


# Theologies of women's submission and the COVID-19 pandemic

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Women's submissions to husbands are an accepted phenomenon in Africa and across the globe. The triad, Indigenous cultures, African Traditional Religions (ATR) and Christianity are the sources and shapes of theologies of women's submission. Whenever cultural practices and religious theologies go hand in hand, people tend to regard such practices as par excellence and pay less attention to their negative impact. This article explores the dilemmas of women's submissions in the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in Zimbabwe. The article uses the Feminist theory as a theoretical framework to interpret the meaning of theologies of women's submission in COVID-19. Data for this study were gathered through desktop research. The article concludes that the unprecedented emergence and challenges of global COVID-19 have further unmasked African women's unique difficulties in society, especially on the much-celebrated practices of the theologies of submission. Women's submission trapped women to be affected more by COVID-19 than their male counterparts.

**Contribution:** This article investigates submission theologies and dilemmas regarding women's submissions during the COVID-19 pandemic. It foregrounds that the celebrations of theologies of women's submissions through religion and cultural practices in society make it difficult for people to pay attention to their subtle harmful vices. It concludes that theologies of women's submission negatively trap women to be more affected by pandemics than their male counterparts.

**Keywords:** submission theologies; women; pandemics; Christianity; COVID-19; Zimbabwe.

## Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) had a substantial effect on almost all people's lifestyles worldwide. Most African scholars have captured in detail the global historical development of COVID-19 and the related conspiracy theories (eds. Machingura, Chazovachii & Mawere 2021; eds. Makamani, Nhemachena & Mutapuri 2021; Munyao 2022). There is more to what is known about the impact of COVID-19. Many people died:

[O]ne can say that COVID-19 has hit at the very centre of planetary human entanglements, affecting both private and public lives. The modern world as we know it has been turned upside down. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020:367)

According to Egwu (2021):

[T]he COVID-19 pandemic has brought a lot of challenges and disruptions to our lives. The livelihood of people has been affected, and the pandemic has taken a toll on people's mental and psychological health. (p. 1)

The pandemic pierced all aspects of life, from global health, economics, politics, religion and gender to socio-cultural structures. More research is needed to understand the impact of COVID-19 on African religious women, especially on subtle theologies and practices such as women's submissions. The overwhelming bane of COVID-19 forced many to find ways to deal with it daily. The COVID-19 pandemic called for collective resilience and adaptability in overcoming the virus. Coronavirus disease 2019 'pushed home the necessity of finding humane ways of co-existing and sharing space on this earth between humans and other beings' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020:367). To a greater extent, co-existing during COVID-19 called for submission. The teachings about women's submission are more prevalent within Zimbabwe's socio-cultural and Christian traditions. There are fewer questions about the ramifications of these theologies of submission in pandemics, mainly why women are most likely to comply. Pandemics, particularly COVID-19, have ignited the passion of scholars to revisit theologies of submission. The COVID-19

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exposed the brokenness of human security and social safety (Munyao 2022). To address the issue of social safety mentioned by Munyao, it is critical to explore the impact of women's submissions in the context of pandemics.

Accordingly, the article explores the dilemmas of women's submissions during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe. Using data gathered through desktop research, this article starts by exploring feminist theory and how it helps to understand women. As a subject of study, women call attention to all socio-economic and political factors that militate against them. The second part gives a snapshot overview of the existing literature about pandemics. The third section explores the women's theologies of submissions from a cultural and religious perspective. The fourth section discusses how women's submission theologies are a trap in the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Feminist theory theoretical framework

