



Gender, Climate Change and Food Insecurity: A Zimbabwean Rastafari Perspective

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Abstract

The global climate change crisis has a direct bearing on the imbalances affecting the ecosystem including food security. In Africa, the theme of food security is urgent and has been exacerbated by pandemics and the footprint of the ecological crisis. The study seeks to examine the experiences of Rastafari women in the context of gender, climate change and food insecurity in Zimbabwe. Rastafari is a religious and political movement that developed in Jamaica in the 1930s and was adopted by many groups globally. It contains elements of Protestant Christianity, mysticism, and a pan-African political consciousness. Paradoxically, Rastafari is a patriarchal movement that subordinates women, but at the same time claims to advocate for the liberation and social justice of the oppressed in society. The research posits that Rastafari women experience a double jeopardy in the face of human-made climate change and food insecurity in Zimbabwe. The study grappled with the following questions: How are the forms of inequalities legitimated in Rastafari? What becomes visible as violence and what is eclipsed in Rastafari? What practices are being reshaped and reconceptualised under climate change and food insecurity contexts? By using observation and interviews to gather data as well as insights from the ecofeminist theoretical framework, the study established that rapid industrialization, heightened consumerism, unrestricted technologies, policy flaws and other anthropogenic factors engineered through the hegemonic tendencies of 'Babylon' are blameworthy for the catastrophe of climate crisis and food insecurity. Rastas are skeptical towards the use of Genetically Modified Foods. The research concludes that despite gender disparities in the movement, the agency of women Rastas is expressed through, inter alia, natural living, Ital foodways and waste management in the context of ecological crisis and food insecurity.

Keywords: Climate change, food insecurity, gender, Rastafari, Zimbabwe



Introduction

For [Rasta] take unto himself this concept: It's a nature him a deal with. It's earth him a deal with, right? The earth is a mother, is food, is how you look, is how you talk, (and) is how you relate with people. – Mutabaruka cited in Dickerson (2004:41)

The ecological crisis is essentially a crisis for development work, which has culminated in pandemics, health and food insecurity challenges at local and global levels. According to George Tsiattalos (n.d.) “the fate and prosperity of humanity is inextricably connected to the health and balance of the natural world”. This implies that the actions of humanity to the earth determine their destiny. The above epigraph from Mutabaruka aptly captures how and why humanity should live in harmony with Mother Nature through a spirituality that can transform the Anthropocene. Transformative power is urgent against the backdrop of the environmental crisis, dis-eases and poverty (Sibanda, 2019). This is because the climate change crisis has a direct bearing on the imbalances affecting the ecosystem including food security, health and human flourishing. In Africa, the theme of food security is urgent and has been exacerbated by pandemics and the footprint of the ecological crisis. The earth crisis requires a holistic approach characterized by political will, techno-fixes, spirituality and morality (Moe-Lobeda & Helmiere, 2013). There is no dispute that development is entangled in the call for ecological and gender justice. Along the same lines, human well-being, which is purported to be the main thrust of development, also depends on ecological well-being. Essentially, “[h]uman societies’ relationships to their environments are shaped, often unconsciously, by religiously influenced worldviews, cosmologies, and value systems” (Moe-Lobeda & Helmiere, 2013:207). This places religion among the agents for transformation through specific individuals and groups such as youth and women actors. On this basis, the African feminist scholar, Yoknyam Dabale, rightly describes African women as “environmental freedom fighters” (Dabale, 2019). This dovetails with the view that throughout history, African women, often occupying a presumed periphery, have played under-researched roles as advocates for health and well-being, food security, environmental justice and protectors of Mother Earth.

The study seeks to examine the experiences of Rastafari women (queens/dawtas/sistrens) in the context of climate change and food insecurity in Zimbabwe. Apparently, there is a paradox that Rastafari is a patriarchal movement that subordinates women, but at the same time claims to advocate the liberation and social justice of the oppressed in society. The research posits that Rastafari women experience a double jeopardy in the face of human-made climate change and food insecurity in Africa, including Zimbabwe. Nevertheless, Rastafari women’s power and agency allow “disrupting orthodoxies” (Kelleher, 2019) where they can share their experiences and ‘orthognoisy’ (correct knowledge) on health, *Ital* (natural) food and diet as well as interactions with biodiversity, ecology and nature. This shows how Rastafari women practitioners retrieve and recreate the potent resources of their movement to tackle food and climate change emergencies even though they are often pushed to the periphery. The study grappled with the following questions: How are the forms of inequalities legitimated? What becomes visible as violence and what is eclipsed? What practices are being reshaped and reconceptualised under climate change and food insecurity contexts? As I seek to address these questions in this study, I proceed to explore the theoretical framework and research methodology in the next section.



Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

The study was informed by the ecofeminist theoretical framework and a qualitative research methodology. The term “ecofeminism” was coined by Françoise d’Eaubonne (1920-2005), a French feminist and environmentalist, in 1974 after being influenced by the French feminist tradition, where in 1952, Simone de Beauvoir criticised patriarchy for othering women and nature (Regan, 2020; Glazebrook, 2002:12). The sub-branches of the movement include vegetarian ecofeminism, spiritual ecofeminism and material ecofeminism, which are applicable to the experiences of Rastawomen in this study. Therefore, ecofeminism is a new branch of feminism, which regards the oppression and marginalisation of women as associated with the exploitation of Mother Earth (Kangwa, 2017:59). Also known as eco-feminist theology, ecofeminism exposes the paradox between the high value of both women and ecology whilst both are circumscribed, negated and violated through patriarchal marginalisation and human lordship, respectively (Chimhanda, 2013:126). Ecofeminism anchors on the earth-based spiritual imagery, positing that the religions of the world have an ethical responsibility to challenge a patriarchal system that exploits the Mother Earth and discriminates against women. The paradox of women marginalization under patriarchy is pictorially illustrated by the African theologian, John S. Mbiti (1991:59 cited in Chimhanda, 2013:126) when he says “African women are flowers in the garden; their men are the fence around it”. However, this is akin to a “victim analysis” that misses a variety of women’s multiple statuses and relationships, as well as the dynamism and creativity of their activities (Johnson-Odim & Strobel, 1999:xxix). Thus, whilst it is important to explore Rastafari women’s subordination through the window of ecofeminism, their agency and initiative must not be overlooked because margins also have an impact on the centre. As Kangwa (2017:59) further asserts, the earth can be “healed and ecological balance restored through political [and religious] action that emphasizes the equality of all species”. In other words, ecofeminists are preoccupied with the well-being of the entire ecosystem through an ethic of care.

Notably, Ecofeminism is comparable to Motherism given that both theories argue that women and the earth support, nourish, and protect humanity. In addition, Ecofeminism shares similar traits with Motherism, which points to some aspects of African femininity where women often represent fruitful procreation in humans as well as the fullness of the earth (Ashaolu, 2021). In fact, in Motherism, women are portrayed as protectors of the environment and advocates of interdependent relationships between humans and ecosystems. On this basis, women are seen as an extension of Mother Earth, the global nurturer of all creation. The maternal qualities of women such as love, patience, tolerance, cooperation and care are stressed as they are associated with peaceful management of the environment, empathy and strong knowledge of traditional living and the science of nature (Ashaolu, 2021). The Ecofeminist theory is helpful in the context of this study where Rastafari women’s agency expressed through “reasoning”, “orthognosy” and “I-consciousness” catapults them beyond mere co-sufferers with the environment under patriarchal hegemony to become advocates for complementarity in an equilibrium of ecosystems of all species – human and non-human, as well as earth mysteries. Indeed, with correct knowledge ‘disrupting orthodoxies’ (Kelleher, 2019) on matters pertaining to the politics of pandemics, public health and food insecurity, Rastafari women would be better placed to search for solutions to the world’s disorderliness that threatens the environment such as drought, global warming, deforestation and loss of biodiversity. Hence, ecofeminism is a hermeneutic key to the understanding of Rastafari women experiences and their relationship to Mother Earth through *Ital* lifestyles in a liberative praxis. This would reposition “the agency of Rastafari [women]” (Sibanda, 2022) under the shadow of ‘Babylon’ system.



The research employed a qualitative phenomenological research design, which described the experiences of the participants from an insider perspective. The study used the sociological and phenomenological approaches to explain and analyse the experiences of Rastafari women from Nyahbinghi Rastafari communities in Zimbabwe. Through the phenomenological method, an insider/believer's perspective (Cox, 1996; Sibanda, 2021:129) was enhanced using elements such as *epoche* (bracketing of preconceived ideas), empathy and *eidetic* intuition (meaning or essence) of Rastafari women's values and activities. The sociological approach was important in explaining the interplay of religion and society (Bourdillon, 1990:2), on one hand, and to present the status of Rastafari women in families, the community and the society at large. In addition, the sociological method provided a sense of "collective consciousness" given that social interaction and social integration are inspired by feelings of common historical experiences and social togetherness as advanced by the French sociologist, Emile Durkheim (Sibanda, 2021:129). On this basis, Rastafari women's experiences, values and beliefs were interrogated as social facts for understanding the phenomena under study. Furthermore, the sociological method was useful to gauge the extent to which individual Rastafari women were socialized by adopting the behaviour and symbol(s) of the Nyahbinghi Rastafari communities in Zimbabwe as a social glue. Data were gathered through observation and in-depth interviews with information rich Rastafari women and other Rastafari elders in Zimbabwe.

