

Law, Religion, Health and Healing in Africa



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18 THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON WOMEN IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF ZAMBIA

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INTRODUCTION

The first Covid-19 case in Zambia was reported on 18 March 2020 at Kenneth Kaunda International Airport in Lusaka.² These first infected Zambians were a couple who went to France for a two-week holiday with their two children.³ Later on, cases were confirmed in Lusaka City and then eventually from all the ten Zambian provinces.⁴ The United Church of Zambia (UCZ) is the largest Protestant church in Zambia. With a Presbyterian type of governance, the UCZ has three million members with 1 060 congregations, and it has grown from the time of the union to today. The UCZ is now found in all ten provinces of the country, and according to church annual reports 60% of its members are women. It has been observed that in the UCZ, women are the majority, but they are not involved in decision-making positions.⁵

The present study of the effects of Covid-19 on UCZ women was done at Calvary Congregation and St. Marks Congregation in Lusaka.⁶ The study examined how Covid-19 laws and policies affected women in the UCZ. Women, who form the majority in the church, are often responsible for cleaning and offer hospitality to the members. Women are the ones who take care of the sick and manage activities related to funerals and weddings. These activities made women more vulnerable health-wise during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Covid-19 affected both male and female, and rich and the poor alike, in the country. Since a majority of UCZ members are women, they were more directly and

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- 1 Reverend, United Church of Zambia; Master's Student in Systematic Theology, School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics, University of KwaZulu-Natal.
 - 2 Kayula J. 2020. "Covid-19 and Labour Law: Zambia", *Italian Labour Law e-Journal* 13(1).
 - 3 Simulundu E et al. 2021. "First Covid-19 Case in Zambia – Comparative Phylogenomic Analysis of SARS-CoV-2 detected in African Countries", *International Journal of Infectious Diseases* 102:455-459.
 - 4 Sialubanje C et al. 2022. "Perspectives on Factors Influencing Transmission of Covid-19 in Zambia: A Qualitative Study of Health Workers and Community Members", *BMJ Open* 12:e05789.
 - 5 Kabonde PM. 2014. *Ordination of Women: Partnership, Praxis and Experience of the United Church of Zambia*. PhD Thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 5.
 - 6 St. Marks and Calvary are congregations within the UCZ from which participants in this study were selected. The two congregations are located within Lusaka presbytery. St. Marks congregation is in a peri-urban area in Chisamba District, fifteen miles from Lusaka city, while Calvary congregation is in Lusaka District urban area.

immediately affected, but children other family members were not spared, with many eventually testing positive for Covid-19. While the majority who were infected recovered, others lost their lives. According to Bernadette Deka-Zulu, the executive director of the Policy Monitoring Research Centre (PMRC) in Lusaka, “the disease outbreak affected women and men differently and make existing inequalities for women and girls worse as the impact of Covid-19 has not been gender neutral”.⁷ This is because “women not only provide care formally as healthcare workers, but have observed most of the work of informal and unpaid care in the Covid-19 response at domestic and community level”.⁸

Using a specifically feminist approach, the present study examines: (1) how Covid-19 laws and policies made by the government affected women in the Church, (2) how women in the Church responded to Covid-19 laws and policies made by the government, and (3) how the church responded to the government Covid-19 laws and policies made in helping the women socially, economically and spiritually. The intent of the study is that the government and the church may find ways and means of helping women to be self-reliant and self-sustaining during future pandemics.

ASSESSING THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON UCZ WOMEN

Scholars in Zambia and other parts of Africa have written on Covid-19 and the particular challenges faced by women. Bernadette Deka-Zulu in her research has chronicled in her research how Zambian women in business were affected by the pandemic.⁹ Mathew Nyashanu and fellow researchers examined the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on Christian self-employed women, businesswomen, civil servants and housewives in the city of Ndola, looked at the gender inequalities which makes women more vulnerable during pandemics.¹⁰ Nelly Mwale has studied the responses of Roman Catholic religious sisters to Covid-19 and how this was portrayed in Zambian media. Mwale argues that the role Roman Catholic sisters played in the pandemic reveals the active role women have played in combatting Covid-19 in the church.¹¹ Bridget Mukuka has written on violence against women and children in Zambia during the pandemic from a gendered perspective.¹² In addition, Ogechi Adeola has written on gender and sustainable

7 Deka-Zulu B. 2021. “Overview of the Challenges caused by Covid-19 on Women-Led Enterprises in Zambia”. Lusaka: Policy, Marketing and Research Center (PMRC), 6.

8 Deka-Zulu, “Overview of the Challenges caused by Covid-19 on Women-Led Enterprises”, 7.

9 Deka-Zulu, “Overview of the Challenges caused by Covid-19 on Women-Led Enterprises”.

10 Nyashanu M, Ikhile D, Karonge T and Rumbidzai C. 2020. “The impact of Covid-19 lockdown in a developing country: narratives of self-employed women in Ndola, Zambia”, *Health Care for Women International* 41(11-12):1370-1383.

11 Mwale N. 2022. “Representation of Roman Catholic religious sisters Response to Covid-19 in the Zambian Media”, *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(2):1.

