




The quest for women's agency: An Africana Womanist's perspective of gender involvement in global pandemics, the case of HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The paper is a qualitative exploration of the role and involvement of women in global pandemics, especially HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe. Women are regarded as a biologically weak species yet so important that a family cannot run without them, thus the African proverb '*musha mukadzi*' (A home can only be called a home with a woman around). Their gender makeup deprives them of so many opportunities, and it often makes them susceptible to being regarded as the 'other' compared to their male counterparts. Granted their central role in the home, let alone in responding to a global pandemic like HIV/AIDS, need not be overemphasized. Noteworthy, African culture and religion have given women the power to be at the center of their homes despite the patriarchal system that characterizes most African societies. Women in African culture play a central role by virtue of their connection with the Earth as healers and nurturers of life. Socially, politically, and economically, the centrality of a woman cannot be overlooked; hence, her participation in the global pandemic of HIV/AIDS has given impetus to this research. Using Zimbabwe as a case study, the research purposively selected women and girls in Gweru urban whose families have been affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic to assess their responsibilities and roles in handling the situation. Guided by the Africana womanist perspective, an African-centered paradigm on gender, the article argues that locating women's agency in the face of global pandemics gives them the respect that they deserve, hence the researcher's motivation to delve into the issue of gender participation in that regard. Thus, in the quest for women's agency, the paper gives African women the mandate to be at the helm of the family in the face of HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe. Their role positions them as an important supporting system in communities that sometimes denigrate them.

Keywords: Africana womanist; HIV/AIDS global pandemic; gender; woman agency; Zimbabwe

Introduction

The African continent has gone through a myriad of challenges that range from natural disasters to man-made disasters. The catastrophes are referred to as global pandemics as they cannot spare the globe, especially when we talk of diseases such as HIV/AIDS, COVID -19, and Cancer, among others. On the natural side, climate change has caused various continents to battle its effects, from drought to major destructions from flooding to landslides as was witnessed in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Malawi in 2016 through cyclone Idai. Because of these pandemics, the quest for women's agency is pursued, as the survival of people on Mother Earth is perceived as a feminine responsibility. Some natural disasters, which eventually bring poverty and drought, among other challenges that make life difficult for women, exacerbate many people's vulnerability



to HIV/AIDS infection in a bid to make a living through transactional sex. This situation, coupled with the manipulation and oppression of women by their male counterparts, through cultural patriarchy, having small houses or side chicks among other tendencies has seen the outbreak of such epidemics as HIV/AIDS.

The concept of Mother Earth refers to the general perception that the Earth is often perceived as feminine. Thus, the personification of the Earth as Mother Earth is derived from its affinity with the roles of women in society, that is, bringing forth life, nurturing, and caregiving (Van Wyk, 2022: 2; Zein & Setiawan, 2017:1). Hence, scholars often juxtapose the exploitation and degradation of Mother Earth by an androcentric and patriarchal society, with the oppression and manipulation of women (Radford-Ruether's concept in GAIA). As such, Mpofu (2021:4) has it that the Earth provides us with a space to live and resources to thrive on, yet we mistreat it in various ways that compromise its capacity to provide for us. Furthermore, by virtue of their connection with the Earth as healers and nurturers of life, women tend to shoulder the responsibility of protecting and preserving Mother Earth.

In that regard, even in the face of natural or human-made disasters, like cyclones, diseases such as cancer, cholera, COVID-19 and HIV/AIDS, women are at the receiving end as they are generally expected to nurture, to love and take care of the vulnerable. In their state of being broken by these circumstances, they still have to rise to the occasion and see that life has to be preserved. In concurrence, Chireshe (2022) submits that given women and girls' key culturally prescribed roles, like being carriers of life through childbirth, nurturing, caregiving, and serving as pillars of the home, their oppression and exploitation stifle their contribution to societal development, thereby curtailing sustainable development. It is against this backdrop that the paper envisages the quest for women's agency in their involvement in global pandemics, especially HIV/AIDS, which is the focus of this study.