Rastafari: A Historical Overview

In its relatively long history of existence, Rastafari, a minority new religious movement (NRM) of Jamaican origin, is associated with the margins and struggles for self-definition. Edmonds (2012:6) described it as a "movement of Jah people" because most Rastafarians uphold the divinity of Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, known as Jah Rastafari. Inspired by the ideas of Garveyism, Pan-Africanism and Ethiopianism, the movement was made up of the Afro-Jamaican black ex-slaves who constituted most of the Rastafarians in the Caribbean context (Parsons, 1993; Sibanda, 2012). Although Marcus Garvey never followed Rastafari or believed in it, he is considered to be one of the religion's prophets whose ideologies ultimately developed into what Rastafari evolved into. The influence of Marcus Garvey to the emergence of Rastafari was remarkable as he instilled the philosophy of black pride through the "Back to Africa Movement", which encouraged all black people to develop group solidarity as African people. Due to Garvey's legacy on Rastafari, the Rastafarians were regarded as "Garveyites", the real ideological "successors of Marcus Garvey" (Tafari, 1980:1). It is argued that this 'Garveyite' philosophy of self-determination is critical for Rastafari women at the micro-level efforts where Rastafarian women's production tends to be situated. In addition, the coronation of Ras Tafari as Negus of Ethiopia on 2 November 1930 who adopted the title, Emperor Haile Selassie I, was a fulfilment of Garvey's prophecy about a black redeemer king (Afolabi, 2004). In Rastafari circles, since the coronation of Emperor Haile Selassie I was conducted in Ethiopia alongside the installation of his wife, Empress Menen Asfaw as Queen, it was a significant indicator for establishing a gender balance reminiscent of the Kemetic principle of MAAT in Rastafari. The Rastafari pillar of Garveyism is connected to the pillars of Ethiopianism and Pan-Africanism.

Rastafari is a typical Pan-Africanist-cum-Ethiopianist movement, which regarded Africa and Ethiopia as "Zion" and "Promised Land" in contrast to "Babylon", a place associated with all forms of suffering and oppression (Campbell, 1988). Within Rastafari, Jamaica and other western-influenced places are regarded as 'Babylon' or places of 'exile' to be resolved through repatriation, 'the great exodus.' Ideally, repatriation was initially thought of as a physical return to Africa, their long-lost homeland, but it now signifies a return to their culture and liberation from the alienation of the West (Perkins, 2018). It can be argued that by extension, the Rastafari



concept of repatriation implied transforming toxic attitudes such as racial discrimination, gender imbalance, and environmental terrorism, which would promote mutual respect, women rights, food security and responsible environmental ethic.

Today, Rastafari has grown and spread from Jamaica to become a global phenomenon present in different countries and regions of the world including Zimbabwe, South Africa, all islands of the Caribbean and to Black populations throughout the southern hemisphere and in Europe. Rastafarians are also found in a lot of other African countries, and as far away as in Australasia. Roots reggae music is partly credited for being instrumental for the implantation of the Rastafari in Zimbabwe. When the reggae music icon, Bob Marley, was invited to perform at the onset of Zimbabwean independence in 1980, it became an important turning point for the growth of Rastafari in Zimbabwe. The 'movement of Jah people' was made up of males (kings) and females (queens/dawtas/sistrens). However, even from the Jamaican context where the movement originated, negative perceptions about Rastafari brethren reduced the possibility of women joining the movement, as it was deemed subversive, dangerous and insane. According to Ras Ivi cited by Christensen (2014:96) "In the earliest days you didn't have much sisters. There were only a few cause[sic] this was a tough road. Any woman who decide[sic] to trod this path must be a lioness of heart to tek on this faith! So to all the elder sisters, oh mon! we give the credit." Thus, the resilience of Rastafari women was important in stabilising the movement through 'I-consciousness', which closely relates to Rastafari identity. There are different Rastafari Mansions/Orders such as Bobo Ashanti, Twelve Tribes of Israel and Nyahbinghi. Among them, the most orthodox Mansion of Rastafari is the Nyahbinghi Order, which is the focus of this study. The Nyahbinghi Rastafari has a strict commitment to codes of dress, dietary restrictions, gender roles, and various ritual observances (Christensen, 2014:8). It is in this context that Rastafari women's status under the climate change emergency and food insecurity can be understood.

Rastafarian Perspectives on Gender in Zimbabwe's Social Hierarchy

There is an ambivalence and a gender paradox in Rastafari characterised by, on the one hand, a positive egalitarian impulse in which women are empowered through open participation in the *trod* and a negative slant that perpetuate notions of gender stereotypes enmeshed in patriarchy, on the other hand. However, before exploring the Rastafari women's agency towards addressing the ecological crisis and food insecurity, the next section explores the gender stereotypes in Rastafari, namely, the role and status of women, women subordination in marriage and marginalization of women on spiritual matters. This is important in order to appreciate what militates against the full potential of women in Rastafari.