This study uses feminist theory as a theoretical framework to understand the impact of women's submission theologies in COVID-19. Feminist theory is an interpretive tool for analysing sexual differences and women's emancipation (Bator 2001). The starting point of feminist theory is to view women as oppressed because of their sex and social systems, and such a status quo must change. Sexism and patriarchy are prominent knowledge systems that propel the oppression of women. Thus, feminist theory helps this study to understand that the impact of COVID-19 is not equal between men and women. So, from a feministic perspective, it is critical to recognise the role of women and their experiences during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Feminist theory is built on gender, which assists in defining traits that permeate all aspects of social life. Gasztold (2020:17) states, 'Feminists believe that, traditionally, research has negated cultural gender and, therefore, all attempts to extend gender neutrality to all analyses which centre on the human being and its interactions in the public sphere'. Coronavirus disease 2019 and the restrictions have reinforced several gendered African religious and cultural perspectives. Gender is a critical factor in understanding the impact of submission theology in pandemics. It is essential to analyse women as a subject and their experiences in pandemics. According to Manyonganise (2022), COVID-19 has put the face of a woman. Accordingly, this resonates with the position that pandemics increase gender-based violence (GBV) (Magezi & Manzanga 2020; Mothoagae & Mavhandu-Mudzusi 2021; Stiebert 2021). In terms of GBV, post-structural feminism encourages the deconstruction of power. Broadly, feminism encourages women's studies to examine further issues related to power, social status and gender. Enloe (2007:99) states, 'Feminism puts women – their experiences, their ideas, their actions, thoughts about them, efforts to convince and manipulate them – on centre stage'. Thus, the hypothesis of the feminist theory in this study is to explore how creation stories and other selective biblical stories on submission are loosely

used and twisted to justify women's submission. Biased interpretations and representations are prominent towards sustaining patriarchal notions of subjecting women. For instance, Ephesians 5:22–25 is used out of context to justify that women should submit to their husband.

## A snippet of the existing literature review on pandemics

There is a growing literature about religion and pandemics. Scholars have echoed that religion has a critical role in curbing pandemics. According to Chitando (2009), churches in Zimbabwe provided spaces to communicate and teach about HIV and AIDS. Furthermore, the work by Chitando contends that Africans who were affected by HIV and AIDS and other challenges, such as ethnic war and corruption, will survive the pandemic. Although the Ndaue women in the Chipinge district in Zimbabwe were a victim of harmful traditional practices, which increased the spread of HIV and AIDS, women were instrumental in providing a positive response to the HIV and AIDS pandemic (Mapuranga 2009).

In West Africa, the Ebola outbreak in 2014 affected countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea and religious beliefs and practices impacted the ways of caring for sick patients (Marshall & Sally 2015). Findings by Marshall further explain the fact that Ebola pandemics stirred issues of stigma and gender role challenges. Still, religious institutions and the health and education sectors provided services to deal with the pandemic. According to Jansen (2019), the unified voices and continuous collective effort of faith leaders helped to reduce infections and encouraged people not to be afraid of Ebola.

Religious beliefs are society's primary lens to understand people's experiences during pandemics. Religion embeds cultural practices and beliefs, facilitating communication between humans and the divine (Westerlund 2006). Anthropologists noticed that religion has fundamental characteristics that reveal and explain misfortunes and sickness (Louise 2008). Religious explanation for pandemics is twofold: firstly, it helps people look for supernatural explanations, and secondly, it makes sense to contemporary society (Bryne 2008). Such submissions by these scholars shed more light on how religion impacts women's submission theology. For instance, Christianity is a tool used to exert pressure in forcing women into patriarchy by misinterpreting or cherry-picking scriptures out of context to meet their goals.

Women's submissions do not happen alone but are shaped by intrinsic theologies and cultures. In Zimbabwe, diverse factors, such as religion and culture, bolster women's submission. The Shona culture in Zimbabwe has clear boundaries about the role of men and women from childhood to adulthood. Bourdillon (2004), a renowned traditional researcher in Zimbabwe, argues that:

[A] man's character to an extent lies in the traditions in which he was brought up and the experiences he has undergone, but anyone can change, especially under the influence of outside pressures. (p. 3)

Through oral tradition, children understand their culture. Folktales and *mahumbwe* (role-play – where children play the role of the elderly) are a source of information. Attitudes and actions such as these reinforce the patriarchy in Zimbabwean society. According to Baloyi (2011:107), ‘headship of man in the house has been of greater importance’ than fairness or the wellbeing of women. For instance, it is socially accepted that husbands can discipline women and children. In such cases, women’s submission is even forced on women. Perceptions about submissions are shaped by men’s and women’s experiences of headship in society. Mukonyora (1999) argues that men in African society are regarded as official guardians of land and lineage. In sub-Saharan Africa, kinship is stressed through males and the passing over kinship through females. The husband is seen as the sole provider of the family and collectively cements the behaviour of men. For instance, men’s providence makes them superior, and they consciously expect women to submit and depend on them. The submission of women happens even after the husband dies or after a divorce.

