

Prayers for women's livelihoods in Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 lockdown era

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This study is centred on African Initiated Churches (AICs) and women's livelihoods during the COVID-19 era in Zimbabwe. African Initiated Churches which have a large women's following became a portal of women's livelihoods because the churches dealt with poverty affecting women and their lost entrepreneurial opportunities. At their *sowes* [worship places], the AICs responded by providing women with *miteuro* [ritualised prayers], which were performed with anointed waters and *nhombo* [anointed or ritualised pebbles] all of which helped in giving *zambuko* [deliverance or breakthrough]. The prayers were found to give hope and resilience, which became protective factors against the adversities associated with COVID-19.

Contribution: This study's contribution is centred on Practical Theology. It showed how the church has spiritually supported women's livelihoods, consequently empowering them in the economic spheres of their lives through faith.

Keywords: African Initiated Churches; COVID-19; entrepreneurship; faith healers; muteuro; sowes; women's livelihoods; Zimbabwe.

Introduction

This study is based on Practical Theology exploring the response of African Initiated Churches (AICs) to women's livelihoods, which had been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic, which, according to Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO Director-General, 'is not just a public health crisis; it is a crisis that touches every sector. So, every sector and every individual must be involved in the fight' (Young 2020:n.p). In the context of Zimbabwe, apart from people losing the lives of loved ones, their businesses closed, others lost their jobs and inflation skyrocketed. Resultantly, many were left in abject poverty (Ngcobo & Mashau 2022). At the height of the pandemic, during lockdowns, women shouldered much of the burden at home, providing care to sick family members, serving food on the table for the family and facing longstanding gender inequalities in unpaid work (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2020). Just like all other institutions, the church also felt the brunt of the lockdown measures to contain the spread of the virus. However, within that stifled Christian landscape, the self-governed open-air AICs defied the government's COVID-19 lockdown measures and undertook the missionary role by positively responding to the crisis. This study makes special focus on how women's economic fortunes, which had been affected by lockdowns, were rejuvenated within AIC's spiritual intervention strategies. The chosen area of the study, which is Masvingo, is mainly populated by the Shona people who constitute the biggest ethnic group in Zimbabwe.

Methodology

Using a phenomenological approach, this qualitative study solicited data from fieldwork using narrative enquiry. Narrative enquiry uses stories to describe human experience and action. People would then give meaning to their lives through the stories they tell (Ntinda 2020). The study identified the following factors that determined livelihood choice during the COVID-19 pandemic such as age, gender, marital status (Ayifaha et al. 2021) and religious affiliation.

As shown in Table 1, the study participants consisted of 18 women and 4 men who were voluntarily recruited using purposive sampling from the city of Masvingo, which is in the southeastern part of Zimbabwe. The composition of the participants consisted of the following: 10 followers of AICs, five non-AICs followers, three AICs prophetesses and four AICs prophets. During the recruitment procedure, the consent of participants was gained verbally, and the participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Twenty semi-structured interviews,

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TABLE 1: Total number of study participants in the study ($N = 22$).

Age range (years)	Gender		Marital status			Religious affiliation			
	Male	Female	Married	Divorced	Widowed	AICs followers	Non-AICs follower	AICs prophets	AICs prophetesses
18–30	2	8	7	3	0	5	2	2	1
31–40	2	10	4	6	2	5	3	2	2

AICs, African Initiated Churches.

which lasted for 30 min each were conducted. Five focus group discussions (FGDs) with each group having 10 participants were conducted and the discussions lasted for about 50 min. The fieldwork was carried out between January and May 2022 in the city of Masvingo and complemented with desk research. The information was used by this study to understand, describe and analyse aspects of participants' socio-economic lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. The names of the participants and their churches were not disclosed. Major themes emerging from the data were then summarised and presented thematically. The '*Musha mukadzi* and women's livelihoods' section deals with the conceptual framework of the study.