Furthermore, the paper argues that the increase in global pandemics, especially diseases, are struggles that need both genders' cooperation in order to relieve the burden on Mother Earth. More so, it calls for the other gender to be more responsible as they will both carry the burden of being nurturers. Interestingly, the same culture that gives women roles and power to give life is the same that perpetuates the oppression of the same. To this effect, Muwati, Tembo, and Mutasa (2018) lament that this culture has been misunderstood and ill-defined by contemporary Shona men and women due to years of disorientation. They further claim that the same culture that provides power bases for women as well as mechanisms for managing unruly masculinities and sheepish femininities is more often than not cast as the very pejorative source of women's presumed underdevelopment (Muwati, Tembo & Mutasa, 2018). Against this understanding, it is possible, therefore, to pursue women's agency based on the evidence of African women with a voice, that is, a woman with ability (Wheeler, 2007: 321), and put in place a paradigm which characterizes the African woman as strong, self-namer, self-definer, family-centred, and male compatible, all of these constituting essential attributes which are an expression of agency.

Theoretical Framework: Africana Womanist perspective

The arguments in this paper are guided by an Africana womanist paradigm, which Mazuruse (2010) defines as a pan-African theory of gathering, deducing, and explaining African life. Hudson-Weems (1993) made the theory relevant as it is critical in unraveling the hidden social history of African women. Hudson-Weems (1993: 154–155), postulates that, "Africana womanism is an ideology designed for all women of African descent. It is based in African culture and, therefore, it necessarily focuses on the exclusive experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of



Africana women”. This theoretical approach includes African women throughout Africa and in the diaspora. It exists to rectify the stereotypical misrepresentations of African women as helpless and hopeless victims. In respect of the topic under discussion, the theory seeks to give women agency to be actors and give solutions to their predicament rather than continuing to cry at the hands of the oppressor. In other words, the theory upholds the role of women as nurturers and caregivers, among other responsibilities. Africana womanism seeks to redefine the position of women and their individual space in life using indigenous African cultural aesthetics. Mguni (2006: 42) emphasizes the importance of culture in the liberation of women, “The condition of the African woman can be fully appreciated within the context of African culture and the sincere liberation of the African woman can also, only take place in the same context”.

Hudson Weems (1993) posits that there are many positive features of a true Africana woman, but there are eighteen distinct features. These descriptors include self-namer, self-definer, family centred, genuine in sisterhood, strong, in concert with male in struggle, whole, authentic, a flexible role player, respected, recognized, spiritual, female- male compatibility, respect for self. An authentic African woman should have most of these qualities. These qualities or descriptors of the African woman give her agency in her personal life and place the woman at the core of her family and community life. They also place the woman at the core of the life of her family and community, thus giving her the mandate to act on global pandemics like HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe. In this study, only five descriptors are utilized. These include self-naming, that is, accessing herself and naming herself. Self-naming involves the ability for women to call themselves the way they want to be called and not to be named by others. The second one is self-defining, that is, defining her reality and the people around her in terms of their African cultural experiences and not to be defined according to white middle-class women's ideology (Hudson-Weems, 2003).

The above two characteristics of Africana womanism require self-introspection on the part of women of African descent as they urge women to be strong and not allow everyone to tell them they are oppressed, they can't participate in men's jobs, they are prostitutes in the case of HIV and AIDS pandemic. Rather, they must get involved and act on their situation without prejudice. Women of African descent ought to define themselves and learn to overcome any external forces that seek to define who they are.

The other tenet of this article is respect for self, that is, to acquire true self-confidence, which in turn enables an African woman to have complete and positive relationships with all people. This characteristic highlights the respect expected to be given to women, which determines the relationships women have in society and even with Mother Nature. Their relationship with their male counterparts also matters as respect should be central in their conduct.

Family-centered and in concert with men in struggle, are the other tenets that inform the study. This means that African women put the interests of society at the centre before their personal interests. Thus, being caregivers and nurturers in the event of disasters and illnesses is part of their 'DNA', which needs to be espoused. They unite with their male counterparts in raising the family and solving the problems in their families and communities at large. Africana men have never had the same institutionalised power to oppress Africana women, but they complement each other. Thus, Africana women in the traditional past were not oppressed by their male counterpart but were equal players in their struggle for survival. This paper, therefore, is seeking women's agency in their participation in the global pandemics, especially HIV/AIDS in Gweru urban, Zimbabwe.



