



MOBILISING PROPHETS AND PROPHETESSES IN THE APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS' RIGHTS IN ZIMBABWE



AS A PROPHET, I RECEIVED MY WORD AND GUIDANCE FROM THE SPIRIT. GOD CAN ALSO SEND AN ORDINARY HUMAN BEING TO CONFIRM A MESSAGE. THIS MESSAGE OF ENSURING THE SAFETY OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IS VERY IMPORTANT. OUR GOD IS A GOD OF LOVE NOT VIOLENCE

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SILENCE OF FAITH LEADERS HAS CONTRIBUTED TO HIGH RATE OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN ZIMBABWE'S APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY

In 2019, the Apostolic Women's Empowerment Trust (AWET) co-created interfaith briefs on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender-based violence (GBV) and teenage pregnancies to initiate conversations within Zimbabwe's Apostolic community.

Patriarchal norms and teachings are widespread among Apostolic faith leaders and congregations, shaping behaviours and practices that contribute to many teenage pregnancies, the high prevalence of gender-based violence, and the undermining of women's and girls' rights. AWET organized intra-faith training, dialogues and conversations, elevating women's rights on the apostolic agenda. This work triggered increased internal interest and enabled AWET

to secure commitments from faith leaders to develop related church policies.

This case demonstrates the importance of engaging leaders from various Apostolic churches, fostering collaboration, and nurturing the will to address teenage pregnancy and GBV as communal challenges that require urgent attention.

The incidence of teenage pregnancy and gender-based violence (GBV) in the Apostolic community is high and continues to rise.¹ Apostolic communities have historically made teenage pregnancy a personal matter. Teenage mothers are seen as being fully responsible for becoming pregnant. However, the position of AWET is that everyone is collectively implicated in this challenge.

DRAWING ON THE STRENGTH OF ITS FAITH, THE APOSTOLIC WOMEN EMPOWERMENT TRUST SEEKS TO ADVANCE WOMEN'S RIGHTS



The Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust (AWET) is a non-governmental trust which was founded in 2016.² AWET employs a holistic, multi-sectoral, participatory and multi-faceted approach to addressing the socio-cultural and religious factors that limit educational opportunities for the members of Apostolic churches. AWET works to empower women in Apostolic churches so that they can actively participate in social and economic development

processes and advance their rights and those of others. AWET prioritises addressing child marriage and GBV within the Apostolic faith community in Zimbabwe.

With 2.5 million adherents in Zimbabwe, the Apostolic faith is an indigenous African faith that is comprised of several distinct groups, each with differing interpretations of Apostolic teachings and practices. Apostolic faith groups base their teachings and practices on the Bible, the founders' philosophy and doctrine, and "revelation from and of the Holy Spirit" or Mweya. Apostolic faith teachings and practices also incorporate some aspects of African culture and religion and modernity. The diverse foundations on which religious beliefs and teachings are built produce multiple interpretations and expressions of the Apostolic religion.³ Groupings within the Apostolic faith community range from ultra-conservative to liberal. One measure of where a particular group sits on the continuum is the degree to which there is an uptake of modern healthcare services, modern medicines and immunization, as well as the alignment of beliefs, teachings, rituals and practice to emerging or new thinking.



Apostolic faith leaders are called prophets and prophetesses. They model themselves on the biblical apostles who performed miracles and accessed the spirit world, receiving guidance from God. They have a central role in articulating their local congregations' teachings and values. They emphasize strict adherence to religious teachings and practices, compliance with normative values, and impose penalties on those who violate church regulations and religious teachings.

As regards women's rights, Apostolic faith teachings are pluralistic, ranging from extremely patriarchal to gender equal. The public statements and teachings of Apostolic faith leaders who self-identify as conservative have fostered social norms that stand in the way of women's and girls' rights. Their interpretations of traditions, the Bible, and revelations emphasize women's obedience, submission, willingness, and weakness while stressing male dominance, assertiveness, and power. Women are expected to be virtuous, pure and remain virgins, while men are encouraged to be strong, (sexually) assertive and remain in control. By choosing to be silent, Apostolic faith leaders have accepted violence as a mode of social interaction. Thus, they have promoted or tolerated child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence. The

Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe, the body that seeks to have some measure of control over Apostolic churches, has acknowledged that the practice of child marriage was more prevalent among Apostolic followers than other religious groups.

Many stakeholders, including government and civil society, have written off and side-lined Apostolic faith communities, characterising them as "hard to reach." This has stigmatised adherents of the Apostolic faith and reduced their access to services which has, in turn, increased the vulnerability of women and girls to violence and exclusion. AWET has recognised this gap and has stepped up to capacitate Apostolic faith communities.

THE PROPHETS AND PROPHETESSES HAVE REFLECTED ON THEIR TEACHINGS AND DECIDED TO DEVELOP CHURCH POLICIES THAT END GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Working with prophets and prophetesses, AWET aims to transform Apostolic church policies, teachings, and practices on teenage pregnancy, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). The Interfaith Advocacy Briefs have been a valuable resource in AWET's drive to initiate positive change within the Apostolic faith community and have served as a rallying point and enabler of discussion on sensitive issues.