12 Mukuka BNM. 2021. “Covid-19 and Violence against Women and Children in Zambia. A Gendered Perspective”, in Chammeh JK (ed). *Religion Gender and Wellbeing in Africa*. New York, London: Lexington Books, 49-59.

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development and the political, social and economic effects of Covid-19 recovery in Africa.¹³ Although this existing literature shows the economic, social and religious challenges of women during the Covid-19 pandemics, these scholars write from a gender perspective, but not from a feminist narrative perspective.

While scholars of other African churches have written on Covid-19 effects on women, there is no literature found on the effect of Covid-19 on women in the United Church of Zambia. Hence, there is a gap in the literature in terms of the experiences of women in the UCZ that this study fills, for Lilian Siwila, a scholar of theology and gender studies, has observed that “most churches in Africa are filled with women and children”.¹⁴ Siwila’s statement is very true, especially in the UCZ, where majority are women. While Covid-19 certainly had effects on men in the church, women, constituting the majority of the church, were disproportionately affected. Thus, the objective of the present study is to investigate the effects of Covid-19 pandemic laws and policies made by the Zambian government on UCZ women. It has been observed that “religion and theology are part of the fabric of African life, and therefore a crucial part of understanding, responding to, confronting and overcoming Covid-19”.¹⁵ The study contributes to the already existing literature by adding UCZ women’s voices. It is also a contribution to African feminist theological responses to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The present study used qualitative methodology in which twelve women from the UCZ were interviewed on the effects of Covid-19 in their lives. Using a feminist narrative theory, the study analysed the effects of laws and policies on women in the church. Primary data was obtained through one-to-one and group interviews by using open-ended questions, along with a questionnaire distributed to all participants, both observation and analysed through thematic analysis. These interviews were very important in order to hear women’s narratives during the Covid-19 pandemic. Primary data from the interviews was then supported and corroborated by a range of secondary sources.

Of the original twelve women, nine from St. Marks and Calvary congregations participated in this research, as the other three withdrew due to other commitments. The interviews were done in two parts. Six women answered the questions as a group and three were given a questionnaire to answer individually and later submitted. The group discussion interview with six women from St. Marks Congregation women’s group was done on Sunday, 27 March 2022. The women who took part in the group discussion at St. Marks were approached through the

13 Adeola O. 2021. “Introduction: Gendered Perspective on Covid-19 Recovery in Africa: Towards Sustainable Development”, in Adeola O (ed). *Gendered Perspective on Covid-19 Recovery in Africa. Towards Sustainable Development*. Switzerland: Springer, 1-38

14 Siwila CL, Mukuka S and Mwale N. 2022. *Chikamoneka!: Gender and Empire in Religion and Public Life*. MalawiMzuni Press, 50.

15 Stiebert J. 2021. “Introduction”, in Labeodan HA, Amenga-Etego R, Stiebert J and Aidoo M. (eds). *Covid-19: African Women and the Will to Survive*. Bible in African Studies 31. Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 11-13.

congregation secretary, who announced interviews and those who were interested were approached. Six women agreed to sit for the group interview on the agreed date. The study group thus consisted of six women who were members of the UCZ and were farmers and businesswomen between the ages of 30 and 60. The other three participants from Calvary Congregation were teachers and businesswomen between the ages of 45 and 55 years. These three were not interviewed in person, but were given a questionnaire, which they answered on their own time and submitted to the researcher on the agreed date between 26 and 30 March 2022. Since these three participants were working, it was difficult to meet them during the day. Hence, questionnaires were given to them to allow participants to answer at their own convenient time.

It should be noted that confidentiality was observed in this research, in that the names of the participants are not attached to any information. We agreed that their names be withheld for privacy purposes, and this gave the participants confidence to open up and share the stories and challenges they experienced as a result of Covid-19 laws and policies imposed by the government during the lockdown. The data is limited in the sense that it comes solely from the two UCZ congregations indicated above. However, the study represents a lot of silent voices of women on effects of Covid-19 in the UCZ. As an insider and leader in the church, I was aware that participants might feel influenced to be part of the study because of my leadership role in the church; however, I informed the participants my role within the church should be set aside so that they might feel free to participate and share openly within the context of the study with my role being that of a participant-observer.

The feminist theory approach that was used in the study to elicit narratives from women experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic was grounded in the understanding that traditionally “knowledge, truth and reality has been constructed as if men’s experiences were normative”.¹⁶ Feminist narrative theory helps to investigate how masculinities and femininities come to play through women experiences as mothers, wives and Christians. This research is located within the tradition of African feminist theology, which believes in listening to women’s experiences in religious spaces and encourages them to narrate their own stories. For purposes of the present study, narratives are “the stretch of stories that are told orally, and are descriptive of personal experiences of individual sharing their stories or related oral texts”.¹⁷ Feminist narrative theory is important because “narratives of women during the pandemic are significant for constructing women as active players in the making of contemporary church history”.¹⁸ Though examining women telling their

16 Barbre JW and Personal Narratives Group (eds). 1989. *Interpreting Women’s Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 3.

17 Smith FC. 2014. *African American Female Narratives and Identity Development: A Case Study of Language, Literacy, and Identity Development in the Beauty Salon*. EdD Diss, University of Kentucky. See also Bal M. 2004. *Narrative Theory: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* vol 1. New York: Routledge, 1.

