



## UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

SCHOOL OF RELIGION AND THEOLOGY

**Term paper:**

“African Women’s Perspectives on the interconnection of illiteracy and marginalization of married women in Zambia”

**Issues in Contemporary African Christianity: African women’s Theologies**

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## Abstract

This essay analyses the interconnection between the illiteracy of the majority of married women in Zambia and the marginalization that they experience. This marginalization is founded on patriarchy, which gives a preferential option for males at the expense of females. In this way, all feminine is seen as inferior and may therefore be exploited by men. African women's theologies are a revolutionary theology aiming at liberating women by seeking equal educational systems. This essay argues that women need the same platform to unleash their potential in life as men. In trying to mitigate the illiteracy of women, this essay ~~has-analyse~~s how illiteracy of the majority of -married women in Zambia is one of the reasons leading to their marginalisation. Feminist scholars show how the interconnection of illiteracy and marginalisation of women are embedded in patriarchy and finally show how the African women theologians have critiqued patriarchy and proposed a paradigm shift by arguing that gender inequality ~~denies~~denies women's rights to the fullness of life. This essay is a brief examination of how the illiteracy of the majority of married women of Zambia suffers marginalisation because they are seen as unable to think logically.

Comment [SN1]: femininity

Comment [SN2]: ?? Huh?

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## INTRODUCTION

This essay seeks to demonstrate that there is interconnectedness between the illiteracy<sup>1</sup> and marginalisation that the majority married women of Zambia experience. Feminist theology discourses have unveiled the significance of the unequal distribution of power between women and men around the globe. Zambians like many African people believe that a child is everyone's child. This means that he/she gets instructions from the parents in the community. In these communities, a Zambian woman is socially constructed as society forms what a woman has to be.

Growing up, women hear phrases that ~~entail~~ suggest that they have to prepare for marriage which means women do not need to study. This essay explores the experiences of the majority of Zambian married women through male inferiorization of women. It seeks to demonstrate how illiteracy and marginalisation of women are interconnected, and are embedded in acts and ideologies of patriarchy. This in itself demands one to ask, in what ways is illiteracy of women contributing to the marginalisation of women in Zambia? In order to respond to this question, I have appealed to African women theologies because of the strength it has in exposing issues of sexism and gender injustice in Church and society (Phiri 1997:70). African women's theologies utilise African cultures as one of its sources. It analyses aspects of the cultures such as songs, myths, proverbs etc. as sources of theologising (Phiri 2008/9:115). Isabel Phiri (2008/9:115) has argued that African women theologies differ from African theology in that it shares "with global feminist theology the highlighting of women's experience of self, God, community and nature as its starting point". In short, experiences of women are the starting point of African women's theologies. Like global feminist theology, African women's theologies suspect patriarchy as a cause of social inequality and apply global feminist theories to analyse African cultures and religions. Underpinning this essay within this framework, I have shown illiteracy and marginalisation of Zambian women are interconnected and embedded in patriarchal ideologies.

**Comment [SN3]:** This will need substantiation

The essay took a document analysis approach, which involved an extensive literature research of gender issues in African cultures and Christianity ~~on-the~~ and looked at both published and

<sup>1</sup> The word literacy is understood in this paper in its broader ~~in~~-widely diverse fields like 'computer literacy', legal literacy'. More accurately literacy conceptualised as high level skills in which the pedagogical tools of learning are applied by the teacher with intention and purpose, and the learner's background and need in a synthetic communicative context (Seon-Hee 2000:1). This is a form of education that prepares people for critical engagement with societal issues that affect them.

unpublished materials. In this analysis, I adopted African feminist cultural hermeneutics methodology because of its focus on the search for the positive and life-giving practices to women in African cultures while rejecting those that are life-denying (Phiri and Nadar 2006:12). The method is used here to critique the issues of gender inequality as it relates to education/literacy and has led to the oppression of the majority of married Zambian women. By utilising this approach, it becomes clear that illiteracy of majority of married women in Zambia is one of the reasons leading to their marginalisation. I have demonstrated that there is an interconnection between illiteracy and marginalisation of women and how these are embedded in patriarchy. Finally, I have shown how the African women's theories have critiqued patriarchy and proposed a paradigm shift by arguing that gender inequality deny women's rights to the fullness of life, by proposing prospects for gender equality in the context of illiteracy.

