003) and Phiri (2000) have long made the case for African women's theological contributions in gender justice and the transformation of structures that are harmful and exclusive in religious setups. Yet, as Jini (2023) notes in his intersectional analysis of church leadership, women's exclusion is not merely a matter of policy but a complex interplay of theology, culture, and power. Hence, within the ELCZ, Western Diocese, these dynamics manifest in limited access to theological education, underrepresentation in decision-making bodies, and resistance to female leadership. Therefore, this qualitative study aims to bring to light the lived experiences of women in church ministry in the ELCZ, Western Diocese. By critically engaging with both local realities and broader scholarly discourse, the research seeks to add to ongoing efforts towards inclusive ecclesiology and transformative praxis in Zimbabwean Christianity.

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## METHODOLOGY

This study made use of the qualitative methodology to investigate barriers to the full involvement of women in church ministry within the ELCZ, Western Diocese. This approach was deployed because it can gather first-hand information from the participants. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize that qualitative inquiry is particularly effective in capturing the depth and complexity of human experiences, particularly in contexts influenced by cultural and institutional dynamics. Thus, in-depth interviews were conducted with three female pastors and five wives of pastors, and five female lay leaders to gain varied perspectives. Additionally, a focus group discussion with five female lay leaders was held to facilitate dialogue and shared experiences. To get insights from the leadership perspective, questionnaires were distributed to three male top leaders (one Bishop and two Deans) who play crucial roles in policy formulation and decision-making processes. In total, twenty people participated in this study. Thus, analytical procedures followed thematic analysis, involving systematic coding, theme identification, and integration of participant voices (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To strengthen transparency, verbatim quotations from participants were incorporated to illustrate lived experiences vividly. Furthermore, the study engaged with existing literature on gender and theology to situate findings within broader academic discourse, thereby demonstrating how local realities intersect with global debates on women's roles in ministry. This dynamic and multi-layered approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by women in church leadership.

### Theoretical Framework

The research employs the feminist theory as its theoretical framework to analyse the impediments that hinder women from participating fully in church ministry in the ELCZ, Western Diocese. This theory was used because it is a vital tool to criticize the patriarchal systems and cultural values that continue to perpetuate gender inequalities, and it exposes how these components marginalize the voices and contributions of women in religious contexts. Accordingly, this framework allows for a more in-depth insight into systemic barriers and examines the experiences of female clergy, lay leaders, and wives of pastors in religious spaces. It also highlights the necessity of transformative change in the church to advance gender equity. Through this lens, the study aims to illuminate the intersection of faith and gender, advocating for reforms that empower women in ministry roles. According to Oduyoye (2001), African feminist theology confronts cultural and ecclesial frameworks that oppress women and demands re-reading scripture and tradition through the lived experience of women. Equally, Phiri (2004) stresses that feminist theology in Africa should be grounded on the socio-cultural realities of African women, whereby African women are liberated on both spiritual and structural levels. Furthermore, Oduyoye (2001) and Phiri (2004) emphasize the need to develop inclusive theological spaces that capture the experiences and views of women, thus changing the story in religious institutions. Therefore, this study not only critiques existing power structures but also seeks to pave the way for genuine inclusivity and empowerment of women in church ministry.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The persistent marginalization of women in church leadership across African ecclesial contexts has drawn increasing scholarly attention. Despite theological affirmations of equality, women continue to face systemic barriers that hinder their full participation in ministry. These barriers are deeply rooted in patriarchal cultural norms, restrictive theological interpretations, and institutional inertia (Phiri, 2004; Oduyoye, 2001). Feminist theologians such as Oduyoye (2001) and Phiri (2004) have been foundational in articulating the dual oppression African women face, from both cultural patriarchy and ecclesiastical structures. Oduyoye (2001) emphasizes the need for African women's theology to reclaim space within the church by centering women's lived experiences and challenging androcentric interpretations of scripture. Phiri (2004) further argues that African women's religious experiences must inform theological reflection and ecclesial reform.

In Zimbabwe, cultural expectations around gender roles further complicate women's participation in ministry. Chitando and Chirongoma (2012) note that women are often relegated to subordinate roles, such as pastor's wives or Sunday school teachers, rather than being recognized as leaders in their own right. Gunda (2010) critiques the misuse of biblical texts to justify gender inequality, calling for a liberative hermeneutic that affirms

women's leadership. On the other hand, Kanyoro (2002) introduces the concept of "cultural hermeneutics," which interrogates how African cultural values intersect with biblical interpretation to either empower or oppress women. She argues that transformative theology must engage both scripture and culture critically. Similarly, Dube (2003) advocates for a postcolonial feminist approach that challenges both Western missionary legacies and indigenous patriarchies.