***Musha mukadzi* and women's livelihoods**

Among the Shona people, there was genderisation of family chores as prescribed by their religio-cultural belief practices. Genderisation of family roles is understood within the context of clusters of socially defined expectations that people of one gender are expected to fulfil (Wokocha 2008). The indigenous Shona religious culture, for example entrenched in AICs encouraged women to abide by teachings that made them good mothers and wives who contribute positively to satisfying the family's physical and emotional requirements. This study acknowledges the importance of women as a common belief among the Shona people especially in a pandemic situation. So, two concepts were conjoined as the study's frameworks, which are *musha mukadzi* [the home is a woman] and women's livelihoods. Among the indigenous people, women's central role in their communities is metaphorically expressed by the Shona proverb *musha mukadzi* (Mujinga 2023). It is a Shona adage stating that the image, prosperity and happiness of a family are anchored on the presence of the woman (Mujinga 2023). The women had the autonomy to be involved in initiatives, which were meant to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 through visiting AICs and seeking spiritual help to revive or initiate some economic relief in their families. Thus, according to Anderson et al. (2021):

[U]nder the common assumption that women and men, on average, differentially prioritise resource expenditures, increasing a women's share of household decision-making authority would be expected to change household economic outcomes. (p. 194)

This study understands a livelihood as meeting people's survival needs including shelter, food, water and clothing (Mujinga 2023). In Mujinga's view, if these are not provided, people live in abject poverty. In his study of the Shona people, Gelfand (1992) depicts women as the driving force for family livelihoods. The beginning and sustainability of the women's livelihood strategies hinged on the accessibility and

availability of AICs' spiritual resources. *Musha mukadzi* was a vital source of social capital for women's livelihoods. This resonates well with Chirara and Chisale (2023) who argue that the *musha mukadzi* philosophy was used in Shona indigenous communities as a resource for sustaining livelihoods. Thus, the religio-cultural traditions served as a powerful influence in shaping Shona people's gender roles and attitudes, providing moral frameworks, social norms and interpretations of teachings through sayings that often reinforce traditional gender hierarchies and expectations. According to Trzebiatowska and Bruce (2012), in almost every culture and religious tradition, women are more likely than men to pray, worship and claim that their faith is important to them. It is on this basis that when COVID-19 negatively impacted indigenous families, women resorted to spiritual assistance to enhance their families' economic well-being. Economic well-being means people have their most basic survival needs met and have sustainable income and assets so they can prosper (International Rescue Committee [IRC] 2024). In the 'Clarification of the term AICs, their economic slant and the place of women' section, the study elucidates the meaning of AICs, their economic implications and the role of women.

Clarification of the term African Initiated Churches, their economic slant and the place of women

The study highlights some of the institutional characteristic features of AICs in their inclination to economic and business participation of their followers. For the acronym AICs, this study has adopted 'African Initiated Churches' (Chitando 2005:8). It is more appealing because the name implies churches founded by indigenous Africans for Africans in their special African situations (Appiah-Kubi 1977:117). Admittedly, this study is so much interested in nascent AICs' groupings, which had not been explored by both seasoned and budding scholars of religion, yet these churches offer so much to enhance indigenous people's livelihoods through their *miteuro* [ritualised prayers]. These church groupings are found in the margins of the cities' residential areas. They usually regard themselves as *chechi dzeMweya* that is Spirit-type churches (Maguranyanga 2011), and consequently base their religious beliefs and practices primarily on *Mweya* [Spirit] or *Izwi* [Voice of God]. They use certain garment and cloth colours, which are understood to be associated with wealth accumulation or economic prosperity. So, in matters to do with finances, employment and businesses, they receive advice and or guidance from the Holy Spirit or Voice of God through the mediation of prophets and church leaders. They encourage members to be self-employed and engage in

various artisanal jobs (Taru & Settler 2015). In terms of the composition of their membership, Chitando (2005:122) postulates that women constitute most members within AICs. These churches play a tremendous role in dealing with women's livelihood challenges. They consolidate women's traditional status and position [*musha mukadzi*] of being the main actors in providing for their families as presented in the 'Findings' section of this study

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was submitted to the Philosophy and Religious Studies Research Ethics Committee (PRSREC) at Great Zimbabwe University and consent was received on 27 June 2022. The ethics approval number is PRSREC 0018. All procedures involving human participants adhered to the ethical standards set by the institutional and/or national research committee, as well as the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

Findings

The ensuing presentation is the findings of the study. The first issue to be explored was prayers for women's livelihoods.