18 Mwale, “Representation of Roman Catholic religious sisters Response to Covid-19”.

experiences, the present study examines the social significance of religious spaces in how women narrate the effects of Covid-19 and the role the church played in helping them during the pandemic.

LAWS AND POLICIES ON COVID-19

The Zambian government

It should be noted that the pandemic was global, and all countries had to take their own measures to prevent their citizens from the spread of this disease. It has also been observed that “several African nations have stood out for their highly organised and effective large-scale public campaign”.¹⁹ The Minister of Health, Dr Chitalu Chilufya, had a press briefing on Covid-19 prevention and control measures. In his statement, he announced the restrictions on all foreign travels and public mass gatherings.²⁰ In his statement, the minister also informed the media that the measures taken was in line with the Public Health Act, for as Kachikoti Banda and other public health officials and researchers have stated, “The Public Health Act Cap. 295 of the Laws of Zambia is a guiding law for public health matters in the country”.²¹ In addition, then-president of the Republic of Zambia, Edgar Lungu, in his 25 March 2020 address to the nation, made further pronouncements that were meant to cement the already existing measures.²²

Through the Ministry of Health, the government of Zambia put some measures in place to preserve the lives of people in the country. These were known as the “five golden rules” to which every citizen was supposed to adhere or face punishment of the law. Then Minister of Health Dr Jonas Chanda highlighted the five golden rules’ requirements of: (1) masking up consistently and correctly in public; (2) hand hygiene, including washing your hands with soap and water or using sanitised; (3) observing social or physical distancing; (4) avoiding crowded places whenever possible and staying home if without business to be about; and (5) in case of Covid-19 infection, seeking medical care early when symptoms develop.²³ According to Part III of the Act on notification of infectious diseases, the minister of health is mandated to “declare that any infectious disease other than those specified ... shall be notifiable

19 Stiebert, “Introduction”, in *Covid-19: African Women and the Will to Survive*, 12.

20 Republic of Zambia. Ministry of Health. 2020. “Press Briefing on Covid-19 and Additional Preventative and Control Measures”, 17 March.

21 Banda KW, Mwanza BG, Mwananumo EM and Banda IN. 2021. “Governance Mechanisms for Managing Municipal Solid Waste: A Review”, Proceedings of the 11th Annual International Conference on Industrial Engineering and Operations Management Singapore, 7-11 March.

22 Kayula, “Covid-19 and Labour Law: Zambia”.

23 Republic of Zambia. Parliament. 2021. “Ministerial Statement on the Status of Covid-19 Situation in the Country”, 3 February.

diseases under this Act”.²⁴ Although the Public Health Act passed in 1995, did not mention Covid-19, which was not yet on the horizon, the Ministry of Health provided two statutory instruments in 2020 to address the emergence of Covid, including SI 21 designating Covid-19 as a notifiable disease and SI 22 providing additional regulations to facilitate management and control of the pandemic.²⁵ The statutory instruments provided for the inspection, permitting or closer of public places to ensure that rules are followed.

The Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs also released a letter to all religions in Zambia to guide religious leaders on the guidelines from the Ministry of Health and the five golden rules are repeated in the letter.²⁶ In the letter from Religious Affairs, all churches who used classrooms for worship were suspended. However, the churches in this study were not affected by this rule, because they had their own church building. Nevertheless, in the letter, children and elderly people above 70 years were not allowed to come to church. The suspension of children going to church prevented nursing mothers to attend church services while their husbands attended. The decision was to prevent children as well as mothers from being infected, but the husband going for gatherings and coming back home also put women and children at risk of being infected.

As Nelly Mwale has noted, “The prevention and control measures had implications on different spheres of life.”²⁷ Although the above measures were put in place by the government, it was difficult to maintain social distance in public places, such as churches, public buses and markets. Therefore, guidelines from the Ministry of Health were reinforced by the police, who monitored the people, especially in public places. In some cases, police harassed people in the churches who were found not observing five golden rules, even if just a single one. This prompted then-president Lungu to issue a statement in which he “directed that agencies entrusted with enforcement of Covid-19 guidelines should refrain from abusing and harassing citizens found breaking the rules”.²⁸ Luckily enough, the churches that participated in this study were not harassed by police.

24 Republic of Zambia. Ministry of Legal Affairs. “The Public Health Act. Chapter 295 of the Laws of Zambia”.

25 Republic of Zambia. Ministry of Health. 2020. “Press Briefing on Covid-19 and Additional Preventative and Control Measures”, 17 March. See also Republic of Zambia. 2020. “The Public Health (Infected Areas) (Coronavirus Disease 2019) Regulations, 2020”, Statutory Instrument 22 of 2020, *Government Gazette*, 13 March.

26 Republic of Zambia. Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs. 2020. “Letter to Churches on Covid-19, 2020”, 22 September, 1-2.

27 Mwale, “Representation of Roman Catholic religious sisters Response to Covid-19 in the *Zambian Media*”, 3.

28 “Police harassing faithful? (Pictures)”, *The Zambian Sun*, 15 April 2022.