The Role and Status of Women

The gender stereotypes in Rastafari can be mirrored through the role and status of women. This is a bone of contention in Rastafari. The principle of 'One Love' is a pervasive watch phrase in Rastafari, which has been popularised through Bob Marley's reggae music song *One Love* (Marley, 1977). In a wider sense, the 'One Love' envisaged by Marley referred to the Rastafari element of agape. However, the same principle of 'One Love' was employed to establish the existential "relational identity and identification" (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007:9) of Rastafari gender relations at the individual, interpersonal and collective levels. The study established through interviews and observation that the Rastafari dose of One Love was liberative and oppressive at the same time such that Rastawomen drowned and swam in the murky waters of 'One Love' in postcolonial Zimbabwe.



There is an extent to which Rastafari could be regarded as an oppressive and gendered movement to the detriment of women. The study established through interviews with male and female Rastas that the marginalisation and exclusion of women was based on their dependence on the Bible. The biblical texts on which Rastafari gender standpoints are anchored were carefully selected to suit the reality of their world view. For instance, the male Rasta leaders rigidly follow the Levitical laws and taboos on women's menstrual issue of blood in which women are excluded from attending the *binghis* when they are in their menses. During an interview with one female member at Marcus Garvey House, it was revealed that even when a woman commenced her menses whilst at the *binghi*, she was expected to immediately climb down the hills, the sacred space where the tabernacle was located, in order to preserve the purity of the *binghi*. However, the female members were complicit to this rule as they concurred with the move as correct. This shows that women have been socialised to accept conditions that appeared as stringent stereotypes pertaining to Rastafari women rights to an outsider. In other words, this was one of the typical patriarchal slants of Rastafari where men regulated and restricted women's access and presence to the public space in order to preserve its sanctity. In this manner, gender equality and equity were relegated to the limbo.

The above case shows that there was a politics of space in Rastafari. As established through interviews, among Nyahbinghi Rastafari communities in Zimbabwe, space was relational, socially constituted and gendered against women through their exclusion from 'spatial practice' at the *binghi* because no one compromised on the issue of blood, which was regarded as ritually defiling and dangerous. Kim Knott's (2002:11) observation is instructive when she says that space was multi-dimensional, open and dynamic with properties and aspects to show how it was perceived, conceived and lived by people for love or struggle. Apparently, "gendered space" which privileged one gender at the expense of the other resulted in diverse patterns of being, belonging and inhabiting as noted in Rastafari. One interviewee noted that in Rastafari, Rastamen regarded Rastawomen as the 'other,' when ritually impure because of menses and soon after child birth. Resultantly, as a movement that was located on the margins of the urban environment in Zimbabwe as compared to other religious traditions, Rastafari women experienced a double jeopardy from their male counterparts in the *trod* and society at large. In other words, Rastawomen occupied the lower part of the social ladder to become the 'periphery of the periphery'. Lake's (1998) observation with reference to the experience of Rastafari women as 'subordination in the midst of liberation' becomes apt to the Zimbabwean situation as well.

In line with the above, the Bible is also appropriated in Rastafari on matters of the dress code for Rastawomen. Two of the issues that came to the fore were the head cover and the attire that women were expected to put on. One interviewee noted that though the Rasta-coloured artefacts like bangles, beads, and other regalia were used in a uniform pattern that suggested gender equality in Rastafari, there is also an oppressive side of it when "ranks and robes" (Adogame, 2009) defined social status. Through participant observation, the researcher noted that women and older girls compulsorily put on head scarves to cover their dreadlocks in public and when at the *binghi* sessions. This was explained by one Rasta Elder as a teaching based on 1 Corinthians 11: 2-16, where veiling was made compulsory for women. This particular Elder further said that on the contrary, the male counterparts did not cover their heads at the *binghi* and it was not even compulsory for them to cover their dreadlocks in the public. This disparity portrayed a discriminatory practice that was gender insensitive. However, some of the research participants did not regard this as oppressive, but as a sign of dignity and ideal womanhood. In the words of one Rastawoman, she expressed it as follows: "We do not have a problem with veiling as it enhances our womanhood and self-respect in the *trod*". This resonates with the



findings of Klobah (2008:173) pertaining to the representations of Rastafari womanhood through dress.

