

An exploration of the role of Karanga-Shona women within the ZIRRCO ecological project in Masvingo, Zimbabwe: Towards an indigenous eco-feminist theology

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If they come and say, "You know nothing", when we know our soil, myself, Zarira, I will tell them, those in office, and say "You are learned and educated in your universities; Zarira has the university of the soil. You have got your own lawyers, but Zarira's lawyer is the soil." He is a big lawyer, this one! [Ambuya VaZarira laughs as she indicates the soil]¹

The war of the trees as an indigenous ecological intervention in Masvingo, Zimbabwe has been well documented by Professor Marthinus Inus Daneel in his extensive works. However, his work does not say much about the centrality of women's input towards the success of this endeavour. Standing on the shoulders of this ecological giant, the main point of departure in this essay is that it intentionally focuses on the fundamental role of Karanga women in this ecological undertaking, particularly analyzing the extent to which women were involved and empowered by the movement as already started in my earlier publication.² It is significant to note that the Karanga society is highly patriarchal and most of the available literature apparently glosses over the role of women in this ecological project. Although women were the main actors in this whole undertaking, however, the leadership of both the traditional and Christian ecological ministries is highly patriarchal and it is usually the voices of such leaders that are captured in most of Daneel's writings which were reviewed by this author. The key research questions guiding this discussion are as follows: In what ways were women involved in the ZIRRCO (Zimbabwean Institute of Religious Research and Ecological Conservation) project? Which women were involved? What are the present visible signs of the women's involvement?

Question 1: In what ways has the ZIRRCO project empowered or not empowered women?

Historically, the patriarchal system in Zimbabwe has resulted in the persistence of gender inequalities, as prescribed by traditional culture and religion. Culturally, a woman is expected to be dependent, submissive, well mannered, enduring, fearful, self-hearted, hardworking and conservative. On the other hand, men are expected to be the opposite: independent, ambitious, brave, aggressive and economically empowered.

The two associations (AZTREC [Association of Zimbabwean Traditional Ecologists] and AAEC [Association of African Earthkeeping Churches]) started by extending a hand to the women in ZIRRCO and this greatly empowered them in various ways. From the initial stages of the organization, women played a significant role as earth keepers and they were the majority of participants at all earth keeping ceremonies (more than 80%) of all the adults.

¹ Fontein Joost (2004) 'TRADITIONAL CONNOISSEURS' OF THE PAST: The ambiguity of spirit mediums and the performance of the past in southern Zimbabwe *Occasional Paper 99*

² Chirongoma, S (2012) "Karanga-Shona rural women's agency in dressing mother earth: A contribution towards an indigenous eco-feminist theology" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa: Essays in honour of Steve de Gruchy* Vol 142, pp.120-144

These two religious organizations (AZTREC and AAEC) realized the need to promote the women's cause which is not only earth keeping but also the pertinent need for improving their general socio- economic status. As such, a department was formed within the organization- the Women's Desk (WD) to focus on women's empowerment. The desk was very vibrant and provided the long awaited response to the needs of the marginalized group (women). By the end of the year 2000; close to one hundred groups were established and functioning. Each club was supposed to perform an ecological activity in order to qualify to receive financial aid from the WD. The activities ranged from growing nurseries, woodlots and gully reclamation. Due to the nature of women; caring and nurturing they generally had a high rate of survival of trees in their woodlots and nurseries. When the women felt they were empowered; they did not forget the children, they approached schools to engage in new environmental ventures. They composed some slogans and songs which encouraged and motivated them to address the challenges they face in society.

- The first and foremost empowerment for women in ZIRRCO was the ability/opportunity to gather as women alone and look into challenges affecting them, and more importantly to come up with practical solutions to the identified challenges.
- Secondly, establishing earth keeping projects which reaped the highest survival rate of trees than men, even the gullies they reclaimed were further converted to gardens which produced more than what they could consume such that they sold the surplus. This improved their socio-economic status and some built new houses better than what they had. A case in point is Gomana women's club in Zunga, Chivi. They closed a gully that was about two kilometers wide and turned it into a pond which irrigated several plots of land with ever-green and productive gardens that produce sugar cane, fruit trees, vegetables and maize/corn. Thirty families actively participated in this project and it is still vibrant up to date and many people are benefiting from their nutritious produce since most of the landscape in Chivi is highly prone to drought.
- Establishment of self help income generating projects in Masvingo urban, Gutu, Nerupiri, Bikita, Zaka and Chivi. For instance Takabatana³ bakery in Zunga, Chivi was so successful such that many women managed to send their children to Secondary schools and colleges using the income from the projects. Trainings in women leadership, institutional building, environmental rehabilitation and business management were offered to all project members. Currently some women are still running their projects utilizing the skills gained from the ZIRRCO training as well as providing employment for the local people (men, women and the youth).

³ Meaning, 'we are united' denoting the members' unity in purpose

Question 2: Which women have been empowered?

Many women were empowered; but this paper will discuss the outstanding ones.