Research Methodology

The paper employed a qualitative research methodology, which Denzin and Lincoln (2005) assert aims to gather a comprehensive understanding of human behaviours and the resources that govern it. This visibly highlights that qualitative researchers study cases in an effort to make sense of or strive to interpret occurrences according to the implications people afford them in their natural settings. Thus, an Africana womanist perspective of gender participation in global pandemics with a particular case of HIV/AIDS in a bid to pursue women's agency was studied. Data was qualitatively collected through purposive and convenience sampling of women and girls whose families have been directly or indirectly affected by HIV/AIDS in Gweru urban. Thematized collection and analysis of these women's views are analyzed using the Africana Womanist perspective. Africana womanist theory was chosen based on its strength to accord a representation for women agency in participating in HIV/AIDS epidemic in Zimbabwe. Given that Earth sustains humanity, in the same way, women sustain humanity through their nurturance (Owusu-Ansah & Owusu-Ansah, 2021:46). Hence, the Shona saying, '*musha mukadzi*', literally translated as 'a home is a woman', which signifies the centrality of the woman as a pillar of the home.

Women agency in HIV/AIDS epidemic

The study was carried out in Gweru urban, where the researcher sought to discover the participation of gender in global pandemics, especially in an era where most endemics are a result of environmental degradation. The researcher paid attention to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and women and girls from families who were affected and infected by the disease were key in providing information for the study. Gweru is the third largest city in Zimbabwe. People survive through different economic activities like vending among other activities. Besides formal employment, most of the people survive through artisanal mining in surrounding towns. There are several locations in the city and the researcher uses Gweru urban particularly Gweru General Hospital as the central point where HIV/AIDS infected and affected people meet for their monthly supply of medication. In this case the respondents were purposively and conveniently sampled to give views on the questions asked. The researcher used a total of ten people, three married women, three girls and four single ladies. The results presented were taken from some of the respondents. Some of the questions asked include, 'How do people look at you knowing that you take care of an HIV/AIDS infected person'? Being a woman, how do you feel taking care of a bed ridden ill brother? So, these questions would vary according to their situations.

The findings of the study suggest that women's roles and their involvement in global pandemics, especially HIV/AIDS makes them to be viewed differently. Their situations differed depending on their experiences in care-giving. Following is a discussion that brings out the different ways in which women's roles were regarded. The discussion is informed by the Africana womanist theory on gender. Themes derived from the findings are used as key sub-headings.

The double tragedy of women

From the interviews done for the study, it came out that women experience double tragedy in their involvement in caring for HIV/AIDS patients. The double tragedy of women is witnessed in a scenario where they are givers of life and at the same time they are burdened with caring for that life. This is supported by Saredidine (2018:2) when he posits that Mother Earth is conceived of as female and female as Earth, based on similarities between women and nature in terms of birthing life. This means that Mother Earth symbolizes the environment in which life thrives, the



same way women sustain human life through childbirth, nurturing until the end of life. In that regard, women have a double burden to make sure that all is set. In the same manner their role needs them to be devoted African women and be able to be self-namers and self-definers so that they are not judged by anyone outside their context. By self-naming and self-defining, Gwekwerere, Magosvongwe and Mazuru (2012: 100) observe that:

...constitute the touchstone of authentic human existence and, in the event that they are foregone, it will be difficult for African people to take a resolute and principled stand in their transactions with others because they will lack keen awareness of their human worth and legitimate entitlement to freedom, dignity and authentic existence like any other human group.

This is a truism as far as African societies is concerned. People should understand how people live and do things from their own context so that even if they are named or defined, the names would speak of their genuine experiences. In the context of the study, women who were interviewed spoke from their position as caregivers and were also faced with the burden of ensuring that food was on the table for the rest of the family. I asked for comments on how people view them, especially regarding the responsibility that is before them. One married woman who is taking care of her ill husband lamented that:

Ini handitombotarisi kuti kunze kunei. Chakandikoshera kuona kuti murume iyeyu ararama tichengete mhuri tiri pamwe. Vamwe vanotondiseka kuti musiye ndiye akatsvaka chirwere chake kumagonyeti. Asi handitereri nekuti pane pandinotomuda munhu iyeyu. Ipapa chero akadai mapiritsi ndonomutorera ndini ndoona zvekare kuti tadyei nekuti basa ravo harina penjeni iri. Zvatodai ndini mai ndini baba. Dai taigara kumusha zvaiva nani zvino muno mutaundi zvakaoma.