The United Church of Zambia

Because of the pandemic in the country, the United Church of Zambia issued a pastoral letter through its synod general secretary Rev Dr Mulambya Kabonde. The first pastoral letter was issued in March 2020, after the Ministry of Health restricted all public gatherings in the country including churches. The second pastoral letter was not so different from the first letter, despite the fact that President Lungu, on 24 April 2020, had announced the opening of the churches subject to observing the five golden rules. Nevertheless, the pastoral letter indicated that, worship services, group meetings, Holy Communion and other activities remained suspended.²⁹ The suspension of church gatherings came at a time when churches come together to celebrate Palm Sunday in the streets. This created tension between the government and the Christian community, as well as between church members and leaders. The members condemned the clergy for allowing the government restrictions on church worship. In 2020, a third pastoral letter allowed the opening of the UCZ churches in the country with strict measures.

However, in June 2021, the UCZ, through its newly elected General Secretary, Rev Chipasha Musaba, released a fourth pastoral letter, which allowed gatherings after each congregation obtained permission from government through Ministry of Health who inspected the building and declared it clean.³⁰ Surprisingly, after one year and some months, the church still did not allow children or the elderly to come to church. There was no Holy Communion, no funeral or wedding gatherings at home or church and weddings were restricted to family members. Since all church group gatherings were suspended, including catechumen class, there were no baptisms. What is notable about the above pastoral letters was that the two sacraments of the church, baptism and Holy Communion, were suspended in a way that shook and tested the faith of the church. These church restrictions were not welcomed by the members, who thought the church failed to stand its ground in support of the worship of God even in difficult times. Members also felt that leaders of the church failed to protect its faith and doctrines, leaving the people vulnerable to temptations. Bridget Mukuka observed that, "For many Church members, partaking holy communion brings them closer to God ... Hence, no one can be stopped from partaking holy communion unless there are serious offences that a person has committed."³¹ Indeed, the government restrictions and church responses affected these long-standing church traditions. However, the church suspension of sacraments of Holy Communion and baptism protected church members and the clergy from the virus, as such church services are fully packed and observing social distance would have been difficult.

29 United Church of Zambia, Synod Headquarters Lusaka. 2020. "Second Pastoral letter on Covid-19", 25 April.

30 United Church of Zambia, Synod Headquarters Lusaka. 2021. "All One in Christ", Council for World Mission. Fourth pastoral letter on Covid-19, 17 June.

31 Mukuka, "Covid-19 and Violence against Women and Children in Zambia", 51.

The suspensions of other church activities were not easy to resolve through online means. Many people went through difficult times without the presence of the church encouragement. This was very difficult in the context of African religiosity. Pastor and theologian Chammah Kaunda observes, “spirituality in all its various manifestations and aspects of life, should not be regarded as separate from the totality of African human life.”³² This observation brings to light the spiritual effects that the government Covid-19 laws and policies touched by not allowing churches to gather. Kaunda suggests that since African spirituality include all aspects of life, then its hindrance results in moral decay in the community.

The laws and policies made not only affected the churches, but also other cultural practices of African and Zambian people. For example, Zambian women are sociable, and when someone has a funeral they will go and gather at the funeral house and spend nights there. But Covid-19 laws and policies restricted such gatherings, further isolating people who were mourning, especially if people heard that the deceased’s death was due to Covid-19. Women were particularly affected by the lockdown, since they were more exposed, more than men, to diseases as frontline workers. The lockdown also created a great challenge economically in sub-Saharan Africa, with women being hit harder because of lower income and higher poverty rates.³³ Women were vulnerable to disease, because they are the ones who take care of the family. That is why the lockdown was such a big challenge to women in the church, community and health sectors. To take another example, it was observed that during the periods of the lockdown and other restrictions, the police and other security forces recorded large numbers of incidents of gender-based violence.³⁴ That could have been due to couples stuck together at home for long periods of time.

ZAMBIAN WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Laws and policies on Covid-19 by the Zambian government affected women socially, economically and spiritually. Participants in the present study acknowledged that in the beginning, there was a lot of resistance, because no Covid-19 cases were recorded in their families, community and churches. This made it difficult to convince people to follow the “five golden rules”. Even so, the women made it clear that even though the laws and policies were very hard and harsh on them, they still appreciated how the government handled the pandemic and put in place to protect all.

32 Kaunda CJ. 2021. “Introduction: Encountering the ‘Voice’ of Well-being in African Contexts”, in Kaunda CJ (ed). *Religion, Gender and Wellbeing in Africa*, 2.

33 Aoyagi C. 2021. “Effect of Covid-19 on Region and Gender Equality in Sub-Saharan Africa. Evidence from Nigeria and Ethiopia”, Working Paper No. 2021/169 Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund.