Whenever cultural practices and Christianity go hand in hand, people tend to regard such practices as par excellence and pay less attention to their negative impact. The notion of submission is central to Christian belief and applied to many facets. In most cases, submission is regarded as an act of love. Such a proposition is elusive as so many evils can be performed in the name of love. To a greater extent, submission has been misguided, distorted and ill-used in Christian families and communities. Prominent biblical scripture used for submission is Ephesians 5:22–25, which encourages women to submit to their husbands. The concept of submission involves voluntary training to achieve it (Band, Drape & England 2003). Women’s submission level to their husbands is equated to duplicate submission unto the Lord (Chapell 2009). Women have suffered and been abused by men because of this scripture (Shaba 2005). For instance, some women are afraid to ask their husbands to use condoms even during this pandemic (Shaba 2005). The Christian submission theology is popularly reinforced in churches and homes (Ekeyo 1994). In the worst scenario, women who dare challenge their husbands in cases where submission is not the best choice are either regarded as sinners or acting in violation of the scriptures (Ekeyo 1994). This resonates with complementarian theology, which argues that women are supposed to submit to their husbands in marriage. Keller and Keller (2011) state that biblical submission is framed in mutual love and respect.

The Christian theology of submission is extended to mean that women who submit to their husbands keep a God-given virtue that their children will follow (Dickson 2011). Another challenge Machingura (2011) noticed about submission is that submission is equally emphasised in Christian and African traditional duties. There might be a slight hesitation in controlling a church’s values about submission (Theron 2015). The creation stories account for submission; a woman came from Adam’s rib. Genesis 1:26 states that man was formed in God’s image, but equality is not prioritised. According to the

complementarian theology, men and women are equal in value before God. However, Piper and Grudem (eds. 1991) opine that the difference between men and women is seen in their distinct roles in family and church. Also, in 1 Corinthians 11 verses 7–9, a man is a portrait of God and reflects his glory, but the woman is the glory of man. Furthermore, ‘the historical characterization of God as only male, then, has prolific implications for the construction of women’s personhood, particularly as it relates to submission to violence’ (Moder 2019:88).

## Women submissions: A trap in pandemics

This study discusses women’s submission dilemmas in the context of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe. The emerging dilemma themes are women’s submission and sexual violence, women’s submission and economic challenges, women’s submission and mental health and women’s submission and sexual and reproductive health.

### Women’s submission and sexual violence

The measures to curb COVID-19 trapped women in sexual violence. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020:367) ‘closed borders and lockdowns have become part of the most immediate global response to curbing the spread of human infections by the virus’. The COVID-19 pandemic increased reported cases of intimate partner violence (IPV), GBV and rape (Martin & Ahlenback 2020). According to Manyonganise (2022), African families’ social and cultural setup made COVID-19 social distancing a luxury. Resonating with this point Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) asserts that:

[M]ore than any other recent occurrence, the outbreak of COVID-19 has proved the point about the extent of global human entanglements and pushed home the necessity of finding humane ways of co-existing and sharing space on this earth between humans and other beings. (p. 367)

### Women’s submission and economic challenges

The nation’s financial crisis, intensifying inflation, increased food shortages challenging communal health systems, lockdown and communal distancing, worsened communal customs and economic and communal anxiety have made women defenceless in Zimbabwe (Tinarwo et al. 2023). This study adds that the emergency of COVID-19 is plunged into the existing patriarchal issues, further exacerbating women defenceless. The COVID-19 has negatively impacted women because many women use informal business sectors (Zhanda et al. 2022). According to Dzawanda, Matsa and Nicolau (2021), the coronavirus restrictions prohibited women from engaging in trade locally, even going to trade in other countries or finding different ways to sustain themselves. In addition, although prostitution existed before the pandemic, however, the Global Fund (2021) also shows that the closing of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic led many poor girls to engage in prostitution to help their parents. In Mazowe, some women and girls are involved in sexual



activities to sustain themselves, ignoring the dangers of being infected with deadly diseases such as HIV and AIDS (Matiashe 2020). Several people lost their jobs because of lockdowns and limitations, forcing companies' production to lessen (Chirisa et al. 2021). According to Manyonganise (2023), the advances in technology have made women feel left behind in economic empowerment because of marginalisation as most Indigenous women cannot conduct business online. During COVID-19, women and girls have been economically vulnerable (Stiebert 2021).