(I don't personally look at what is happening out there. What is important for me is to see that my husband is healthy so that we look after the family together. Some laugh at me, and advise me to leave him since he contracted the disease from trucks where he was working. But I don't listen because I need him. Like now he is sick I go to fetch his tablets for him and I should see that the family is fed. As it is, I am now mother and father of the house. If only we could be in rural areas, it could be better unlike here in town, life is difficult.) (*None working married woman in her 50s*)

This is a clear indication that women of African descent can adjust and take part in these pandemics by looking after the sick. In the case of the above submission, where the husband was a truck driver, it is clear that HIV could have been contracted through transactional sex from young women and girls who do that for a living. In the same vein, it is the woman again who is suffering after being cheated and now looking after the ailing husband. This means that humans and nature are interconnected and depend on each other for mutual sustenance. In support of the same view, Bolton and Talman (2010) have it that humans and other species rely upon natural ecosystem processes and ecosystem services for their very survival. In this case, it is more like it is the woman's turn to fend for the husband and family as the husband has been doing during the time he was not sick.

Thus, mutually sustaining each other. However, even if the ecosystem may be burdened to sustain nature, people tend to take the Earth for granted by abusing it to achieve their economic and political goals (Mpofu, 2021:4; Saredidine, 2018:2). Even so, the woman in the interview shows that an African woman should not give up. In Shona they say '*haurasi mbereko nekufirwa*'.



There is life after the illness. This is in line with being a self-namer and self-definer, where self-naming entails accessing herself and naming herself. Self-naming involves the ability for women to call themselves the way they want to be called and not to be named by others. More so, self-defining, defining her reality and the people around her in terms of their African cultural experiences and not according to foreign ideologies. The woman also refuses to be defined by other people's experiences and circumstances. In her narration, she is not fighting for her freedom; neither is she a:

...hater of men, nor does she seek to build a wall around her gender across which she throws ideological missiles. She desires self-respect, an active role, dynamic participation in all areas of social development, and dignity alongside men (Kolawole, 1997: 36).

So, even if she was supposed to throw tantrums over the husband's behavior, she told herself that she needed this man after the illness, hence despite the ugly experience that they face, they are an important system in the life of her family and community just as mother earth is to humanity. Mother Earth is faced with many forms of treatment that she cannot choose from its people, who will in turn go back to her for survival. It is a sad reality, but life has to go on. In the case of the above woman, she may also take the risk of contracting the disease herself but the women's agency calls for women to self-name and define themselves outside their husbands' actions so that the environment and the family are well looked after.

Furthermore, prevalent in African culture is the indispensability of complementarity as opposed to conflicting male-female relations, which are detrimental to the safety of the community. Chivaura (2000: 22) reiterates the centrality of synergistic relationship as opposed to schism:

In a collective or cultural progress, dialogue between men and women encourages unity of purpose. It looks forward to everyone's participation in social life. The dialogue is based on the individual's capacity to be creative and contributive to the collective good. It operates at all levels and enriches all involved.

Based on the above submission, it can be concluded that self-definition and self-naming are critical aspects of the Africana womanism, which gives both men and women equal opportunities to participate in looking after the family and be responsible for their actions. They have denied the foreign labels that were brought by colonialism that women's place is the home. The woman in the interview now goes out to find employment so that the family is fed, a clear testimony that self-defining has given them equal opportunities. Besides, one of the key identity markers of the Africana womanist paradigm, as previously pointed out, is the ability to self-define. In African culture, fulfilling social roles makes one fully human, while negation of such roles is a deviation from the norm. This thinking finds expression in P'Bitek (1986: 20) in the following observation:

Man cannot, and must not be free. He is incapable of being free. 'Son', 'mother', 'daughter', 'uncle', 'husband', 'grandfather', 'wife', 'clansman', 'mother-in-law', 'chief', 'medicine-man', and many other such terms, are the stamps of man's unfreedom. It is by such complex terms that a person is defined and identified. They order and determine human behavior in society.

