

# Gender Inequality in the Church: Addressing Patriarchy within the Liturgical Spaces in the Johane Masowe Chishanu Church in South Africa

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## Abstract

This article discusses gender inequality in the Johane Masowe Chishanu Church (JMCC), a Zimbabwean church that has established branches in South Africa. The article reports on a study that grappled with the question of how the JMCC addresses patriarchal structures that have pervaded and replicated in most African Indigenous Churches (AICs). Using an African cultural hermeneutics theory, the current study sought to build on the valuable inputs of the late Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel (1959–2020), who dedicated her work to the cause of gender inclusiveness and the eradication of social injustices. Plaatjies-Van Huffel, whose extensive contribution as an academic and a minister in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), is revered throughout theological and academic settings, particularly in southern Africa. Accordingly, the study found that although the JMCC has celebrated 90 years of its existence, women and girls have not been given an equal opportunity in officiating the sacraments and other liturgies. Hence, the study recommends that the time is right for women and girls in the JMCC to follow in the footsteps of Plaatjies-Van Huffel in the struggle to liberate themselves from traditions and cultural bondage. Further, the study recommends that some religious and cultural traditions, which forbid women from occupying these sacred spaces simply because they are female, must be addressed. The data for the study was collected through conducting interviews and consulting secondary sources, such as published books and journals.

**Keywords:** African Indigenous Churches; gender; Johane Masowe Chishanu Church; inequality; liturgical spaces; religious; patriarchy; rituals

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## Introduction

Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel (1959–2020) was born and raised in a patriarchal environment where women looked up to men for leadership. However, breaking down the walls of limitations, Plaatjies-Van Huffel was the first South African woman to be ordained as a pastor in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) (Landman 2019). Her rise into church leadership was not an easy one. The current study observed that Plaatjies-Van Huffel's confrontation with patriarchy and its surrogates carried connotations of bravery and risking her status as an African woman. The reasons for this submission are that, in her African cultural setting, men are structured as the heads and leaders of the families. Again, in the church she grew up in, only men were ordained as leaders. So, the women in the Johane Masowe Chishanu Church (JMCC) share the same challenges as Plaatjies-Van Huffel in that only male congregants occupy almost all the liturgical spaces in the church. Consequently, the study took Plaatjies-Van Huffel as an example to prove to all women in a patriarchal society that it is possible and doable to dismantle the ugly head of patriarchy and liberate themselves. Thus, the article was written in the spirit that the struggle must continue until women and girls are given equal freedom to serve God Almighty in the way they want to. Plaatjies-Van Huffel's work, role and contribution in her ministry in the URCSA and in the ecumenical movement until her untimely death on 19 May 2020 are cited as examples of the struggle that women in patriarchal societies and institution are facing.

## Historicising Gender Inequality in the Church

There has been gender inequality in Christianity since time immemorial. In fact, the current study has shown that gender inequality is as old as biblical history (Casimir, Chukwuelobe and Ugwu 2014). Accordingly, gender is a sociocultural, political and economic construct developed by society that defines the roles, responsibilities and general societal expectations of both men and women (Casimir, Chukwuelobe and Ugwu 2014). However, this demarcation of responsibilities and duties emanating from sexism, particularly in a patriarchal society, is seen in the study as men's agenda to deny women an equal opportunity to contribute to societal development through the recognition accorded to individual expertise, training, education, experience, exposure, abilities and competency (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2019, 78). The liturgical spaces within the JMCC have been singled out to underpin gender inequality in today's African Indigenous Churches (AICs).

Therefore, the article argues that the discrimination of women in the JMCC among other AICs ranges from the unquestionable patriarchal systems and man-made traditions that lack empirical evidence and exhibit uncritical thinking (Casimir, Chukwuelobe and Ugwu 2014). Thus, the article discusses the restrictions imposed on women and girls in the occupancy of sacred liturgical spaces during the JMCC services, such as: being directors of ceremonies; officiating the opening and closing prayer rituals; delivering

key theological speeches; laying on of hands for prospective members for conversion; cleaning and preparing the *sowe* for services (before and after church services); and, lastly, lighting the ritual fire during all-night vigils. All these duties and responsibilities are left in the hands of men, as is discussed in the article.