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## WOMEN AND ILLITERACY IN ZAMBIA

Zambian women are ~~raised from childhood and~~ socialised from childhood to believe that they are only meant for marriage and education is not necessary for them. This in turn socialises women into believing that even if they have no education, they will marry and survive. Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike (1991: 71) grieves that African women have endured the oppression that they face and have accepted "fatalistically" the conditions prescribed to them despite the oppressive nature of such conditions. Zambian women similarly have been constructed in a way that they expect to be married and that by marriage their lives would be enhanced. Elizabeth Mumba (2002:6), professor of Adult Education, currently Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Zambia, laments that many parents in Zambia prefer to spend the little money they have on the education of boys rather than of girls. Mumba (2002:6) continues that women in Zambia have been made to believe that they are not equal to men in the spheres of education, especially in mathematics and science. This message is reinforced by society that "this is a man's world". Mumba (2002:6) argues that this has resulted in their having low levels of self-esteem which eventually leads to an inferiority complex. Women do not even have a choice in most cases about whether to marry or pursue an education. It is as if woman and marriage are synonymous. In fact, a single 30-year-old woman would be seen as having (*icishilu*) been bewitched if she is not married at such an age.

Going through marital problems, my sister in-law narrated how she did not mind divorcing because she only had daughters, even if they did not get an education they would marry and have a good life. At the heart of denying women an education (because they will just get married) are patriarchal ideologies that are interested in keeping Zambian women under subordination.

Majority of Zambian married women have experienced marginalization in most aspects of life. ~~I-~~ illiteracy adds to that sphere. The majority of married women in Zambia (and in several societies in Africa) are in an illiterate position by prescription, of course some women may have decided not to get an education for various reasons, which are usually because they have to take care of family. However, when one looks closely at what could have led to the decision of not getting educated, it would be discovered that culture was at the root. Mercy Oduyoye (1992:10) is right in asserting that women's position in religion and society is prescribed to them for benefit of the whole community. Women almost always have to give up their right in order to let community benefit. Oduyoye explains that among the Yoruba of Nigeria ~~that~~ a bride's feet are washed at the threshold of her husband's house symbolizing the death of her old self ~~with the marriage~~ when she marries. ~~a~~ A Zambian woman dies many deaths to serve the needs and interests of the husband, family, community etc.

Comment [SN6]: Awkward expression

Comment [SN7]: Reference?

Mumba (2002:6) and Nelly Stromquist (1997:14) have observed that due to domestic societal tasks, girls usually are unavailable for schooling; this worsens when they reach adulthood as such responsibilities multiply. A lack of literacy makes women unable to become critical thinkers and acquire the ability to be agents for their own change and social transformation (Egbo 2000:23). Literate women are more in position, as argued by Bebedicta Egbo (2000:25) to "questioning both the existing social order and the colonizing effects of conventional literacy practices". Women in Zambia are told to be quiet about many things including marital problems and abuse from their spouses. Being uneducated/illiterate makes this silence even worse for most Zambian married women. African women scholars have demonstrated that culture has been used as a euphemism to put women down so that they do not realise their full potential or question the ills that they see in society.

## THE INTERCONNECTION BETWEEN ILLITERACY AND MARGINALISATION OF MARRIED WOMEN IN ZAMBIA

In analysing the marginalisation of married women, this section raises a number of issues. First, their spouses oppress because of their illiteracy. Here I present three ways in which the majority of illiterate married women of Zambia are perceived in marriage.

First, they are seen as less human and *inferior to the husband*. p'Bitek Okot (1966:36) had earlier alluded to this fact in his song of *Lawino*, where he shows that an illiterate woman is perceived as less human. He gives this song as a lamentation of the uneducated Acoli woman in Kenya. Tinyiko Maluleke (2006:62) has suggested that literacy with its western stance has not been helpful to the African context. In this sense I would also suggest that a literate husband with illiterate wives tend to look at their wives as inferior. The impact of western forms of education that does not take into account the African wisdom and philosophy, this coupled with the African patriarchal culture is double marginalization for Zambian married women. First, they are women and second, they are illiterate. Thus, as Maluleke (2006:63) proposed an education that takes into account African context, education needs to take into account women's experiences of illiteracy and conscientise men on respecting their wives despite their illiteracy.