Vital prayers for women's livelihoods

Several participants involved in petty trading reported that during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, visiting prophets was crucial for them. The prayers they received gave them the courage to continue their business activities despite the rules and regulations imposed because of the pandemic. One participant M14 said:

'We did not receive any financial help or material assistance from the prophets and faith leaders but prayers for entrepreneurial activities' (Participant 14, interview, Masvingo, 25 February 2022).

It was emphasised during FGDs that for the women, prayers removed obstacles such as police arrests, which were affecting the smooth flow of their small livelihood businesses, especially during lockdowns. Confirmation from World Vision (2023) on this matter is that when families' livelihoods improve, they can break the cycle of poverty and sustainably pursue their family's education, health, food security, nutrition and shelter needs.

During FGDs, participants concurred that some AICs' women organised prayer teams through the guidance of their faith leaders. They congregated once a week praying for business opportunities and survival of their business. It was also learnt that occasionally, the women would invite their prophets to pray with them. The discussants emphasised the presence of their prophets as significant in that it was a platform where their written petitions were put in sanctified utensils such as clay pots for ritual prayer purposes. A significant number of women testified during FGDs that

there was a big positive change brought about by having prayers embedded in their small businesses. The indigenous Christian women believed that prayer was the mechanism God used through his prophets to interact with women entrepreneurs and become more involved in their businesses and lives (Kahle 2017).

The way AICs' establishments responded to the COVID-19 pandemic was an indication of their spiritual impact on the economic landscape ravaged by the coronavirus. One participant M23 responded using the following words:

'At the height of the COVID-19 era, I was committed to helping people who had economic constraints, particularly women. I had a golden colour garment which I wore when praying for women's livelihoods. The golden colour boosted the financial situations of my clients.' (Participant 23, interview, Masvingo, 5 February 2022)

What M23 said about the symbolism of gold colour is confirmed by Fussell (2024:n.p) who contends that 'Long associated with wealth and prosperity, gold is a colour synonymous with luxury and riches and sometimes excess'. The faith healers provided direct spiritual assistance for women who were not only determined to feed their families but also to work to improve livelihood opportunities for long-term economic well-being. Women who were given spiritual prayers by M23 testified that they were successful in their finances and small businesses. This success was imbued in the belief that it was through the power of God who is often depicted in the Old Testament as the one offering new solutions to his people (Ficatier 2017).

African Initiated Churches in livelihoods consultancy

When the economy came to a 'halt' during the lockdowns, entrepreneurs and those aspiring to be entrepreneurs relied on prophets for business consultation:

'Our faith leader engaged a prophetess who was also an experienced businesswoman to give us talks on booming entrepreneurship during the COVID-19 era. The consultations which were free of charge were mainly done once a week during our women guilds sessions and we benefited a lot from the business advice we were given.' (Participant 19, interview, Masvingo, 20 February 2022)

Focus group discussions also elaborated that during the consultation processes, livelihoods prophecies were given to women, which inculcated general beliefs about wealth creation, prosperity and acquisition of material goods. M1, a discussant recounted saying:

'A prophecy was given by a prophetess that we were to earn a living through selling of wares which were on demand especially by women who sought spiritual help from prophets. Though it was risky, we were encouraged to move in the city's residential suburbs selling items such as cloth, candles, tokoloshi salt and vimbela. The prophetess linked us with a businessperson who was sending us these goods from South Africa.' (Participant 1, Focus Group Discussion, Masvingo, 19 March 2022)

This concurs with the results of a study conducted by Sibanda and Humbe (2022) on wealth creation when they found out that some Apostolic churches defied the lockdown rules on the basis of venturing into their informal businesses to make ends meet. This particular concern confirms the AICs ethic of economic engagement, whereby they take the production of wares such as tinkered pots, buckets, dishes, kettles, candle stands, baking sheets and handcrafted items such as door mats as well as baskets as forms of self-reliance and survival. In Ayifaha et al.'s (2021) view, religious affiliation could have an additional effect on livelihood activity choice, through its effect on risk behaviour.