## Theoretical Framework

The current study was carried out in order to understand the criteria used to select leaders in the JMCC. The aim was to interrogate the criteria used to select leaders in this AIC emerged as a result of the researcher's 10 years of participant observation among the JMCC. So, over the years, the researcher observed that only male congregants were selected to be directors of ceremonies; only male congregants officiated the opening and closing prayer rituals; only male congregants were assigned to clean and prepare the place of worship before and after church services; and lastly, only male congregants were allowed to lay hands on prospective members for conversion or on the sick. Also, over the years the researcher observed that women and girls in the JMCC seemed to be at peace with this patriarchal dominance.

So, the central question raised was: Why were these women content with such blatant male dominance in the church by which they were denied any chance to officiate these sacred liturgical duties in the church? To understand this anomaly, the African cultural hermeneutics theory was used. Borrowing from Mapuranga (2013, 10), the African cultural hermeneutics theory was developed "by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians to understand the issue of women's marginalisation in organised religions in Africa". Since then, the cultural hermeneutics theory "has been gaining ground in the study of religion and gender in Africa. According to Kanyoro (2002, 9), "cultural hermeneutics is an analysis and interpretation of how culture conditions people's understanding of reality at a particular time and location". Therefore, this approach enabled the researcher to analyse the extent to which the traditional African culture influences the formation and maintenance of gender inequality within the JMCC's liturgical spaces.

## Methodology

Settling for a research methodology for the current study was another daunting task, especially looking at a number of factors. Firstly, the JMCC does not have its own documents and theological transmission is through oral means. Secondly, the researcher is not a member of this religious movement. It was against this backdrop that the phenomenological research methodology became the most appropriate one. For Chitando (2001, 52) "phenomenology research methodology may after all prove to be the solution to the problem of methodology of African Religions". He further argues that "phenomenology principles help to bridge the gap between 'insider' and 'outsider'". For Chitando (2001, 53), the key phenomenological principles of *epoché*

(or bracketing), empathy, non-reductionism and upholding the believer's point of view allow "outsiders" to penetrate foreign religions.

Twenty participants were selected for the study, of whom five were JMCC leaders (*Varidzi we Sowe*) and 10 were women's leaders commonly known as *MaEsiteri*. These were older women of around 50 years of age and above, who were only leaders during the women's meetings. Further, three prophets and two prophetesses were among the participants. Data collection was done over a period of five months from August 2019 to January 2020. The study was carried out in the Pretoria CBD among the five different assemblies of the JMCC near the Bosman Street Station. Although the sampling was done in Pretoria, the researcher observed that all its church members were Zimbabwean immigrants.

## Women in the JMCC: A Historical Background

The JMCC is a Zimbabwean AIC founded by Shonhiwa Masedza (1914–1973) whose Christian name was "John of the Wilderness" (Johane Masowe). The church was founded between 1930 and 1931 (Dillon-Malone 1978). Thus, at the time of the writing, the church was celebrating 90 years of existence. The JMCC is commonly known as *chechi yeMadzibaba* (church of the fathers) or *chechi yenguwo chena* (white garment church). The church is referred to as the white garment church because all of its members wear white robes during church services (Musoni and Gundani 2019). Inversely, the JMCC is also referred to as *yeMadzibaba* (of the fathers), although not because only males are members of the church. In fact, Mukonyora (2000) who had studied this AIC extensively, observed that women constitute the majority population of the church. Surprisingly, with women as the majority in this church, the JMCC is commonly known as church of the fathers (*yeMadzibaba*). It is against this backdrop that the current study interrogated gender inequality in the church and addressed patriarchy within the JMCC's liturgical spaces.