Comment [SN8]: Awkward phrasing

Second, this perception that illiterate women are inferior to their husbands leads to *verbal abuse*. Daisy Nwachuku (1992:64) asserts that in a quest to contextualize African theology, consideration of African women's experiences should be taken as a normative of theologizing. Not only do majority of Zambian married women suffer physical abuse, they also experience verbal abuse. This form of oppression puts Zambian married women at the margins to an extent that they cannot give solution to their problem, this is because most people who are oppressed are unable to see the solution by themselves. In this sense, the majority of Zambian married women's illiteracy makes it even more complicated and difficult to see the solutions to their problems. Egbo (200:25) validates that literacy empowers women from the margins of domestication and gives them strength to fight for their emancipation.

Thirdly, it there seems there are special things that are *reserved only for the educated*, in this case men. Sarojini Nadar (2008/9:13) demonstrates that despite women having a job, culture and

religion have a strong hold on them that they are still looked down upon. If this is a case with **educated** women, culture has even more hold over the **illiterate** women. Egbo (2000:22) is right that illiterates are usually perceived as unable to think critically and reflectively on their sources and language. This illustrates the fact that **the** majority of Zambian married women need education, which will give them ability to attain those special things reserved for the educated and will empower them to stand up against the abuse reflectively. Egbo (2000:25) emphasizes that “an empowering literacy must transcend the benign conventional approaches to literacy that further domesticate marginalized groups” which in this sense are women. Clement Katulushi (1999:102) laments that some financial institutions in Zambia cannot give women loans without the consent of their husbands or a male relative. This is exacerbated by the fact, as Phiri (1997:68) notes that it is at the core of culture, which perpetuates illiteracy of women (in Zambia), that public policies for women are formed. Women in Zambia are excluded from the main decision-making organs of society and not fully represented in parliament because there are only a handful of educated women and most of the policies that are formulated are androcentric in nature. Katulushi (1999:102) observes that most Zambian men, especially in political sectors, argue that God made it that women and men should never be equal and the debate about improving the lot of women is a waste of time. It is clear that cultural mentality has so perverted the public sector of Zambian society to the extent that everything is interpreted through the lens of patriarchal ideology. Therefore, if those in places of power that can improve women’s livelihood are the ones denying equality, the possibility of improving women’s life are scandalised. It can be argued that improving the status of women should include literacy. Development and progress would be futile if the education of women is not taken seriously. Egbo (2000:25) argues that “women in the Sub-Saharan region have been marginalised on two levels: first by **being** denied equal access to literacy opportunities and second by being offered domesticating pedagogies that further condemn them to the sidelines.” **When and if literacy is offered to all, it must be noted that Zambia is in Sub-Saharan Africa. The second marginalisation Egbo (2000:27) has argued is as result of power relations and social identities that are constructed through school texts. Thus, “postmodern feminist researchers have engaged dominant texts and discourses with the aim of exposing their linkages to knowledge and power”.**

**Comment [SN9]:** You have used illiterate as the opposite of “educated” throughout the essay.

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**Comment [SN10]:** ?Obvious?

**Comment [SN11]:** Relevance?



## PROSPECTS FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF ILLITERACY

It does not take a leap in imagination to note that women are marginalised on a gender basis and illiteracy. Lois Moyo (2007:5) has indicated that Zambia has a “lower educational gradient” for women, which in turn exacerbates their poverty. There is a need of conscientising Zambian married women on education in the fight against gender imbalance. Realizing that Zambian women were not given equal access to education as their male counterparts, an NGO was formed known as (FAWEZA), which is the Forum for African Women Educationalists of Zambia. FAWEZA was formed in 1996 with the primary objective to promote girl-child and women’s education in Zambia. Despite this effort, many women and girls are sacrificed at the altar of marriage when there are inadequate funds for education so that their brothers can get an education. This has not done much in improving the socio-economical status of married women in Zambia, as most married women are dependent upon their husband for their social and economic wellbeing. I will present three prospects for equality of women and men.