- In Masvingo urban, individuals such as Mrs Machokoto, Mrs Marima, Mrs Machokoto, Mrs Makuku and Mrs Hore initiated vibrant and productive family projects. The Hore family embarked on a nursery project; the Makuku family had a gardening project and the Machokoto family ventured into a bakery project.
- One group in Bikita, (near Mashoko mission) started a gardening project in 1993 called Maizivei⁴ and to date it is still viable, children of the deceased members have inherited membership of this project from their mothers.
- The Makuvaza nutritional gardens in Bikita are still vibrant and flourishing.
- In Gutu, the most successful woodlot projects and vegetable gardens were Zvataida, Rusununguko, Wasara-Wasara and Chiedza. Many woodlots benefited women through the sales of poles. According to Mrs Matanga, the treasurer for Rusununguko club, the membership of the group started at 12 and dwindled down to 3. They were given various tree seeds to plant by ZIRRCO and they also took an initiative of planting the amarula trees which they grow for harvesting its fruits in order to prepare local traditional drink amarula (mukumbi). After others had decided to withdraw from the club, the remaining 3 members persevered and embarked on another project for cattle fattening.⁵
- There is also Tasungana⁶ gardening project and Zvataida dressmaking project in Zaka which makes school uniforms and other clothing items.
- Another group in Ndanga, Zaka embarked on a bakery, tree planting and soap making projects. Some projects are still functional but particularly most soap-making ventures have been negatively impacted by the downward spiral of the national economy which has eroded most indigenous business ventures. Some of the poultry projects were negatively affected by the spiralling high prices of poultry feeds and most animals, particularly cows perished during the long spells of droughts.
- Some groups have started new projects implementing the skills imparted to them by the ZIRRCO capacity building training. Currently, most groups are involved in

⁴Meaning, 'what did you know/you knew nothing'. The name of this project seems to suggest that the members are acknowledging that they had limited information/insights before joining the project or it could also suggest that they are now realizing their hidden potential which they did not seem to take into cognizance before the capacity building training which they received.

⁵ Cited from the ZIRRCO File Archives, "Gutu Women's Projects 1994-1995"

⁶ Meaning we are bound together/united/connected also denoting the sense of unity and oneness shared among members

orphan care projects due to the many numbers of orphans as a result of many adults' deaths succumbing to the HIV epidemic in Zimbabwe. They take care of the orphans and vulnerable children's basic needs as well as providing them with educational needs.

Question 3: How have they been empowered?

Before these capacity building training activities, women were almost invisible in key leadership roles and decision making within their churches and society in general. However, after going through the training, they were so empowered such that their visibility was quite phenomenal particularly in terms of decision making on community projects and even in churches they were given a platform to address women freely and share their knowledge with the rest of the community. Their sense of worth and self-esteem was elevated such that many more women are now able to participate and make decisions in any development projects in their area. Bearing in mind that most of the AAEC member churches are African initiated churches which are highly patriarchal, the fact that women were given space to address whole congregations and train all church members (male and female) in income generating projects is a real milestone in the history of AICs in Zimbabwe. Other women trained fellow villagers in soap-making, bread making and poultry rearing on a commercial scale.

Furthermore, women had access to land and had sole ownership of what they produced. The produce from such lands was controlled by women and benefiting women. Women were able to access employment in some of these projects; particularly in soap making and bakeries. Through the knowledge obtained from ZIRRCO, projects were flourishing. More importantly, the women's husbands became much more flexible and allowed their wives to spend more time away from home attending to these income generating projects which were viable and providing a reliable source of income in their households. According to Mrs Matanga of Rusununguko club, as women, it gives them a sense of satisfaction they have sole ownership of the roofing materials that they are producing from their gumtree plantation- whenever the men from within the community needs to use these, they have to approach the women and purchase the roofing planks. Furthermore, they are now able to make a meaningful contribution to the household income unlike in the past when they were relying on their spouses' income for sustenance.

Question 4: What are the present visible signs of this empowerment?

The first visible sign of the empowerment of women from ZIRRCO is the case of Raviro Mutonga who openly acknowledges how much she was empowered by ZIRRCO, through attending different capacity building courses and interacting with other women entrepreneurs at various platforms. Raviro joined ZIRRCO when she was about eighteen years old as a research assistant and rose through the ranks to become the Women's Desk Coordinator up to being the Head of Department for Local Economic Development. In 2004, she became a

founding member of Masvingo Community Skills Empowerment (MCSE) where she is currently the coordinator of the organization. MCSE is a non-profit making organization focusing on women's empowerment since they comprise the majority of the marginalized members of society. Raviro describes herself as "a vehicle that drives women's agenda and organizes women in social and economic processes. MCSE also pays particular attention to the plight of children, women's entrepreneurship and conscientizing women and children about their civil and political rights."⁷

Many women in Masvingo province are economically and socially independent today because of the empowerment gained through ZIRRCON. Mrs Gwamure, the coordinator of the successful Gomana project in Zunga, Chivi is another case in point. Some have even taken up political positions in society; ZIRRCON was really an eye opener for many women in Masvingo.