The study also established through interviews that the attire for Rastawomen should be modest, as clothing was conceived in both material and spiritual terms. Some Rastawomen said they were expected to wear long and loose fitting dresses, preferably in Rasta colours of red, gold and green. Putting on tightly fitting attire, mini-skirts and trousers was prohibited in Rastafari. In the words of Elder Hall, “women are dignified by dress which enhances self-respect – a dress that does not over-reveal to outsiders.” Put differently, the dress was supposed to be respectable in Rastafari and in the community at large, as clothing defined who they were. This resonated with existing literature where the dressing of a Rastawoman was regarded as a “fulfilment of her Royal dignity and not to the dictates of fashion designers bent on making a plaything and sex object of woman” (JAHUG, 1992:17). Therefore, there is a connection between clothing, body, soul and one’s personal and collective identities. As stated by Quentin Bell, “our clothes are too much part of us for most of us to be entirely indifferent to their condition: it is as though the fabric were indeed a natural extension of the body, or even the soul” (Warr, 2010:372). In other words, clothes were like a second skin. Thus, Rastas regarded clothes as conduits for channeling their religious vocation, behaviour and identity.

Through interview, one Rasta Elder further confirmed that the Rastafari standpoint on clothing was partly based on the biblical tradition that demanded women to adorn themselves modestly and sensibly (cf. 1 Timothy 2:9-10; 1 Peter 3:3-4). However, from observation, the researcher noted that the use of the Bible in Rastafari was guided by historical reflection and a selective biblical literalism. Through interviews with other Rastamen, it was revealed that there was consistency between Rastafari women dress code with the African traditional worldview on dress, which demanded women to dress with modesty, failure of which one was easily mistaken to be of loose morals. This was not surprising given that some Rastas associated women with the mythical notions based on the biblical story of Eve who they say fell from grace as a temptress. In addition, the question of modesty in dressing negatively affected the freedom of expression on the part of women in Rastafari, which showed the ambivalence of Rastafari stance on liberation. As Klobah (2008:160) further notes, womanhood was defined through Rastafari texts and orally transmitted ‘reasonings.’ Given that gendered space in Rastafari was social and mental, it also suggested unequal power dynamics on the basis of ideas and beliefs.

On the question of dressing modestly, some women participants felt that the command had outlived its usefulness, particularly to the youth in Rastafari. They said that it would be welcome if the rule was adjusted in favour of the younger generation in the *trod*. Arguably, these were some of the gender norms that might position some Rastawomen as ‘rebels’ in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Tafari-Ama (1998:91) is succinct in this regard when she notes that the issue of considering the women Rastas as resistant to the established traditions of patriarchy reflected a paradigm shift in present-day probing of Rasta male-allocated roles in society at the backdrop of the women’s call for gender liberation. From observation, the proportion of female members was far less that of male Rastas unlike what obtained in other religious traditions such as Christianity in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Therefore, Rastafari had a gender-based double standard that stultified women’s rights and interests on the ritual use of space, taboos on blood and patterns of dress code (Sibanda, 2014). A related arena of women subordination is noted in the institution of marriage.



Women Subordination in Marriage

The gender stereotype as well as the role and status of women are also enmeshed in women subordination in marriage. The study established through interviews and observation that there were some oppressive elements within Rastafari where women were subordinated to male leadership in marriage in the domestic and public spheres. In the first place, through an interview, it was revealed that it is the Kingman who makes the 'womb-man' (woman) to 'sight' the path of Rastafari, which ultimately gave dominance, to males. By the same token, the Kingman was the head of the family which gave him the leeway to express his patriarchal authority. From the researcher's further interactions with Rastas, it was noted that the use of contraceptives such as condoms and family planning tablets was discouraged as a western ploy to suppress the growth of the black populace. This exposed the Rastawomen to the risk of contracting HIV and to have a lot of children, which earned them the superficial tag of an ideal Mother from Rastamen. However, through interviews, it was established that the ability to bear many children for the Kingman has not spared some of the women Rastas from abuses such as gender-based violence, neglect and lack of respect as an equal partner. Isabel Apawo Phiri's (1997) observation on the hypocrisy from males in patriarchal societies who tend to respect women as 'sacred vessels' because of what they could produce, not for who they were, is instructive to the Rastafari women's experiences in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