## Liturgical Spaces: A Definition

For the purposes of the study, the term "liturgical spaces" was used to mean:

A religious space where the church encounters God, sets forth its own self-understanding most clearly ... a ritual life which gives the church an identity more than anything else ... liturgical space is the church's ground for identity. On ritual grounds, church tells its story, enact its identity, recreate and nourish its memory. Liturgical spaces are holy places because they are places of encounters and rituals. (Adams 2009, 28)

Thus, "liturgical spaces" is a combination of two words, "liturgy" and "spaces". The word "liturgy" comes from the Greek *leitourgia*, or "the work of the people" and was first related to how people used to organise their lives in the city, including by means of

its festivals and civic duties (Carvalhaes 2015, 3 ). Furthermore, Carvalhaes argues that, currently, liturgies are used by many religions to arrange their worship and their ceremonies to honour God/gods, and/or the divine. He adds that:

liturgies and liturgical theologies help organise religions with a plethora of actions, vocabularies, and a specific grammar that defines forms of reasoning and bodily movements, shaping faith or religious life with flowing, movable, and plural senses of identity. (Carvalhaes 2015, 4)

Carvalhaes (2015, 5) continues:

liturgies or rituals not only organise the religious life within sacred spaces or sanctuaries, but also interpret the life of the individual and the group in the world and consequently interpret the world itself.

In short, liturgies are powerful religious actions that tell believers “what and how to think, what (not) to do, how and what (not) to relate to, what to avoid, and so on” (Carvalhaes 2015, 5).

Adding to the above citations, the theoretical framework of the study was also based on Moyo’s (2015, 96) definition of liturgy:

Liturgy (*leitourgia*) is a Greek composite word originally meaning a public duty, a service to the state undertaken by a citizen. Its elements are *leitōs* (from *leōs* = *laos*, people) meaning public, and *ergo* (obsolete in the present stem, used in future *erxo*, etc.), to do . . . The meaning of the word “liturgy” is then extended to cover any general service of a public kind.

Liturgical spaces are essentially ritual spaces which are strongly related to power (Siwila 2015). Whoever holds the liturgical space defines the direction the church service should take, and the rest will be mere followers. Accordingly, borrowing from Siwila’s concepts, the article argues that the patriarchal bias within the JMCC’s liturgical spaces is mainly informed by the cultural contexts from which the church emerged. Siwila (2015, 89), discussing the influence of culture on liturgy, states that:

There is no doubt that liturgy has been influenced by the culture of the people who have performed it in every stage of its development. There are no aspects of Christian liturgy that are not derived from the various cultures through which it has been passed on in its historical evolution.

Thus, the ideology (patriarchy) that approves male headship has been highly influential in placing women at the fringes of most AICs (Mapuranga 2013). Patriarchy refers to:

The domination of the male over the female, children, servants and slaves underlies all forms of chauvinism, racial, cultural and class domination. Patriarchy also refers to

structures and ideologies, which engender the domination and exploitation of the weak and the powerless amongst us. (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2011, 2)

Based on the theoretical framework alluded to above, the article interrogates the extent to which the Shona traditional patriarchal culture which more like Judaism influenced the side-lining of women and girls from occupying key liturgical spaces within the JMCC.

## Discussion of Findings and Themes

This section describes and interprets the restrictions imposed on women and girls in the occupancy of sacred liturgical spaces during JMCC services as well as their position in the JMCC as provided by the participants during participant observation among the five different assemblies of the JMCC in Pretoria. Thus, the patriarchy ideology that approves male leadership in the JMCC was brought to light through the participants' responses in the interviews conducted in the study.