Utilising the role of ZIRRCON women to advocate for an indigenous eco-feminist theology

Reflecting on the experiences and the contributions of women who participated in the ZIRRCON project as discussed above, it is pertinent that researchers and academic theologians should pay particular attention to their roles and what they have to offer if a holistic academic engagement and theological reflections on the ZIRRCON movement should be presented. Writing specifically within the context of African Christianity, Dana Robert reiterates this point in the following words:

The majority of Christians in Africa are women. Given this reality, African Christian theologies and church histories must take seriously the lives of ordinary women. Future generations will look back on the unprecedented expansion of African Christianity during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and wonder how it came to be. Without research on the roles of women in the growing churches of Africa today, the story of Christian growth will be woefully inadequate.⁸

In light of the ecological initiatives embarked upon by ZIRRCON women, an indigenous theology would be inadequate without taking into consideration the zeal and the passion that drives ordinary rural women to tenaciously embark on their work as they engage in the preservation and restoration of their motherland. The challenge to curb ecological degradation lies heavily on these rural women since they are mainly responsible for providing food for the family, bearing and raising children. The land is the basis of their livelihood where they gather fruits, grow vegetables, collect firewood and fetch water from. The role of nurturing and preserving lives is embedded in their daily activities; hence ecological preservation comes naturally to them. Realizing how the ecological order that is so essential for human survival has been exploited and destroyed by ruthless humanity, these ordinary rural women have ushered in their local resources to embark on projects that bring about

⁷ Personal interview with Raviro Mutonga, 31 January 2014, Masvingo, Zimbabwe

⁸ Robert Dana (2013) "Gender Roles and Recruitment in Southern African Churches, 1996-2001" in *Communities of faith in Africa and the African Diaspora: In honor of Dr. Tite Tienou with additional essays on World Christianity* (Pickwick Publications)pp116-134

health and well-being not only for their personal benefit but for the benefit of the rest of the community.

These ordinary women do not attempt to engage in any abstract theological reflections; rather, they are motivated by their indigenous knowledge of the land. Driven by their feminine and motherly attributes, they have positively utilized the knowledge and financial support provided by ZIRRCON to engage in ecological conservation and participating in income-generating projects. Such initiatives have proven beneficial for the improvement of the livelihoods of their communities. The essence of their indigenous knowledge systems is succinctly portrayed in the following statement uttered by Mbuya VaZarira:

If they come and say, "You know nothing", when we know our soil, myself, Zarira, I will tell them, those in office, and say "You are learned and educated in your universities; Zarira has the university of the soil. You have got your own lawyers, but Zarira's lawyer is the soil, he is a big lawyer."⁹

The women's focus on ecological preservation and their participation in sustainable income generating projects has also elevated their socio-political status in society. As noted above, some of the women have taken up key political leadership positions within their localities. Hence, their involvement in the ZIRRCON project has widened their horizons in terms of socio-political engagement. Having gained their self-esteem, they have come to discover their hidden potential and are tapping into the acquired leadership skills to become more active in the day to day running of their lives. The eco-feminist consciousness raised in these ordinary rural women has ignited their consciousness to the fact that ultimate liberation for humanity should be conceived from a holistic perspective whereby there is a co-existence between humanity and environment as well as peaceful co-existence among fellow human beings whereby one group does not exploit the other due to the patriarchal dominance elevating the status of men and subduing the position of women in society.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed considerable efforts made by ZIRRCON to address the pertinent ecological crisis in the southern province of Zimbabwe. However, this initiative alone cannot save the rest of the country's ecological problems since it is mainly concentrated in a small fraction of the country. It is an acknowledged truth that most of the problems affecting the country are a result of the economic difficulties that force people to engage in activities that damage the ecological order. The government has to take an initiative to educate and encourage the community to preserve their ecology. However, the sensitisation of people to the high risk activities of ecological degradation is likely to be of little benefit unless it is accompanied by considerable and worthwhile interventions that either reduce or remove the

⁹ Fontein Joost (2004) 'TRADITIONAL CONNOISSEURS' OF THE PAST: The ambiguity of spirit mediums and the performance of the past in southern Zimbabwe *Occasional Paper 99*

economic incentive to engage in those activities and people are presented with alternative, sustainable ways of earning a living. This initiative by ZIRRCO, combining traditional religion and AICs in Zimbabwe should be emulated by other mainline churches and people of other faiths in Zimbabwe and the world over so that ecological conservation becomes a worldwide effort that will save the entire universe. The ecological work by grassroots women in Masvingo is commendable; it should also pose a challenge to other women from all other educational, economic and religious backgrounds to do everything in their means to save the earth from ecological annihilation. Women should be in the forefront of preserving mother-earth so that the ‘children of our children’¹⁰ will inherit a habitable and ecologically friendly atmosphere. If academic and middle class women could emulate Wangari Mathaai’s ecological ministry in Kenya¹¹, the world would be a much better place to live. The vision of shalom enshrined in peace with justice should be the guiding principle towards ecological conservation.

¹⁰ De Gruchy S (2007) “An Olive Agenda: First Thoughts on a Metaphorical Theology of Development”: (333-345).

¹¹ Wangari Mathaai was awarded a Noble Peace Prize in 2004 in recognition of her ecological preservation work. Maathai combined science, social commitment and active politics. See http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2004/press.html