In line with the above, according to some Rasta participants, the issues of abuse, gender disparities and gender-based violence have resulted in some divorce cases. In addition, the researcher observed that a significant number of Nyahbinghi Kingmen have remained single despite their maturity, with the number of women adherents remaining few and far between in the *trod*. Another paradox that the researcher observed was that some of those who were married among the Rastamen kept their wives at home and out of the 'public eye'. As one woman Rasta confirmed, this form of oppression to sistrens through isolation made them mere house wives and child-bearing machines in the homes without any hope for interaction with other sistrens in the *trod*. Therefore, troubling and dangerous masculinities were an existential reality in Rastafari in postcolonial Zimbabwe. The equality, dignity and liberation of women in Rastafari were not apparent. Judy Mowatt, a Rastawoman reggae singer lamented in a clear tone that called for gender equality, gender justice and gender liberation. Mowatt decried the irony of the subordination and exploitation that women Rastas experienced, not merely from society in general, but from the Kingmen right in their homes, even though equality and equity were universal rights and God-given (Klobah, 2008:158). The singer identified the problem and proposed solutions at the same time. This showed that there was a hypocritical gap between Rastamen's progressive ideologies against oppressive Babylonian systems and their own practical and existential weaknesses as partners in the home and in the *trod*. These were layers of secrecy that concealed the skeletons of the gender paradox in the Rastafari cupboards. Another gender paradox was explored under the marginalisation of women in spiritual matters.

Marginalisation of Women in Spiritual Matters

The gender stereotype in Rastafari is also found in the marginalization of women in spiritual matters. There were three areas where women were excluded in Rastafari under the spiritual matters. The areas that came to the fore in gender relations were, namely, the aspect of priesthood, the non-sharing of chalice pot and the exclusion of women from using drums in the *trod*. The study established through interviews and observation that women Rastas could not assume positions of priesthood in Nyahbinghi Rastafari before getting to menopause. It was categorically stated that the positions of prophet and priest were reserved for males. This shows that only males could occupy the most influential positions of spiritual leadership. On its own,



this is a gender paradox that excluded women from positions of authority and power. However, through interviews and observation, it was noted that women in Rastafari could sit and actively participate in committees such as the Disciplinary Committee of Nyahbinghi Council of Zimbabwe as well as participating in the Sisters' Council. Another discrepancy noted was that women were not allowed to share the chalice with men as a sign of respect, but some women Rastas felt that it was now obsolete in the interest of promoting gender justice. From existing literature, Maureen Rowe (1980:15) believed that this exclusion of females from sharing the chalice with males also deprived them of equal status and chance of directly experiencing the communal nature of Rastafari. This constituted the ambivalence of Rastafari identity in the context of gender in Zimbabwe.

Likewise, women could not play drums before they reached menopause. One sistren opined that it would be good for men and women to co-play drums as some women had equal competence to play drums drawn from their previous experience in Christianity before some of them had joined Rastafari, where everyone was allowed to play them. In addition, on the issue of drums, one Rasta Elder noted that drums were holy instruments that could not be left to non-Rastas to play, whether they were males or females. Therefore, the chalice and drums were gendered objects. This scenario chimed with existing literature where there were gender roles in the performance of music and use of instruments, which defined socio-economic status (Nannyonga-Tamusuza, 2002:137). La Rue (1994:189) was more apt when she stated that "musical instruments can be markers of culture, as well as status; they can also imply the status of gender." The drums in Nyahbinghi Rastafari defined ranks and hierarchies, as well as the gender of the players. However, for Empress Ithiopia, the playing of drums before menopause by women was detrimental to the fertility and reproductive health of women, which was critical in Rastafari. Therefore, the rule on drums was a positive insight and not a purely oppressive element in Rastafari as appreciated by women themselves. Notwithstanding the patriarchal legacy in Rastafari, there were also some positive elements that liberated women in the *trod*, which allowed them to express their agency, combat the climate change emergency and food insecurity in Zimbabwe as covered in the next section.

Rastafari Women, Climate Engagement and Food Security

This section explores the agency of Rastafari women in climate change and food security matters. It is argued that the agency of Rastafari women manifested through environmental stewardship and artworks; *Ital* foodways and organic farming. This created a group of active Rastafari women environmental stewards and artists; and Rastafari women *Italists* and herbalists. These activities guided the women responses to the western practices driven by greed for profit and selfish capitalist consumerist values, which were detrimental to the environment, human health and wellbeing in Zimbabwe. The Rastafari women hit the glass ceilings in the Rastafari movement in order to enjoy its egalitarian impulse.

Environmental Stewards and Artists

Rastafari women in Zimbabwe were typical environmental stewards whose 'I-consciousness' and activities protected the Mother Earth. Anchored on the principle of stewardship, the "Rastafari green philosophy" (Sibanda, 2015) for sustainable development is a framework which guided Rastafari environmental artists, across the gender divide. This framework promotes the conservation and development of "green" theologies that uphold the earth as an ecosystem. In other words, Rastafari green philosophy calls for unity in the protection of Mother Earth. As established through the study, women Rastas are among the advocates for green economies that counter the western hegemonic technologies such as the dumping of toxic waste, use of



chemical fertilizers and pesticides in excess, which are detrimental to the environment. Thus, the “Rastafari ecological ethic” advanced by the Rastafari women is a pro-environmental *Ital livity* (natural living), which is opposed to the capitalist consumerist lifestyle inspired by greed and destruction. In that way, the Rasta women passionately ‘think, act and live green’ in the *trod*. For instance, the Rastafari women of Marondera Nyahbinghi House of Rastafari participated in communal projects that were environmentally friendly including when they devote their energy towards picking waste for reusing, recycling and repurposing as typical environmental stewards and artists. The products made constitute ‘Jah works’.