### **Being Directors of Ceremonies**

Firstly, the researcher found through conducting interviews that only male congregants were eligible to be directors of events and lead the JMCC services, whereas female congregants were not. According to a female participant:

Leading the services at our shrines (*kuMasowe*) is only done by male congregants. Even we women come first, not allowed to give directions on how the service should go except a male congregant. We women and girls should wait until a male believer comes for us to start the prayers. It doesn't matter how old this male believer will be; as long he can speak and give orders to start (*kuvhura sowe*) it will be his prerogative. In the event that there is a small boy, say ten years old, mature women can take that boy aside and coach the boy on what to say in front of the Congregants. Yes!!! That arrangement is not a problem as long as this older woman does not stand in front to lead the service. (Personal interview: Female participant, 20/11/2019)

From the above information, women and girls are not allowed to be directors of events nor are they allowed to stand in front of the congregation to lead the JMCC services. Accordingly, the article has opined that one of the most contentious issues that have been raised continuously against women in most AICs is that of menstruation. For Shona traditional religions, menstrual blood is considered as particularly polluting (Chitando 2002). This is so because, in African traditional religions, only older women are permitted to brew beer for ancestral veneration (Chitando 2002, 19). Thus, the non-occupancy of women of this liturgical space within the JMCC could be due to the ideology of ritual purity. Referring to the same concept of women being regarded as ritually unclean, Siwila (2015, 90) observes that Africans, like Jews, have taboos associated with menstrual blood. Thus, women's full participation in the liturgical spaces in most AICs is hampered and restricted by taboos surrounding menstruation and

childbirth (Mwaura 2005, 440). So, gender disparities in most AICs are, to a large extent, accentuated by prohibitive rules concerning menstrual blood (Mapuranga 2013). The study has observed that the prohibition of women from standing and preaching is not limited to AICs. Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Vosloo (2013) point out that in most mainline churches, women are only permitted to be ordained as deacons, that is, only as workers in the church and not as office bearers, with the authority to teach or lead.

Inversely, the study observed that it would not be correct to argue that no AICs allow women to stand in front of the congregation either to preach or perform service rituals or be directors of events. Sibanda (2017) notes that, although throughout history, the church leadership has been predominantly male, the tables have been turned. Cases of female leadership, such as Mai Chaza (1914–1960) who founded the Guta raJehovah in 1954, and Tespy Nyanhete (born in 1992) who became the leader of the Mudzimu Unoera Church in Guruve in Zimbabwe, are key indicators of gender equality within AICs (Sibanda 2017, 210). Sibanda (2017, 211) further argues that the mission and ministries of Mai Chaza and Tespy Nyanhete show the transition from male domination to the inclusion of women in key positions in AICs. Thus, to date, the Guruve-based Mudzimu Unoera Church is under the leadership of Tespy Nyanhete (also known as Girl Jesus of Guruve), the daughter of Mrs Entrance Nyanhete (popularly known as Maria/Mother Mary) and Mr Okinebheti Nyanhete (popularly known as Baba Josefa/Father Joseph) (Sibanda 2017, 211).

While other AICs have accommodated women and girls in possession of key central liturgical duties as shown above, the current study has observed that the JMCC had no policies at the time of the study that allowed women to occupy such liturgical spaces. The second participant concurred with the first participant when he stated:

The Holy Spirit instructed us to follow our African traditions and customs handed down to us through our forefathers. And some of the traditions are that women are not allowed to give orders to men. Men are the heads of the family, and this even applies during church services. (Personal interview: Male participant, 16 October 2019)

Another participant supported the first two participants when he said:

The Johane Masowe Chishanu Church is an African church following the African culture because the Holy Spirit said to Baba Johane that God loves the African culture (*Mudzimu Unoera akafariria tsika dzevatema*). (Personal interview: Male participant, 16 October 2019)

Thus, the study has noted that although the majority of the congregations were overwhelmingly composed of women and girls, only men and boys were given the privilege of leading JMCC services. Women in the JMCC were subject to patriarchy, which relegated them to the lowest rungs on the ladder during church services. Amazingly, this relegation seems to happen with the blessing of the female congregants.

When asked why women were not advocating for equal opportunities to lead and officiate church services, one female participant had this to say:

Men, as heads of the families, are the only ones who can lead in church. This is due to nature, as men were created by God as leaders with women as their helpers. (Personal interview: Female participant, 11 September 2019)

Thus, the study argues that a shift from the view that patriarchal dominance is due to “nature” and cannot change is called for. Recognition of the fact that patriarchal dominance is the root of distorted relations is needed, and that these can be healed through gender equality, equity and cooperation between men and women in all aspects of life.