34 Mukuka, “Covid-19 and Violence against Women and Children in Zambia”, 51.

Social experiences

The Greek philosopher Aristotle observed, “Man is by nature a social animal.”³⁵ The Covid-19 regulations issued by the government through the ministry of health made life difficult by preventing socialising with others. Participants in the present study indicated through the interviews that laws and policies put in place had good and bad sides. Both the group discussion and individual respondents indicated that, the laws and policies were good because they prevented the disease from spreading and they kept people in good health. Asked what was good about the government Covid-19 laws and policies, one woman said, “Without those restrictions by the government no one would be alive today. You know, us women, we like socialising with a lot of people through *ichilangamulilo*, *amatebeto*, kitchen parties, weddings and funerals. The government did well.”³⁶ (*Ichilangamulilo* is food prepared by the bride’s family to be given to the groom showing them how the bride cooks, and *amatebeto* is food prepared by the in-laws to appreciate their son-in-law for how he has kept their daughter well.) Suspension of weddings and kitchen parties had an economic impact on couples who did not see the restrictions coming.

With regard to family care responsibilities, another woman maintained, “The restrictions brought the disease under control, and it encouraged people to have more sense of care and responsibility, especially women, because of their role of being frontline caregivers in their homes, churches, and the community. It improved the level of hygiene and behavioural change in our homes, church and community.”³⁷ Raymond Hamoonga and fellow researchers have stated that “the success of Zambia’s Covid-19 response is premised in communities adhering to good hygiene practice”.³⁸ Participants in the group discussion indicated that men were better than women when it comes to following Covid-19 health guidelines. But in Zambia, women are usually the ones who take care of family members of all ages when they are sick, a task that fewer men can manage. Overall, women are more sociable than men in Zambian society, and that is why it was harder for them to keep the rules.

In the focus group discussion, it was discovered among some of the women that when their husbands tested positive with Covid-19, they were the ones at their husband’s bedsides taking care of them throughout until they recovered. Unfortunately, when the women tested positive for Covid-19, their husbands followed the rules of social distance upon hearing it and prepared a room to keep their wives in isolation while they remained in the bedroom alone. It turned out that some men love their wives only when they are in good health, which meant that the laws and policies had a negative impact on marriages, as some members of couples felt neglected by their loved ones. The findings suggested that women risked their

35 Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a.

36 Group Discussion. St. Marks Congregation Lusaka, Zambia, 27 March 2022.

37 Questionnaire from Calvary Congregation, Lusaka, Zambia, 26 March 2022.

38 Hamoonga R et al. 2020. “Hygiene Behaviour Change in Response to Covid-19 in Zambia: A cross-sectional survey”, *Health Press Zambia Bulletin* 5(1):3.

lives just to show love by taking care of their sick family members, but they never received same care from men in return.

Economic experiences

The seventeenth-century English poet John Donne wrote, “No man is an island.” There is a need for interconnectedness of all people to God and to each other. The economic effect that the pandemic brought affected not just individuals, but families, communities, nations and the entire globe. Many women and men lost their jobs because of the lockdown. Those who engaged in cross-border trade saw their business shut down, since borders were closed from March through October 2020. This led to high consumer prices, since goods from outside the country become scarce and the few who had them hiked the prices. These policies of the government were hindrances to women’s work both in the private and public sector. In the focus group discussion, it was evident that women were financially affected during the Covid-19 pandemic period. Deka-Zulu states that, “when compared to men 49% women entrepreneurs reported temporary suspension of business activities due to Covid-19 against 35% men.”³⁹

During data collection, I discovered that one of the three participants who were teachers was teaching at a private school, while the other two were at the government school. Teachers at private school were affected differently economically from those in government schools. Teachers from private schools never received their salaries, because parents did not pay tuition fees, as pupils were not learning. It was through payment of tuition fees that private schools were able to pay their workers, while in government schools it was the responsibility of the government to pay teachers and not the school. The private school teacher was used to having her own money, but Covid-19 reduced her to a housewife and asking for money from her husband. This made women feel even worse. Some women stopped even giving Sunday offerings, group gathering offerings, tithes and to other programmes that needed monies to support the kingdom of God. Thus, the church was also affected economically.

The experiences of these women bring to light the challenges that they experienced in the private sector. The government did not consider how those in the private sector would survive. The interviews revealed that the women felt bad staying out of employment, but they were more free to ask for assistance from their husbands than men from their wives. The financial challenges of an individual member of the church also affected the offerings in the church negatively. Most of the women reported that they stopped attending women’s fellowship, even after the lockdown was over. The financial capacity of the women’s group was low as was that of the church.

During the Covid-19 lockdown, the government was forced to close all salons, barbershops, restaurants, bars, liquor stores casinos, kitchen parties, wedding

39 Deka-Zulu B. 2021. “Overview of Challenges Caused by Covid-19 on Women-Led Enterprise in Zambia”. Lusaka: Policy Monitoring and Research Centre.

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ceremonies. Some women took advantages of the Covid-19 lockdown and started making face masks and selling them in bulk. They made not only masks, but also hand sanitisers, and they also sold lemons, ginger roots and other herbs believed to cure Covid-19. In fact, some women were never negatively affected by the lockdown of Covid-19, even when most of the business entities were closed, because they found other means of surviving. A few women reported that they made a lot of money; thus, it could be said that they were economically positively affected by the laws and policies made by the government of the Zambia during the pandemic. Covid-19 prompted the women to be resourceful and seek new avenues of income.