Referring to their vegetable vending business, a significant number of AICs' women in an FGD explained that going to *Chitima* [Masvingo's major vegetable trade centre] was no longer possible because of lockdowns. So, young and middle-aged women from their *sowe* [worship centre] were advised by their prophet to be organised into small groups and travel to nearby plots to purchase farm produce for selling. Acknowledging the intervention of their prophet in vegetable vending, which became a reliable source of livelihood, M16 said the following words:

'I am thankful to the prophet who told us about the plots where we got vegetables, tomatoes, cabbages, potatoes and okra daily. The prophet gave us a *muteuro* for protection during the pandemic era.' (Participant 16, interview, Masvingo, 17 March 2022)

The COVID-19 era became the moment for the AICs to utilise their economic transformative capability as they remained with a high potential to shape attitudes and values for the suffering communities' economic well-being. This was supported by M2 who boastfully said:

'Against all odds, I made a lot of profits during the COVID-19 era, I established this tuckshop using the proceeds from my vegetable business' (Participant 2, interview, Masvingo, 25 January 2022).

The entrepreneurs' faith made them loyal to their prophets' advice (Humbe & Muwaniki 2017). From the aforementioned views, it can be found that the choice of petty trading as a livelihood for women came through the guidance of prophets. Evidently, there was a strong positive social capital effect of being petty traders. In this context, AICs are viewed as what Ayifaha et al. (2021) call producers and facilitators of social capital.

***Zambuko* [deliverance or breakthrough] as a source of business and employment**

Participant M7 contended that:

'... prophesying without ending the problems was a non-event, so people always looked for prophets who provided *zambuko*' (Participant 7, interview, Masvingo, 12 January 2022).

M20 highly praised apostolic churches for having an inclusive approach to helping desperate people regardless of their religious affiliation. She narrated her story saying:

'I became jobless because of COVID-19. So, I had no money to pay rentals and buy food for my children. One day my friend took me to a certain prophetess who operated in the bush about 2kms from our residential suburb. Upon our arrival, she told me the reason why I was one of the few to be retrenched at my workplace. She then gave me *muteuro* to use when bathing for 7 consecutive days while fasting. I was instructed to make utterances of my petitions during bathing. The prophetess sternly warned me against having sexual intercourse during the *muteuro* period. On the last day to do the *muteuro* I received a call from a Non-Governmental Organisation in Masvingo which offered me a well-paying job.' (Participant 20, interview, Masvingo, 16 March 2022)

The notion of *zambuko* was also realised even by those who were in the selling of wares. Some participants felt that the *muteuro* did not only help to protect them from arrest by police officers but also to sell out their perishable goods quickly. M5 acknowledged the efficacy of *muteuro* in providing *zambuko* saying:

'The prophet gave me anointed water to wash my face and sprinkle groceries in my tuckshop just before starting my daily business. I was also given anointed pebbles which I mixed with my body lotion. The anointed water and pebbles warded off evil spirits which caused some misfortunes in my business endeavours during the lockdown period. God sent clients to come and buy groceries from my tuckshop. My small business got boosted, being a single mother, the money I got was handy in fending for my three children and my aged parents.' (Participant 5, interview, Masvingo, 11 April 2022)

Generally, what the women presented to the prophets to have their economic woes managed were questions like 'why am I suffering ...' and requests such as 'how can I get out of this ...'. In most cases, a template that was used by the prophets in managing problems, which have been brought about by this crisis was to interpret the cause behind these misfortunes propelled by the pandemic and explore their implications (Reddy & Mamabolo 2023).