### **Officiating the Opening and Closing Prayer Rituals**

The second liturgical space within the JMCC that women are not allowed to occupy is officiating the opening and closing prayer rituals. Prayer is an important part of the JMCC spiritual life and marks an extremely important church ritual. Each JMCC service begins with an opening prayer ritual. During the opening prayer ritual, all members of the church must kneel down in two straight lines, males on the right, and females on the left, all facing east. A song, *Hosana mukuru* (Hosanna Hosanna), is sung and, an individual will be selected to lead the ritual. This individual will kneel in front of all the congregants, keeping a distance of about two metres from the masses. This important person is commonly known as *Mukokeri woMweya* (one who invites the Holy Spirit), and the ritual prayer is commonly known as *kumikidzo ye shumiro ku Mweya unoera* (committing the service into the hands of the Holy Spirit). Accordingly, only male congregants are given the privilege of officiating this ritual. At the end of the service, the ritual is repeated. The closing prayer ritual is used as a benediction, where the congregants bless and thank the Holy Spirit for the Spirit’s presence and also ask the Holy Spirit to guide the congregants throughout the week until they meet again for the next service. Therefore, what has been gathered from the interviews is that the *Mukokeri woMweya* will always be a male congregant:

Only men can officiate the opening and closing Masowe prayers because God the father created man first and gave him gifts that women did not get from the beginning. Those gifts include leadership of the church, the homes, and society in general ... women must obey! That is God’s own wish since creation. Men are strong enough to do the work of the Holy Spirit when it comes to the fight against Satan. Women were not made for the fight against Satan. This is the reason a man should lead; he is opening and closing prayers not women. (Personal interview: Male participant, 11/09/2019)

Again, the study found that women were prohibited from performing this ritual perhaps because of the church’s understanding that God is male (Mwari-Baba) (Mukonyora 2000), hence, only a male congregant can invite a male God and ask a male God to guide and protect the congregants on his behalf. Accordingly, in most African communities, men are the heads and the fathers of the households, the owners of

livestock, furniture, children and wives (Modise and Wood 2016, 293). So, the study found that African culture becomes the central scripture from which the theology of the JMCC is derived. Only a male congregant qualifies to officiate the opening and closing prayer rituals. In these rituals, God becomes embodied in the male leader who goes to the front of the meeting to request God's guidance.

In support of the above notion, another male participant had this to say:

Men officiate prayers and close prayers because they are the true images of God. Besides, men have the power to fight evil spirits. This is the reason why when sitting at Masowe, men and boys face west (*kumadokero*), while women and girls face east (*kumabvazuva*). We know from the teachings of Baba Johane, that *kumadokero* (the western side) is where demons and evil spirits come from, while *kumabvazuva* (the eastern side) is where mercy and grace come from. So, the implication is that when facing west, men will be fighting demons barring them from coming near them at Masowe, while facing east for women implies welcoming God's grace and mercy to fill the congregation. (Personal interview: Male participant, 11 September 2019)

In another interview, a female participant had this to say:

*Mweya akati ndakafaririra tsika dzevanhu vatema* (the Spirit said "I have admired the African culture"). In our African culture, a man is the head of the family, thus, in our church *Madzibaba ndivo vanovhura ne kuvhara sowe* (male congregants are responsible for opening and closing prayers). This is the reason why our church is sometimes referred to as *chechi ye Madzibaba* regardless of us women with our children outnumbering the male congregants. (Personal interview: Female participant, 22 January 2020)

This comment implies that women are not interested in highly demanding and challenging positions. Thus, the uncontested liturgical space of opening and closing prayers is the effect of sex role stereotypes that have been created by the traditional patriarchal culture. For Kasomo (2010), even in denominations where women are ordained, they still are not considered for higher positions. In other words, male dominance within the JMCC's liturgical spaces is not seen as discrimination in terms of gender inequality among the JMCC women congregants, because for them, since God is male, only male congregants may approach Him on behalf of other congregants.