The study also established through observation that the location of all the Nyahbinghi Rastafari *binghis* were spaces in remote and isolated sites. These chosen spaces were characterised by a range of hilly and rocky outcrops, which they have transformed from ‘wasteland’ into sacred places to suit their values and theological orientations. These sacred places had a serene atmosphere suitable for retreats as well as *binghi* gatherings for individual and collective spiritual development through meditation and reasonings. In this serene environment, the sacred spaces provided a healing effect for Rasta who enjoyed the benefits of visiting hills to nurture deep reflections, admiration and study of the natural environment (Dickerson, 2004:118; Sibanda 2012:72). Therefore, as one Rasta claimed, “they have become stewards to ‘*makomo nemit*’ (hills and trees) in their particular areas as part of the environmental management of natural resources.” Women Rastas are counted among these environmental stewards who practice an ethic of care and spiritual feminist trends.

Inspired by the long-held projections from the King Alpha and Queen Omega Daughters (Daughters of Theocracy), the Rastafari women in Zimbabwe sought to fulfill the Rastafari creed which states that “The hungry must be fed, the naked clothed, the sick nourished, the aged protected, and the infant cared for”. It is through such principles that Rastafari women used ‘I-consciousness’ in challenging threats to Mother Nature and food security in order to promote sustenance of humanity as well as flora and fauna. Thus, the women live in harmony with nature. One Rastafari Elder reasoned as follows in this regard:

Humanity is created from the earth (body), life is from spirit (soul) and we need a balance with the earth. We cannot live without clean water, food from the earth, animals and clean air. Rastas must maintain a natural *livity* not to be obsessed by city life full of deceit, consumerism, confusion, corruption. [Humankind] is forced to live artificial existence, yet must attain tranquility and prosperity by living in harmony with our Mother Earth, spiritually and physically.

This interview transcript showed that Rastas looked forward to the preservation of the environment at all costs. Therefore, Rastafari is endowed with visions and teachings that advocate ‘green’ theologies and ecofeminism consistent with living in harmony with nature.

Among Rastas, the Emperor Haile Selassie I and Empress Menen are also called King Alpha and Queen Omega, respectively. They are important in understanding the gender relations in Rastafari and they inspire women agency in the movement. Rastas upheld that Queen Omega was the Rastafari woman’s highest title tallying with the spiritual role of being an ‘Afrikan Queen, Mother Earth, Mother Nature’. Both Rastamen and Rastawomen in Zimbabwe acknowledged the eminent position of Empress Menen. The Rastafari women hoped to restore the ‘Omega balance’ and the Kemetic principle of MAAT within the Rastafari movement is about social justice. It is a guiding principle that can transform gender relations in Zimbabwe. The title ‘Queen Omega’ promises a new dawn for the African women as it expresses the highest level of



honour that a woman could get. In addition, there is an extent to which the Rastafari movement was guided by the Gender, Environment and Development (GED) slogan, which says “no climate justice without gender justice” (MacGregor, 2010:225). This would lead to redemptive masculinities. The insights of one Rastafari Elder are also instructive when he stated that “True wealth is not measured by cash in the bank, but by how we live in harmony with one another and the environment around us, spiritually and physically.” Therefore, it can be argued that discourses surrounding gender, the environment and food are interrelated in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

In addition, Rastas appealed to history and memory to support the claim for positive masculinities and the agency of women in Nyahbinghi Rastafari in Zimbabwe. For instance, in an interview with one Empress, it was stressed that women were traditionally powerful on the basis of the element of Mother Earth and Mother Nature. In her words, “Nyahbinghi means strength of a woman. So, women occupy the centre and all people celebrate existence through Mother Nature. Nature brings in balance and order.” The importance of women in Nyahbinghi Rastafari concurs with Chaminuka Rastafari House Brochure which says “Nyahbinghi is an ancient woman warrior from Uganda whose slogan was ‘death to all black and white downpressors.’ Nyahbinghi is a warriors[sic], priestess like our own Mbuya Nehanda”. This shows that Rastafari recognised the vitality of women in the *trod* in order to attain self-determination. Indigeneity was refashioned in their respect for heritage and women’s participation in productive and reproductive spheres.