Spiritual experiences

The laws and policies put in place by the government and the church had both positive and negative impacts on the women who were the majority of the members of the church. The most important point that the participants pointed to was the decline in membership, since the few who came to church after lockdown still feared contracting the disease. Concerning the spiritual life of women, there was a decline in participation and membership, as activities planned for the year were disrupted. The participants observed that worshipping during Covid-19 lockdown made the situation worse for those who were not very active in the women's fellowship group. In addition, house prayers proved unfruitful to majority of the members, because the home environment was not conducive for prayers during the day.

When services were allowed to be done for the limited duration of an hour, some people still cited Covid-19 as an excuse for not attending. Many of the women who participated in the presented study said that they missed church and wondered why the church agreed to the government's conditions. They continued to say that they were most upset about suspending Holy Communion, which brings the people closer to God. Church members were encouraged to continue to give offerings, when spiritually they were backsliders.

The clergy were asked a lot of questions as to why members had to give offerings despite not coming to church. However, the church did engage in helping the needy in the society, especially women, by giving them foodstuffs. Such activities encouraged members to give more. The work of the clergy and church leaders during and after lockdown was difficult in terms of convincing people to come back and worship God while observing social distance. A lot was done to convince people to start going to church, such as encouragement through WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages and phone calls from different church leaders to assure people that God's presence was with them despite of the pandemic. Other participants pointed out that Covid-19 helped them to learn on how to be strong, and how to stand on their own and trust God in every situation. It was a time that brought people closer to their families and helped them understand and know Jesus as their personal saviour.

When asked how vulnerable they were as women in the church, most of the women in the focus group discussion, said that, as women, they were responsible

for cleaning the church. The Covid-19 pandemic required them to develop hygiene consciousness, but at the same time they were scared that they might contract the disease. Indeed, Covid-19 helped in improving cleanliness in the church, because the health inspectors inspected the churches to see if they were complying to health guidelines. Other participants noticed that the government law and policy were a bit loose, with health inspectors and police being strict with the churches, but leaving the markets, bars and public transport unchecked and as far as observing social distance.

ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSE OF WOMEN AND CHURCHES

Using a feminist lens, the general view from the data collected was that the laws and policies taught women the value of cleanliness, innovation, physical, spiritual and self-reliance. These values clustered around several different themes.

Gender-based violence

Though the lockdown solved one problem of health in the form of the pandemic, it created a new one in the rise of gender-based violence. Chammah Kaunda and Benjamin Pokol, writing from a feminist perspective, observed that, “gendered inequalities and relations of dominion shapes African Cultural systems, makes women vulnerable to various forms of violence.”⁴⁰ Covid-19 sent husbands, children and businesswomen home. Bridget Mukuka states that, “Staying indoors brought about many types of abuse against women and children”.⁴¹ The question Bridget Mukuka posed was: where was religion when women and children were abused? She forgot that churches were also closed and there was little or no communication with members and leaders. In some cases, this fostered good family fellowship, that had been lost due to parents and children being kept busy and apart. These families cemented their relationships, but in others the loss of jobs created frustration which led to gender-based violence.

The picture of a woman being treated at the University Teaching Hospital (UTH) in Lusaka Zambia was reported in the newspaper by journalist Mwaka Lengalenga on 21 December 2021. Lengalenga reported that the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) was one of the key actors in the fight against gender-based violence. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the organisation recorded an increase in gender-based violence cases. Lengalenga further reported that the organisation received 587 clients in 2020 compared to 398 in 2019 and 431 in 2018.⁴² Deka-Zulu has noted that GBV cases increased by 19.8% with 6 788 cases in 2019

40 Kaunda C and Pokol B. 2019. “African Christianity, Myth of Creation, and Gender Justice: An African Feminist Re-Inculturated Perspective”, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 35(1):6.

41 Mukuka, “Covid-19 and Violence against Women and Children in Zambia”, 53.

42 Lengalenga M. 2021 “Addressing Gender-Based Violence amid Coronavirus Pandemic”, *Zambia Daily Mail Limited*.

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and 7 640 in 2020 and that one contributing factor might be due to lockdown and frustrations that come with the loss of income, further acknowledging that “these measures had weakened women protection and increased women exposure to higher risk of gender-based violence.”⁴³ These observations indicate that laws and policies during the pandemic can be correlated to an increase in gender-based violence. In this study, participants also acknowledged that men staying at home caused a lot of relationship misunderstanding among the couples. Some issues which caused misunderstanding were shortages of food supply for the family. In their research on women in Ndola, Mathew Nyashanu and research colleagues reported that participants in their study “had inadequate food supplies as a result of closing down their self-run of businesses” and “never received any help from the government”.⁴⁴

Women’s use of African medicine

UCZ women expressed fear of dying from Covid-19. The fear went to such an extent that they did not want to go to the clinic for fear of catching Covid. Participants in the discussions conducted for the present study revealed that it was this fear that prompted them to seek solutions by going back to their roots and what their foremothers and forefathers had used to keep themselves healthy. Media reports suggest that there was an increase in the use of medicinal plants commonly used in African traditional medicine and that sellers in Lusaka were running out of stock.