### **Delivering Key Theological Speeches**

The third liturgical space within the JMCC dominated by men is the delivering of key theological speeches during the services. The central theological speech is that speech, which is meant to remind congregants of the rules and regulations for JMCC members that have been passed down orally from their late founder, Johane Masowe. This theological speech is commonly known as *tsanangudzo dze rwendo rwa Baba Johane* (the spiritual journey of Baba Johane) or *Tsoro ya Johane* (Musoni 2017). Thus, only male congregants are permitted to stand in front of the congregation and take turns to

narrate the history of the church. Therefore, the article argues that the domination of men in this liturgical space is again associated with the patriarchal African culture. The reason for this submission is that previous research has shown that women are not allowed to stand in front of men to give a speech (Molobi 2009). Thus, only men are recognised as preachers, leaders and directors of events in the JMCC (Mukonyora 2000).

However, Mukonyora (2000, 10) seems to argue that women also occupy a key liturgical space, namely, as song leaders. Without dismissing that observation, the current study argues that associating women and girls with singing does not match men and boys being directors of events, who open the service and close the service with a prayer, and who have the opportunity to deliver key theological speeches, among others. The researcher views preventing women from narrating the history of the church and outlining the church's theology as assigning women gender roles that are designed to place them on the periphery, while men position themselves at the centre. Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Seloana (2008, 115) observe that, "the laws that dehumanise women in the church were formulated by men who were extremely severe towards women".

### **Laying on of Hands for Prospective Members for Conversion**

The fourth liturgical space within the JMCC that is occupied by men only is the ritual commonly known as *kubatwa pamusoro* (the laying on of hands) for prospective members for conversion. The laying on of hands is a symbolic act that sets individuals apart and signifies the imparting of spiritual blessings, authority, and/or power. The assumption is that a power/spiritual blessing is conveyed through the laying on of hands and that evil forces are driven away (Daneel 1994, 241; Kgatle 2018, 7). Thus, prospective members are mostly converted after one seems to have treated the actual sickness successfully. Or in most other cases, members are converted as a result of a feeling that the JMCC would provide better protection against evil spirits, such as avenging spirits and the spirit of witchcraft. This is the reason why, for the JMCC, the process of conversion is conferred by someone with spiritual authority with regard to the laying on of hands for prospective members of the JMCC. Thus, because of the spiritual significance of this ritual, women are side-lined. Importantly, women are side-lined since they are treated like people that possess less power and are unclean (Gennrich 2017). Women in most AICs, according to Kgatle (2019, 3), are excluded from performing central rituals, such as baptisms and administering Holy Communion, due to a pervasive attitude arising from a complex interplay of cultural practices that consider women "unclean" as a result of menstruation. It is against this background that a woman is prohibited from laying hands on prospective members for conversion. Another female participant had this to say:

Women are not allowed to lay hands on members. Only male leaders can lay hands on church members. Men are the heads of the families; accordingly, only the head of the family can lay hands on other people's heads for conversion. (Personal interview: Female participant, 21 August 2019)

The study found through interviews that male dominance has remained unchanged in the JMCC. In this AIC, women are treated as if they are no more than adjunct members, as they are not considered appropriate participants in most liturgical spaces. Although some women are recognised as prophetesses, they are not allowed to lay hands on the sick. A prophetess must ask a prophet to lay hands on the sick and on prospective members for conversion.