Firstly, churches must become basic illiteracy places for women and men. Phiri and Nadar (2006:11) succinctly suggest tools for analysing both African culture and the church in order to return those aspects in the bible and African culture that promote the full humanity of women and men while rejecting oppressive aspects. This means that education should be encouraged for Zambian married women to be liberated and empowered within the Church. Mercy Oduyoye (2001:78) explains that the church needs to be as a family where no one is excluded from anything. It is a well known fact that women have been excluded from many things in Church and society. Education has been a place where women have often been excluded. Paradoxically, the Church has been a place of solace for women, which is why the Church is a better place that can encourage women to reach their highest potential through creating a space of adult education within the churches. Similarly, Susan Rakoczy (2004) builds on the “discipleship of equals” meticulously showing that women were in ministry after Pentecost in the bible. This should be the principle on which the Church should encourage women to be educated for their own empowerment. Rakoczy writes that “biblical images of the church provide a perspective for a feminist ecclesiology of discipleship of equals in the community” (2004: 199). In other words,

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there are no more special requirements of a female disciple than a male. This means that Zambian women are not to be denied education in order for their brothers to study. Women need education for themselves and their own empowerment then those surrounding them would benefit. A woman's education is not solely for the benefit of her family as Stromqist (1997:13) argues.

Secondly, pedagogical literacy must be done in vernacular languages as a means of empowering women for their emancipation. A culture always has the language in which the worldview and idioms of a particular people is expressed. Egbo (2000:28) cogently states that cultural language prepares women for subordinate roles in marriage and society, thus, the impact language has, if used appropriately, would empower women. This implies for me that to be successful in the contextualization of education, there is a need to take into consideration the language of the people as well as their experiences. This language issue is not just for women but for men as well. This means Meaning that there is a need to have books in the language that the people (in this case Zambian woman) speak. This would be especially helpful in literacy programs for women. Stromqist (1997:17) suggests that women's experiences should be included in the programs that seek to empower women. In short, workshops for women's education must be perceived as locus for empowering women to become aware of their oppression through literacy. It is my contention that for majority of married women of Zambia, it is only education done in vernacular languages that will offer them information to understand their access to and control over resources that can be used to address disparities, challenge systemic inequalities and build efficient and equitable solutions in their marriages and society.

Thirdly, only when Zambian married women are literate can the fight for equality<sup>2</sup> become more feasible. Egbo (2000:7) rightly in stating states "equal access to literacy for women in Sub-Saharan Africa rests on the assumption that lack of literacy, limits women's ability to maximise their potential on the individual, collective and national levels". This lack of literacy then leaves women at the margins where they are unable to source even their own emancipation. This is because, if men are the educated and women are uneducated, how can equality be reached? One can never be equal to someone they are inferior<sup>3</sup> to or at the same level with. Egbo (2000:27) further states

<sup>2</sup> Here equality means that women and men have equal conditions for realizing their full human dignity, rights, responsibilities and potentials so that they can equally contribute to the wellbeing of the society in all its dimensions.

<sup>3</sup> Inferior here means that they have not acquired the same standard and level of education.

Comment [SN15]: ??

Comment [SN16]: This is a new concept here

**enlightens** that learning systems are created to replicate dominant influence structures, meaning that inequalities that are existent in societies can be traced in practiced learning systems. This means that if women are given the equal opportunity to literacy, their worldview will be formed and they will access the ability so that they are empowered and able to stand for what they believe. Gender equity means that both women and men are fairly treated in order to given them equal access to resources and other opportunities that the society has to offer.

## CONCLUSION

This essay sought to demonstrate the interconnectedness between the illiteracy and marginalisation that majority of married women of Zambia experience. Feminist theology discourses have unveiled the significance of the unequal distribution of power between women and men around the globe to be one of the reasons that women are not considered to be “education material”, especially in Zambia. In Zambian communities, a woman is socially constructed as society defines what it means to be woman. In giving the prospects for gender equality in the context of illiteracy, I have argued that the Church should be a place for married **women’s basic illiteracy**. Second, a pedagogical literacy should be done in vernacular languages as a means of empowering women for their emancipation. A culture always has the language in which the worldview and idioms of a particular people is expressed. Finally, I have argued that only when Zambian married women are literate can the fight for equality become more feasible. This is because equality means that women and men have equal conditions for realizing their full human dignity, rights, responsibilities and potentials so that they can equally contribute to the wellbeing of the society in all its dimensions.

**Comment [SN17]:** Not at all clear what is meant here.

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Mutale, this was a very important topic, but one that needed a bit more careful thought into the actual connection between African women's theologising and women's "illiteracy" as you term it. I thought that the connections were a bit too "simple". Furthermore, the term "illiteracy" was a bit "stretched" and the connection with Zambia was not that clear. Nevertheless, a good attempt. 62%