Additionally, from a practical theology perspective, Ackermann (1996) emphasizes the importance of praxis-oriented theology that emerges from the struggles of marginalized communities. She contends that theology must not only interpret the world but also transform it. This aligns with the work of Chisale (2020), who explores how pastoral care can be reimagined to address the spiritual and psychosocial needs of African women in ministry. Collectively, these scholars underline the need for a multidimensional response to the barriers women face in church ministry. This includes revisiting theological education, reforming church policies, and fostering inclusive leadership models. By situating the experiences of women in the ELCZ, Western Diocese, this study contributes to the ongoing struggle for gender justice in African Christianity.

### **An Overview of the ELCZ, Western Diocese**

This research was done in the ELCZ, Western Diocese, which was established in 2006. Previously, the ELCZ was centralized under a single bishop. In 2006, the ELCZ gave birth to three Dioceses, namely: Western, Central, and Eastern (Dube, 2024). Thus, the area under study (ELCZ, Western Diocese) encompasses Matabeleland South and North, extending from Beitbridge-Chikwarakwara to Victoria Falls. Currently, this Diocese has two Deaneries (Southern and Northern), 24 parishes, and 144 congregations (Dube, 2024).

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Challenges Encountered by Women in Their Endeavour to Contribute to the Holistic Growth and Development of the ELCZ, Western Diocese**

The outcomes point out that certain barriers hinder women from fully participating and contributing to the growth and advancement of the ELCZ, Western Diocese. These hindrances are as follows:

#### **Resistance to Women's Leadership and Ideas**

From the findings, one of the challenges that women encounter is resistance to women's leadership and ideas. It became clear that this resistance was mainly influenced by the culture and the patriarchal system. Muyambo (2023) views culture as the breeding ground for such injustices. He goes on to argue that culture has conditioned society to see women as inferior to men. In the same vein, Oduyoye (2001:86) shares the same sentiments by contending that "To a greater extent, the church is part of the oppressive culture." This was supported by one participant during an in-depth interview who noted that:

*"There are some cultural and traditional factors that negatively impact the involvement of women in the ELCZ, Western Diocese. For example, some say "Zithi zingakhokhelwa ngamanina ziwele edakeni (Female leadership can cause the followers to fall in the mud). Already this shows that this cultural understanding does not support the leadership of women." (Participant19)*

Also, some female lay leaders underlined that they faced resistance to having their ideas implemented because of their gender. They hope that in the near future, ideas will not be accepted based on sexual category. Women feel that progressive ideas should be appreciated and implemented whether they come from a woman or a man. Thus, there is a need to challenge toxic cultural traditions that lead to the resistance of women's leadership and ideas in the ELCZ, Western Diocese. Such can hinder or slow church growth and development if not addressed. As a result, there is a need to accept that women have God-given talents and brilliant ideas that can take the church far.

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## Negative Labelling of Women Leaders

Furthermore, outcomes disclose that female lay leaders are not happy because their rise to power is usually associated with negative connotations. They stressed that men rise to power and no one questions why they are in that position but it is a different story with female leaders. This is why scholars like Mwandayi (2023:162) contend that “Generally, women tend to be more disadvantaged when compared to their male counterparts.” During a focus group discussion, a female lay leader who once worked at the upper structures in the ELCZ, Western Diocese noted that:

*“One of the challenges faced by female leaders in the church is negative labelling. For instance, some will conclude that she is going out with the bishop that is why she is in that position.”* (Participant 15)

Accordingly, the concerns raised by lay women in leadership seek to invite the church to challenge the labelling of women in leadership. Through education, church members should be groomed to understand that God gave women the capacity to lead like men. Hence, it is not always the case that women rise to the upper ladders of leadership through sexual-related connections.