Steaming inhalation therapy, known as *ukufutikila* in the Bemba language, was reported to be on the rise in Zambia in home-based care solutions as a prevention measure against Covid-19. The Minister of Health, then Mr Jonas Chanda, was reported having said that, “Local based traditional remedies were vital in managing less severe cases at home. Among the recommended preventative remedies are included hot steaming, vitamin C, ginger, garlic, honey and cinnamon concoctions.”⁴⁵ Steaming inhalation, which was seen as old-fashioned by this generation, again became part of their lives, as women learnt how to use these techniques properly on their children. In his ministerial statement on the status of the Covid-19 situation in the country, Minister of Health Chanda said that for home-based care management of patients who were symptomatic, the advice was to use supplementation with vitamins, a balanced diet with additional fruits and vegetables, taking plenty of fluids to ensure that they were well hydrated at all times, engaging in light exercises and the steaming up commonly known as *ukufutikila*.

What was surprising was that, in the past and before Covid-19, women of faith were the ones who condemned African medicine as being evil. David Mutemwa states that “The limited access to the health care system, left many to resort to traditional

43 Dekka-Zulu, “Overview of Challenges Caused by Covid-19 on Women-Led Enterprise in Zambia”, 12.

44 Nyashanu, “The impact of Covid-19 lockdown in a developing country”, 1374.

45 “Feature: Home-based care solutions for Covid-19 prevention in Zambia on the rise”, *Xinhua* 20 January 2021.

remedies. Home-based care in Zambia includes the use of local based solutions such as steaming.⁴⁶ In the same way that the former president and Ministry of Health recommended the use of African traditional medicine, Mutemwa further clarifies the recommendation of steaming as involving “putting leaves of trees such as mangoes, guavas, and eucalyptus into boiling hot water from which the team raises”.⁴⁷ In light of the resurgence of these African traditional healing methods would also recommend that the government promote African medicines be used even more to control diseases. However, there is need for the Ministry of Health to research the African medicines and therapies that enabled our mothers to live without clinics.

Church traditions tested

The suspension of Holy Communion, baptism, funeral services and group fellowship made people question the church for not defending what they believed during such hard times. The church seemed not to have a say with what the government had put in place. This made a lot of people question whether the church was really the mouthpiece of the vulnerable people in the society. The doctrines and traditions of the church were challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic. The measures the church had put in place were to protect members and church workers from being infected. The United Church of Zambia constitution, rules and regulations pertaining to the sacrament of Holy Communion state, “This sacrament has from the earliest days been recognised as the central act of worship of those who are fully committed to the services of Christ and are therefore termed ‘Communicant Members’.”⁴⁸ What the church considered to be the central part of worship, for which communicant members are suspended if they miss three consecutive months, was no longer being administered. The other implication of not partaking Holy Communion was that if such a person dies, they will not be accorded a Christian funeral service. For a UCZ member, a Christian funeral service is an important rite of passage for the deceased of which they were deprived during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Self-reliance and self-sustenance of the church and its members

Though the church had experienced financial problems, it still extended its helping hand to women and men who lost their jobs and businesses due to Covid-19. Early in the pandemic, personal protective equipment for healthcare workers were expensive and difficult to acquire. However, the church provided personal protective equipment

46 Mutemwa D et al. 2021. “The Role of Women, Philosophy of Life, Global Health, Traditional Medicine and Past Experiences in the Covid-19 Pandemic Response: Zambia Case Study”, *Caritas e Veritas* 11:34-49.

47 Mutemwa et al. “The Role of Women, Philosophy of Life, Global Health, Traditional Medicine and Past Experiences”, 45.

48 The United Church of Zambia, “Constitution Rules and Regulations. 2014”. Article 5.2. On importance of Holy Communion, see also Mukuka, “Covid-19 and Violence against Women and Children in Zambia”, 51.

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for frontline workers in its church-owned hospitals. By doing so, they helped women who were nursing husbands, children or family members who were admitted to the hospital. Though such help rendered by the church to vulnerable families and church-owned hospitals seemed to be a drop in the ocean, the study suggests that there is a need for both the church and churchwomen to be self-reliant and self-sustaining in the context of financial crisis and pandemics.

Mathew Nyashanu and research colleagues have suggested that “there is need to make training available for self-employed women in entrepreneurship skills to ensure that they have skills to protect their business during pandemic times”.⁴⁹ Women being empowered with skills to keep their businesses intact during a pandemic is only possible if they are trained to know how to turn bad situations into business opportunities. The government, together with religious institutions, can work together to find a lasting solution for pandemics. Some women who were tailors saw a business opportunity during Covid-19 by sewing face masks and selling them to the public.

Communication

The main lesson learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic by study participants was that phones become more important than ever before. People learnt how to use WhatsApp messages and video, send and receive money and they communicated to their friends and fellow church members. The church no longer relied on hard copy letters to communicate; instead, emails and WhatsApp were used to communicate with congregants. Felesia Malauzi and Kendra Albright have maintained that the ability of a society to develop “depends on the ability of individuals, including women to access information and knowledge”.⁵⁰ Malauzi and Albright further observe that “information access is critical for women in many regions because they are key players in the development process.”⁵¹ However, Ngabo Nankonde and research colleagues have noted that “the ownership of mobile phones across genders revealed that there are relatively more ‘male headed’ households that own at least one working mobile phone than ‘female headed’ households”.⁵² The United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has observed that “most of those who lack access to digital technology [are] women and girls in developing countries” and Hansen He, Huawei Zambia Director of Public Relations, has urged women in Zambia “not [to] be afraid to put themselves forward and prove that they can

49 Nyashanu M et al. 2020. “The impact of Covid-19 lockdown in a developing country”, *Health Care for Women International* 41(11-12):1380.