So, in all those capacities, women and men can equally be at the same level if they define themselves correctly as Africana people. They are equal participants in looking after the family



and caring for each other in the event of illness. Just like they are supposed to care for the mother earth for sustainable livelihoods amongst people.

Women as selfless and humble

Sarriedine (2018:2) opines that the world is currently facing an environmental crisis in the form of pollution, global warming and depletion of natural resources, among others, which threaten life on Earth. This has come as a result of misappropriate use of nature, which eventually results in climate change. The abuse of the environment by its habitants may be equated to the exploitation of women by the patriarchal society, and yet the same society cannot do without the services of these feminine species just like they cannot do without the natural environment. As such, the devastating consequences of abusing Mother Earth, such as droughts, floods, land degradation, and loss of livelihoods, have challenged humanity to rethink its relationship with nature (Chireshe, 2022). It has a big blow on the lives of people since it disturbs the way they live and consequently results in the global pandemics such as HIV/AIDS. As such, taking care of these HIV/AIDS infected persons need the heart of a devoted feminine character who does not reflect on her wounds of abuse but who is selfless and humble.

From an African womanist point of view, a woman has to be family centered to be able to carry such burdens without bitterness. When a person is family-centered, they do not mind what is happening and what benefits or what people will say about their actions. The whole idea is to see the unity of the family first. The family is the most basic trait of social organisation in Africa and the globe in terms of socialisation, child upbringing, transfer of cultural activities and knowledge embedded in the socialization process. Thus, when an African woman is said to be family-centered they are worried about this organization, their immediate family and the community at large. In an interview with one single lady among the respondents, she clearly highlighted the need for family-centeredness because her caregiving was on his infected brother. She narrated a sad situation but it was an eye opener on the role of women in global pandemics.

Ini ndakachengeta hanzvadzi yangu yarwara nechirwere. Musatamba nekubata murume mukuru pese zvapo uchimugeza nekuita zvese nekuti ndini ndaifanira kutoona kuti ari sei. Amai vedu vakashaya, baba nevamwe vanamukoma waitotadza kubatsira mukoma ava asi ndanga ndisingakwanisi kutarisa izvozvo. Taigara sei mumba nemunhu aizvitira? Ndakatorega zvandaiita zvose kuti ndione kuti mukoma vari sei kusvika vazoshaya havo.

(I looked after my brother who fell sick from HIV/AIDS. It is not easy to take care of a big man, bath him, and do everything because I was the one who was supposed to look after him. Our mother is late, my father and other brothers could not do the same but I could not just watch as a woman. You would not want to stay in a smelly home. I even stopped what I was doing to take care of my brother until his final day.)

This is clear manifestation of what the Shona people would call *moyo wekubereka* (heart of giving birth). You would not just look and watch when somebody else's child is suffering. The fact that a woman is naturally a nurturer and a mother, this lady could not watch her brother suffer. Therefore, Hudson-Weems (1993: 70) submits that “[t]he African womanist is committed to the art of mothering and nurturing, her own children in particular and humankind in general”. The collective role is supreme in African culture, for the African woman descends from a legacy of fulfilling the role of supreme mother nature-nurturer, provider and protector. In the same way that Mother Nature would not look at human race suffering, sometimes it thrives, goes out of her way to make



sure that the community lives. According to Hudson-Weems (2004: 64), “she is one who values protecting her family, her children [and places a] high premium on family centrality, a critical component of Africana womanism”.

Further, in another family where both parents were dead, a girl child remained to take care of the other family siblings who needed to be looked after. In the interview, she narrates that;

Baba namai vese vakashaya nechirwere. Ini ndiri wechipiri mumba. Mukoma vakuru mukomana akati haakwanisi kurega zvaaita kuti agare nevana, naizvozvo ndakatozorega kuenda kuchikoro kuti vadiki ava vawane anochengeta. Ehe mukoma vanogona kutipa zvekushandisa apo neapo asi ini ndini ndotofanira kuona kuti vana vadyei vapfekei, vaenda here kuchikoro. Ndakutoita samai vavo.