## Men as Barriers to Women’s Leadership

Results indicate that some men hinder women from fully exercising their God-given gifts. Culture remains a major culprit that ought to be addressed. Nkomazana (2005:31) maintains that “Culture plays an influential role in shaping masculinities such that its influence is seen in all spheres such as the political, historical, economic and religious spheres.” In line with the above discussion, during in-depth interviews, some participants pointed out that:

*“Husbands sometimes refuse to let spouses partake in certain posts even if they are the best candidates.”* (Participant 7)

*“Some men, because of their ego, do not accept women in leadership; they feel that a woman’s place is at home.”* (Participant 5)

*“Very few males have confidence in women’s leadership.”* (Participant 10)

*“Some male counterparts, especially the older generation still hold on to the notion that women cannot lead a higher-level structure.”* (Participant 6)

The above statements from the female lay leaders indicate the need to educate men. This is a lament for help from women and the church cannot afford to ignore this genuine cry. Therefore, the church has a mandate to assist men to be delivered from toxic patriarchal tendencies. For, Oduyoye (2001:86), “The disrespect and marginalization of women is disrespect to all humanity and indeed to God who created all in His image.”

## Unfair Treatment of Widows and Single Women

The research’s outcomes divulge that widows and single women are regarded as people who cannot serve God adequately. Widows and single women seem to face stigma in the church due to various reasons. Ackermann (2006:236) upholds that “When marginalization and discrimination continue to exist, the very character of the church as the body of Christ is weakened.” Speaking of what is happening in the church, four participants (during in-depth interviews) shared that:

*“Suspicion and insecurity by married women is rife hence widows and single women cannot serve God freely.”* (Participant 8)

*“No matter how hardworking you are in church activities, when you are not married, you remain questionable.”* (Participant 3)

*“In some parishes, if widows are leading the service, few people come to church.”* (Participant 4)

*“In the journey of leadership, marital status has negatively affected those in the position of trust if you are an office bearer and you are single or widowed, you become a threat to the married women. You lose support from other fellow women and they start looking down upon you and demotivate you. More so, if you are single, your sexual purity is always questionable.”* (Participant 11)

The above sentiments prove that widows and single women undergo challenging experiences in the ELCZ, Western Diocese. Thus, in such contexts, researchers such as Oduyoye (2001) call for gender parity in the church. She maintains the church should show the true image of God by practicing fairness. The church ought to invest in Christian education. Accordingly, the researcher reasons that before seeing a widow or a single woman, the church needs first to see a human being created in the very image of God. Being a widow or single woman must not be regarded as a curse or something bad. Surely, the study holds that the unfair treatment of widows and single women in the church demands an urgent reaction.

### **Lack of Women Leaders in the Top Leadership**

The gathered results show that respondents appreciate the involvement of women in some positions of governance. For example, some highlighted that the Diaconia Evangelism and Stewardship Board (DESB) at the Diocesan level was led by a female pastor for the past four years, and the Diocesan Sunday school superintendent was also a female minister. However, there is a lament that women need to be included in the top leadership of the ELCZ, Western Diocese. Currently, the Bishop and the two Deans are male. The bulk of the participants concurred that these three positions are key in decision-making processes and the absence of a woman in the executive means that the interests and concerns of women are likely not to be considered in the way they would wish. Mwandayi (2023:170) documents that “A female pastor in the ELCZ, Betse Ndlovu, in her dissertation submitted to the Midlands State University in 2013 argues that despite women being allowed to train as pastors in the ELCZ, there is still a visible problem of excluding women in top leadership as they are not recognized as Bishops and Deans in the very church they feel they are part of.” Mwandayi (2023:170) further states that “Some mainline churches have remained adamant in denying women access to top leadership positions in the church.” In addition, Kurian (2011) resonates with Mwandayi by maintaining that Christianity has confirmed rather than weakened traditional patriarchal structures. During a focus group discussion, it emerged that:

*“Women’s representation in the highest positions needs to be looked at, especially the uppermost clergy positions like Bishops and Deans.”* (Participant 12)

Chitando and Biri (2013:36) lament that, “Numerous religious and cultural institutions in Africa promote male dominance through structuring their organization to allow exclusive male leadership while pushing women to the domestic arena.” Hence, for Moyo (2021), this is an error to be corrected and she challenges the ELCZ to ensure that women are involved in the top leadership. This is reinforced by Moyo (2023:145), who upholds that “God calls men and women to ministry to serve God at all levels of the church.”