The double effect of women's economic challenges during COVID-19 should be interpreted using the socio-cultural lenses and the legacy of submissions. Auret (1990) disputed that the whole Zimbabwean set-up concerning riches is gender controlled. Women in Zimbabwe not only have low educational training but also the patriarchal tendencies subject them to poverty. The Shona tradition and cultural aspects have favoured men economically. Men lead, make decisions and possess the most authority in the family. Boys are groomed to take leadership roles and make crucial family decisions. Girls are trained to be caretakers of homes, thus cooking, cleaning and raising children. More often, women continue to work hard to rise in professionalism and hold top societal positions.

However, their predicament is that men are noticed as authoritative figures. Society struggles to accept and recognise women's roles, such as motherhood, as professional roles. Society shapes gender roles through values, ethos, customs and culture. Colonialism has significantly worsened women's professionalism by keeping them as nannies, making them inferior to their male counterparts (Sweetman 2000). Culture is an outlet for showing emotions and rational responses to different circumstances. Some cultural practices are unfair to women. From an egalitarian theology perspective, submission should be viewed on the premise that men and women are equal in value and function. According to Wright (2004) scriptures used to support egalitarian gender roles should be interpreted in their historical and cultural context. Society has an agenda to control women (Jeffreys 2002). Accordingly, this resonates with the egalitarian theology, which argues that certain biblical scriptures that support women's submission are either culturally bound or misinterpreted. According to Pierce and Groothuis (eds. 2005), there should be equal relationships and partnerships between men and women in both the church and at home.

### Women's submission and mental health

The subject of mental health is less topical in Zimbabwe because of various socio-cultural stigmas. So, it is urgent to revisit this subject, especially considering what COVID-19 has revealed. It is predicted that 'the COVID-19 pandemic is a mental health time bomb that will soon explode with catastrophic results in Zimbabwe' (Cassim 2020). This assertion resonated with the finding of Mutamiri (2021), who notes that:

The COVID-19 aftermath led to an increase on the importance of mental health and mental wellbeing. Mental health has become as important as physical health, thereby increasing the need for treatment, diagnosis, and intensive psychological care. Such rise in mental health issues can be attributed to such problems as economic depression, the rising cost of living, loss of income, unemployment, and the uncertain, slow recovery of economic systems from the post-COVID-19 pandemic. (p. 4)

During COVID-19, women experienced difficult times, including but not limited to abuse, rape and caring for persons suffering from the COVID-19 virus. Women do double work, such as household chores, taking care of the family and contributing to putting food on the table. Debatably, women put in more time than men and are constantly worried about overtiredness and burnout. Women's hormonal imbalance during menstruation, pregnancy and menopause potentially trigger mental health issues (Albert 2015). These issues and many others are recipes for women's mental health illness.

Women's mental health issue is a result of a boiling pot encouraging women to submit in unhealthy circumstances and abusive marriages. The male-controlled systems of Zimbabwe, which deny women employment space, cause a greater rate of mental health illness (Abas & Broadland 1997). Lowly-paid women often are subjected to depression, leading to mental health illness (World Health Organization [WHO] 2021). Women in Zimbabwe tend to suffer more from anxiety and depression (Chibanda et al. 2011). In Africa, forced marriages, abortions and family-in-law conflicts are triggers of women's mental health illness (WHO 2005). Teaching about women's submissions to family members, especially wives to mothers-in-law, is prominent. In Christian tradition, the scriptures of Ruth and Naomi are often used to educate women to always stick to their mother-in-law, no matter the situation. Such submission of women to significant others in the family to a greater extent affects women. According to Nolen-Hoeksema (2001), social values and hierarchy affect women, causing depression and anxiety.