50 Malauzi F and Albright KS. 2009. “Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and Development information for Professional Women in Zambia”, *International Journal of Technology Management* 45(1-2):177-195.

51 Malauzi and Albright, “Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and Development information for Professional Women in Zambia”.

52 Nankonde N, Banda B and Siluyele I. “Evaluating the Gender Gaps in Access & Usage of ICTs in Zambia”. Lusaka: ZICTA/SPIDER, 16.

defy odds and break through that proverbial glass that espouses that ICT is a male field".⁵³ These data indicate that women have a long way to go to have the access to phones that men do.

The Covid-19 period prompted clergy and church leaders to make use of their phones to communicate with their members. The challenge was with women who lacked mobile phones, as indicated by Nankonde and fellow researchers. During the Covid-19 period, the clergy and church leaders used Zoom meetings to discuss affairs pertaining to the church and WhatsApp and Facebook to preach and communicate important information to church members. One member from the group discussion shared her experience of bad communication during lockdown. It was an instance in which she was sick and no member of the church visited her or called upon her to find out how she was coping, for fear of contracting the virus, even though she only had malaria. It made her feel bad – how Covid-19 disconnected the members and broke their fellowship and care for one another.

The pandemic did not just break communication among people in the church, but also in the wider society. Care was disrupted in cases of sickness, funerals and weddings. As a leader in the church, there was no other means to share the word of God without gathering. Hence, the church encouraged the church pastors to make use of social media to preach and restore hope in the lives of the people. Communication is very vital, as it unites the families and helps us to achieve our goals, but Covid brought the life of the church to a standstill.

CONCLUSION

The first objective of this study was to investigate how Covid-19 laws and policies made by the government affected women in the church. The results show that women during lockdown were affected both positively and negatively. The positive part was that the Covid-19 pandemic prompted women to be clean both at church and at home in a way that prevented them from being infected. In the church and at home, women played an important role in preventing the Covid-19 through practising good hygiene. The women had adequate time to spend with their spouses and children. In addition, house prayers encouraged fellowship in the family and built their faith in God.

However, as much as these laws and policies had positive effects, they also had negative effects on women and the family. It should be noted that the majority of the women who participated in the study were farmers and businesswomen and a few were schoolteachers. When the lockdown was implemented, their business went down, resulting in a shortage of food supplies for their families. Some of the men in their families were also out of employment, and they stayed home with their wives all day. That resulted into increased gender-based violence among couples due to economic pressures. The effects were not just physical, but also spiritual.

53 Chiwila C. "Zambia: Not Leaving Women Behind in ICTS", *Times of Zambia*, 1 June 2021.

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The second objective of the study was to assess how women in the church responded to Covid-19 laws and policies made by the government. The data collected revealed that it was difficult for women to keep the social distance rules the whole day, as they had many responsibilities at home. Women were vulnerable to Covid-19 at church, in the society and at home. This is because women are social beings who care for the family. When members of the family were sick, the women took care of them, but they were asked by their male partners to isolate when sick. The duty to care for the sick resulted in women returning to African traditional healing medicines and therapies, the preparation of which was mainly known by women in earlier eras. Women did everything possible to save lives. Though physical contact was discouraged, women used phones to communicate to their families and fellow church members.

The final objective was to analyse how the church responded to the government Covid-19 laws and policies and how these policies affected women socially, economically and spiritually. The church limits on time for worship affected women's group social activities. However, the church, through its social services, helped vulnerable by giving them food. In the hospitals run by the church, donations from members were made to health institutions to prevent the spread. Though the church did not give food to all, others were helped, and their faith was revived.

The study proved that Covid-19, as other pandemics, was gendered in a range of ways. Inasmuch as men were affected economically, socially and spiritually, women were more affected, as they had to look after the families and make sure that hygiene standards were followed both at church and at home. Women played an important role as home-based caregivers to symptomatic patients. But despite all the work they did and the pressure to look after the children at home, some women experienced gender-based violence. The violence was physical to some and mental to others, as they were not taken care of by their husbands when they were sick.

The UCZ women's stories indicate there is need for the church and the government to collaborate in any pandemic that may come and particularly to consider how women's experiences can be addressed. Trouble can result when the government closes churches, workplaces, markets and essentially the whole country, even in places where Covid-19 was not present. The government should make decisions according to the context of people living in the developing countries when it comes to lockdowns and medicines to be used. It is good that the use of herbal medicine was supported by the president and the Ministry of Health. The study shows that there was no change in women access to phones recorded. There is need comparative research on women access to phones before and during Covid-19. On the other hand, the lesson for the church is to learn to be self-reliant and self-sufficient and empower women in acquiring various skills and in accessing access to phones for business and spiritual purposes. Further comparison research on the effects of Covid-19 on men and women should also be done.