Recognising the decentralized and diverse nature of the Apostolic faith community, AWET started by mobilising and engaging with faith leaders from 45 churches in the Gokwe, Gweru, Kwekwe, Shurugwi and Zvishavane districts in Zimbabwe. In June 2020, these faith leaders participated in a centralised "Apostolic Community Co-creation Workshop on Policy Sensitisation" held in Gweru, Zimbabwe, to develop and promote policies to address the root causes of violence against women and girls. The workshop included awareness-raising activities, knowledge building and exposure aimed at changing attitudes and practices that cause harm within the Apostolic faith community and beyond.



CHILD MARRIAGE IS GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE. IT IS VIOLENCE AGAINST THE GIRL CHILD. IT IS DONE IN THE NAME OF PROTECTING AND ENSURING THE FUTURE OF THE CHILD.

HOPE DUNIRA



THE INTERFAITH BRIEFS HAVE AN OPEN AND ACCOMMODATING PERSPECTIVE, WHICH STRATEGICALLY HELPED START THE CO-CREATION PROCESS. WE REFLECTED ON THE VERSES CITED IN THE BRIEF AND IT ALLOWED US TO START OUR OWN CONVERSATIONS

- NYASHA, JERUSAREMA APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY

Faith leaders identified harmful practices which are common within Apostolic communities. The identified practices were deemed harmful because they contribute to violations of women's and girls' rights and in some cases, the rights of boys as well. Workshop attendees took up child marriage as their main area of focus and committed themselves to eliminating child marriage within their congregations.

The Interfaith Brief on Gender-Based Violence was used as a resource to enliven participants' discussions. The participating prophets and prophetesses acknowledged the role they can play in addressing gender-based violence. They expressed their views on gender-based violence, drawing on their faith, and spoke openly about the challenges they face in developing gender policies within their churches. They also identified the main steps to formulate and implement these policies.

CHAMPIONING CHANGE THROUGH COMMITTED CONCERTED EFFORT



The 45 Apostolic faith leaders who participated in the AWET-led initiative committed to championing the rights of women and girls within their churches and communities. They are engaging their congregants on issues such as teenage pregnancy, child marriage and gender-based violence and have mobilised other community members to adopt positions that promote women's and girls' rights. Furthermore, the Apostolic faith leaders have:

- Spoken out on the effects of child marriage within the Apostolic faith community and implemented safeguards to protect Apostolic girls. Madzibaba George from Kwekwe said: "Speaking about child marriage is an opportunity for us as leaders to show that the Holy Spirit indeed does not want the abuse of girls."
- Signed a commitment charter to advocate for the creation of appropriate policies within Apostolic churches.
- Identified and set up safe spaces where women and adolescent girls can talk about sexual reproductive health openly and without fear, since the Apostolic Church meets out in the open and generally lives within the same communities.
- Secured commitments and participation from the male adherents of the Apostolic faith who attended the trainings and further cascaded the learnings to other men to advocate for church policies that protect women and children.

Overall, the initial 45 champions of women's and girls' rights have sensitized another 405 prophets and prophetesses on the issues of child marriage and gender-based violence. AWET workshop participants have continued cascading the information to Apostolic faith communities in their respective districts, leading to the sensitisation of an additional 2250 adherents of the Apostolic faith.

Recognising the breakthroughs achieved by the Apostolic faith leaders who benefited from the training, other church leaders have requested training. Through the initiative, AWET has appreciated the strategic significance of the multiplier effect of having dedicated leaders who are willing to reach out to others. Although COVID-19-related restrictions on movement have affected the scope and speed of AWET's activities, there are signs of emerging change in the Apostolic faith community.

An initial and promising shift in attitudes among Apostolic leaders concerning GBV is evident. First, the conversations around contentious issues such as child marriage and gender-based violence are a breakthrough for the Zimbabwean Apostolic faith community. Second, the commitment to develop gender policies is very positive as it will provide a platform for promoting women's and girls' rights. Third, the interest and enthusiasm of other Apostolic faith leaders as they seek to access the training on GBV is a source of hope.

Going forward, AWET will utilise the interfaith briefs to facilitate intergenerational dialogues within the Apostolic faith community. Adolescents and youth will have opportunities to engage with Apostolic faith leaders in developing approaches to achieve better health and life outcomes. Hosting a youth conference and initiating GBV Committees are additional aspirations that AWET hopes to fulfil in the near future.

REFERENCES

- 1 <https://awet.org.zw/about-us/> accessed April 2021
- 2 E. Chitando et al., ed., *Multiplying in the Spirit: African Initiated Churches in Zimbabwe*. Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2014.
- 3 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/752589/Zimbabwe_-_Women_and_GBV_-_CPIN_-_v3.0e_October_2018_.pdf

AWET participated in a series of interfaith dialogues on women's rights and gender equality facilitated by Faith to Action Network and ACT Ubumbano. On that occasion, 12 faith organisations from seven countries in Southern African countries declared "We can no longer be silent as we are called to uphold human dignity for all creation." Coming from Bahai, Christian, Muslim and Traditionalist faiths, they developed three Interfaith brief on sexual and reproductive

health and rights; Interfaith brief on gender based violence; and Interfaith brief on teenage pregnancy. They also identified opportunities in engaging more effectively within their faith communities. Faith to Action Network and ACT Ubumbano supported their action plans through micro-grants and technical assistance, contributing to many inspiring results like the ones mentioned in this case study.

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