### Women's submission and sexual and reproduction health

In Zimbabwe, COVID-19 has made many people avoid hospitals and resort to traditional remedies. There are so many factors for this status quo. For instance, besides the fact that the health sector in Zimbabwe is malfunctioning because of years of neglect (Dandara, Dzobo & Chirikure 2021), the COVID-19 conspiracy theories have led people to be afraid of vaccinations (Imhoff & Lamberty 2020). Zimbabweans prefer traditional healers in illness, which is difficult to explain (Pitorak, Duffy & Sharer 2012). According to Sibanda, Muyambo and Chitando (2022:15), 'Indigenous knowledge systems will continue to shape the responses of many Africans to pandemics'. Zimfact (2020) states that there is an increase in child and pregnancy-related deaths. Women's mental health issues increased because women were more exposed to COVID-19 because of their caring nature (Cassim 2020). There are ethical dilemmas concerning rights and responsibility. According to Nyoni (2023):

[D]o relatives, employers, and friends have a moral 'obligation' to care for their COVID-19 and HIV victims? That is, do the victims have a 'right' to be cared for by those who are well, irrespective of how they contracted the disease? A reconciliation of such clashing views underscores an application of ethical norms since it is inevitable to make informed and balanced decisions on how to take care of COVID-19 as well as HIV and AIDS victims without application of ethical knowledge. (p. 334)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, women are powerless over men, resulting in health requirements and compromising sexual and reproductive health (UNFPA 2020). Matiashe (2020) asserts that many had to resort to being prostitutes and sell their bodies for money. From a cultural perspective, COVID-19 made many within the community re-examine other ways of life firmly grounded in their lives (Women and Law in Southern Africa 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic happened when Zimbabwe was already experiencing economic and financial challenges (Murisa 2021). Seeking traditional healers was an alternative because they charge reasonably and are available within people's communities (Shoko 2018).

Women's submission to matters detrimental to their sexual and reproductive health is a common phenomenon in Zimbabwe. The traditional culture moulds women to be submissive and obey their husbands as the husband is the leader. Unfair cultural practices limit women from voicing out about prejudices and abuses, particularly relating to sexuality (Wolffe 1992). For example, it is perceived abnormal and ill-mannered for a woman to reject her husband sexually. This insinuates that a woman is not the owner of her own body in issues that involve intimacy. However, she has the authority to beautify herself and look gorgeous so that her body will delight her husband. Migration is regarded as safer for males than women. Some men relocating to other nations led to unsafe sex with numerous people, and upon returning to their families, the wives had less authority to ask for protected sex (Sachiti 2014). The traditional culture weakens the power of women to bargain sex. Girls are expected to be virgins before marriage. Traditionally, girls are tested to see if they are still virgins; this was done through elderly women putting a finger and perceiving if the hymen is unharmed (Wadesango 2011). Most women in Africa are not protected; from time immemorial, women have continued to suffer violence and injustices because of traditional ethos (Shonayin 2012). The tradition of paying *lobola* or *roora* [bridal price] gives men the right to discipline women if they are not submitting to them. According to Chisale (2016), women are considered lesser beings than men.

According to Manyonganise (2023):

[S]ome of these studies do not cast African women as perpetual victims in a pandemic context, but also reveal their agency and courage to navigate the impact of the pandemic by ensuring the health and safety of their families and communities. (p. 15)

In Zimbabwe, a woman is seen as the pillar of the family, decorated with the phrase *musha mukadzi* [a home secured by a woman]. This phrase shows how women play a critical duty at home (Manyonganise 2015). In a way, such

appraisals by society cause women to want to survive life-and-death situations.

## Conclusion

This article explored the much-celebrated practices of the theologies of submission and how the challenges of global COVID-19 have further unmasked African women's unique difficulties in society. Women's submission trapped women to be affected more by COVID-19 than their male counterparts. The COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably disrupted all spheres of life. Such disruptions call for revisiting the pandemic's impact on marginalised groups like women, who have suffered in multiple ways. These findings resonate with the Feminist theory, which suggests that when studying women, it is critical to consider the social, economic and political factors that militate against them. The Christian traditions that celebrate women's submissions have worsened the experiences of women during COVID-19. The COVID-19 restrictions made men spend time with women and family at home, opening room for submissions. Women are expected to submit to their husbands, and this has caused an increase in women's sexual health challenges during COVID-19. Women's submission theologies are negative traps to succumb to GBV.

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N.S. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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