### **Cleaning and Preparing the Sowe**

The fifth liturgical space that women are not allowed to occupy is the cleaning and preparing of the *sowe* (church service centre). While cleaning the house each morning is a traditional duty for women in most African societies, cleaning and preparing the Masowe shrine is an obligatory task for men in the JMCC. Cleaning and preparing the *sowe* for the church service on its own is a liturgical duty for men. The JMCC congregates in open spaces that are marked by a circle of small stones with an open space as the entrance into the sacred space. Thus, only men have the mandate to gather these small stones and divide the sacred space from the profane space with the stones. This tradition has been borrowed from the Shona tradition of *kutara guva* (marking the grave). Marking the grave is one of the most crucial rituals among the Shona. According to Chitakure (2017, 84), one of the designated male elders of the deceased person identifies and marks the place where the grave should be dug. Among most Shona societies, only men are allowed to do this. Likewise, because JMCC believers do not use buildings for worship, only male leaders have the mandate to identify an open space that will be turned into a sacred space for worship. After the place has been marked and anointed with holy water, religious flags will be lifted so that congregants can see the flags from afar and come to worship. All these are male duties in this AIC.

### **Lighting the Ritual Fire**

Last, but not least, only men have a mandate to light the fire for the JMCC *pacharara* (all-night vigils) ritual. Every Thursday night, the JMCC converge at their sacred shrines for what they call *moto waPetro* (fire of Peter) (Musoni and Gundani 2016, 10) as they dramatise how the biblical Peter denied Christ three times before the cock crowed. *Pungwe* is a generic term that signifies any gathering that continues through the night until dawn (Matiza 2015, 10). It is extremely common among the Shona people (Matiza 2015). Thus, *pacharara/pungwe* (sitting around the fire all-night through) in the JMCC was borrowed from the African traditional culture of *mapungwe*.

This is so because according to the history of the church, one Friday night in the 1930s, Shonhiwa Masedza (Johane Masowe) was led by the Holy Spirit to attend a traditional ancestral night vigil (*pungwe*), in a village known as Mhondoro Ngezi near Norton town in the Mashonaland West Province (Musoni 2017). Johane Masowe preached at that night gathering and converted many people, hence, the beginning of the JMCC in Zimbabwe. From that night onwards up till today, every Thursday, this African church spends the whole night at *charara*. However, what is significant to note is that only men

can set up the fire for the *charara* ritual. Similarly, based on the Shona tradition, there is what is commonly known as the *moto wepadare* (men's fire at the men's forum/meeting place). Only men are allowed to sit around the *moto wepadare*, while the mothers and girls are in the kitchen cooking. However, among the JMCC, women are invited to attend the *pacharara*, although they will be seated on one side of the fire, while all the men will be seated on the other side. Again, having only men occupy the fire lighting liturgical space within the JMCC, the study has demonstrated the existence of gender inequality in this AIC. This difference in gender ensures that in the JMCC women do not partake in the lighting of ritual fire along with other important rituals as discussed above. Thus, the study has noted that priority is given to men in all central liturgical spaces within the JMCC. Men are dominant, while women suffer liturgical and religious inferiority.

## Conclusion

This article has reported on a study that analysed the question of gender inequality in the liturgical spaces within the JMCC. While some scholars have argued that women are given equal religious spaces in most AICs, to perform certain functions such as being song leaders, and prophetesses, the study has highlighted women's exclusion from liturgical spaces within the JMCC. The JMCC's liturgical spaces can be clearly labelled as male since they are all controlled by males. As such, the study has highlighted several key liturgical spaces that women are not allowed to occupy simply because they are female. The study has observed that religious spaces, such as being director of ceremonies; officiating the opening and closing prayer rituals; narrating the history of the church; and laying on of hands for prospective members for conversion, among others, are only occupied by males. Through interviews, the study has shown that women seem to be at peace with men leading all these religious duties because they believe that men have been ordained by God to lead.

The article, therefore, concludes that these liturgical spaces, which are dominated by male congregants, constitute an ugly patriarchal slant in the JMCC. As rightly observed by Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Vosloo (2013), that the presence of women as constituting the majority in most churches is not an indicator of the transformation of patriarchal anthropology. As long as women are not given an equal opportunity to occupy the church liturgical spaces, as mentioned above, the article concludes that a paternalistic and patriarchal anthropological framework is still dominant in this AIC.

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