(Our parents are both late due to HIV/AIDS. I am the second born in our family. My brother who is older than me said he could not leave what he was doing to take care of other siblings, so I eventually stopped going to college so that I would look after my younger siblings. Yes, my brother would give us support here and there but I was supposed to see that children are fed, are dressed and have gone to school. I stood in as a mother figure.)

This is in fulfilment of the Shona proverb '*musha mukadzi*' (a home will not thrive without a woman). In this case, the presence of the sister as the mother figure made the home tick. To cement the same idea, Muwati et al. (2011: 5) observe that “among the Shona people, the idea that *musha mukadzi* means that in Shona culture the mother is recognised, respected as a function of the whole, operating in concert with all the forces committed to family survival”. In that regard, we can clearly see that with the help of her brother who provided monetary support and other forms of help, the girl is fulfilling Muwati et al's submission that they are in concert to see family survival. The above excerpt reflects on a humble and selfless young lady who embraces the characteristics of an Africana woman. This therefore, means that an Africana womanist perspective calls for the Africana men and women who are family centered to take responsibility of their environment for the survival of human race. When all respect mother earth, no one will abuse it to the point of causing excessive heats and many things associated with climate change. When everyone is devoted to the welfare of the 'family' and the community at large, then these global pandemics will be minimized.

The suffering of the ecosystem and the degradation of the natural environment results in the outbreaks of epidemics in the sense that humans will no longer survive on the system for their living. The complex interactions amongst humans, the environment and health give rise to these pandemics as the malfunction of one results in the suffering of the other. For example, climate change has risen due to instabilities in the ecosystem, which also culminates in food insecurity, poverty, migration, and other challenges. Hunter (2006) accentuates that local natural resources are an essential means of sustenance and income generation in many rural areas of developing countries. As such, the well-being of the environment has a contribution to the vulnerability of its population to contracting HIV/AIDS.

As mentioned before, scarcity in natural resources deepens the poverty levels of its people so that they will no longer depend on their ecological spectrum for survival. In that regard, Dunkle et al. (2004), Hunter (2002) and Gregson (2002) bring out that desperate economic circumstances due to food insecurity, poverty and migration can heighten the risk of HIV infection by leading individuals, particularly women and girls to engage in "transactional sex" for material goods and



to meet daily sustenance needs. More research has brought out the fact that these transactional sex with sugar daddies often are done with no protection, hence the contraction of the disease (Gregson et al. 2003 and Kelly et al. 2003). Women and girls are pointed out as the gender that ends up indulging in transactional sex because they are expected to be providers of food for children back home. This means that if the environment does not provide for human sustenance, then the outbreak of these diseases is inevitable as people will indulge in them for survival. Thus, many scholars have commented on the complex interactions between human well-being and the natural environment (Costanza et al., 2007; Kasperson & Dow, 2005; Levy et al., 2005; McMichael et al., 2008b; Pimentel et al., 2007).

Women as empathizers

Lieber et al (2000) comment that the global burden of HIV/AIDS remains one of the notable challenges facing healthcare systems worldwide. The authorities further remark that the overlap between climate change and HIV/AIDS is of paramount global public health importance, particularly since both inexplicably impact regions of global vulnerability, such as sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and Southeast Asia (SEA) that are heavily impacted upon by both HIV and climate change. In the context of climate change, the mother earth is faced with so many inconveniences that it gives in and fails to sustain humans around. As such, women became empathizers in those scenarios because of their nature. In an interview with another family where both parents were there but they had a son and a daughter who fell sick due to the pandemic. Initially, the daughter fell ill and the son followed suit within no time. The main problem was that these children were left to stay alone at some point when both parents had migrated to Botswana in search of greener pastures. It was during that period that the children could do anything to the point of living reckless lives. However, when things were getting out of hand the mother came back first but it was already late. She narrated her ordeal:

Munoziva maomero akaita hupenyu mutaundi, takaenda kunotsvaka mabasa kunze tikasiya vana vega. Vana vakaita semombe dzemashanga kusvika shoko rasvika ndikadzoka. Nguva yanga yapfuura asi ndakazorera mwana achirwara. Musikana ndiye akatanga pasina nguva ngani mukomana akanga orwarawo. Takarwadziwa nababa vacho vakadzoka tikaonera pamwe. Zviya zvekutukana nekupomerana zvinenge zvakana. Hapana zvirimwa zviya zvinopa utano tairima tese kuti vana vapone. Zvanga zvisina kumira mushe asi kubatirana kwakatibatsira.