Rastafari Women Italists

The Rastafari foodways are critical in promoting human flourishing. However, due to the politics of diet and global food production, the Rastafari women *Italists* have suffered marginalization as people are caught in the web of western dietary enslavement and modern junk food. Notably, among other factors, religion and the environment also influence people’s food choice. Through observation and interview with one Empress at Dangwe Arts Centre, the study established that her Nazarene family followed a strict *Ital* vegetarian diet. The *Ital* vegetarian foodways and diet reinforced Rasta philosophy that “You are what you eat” and “Let your food be your medicine and your medicine be your food” (Sibanda, 2019). The *Ital* cooking and eating habits of women *Italists* were sometimes cascaded through “*Ital* Food Fairs” and “Family Fun Days” where Rastas and non-Rastas participated on special occasions on the Rastafari calendar. The source of food for women *Italists* included vegetables, herbs, whole-grain, fruits, nuts, root drinks and juices. This *Ital* diet avoided meat as Rasta vegetarians argue that human bodies were not to eat flesh, blood and bones. This is a nature friendly diet anchored on organic foods that downplay the use of artificial fertilizers as well as synthetic and chemicalised foods produced through GMO technology. Rastas are careful not to promote “genocide by diet” (Jordan, 2020). Therefore, the women *Italists*, akin to the principles of ‘vegetarian ecofeminism’ (Regan 2020) upheld the Rastafari food pyramid, which promoted human flourishing. In a number of Rastafari homes, the researcher was served with an *Ital* vegetarian-fruitarian diet and foodways. The hegemonic tendencies of ‘Babylon’ are blameworthy for the catastrophe of pandemics and food insecurity because they have a political and ideological agenda to make profit at all costs at the expense of good health and human flourishing.

Rastawomen Herbalists

Alongside *Ital* foodways, Rastafari women also pursued a lifestyle of herbalism. Rastafarians appear to have an antipathy to Western medicines and many are reluctant to use drug treatment since they believe it contaminates the body. Thus, many prefer to opt for alternative therapies and treatments, such as for example herbalism, homeopathy or acupuncture. In order



to create an ecologically sustainable health care system, some Rastawomen set up medicinal herbal plant gardens in their backyards. In addition, some herbs were fetched from the natural environment showing their situational medicinal plant knowledge in the community. The Rastawomen's herbal practice was based on Rastafari value system of *Italism* that consisted of food-medicines. In other words, some herbs were taken as food and medicine. The herbs that Rastawomen often use to strengthen the immune system, medicate the body and relieve pain include aloe vera, lemon grass, garlic, mint, *zumbani* and marijuana. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Rastawomen took a leading role in their families in administering home remedies to alleviate members from symptoms of the virus such as coughing and fever. Given that the Rastafari community never trusted the western engineered interventions against the COVID-19 pandemic such as vaccination and partaking of other common medication against fever, it was essential to concentrate on natural remedies including steaming (*kufukira*) and herbs-cure. From interviews, the researcher established that in most households, Rastawomen played an indispensable role of fetching the necessary herbs such as *zumbani* to cure and protect their family members from the virus. Some of the herbs like *zumbani* and marijuana were taken as teas or even placed in the steaming water, with Rastawomen actively participating to promote human flourishing.

By far, marijuana remains a controversial but essential herb with multiple purposes, which Rastafarians depend on in various ways and this explains why they continue to advocate its legalization. For Rastafarians, marijuana is a tree of life whose "leaves were for the healing of the nations" (Revelations 22:2). This means marijuana can heal all the people across races and the gender divides. The promotion of medical marijuana in Zimbabwe today can be regarded as a subtle impact of the Rastafari fight from the margins to legalize marijuana as a natural remedy to human health. Therefore, the use of medical marijuana to reinforce a natural healthcare system and to resist 'Babylon' remedies and 'polytricks' in the context of pandemics and food insecurity shows that Rastafari women herbalists are pragmatic environmentalists with plant knowledge and ecologically sustainable natural health solutions.

Conclusion

The study has demonstrated that the experiences of Rastafari women (queens/dawtas/sistrens) in the context of climate change and food (in)security can be conceived in ambivalence in the Zimbabwean context. Although Rastawomen are generally located at the margins in this patriarchal movement, their power and agency have disrupted orthodoxies as they shared their experiences and 'orthognosy' (correct knowledge) on health, *Ital* (natural) food and diet as well as interactions with biodiversity, ecology and nature. Rastafari women practitioners retrieve and recreate the potent resources of their movement to tackle food and climate change emergencies despite the fact that they are often pushed to the periphery. The research concludes that notwithstanding, the gender disparities and the risk of gender-based violence in the movement, the agency of women Rastas is expressed through, *inter alia*, Kemetite principles of MAAT, *Ital livity* (natural living), *Ital* foodways and the use of medical marijuana to reinforce their health and resist 'Babylon' remedies and 'polytricks' in the context of pandemics and food insecurity.

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