### **Lack of Support from Fellow Women**

In addition, several participants also indicated that women are also influenced by the patriarchal system not to support each other. The sad part is that patriarchy is a terrible system that recruits other women to serve its interests. Sometimes women are said to be their own enemies and they do not support voting for each other (Sande, 2017). On the same note, Chitsike (2011:181) concurs with Sande (2017) as he argues that “Many women are reluctant to vote for other women to take on leadership positions as they have been socialized to believe that women are not capable leaders.” As a result, a female lay leader and two Deans in the ELCZ, Western Diocese alluded that:

*“As women, we must support one another and there is no need to pull each other down. We are shooting ourselves in the foot.”* (Participant 9)

*“Sometimes women pull each other down. In a congregation with many women and two men, women will always want to vote for men”* (Participant 6)

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*“Women themselves have proven not to be confident in women’s leadership.” (Participant 3)*

Outcomes divulge that women in the ELCZ, Western Diocese have learnt something. Therefore, they are calling for women to stand with fellow women. Certainly, it is high time that women take advantage of their numbers and vote for each other in positions of influence in the church.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **To Address Cultural and Traditional Biases**

In church contexts, women continue failing to participate fully in church ministry because of cultural biases. To guarantee that women may participate in the church without restriction and that it is gender inclusive, the research advises the ELCZ, Western Diocese to focus on teaching churchgoers about the value of gender justice and to make a commitment to promoting awareness.

- **To Develop a Gender-sensitive Curriculum for Children**

Church members must learn about gender justice matters from childhood; thus this will foster sustainable gender equality and inclusivity in the church. Therefore, the research recommends the ELCZ, Western Diocese, to develop a gender-sensitive curriculum for children. For instance, Sunday school children, catechumen class students, and youths should have a curriculum that exposes them to gender justice material.

- **To Prioritize Gender Mainstreaming**

To motivate women’s full participation and promote gender equality and inclusivity, the ELCZ, Western Diocese, should incorporate gender perspectives in all church programs. For example, integrating gender justice themes in revivals, sermons, and Bible study sessions. This deliberate effort will assist in promoting women’s complete involvement in church ministry.

- **To encourage and Support Women to Fully Exercise their God-given Gifts**

Through the church leadership (Bishop, Deans, and pastors), the ELCZ, Western Diocese is encouraged to support women and offer them platforms to fully practice their divine gifts. Thus, this will require a life-affirming space free from judgment and discouragement.

- **To Identify and Develop Women’s Talents and Gifts**

Women like men have gifts and talents that need to be identified and developed in the church. Therefore, it is recommended that the church taps into all the talents/gifts that women have so that they actively participate in church ministry to foster gender equality and inclusivity within the church.

- **To Celebrate and Recognize Women’s Contribution**

It is necessary for the ELCZ, Western Diocese to continuously recognize and appreciate the work done by women in the church. This can mean coming up with public recognition programs/events and awards. Accordingly, such efforts will motivate women’s full involvement in the church and promote gender justice.

- **To Reserve Other Top Leadership Seats for Women in the Church**

The church should consider reserving other top leadership positions for women. Such a deliberate approach carries the potential to motivate women’s unrestricted involvement in church ministry and lead to gender equality and inclusivity in the ELCZ, Western Diocese.

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- **To Design Leadership Development Curricula for Women**

In an attempt to promote women's unconstrained participation in the church, the ELCZ, Western Diocese must come up with leadership programs that are deliberately designed to equip and empower women to take up leadership roles. Thus, this will ensure gender equality and inclusivity in church ministry.

- **To Develop an Inclusive Liturgy**

The study recommends that the ELCZ, Western Diocese must adopt inclusive language in its worship services. For example, the use of gender-neutral language and celebrating women's efforts since the inception of the church. Hence, such efforts can motivate women's unlimited participation in church ministry in an endeavour to foster gender justice in the church.

## CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the persistent impediments to the full participation of women in ministry within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ), Western Diocese, despite notable progress toward gender equality. The findings reveal that entrenched cultural norms privileging male leadership, restrictive theological interpretations, limited access to education and training, and inadequate institutional support continue to marginalize women and hinder their leadership potential. These barriers not only constrain women's contributions but also weaken the church's capacity to embody inclusivity and justice in its spiritual and developmental mission. Addressing these challenges requires deliberate and strategic interventions, including revising church policies to promote equity, investing in leadership training for women, and dismantling cultural biases that perpetuate exclusion. Such measures are not merely corrective but transformative, enabling the church to harness the gifts and leadership of women for holistic growth. By promoting inclusivity, the ELCZ can strengthen its witness, deepen its spiritual vitality, and advance gender justice in ways that resonate with both biblical imperatives and contemporary societal needs. Thus, empowering women in ministry is essential for building a church that reflects the fullness of God's vision for justice, equality, and shared leadership in the Western Diocese.

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