(You know how difficult life is in town, we went to look for employment outside and left our children alone at home. They lived anyhow because there was no one to look up to. People talked until I came back. It was already late because I came when my daughter was already ill. Within time the boy also fell sick. We were pained so much that even my husband had to come back. We could not even blame each other because things were bad. We tried everything, we joined all support groups that we could hear of. We even had nutritional garden that we worked in together. It was not easy)

Despite the promiscuous nature of these children until they contracted HIV, their mother could not just look at them but she empathized with her children and came back home to do the needful. This confession was a bit touching but it was an eye opener on the conduct of people in some situations. In this case, men can also be nurturers and caregivers in other pandemics like HIV/AIDS. Ntiri (2007: 314) contends that “within the African womanist circle, men are not



excluded from women issues. On the contrary, they are invited as partners in problem solving and social change". In the case of the above narration, men can stand in for the survival of the family and the community at large. A good example is of the recent Corona virus (COVID-19) which wracked havoc three years ago. That pandemic could see men also taking part in caregiving as the virus was characterized by lockdowns among other measures to curb for it. In the event that the affected is in your family, there was nowhere men could avoid giving care to that person in the same household. Thus, Chivaura (2000: 25) avers that;

nothing short of true complementarity and sincere unity of purpose between men and women of Africa and her diaspora can keep them together and bring harmony between them so that they can work together and achieve human development and social progress for their families and also themselves as individual persons. This is the lesson African culture insists on teaching us through orature.

In the same way that the woman worked in concert with her husband in the struggle to look after their children, an Africana womanist perspective on gender calls for men to participate with women in global pandemics for the upbringing of their family. In other words, taking care of the mother earth needs a determined effort from everyone for better livelihoods to be achieved. Climate change is not only affecting rural folks alone, but urban dwellers are equally affected because there is vibrant urban farming and also with the land reform program, people have been resettled near towns so their struggles are the same.

Thus, the importance of taking care of the Earth has become topical (UN-Women, 2014:12). The call for women's agency is therefore critical as women should rise to the occasion and cooperate with society in issues and problems that affect her. In the same way that the Africana womanist is compatible with men in the struggle for survival, the human race should come together to fight the persecution that they have exposed Mother Earth to for the betterment of everyone.

UN-Women (2014:7) highlights that agency and their active participation in global pandemics have a tremendous capacity to improve productivity and sustainable use of natural resources; hence, there is a need to include them fully. This means that women of African descent who are family-centered should put the needs of their families first so that they achieve the goals of respecting Mother Earth as a community. In support of the same view, Bayeh (2016:37) and Odrowaz-Coates (2021:2) add that their involvement can contribute to environmental preservation, thus effectively reducing environmental disasters that usually disproportionately affect more women and girls than men and boys in the event of the pandemics. Consequently, Mother Nature plays a significant role to humanity just as a woman is important to the family and community at large. An awakening call to women's agency in global pandemics especially HIV/AIDS in the context of this paper is a noble cause. Be that as it may, the paper maintains that an Africana woman should define herself and name herself according to the situation in her context.

Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, it can be safely concluded that an African womanist approach to problem-solving does not exonerate men from women's problems or vice-versa. Men and women are not there to fight each other, but they should complement each other in their struggles for family unity and survival. This means that the responsibility of seeing that Mother Earth is well-maintained for the benefit of humankind should be everybody's concern. Preservation of the environment in other words, should be done from all angles despite inter-alia people's gender, age and race. Abusing



mother earth will consequently mean that the global pandemic that arises from such abuses are a sign of human's self-centeredness and selfish interests at the expense of other species especially when HIV/AIDS is contracted. At the end of the day, people enter into self-pity in search of replenishment that requires both men and women to play their needed part towards the sustenance of Mother Earth.

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