From the foregoing, one can surmise that the prophets identified the forces behind the woman's dismissal from work and the unattractiveness of wares, which were being sold. So, the *muteuro* was meant to exorcise these forces. Then the second thing was the provision of *zambuko* to the job seeker to secure another job and boost sales for the vendors. The *zambuko* came when the prophets' *muteuro* exorcised spirits, which were forbidding the women from succeeding in employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. The removal of the spirit was necessitated by the women's resilience in adhering to the dos and don'ts prescribed by the prophets such as fasting, having cold baths without detergents and avoiding sexual intercourse for the period they did their *muteuro*. Religious responses came to the forefront of explanation, analysis and responses to COVID-19 because indigenous Africans were seeking an understanding and interpretation of the 'why' of the pandemic.

African Initiated Churches providing prophetic direction for women savings clubs

Reflecting on the performance of her business entity, M2 explained that:

‘... because of the lockdowns, cash flow was severely curtailed, and this negatively suffocated the survival of my business’ (Participant 2, interview, Masvingo, 04 January 2022).

To counter this problem, FGDs were clear in that AICs intensified savings clubs, which were known as *mikando* or *fushai* [micro-credit clubs] opened exclusively to church members. The discussants encapsulated that AICs did not provide financial capital for women to start these savings clubs, but the churches organised social capital for the micro-credit clubs and then provided prophetic prayers for a smooth run of these micro-credit clubs. Articulating the transformative impact of the AICs on women’s business during the COVID-19 period, M7 narrated saying:

‘My sewing business had collapsed only to revive after I received money from my church’s *mukando* project’ (Participant 14, interview, Masvingo, 12 February 2022).

Based on the views of participants, the savings clubs proved their value in Masvingo as one of the major sources of capital for small businesses, which empowered the desperate women. Such grouping might have caused members of the same religion to engage in the same livelihood activities (Ayifaha et al. 2021). Empowerment of women hustlers became a means of increasing household productivity, either through prioritisation of their new business investments or re-allocating finances to already existing underperforming businesses. Similar to these results, Mujinga (2023) also establishes that women in Zimunya bought groceries through the women’s savings clubs to eliminate hunger and food shortages in their households.

Discussion

Implications of the study findings are that there was spiritualisation of the indigenous people’s economic well-being during pandemics. In difficult times brought about by the emergence of COVID-19, women were found to be deeply involved in prayer activities showing their steadfastness in faith. The churches offered hope, solidarity and emotional assistance to women dealing with the crisis’ economic challenges. In a volatile business environment, the ritualised prayers helped women with risk aversion. When faith healers provided *muteuro* and *zambuko* which brought success in women’s petty trading activities and formal employment opportunities, the women attributed their success to the power of God because he was understood as the provider of solutions in difficult moments.

Although the faith leaders were not trained business professionals, in some situations, they also helped in capacity building by praying and practically facilitating

implementations of women’s microfinance programmes, which saved tremendously in bailing out women’s economic woes. It sounds theologically plausible to claim a re-imagination of the way businesses were being run during the COVID-19 era through the guidance of faith leaders, because there was an understanding that through the Holy Spirit, God was helping the faith leaders to be imaginative and innovative in entrepreneurial ideas for their followers.

The tenets of being self-financed and self-governed churches influenced the development of an entrepreneurial ideology among members of the AIC groupings during the COVID-19 era. This shows the importance of religion as a specific type of social capital in the selection of livelihood activities. As was established by this study, it was a faith-mediated economic well-being for women’s livelihoods. Underpinned by the *musha mukadzi* philosophy, women managed to look after their families from the hustling businesses they were running.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic presented huge obstacles to communities worldwide, and Zimbabwe was no exception. Many Zimbabwean women were heavily affected, losing jobs and facing the collapse of their small businesses. However, the AICs in Zimbabwe played an important role in providing ritualised prayers, which unlocked job opportunities for women and supported women’s economic livelihoods. The work ethic of AICs was a manifest extension of their economic mission, which thrives on self-reliance. The positive outlook was *musha mukadzi* philosophy, which served as a source of resilience to overcome the COVID-19 challenges and ensure their businesses’ survival.

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Author’s contributions

B.P.H. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability

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