

# The Intersection of Theology and Gender Equality in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church: A Case Study from Malawi and Zambia

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## ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the intersection of theology and gender equality within the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church in Malawi and Zambia. It highlights the disjunction between the church's theological affirmations of gender equality, rooted in the biblical narrative of the Imago Dei, and the lived experiences of women who face cultural subordination, violence, and marginalization. The research employs qualitative interviews and document analysis to explore theological foundations, cultural practices, and contemporary challenges. Key findings reveal the persistent gender injustices and the urgent need for the SDA Church to align its teachings with the realities of its members. The study offers specific actionable recommendations, including the establishment of leadership training programs for women and the implementation of educational initiatives that promote gender equality and challenge harmful cultural practices. Ultimately, it calls for a transformative approach that integrates theological reflection with practical action, positioning the SDA Church as a proactive agent for gender justice and empowerment in African society.

**Key Words:** Marginalization, Gender Equality, Adventist theology, transactive, transformative

## INTRODUCTION

The theology of human sexuality lies at the heart of Christian anthropology and informs how communities interpret gender relations, leadership, and justice. In the context of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church, this subject is both theological and practical, shaping the church's stance on ministry, marriage, family, and community life. Within Malawi and Zambia, these issues are particularly pronounced because the SDA Church exists within patriarchal cultural frameworks where women often experience subordination, violence, and marginalization (Phiri, 2020). A robust theology of sexuality rooted in the biblical narrative of creation and supported by contemporary theological reflection offers a pathway toward justice and transformation.

The SDA Church historically affirms the biblical anthropology of the Imago Dei—that humanity, male and female alike, reflects the divine image (Gen. 1:27; Gen. 5:1). Yet, the practical application of this theological truth often collides with entrenched cultural practices such as lobola (bride-price), polygamy, and patriarchal leadership structures. These tensions create a paradox: while Adventist theology proclaims the equal creation of men and women, ecclesiastical practice in some African contexts continues to perpetuate inequality (Davids, 2023). The challenge, therefore, is to align theology with lived reality by embracing both the biblical witness and contemporary insights into gender justice.

The SDA theological position on gender equality is firmly grounded in the biblical narrative of creation and enriched by Ellen G. White's contributions and contemporary theological reflection. This framework, when contextualized within Malawi and Zambia, challenges the church to confront cultural practices that perpetuate inequality and to embody a more inclusive vision of ministry. By affirming the equal creation of men and women, the church not only strengthens its mission but also contributes to the broader struggle for justice and dignity in African society.

## Statement of the Problem

The tension between theology and practice within the SDA Church in Malawi and Zambia reflects a broader crisis faced by many faith communities navigating between biblical ideals and cultural realities. While Scripture and *Adventist theology* affirm the equality of men and women as co-bearers of the image of God (Gen. 1:27; Gal. 3:28), the lived experiences of women in these contexts often tell a different story. Women continue to be subjected to discriminatory practices in both church and society, revealing a dissonance between doctrinal commitments and everyday realities (ADRA, 2021).

## Cultural Patriarchy and Religion

Patriarchal structures dominate much of Malawian and Zambian culture, with traditions such as lobola, inheritance practices, and gendered divisions of labor reinforcing male dominance (Phiri, 2020). These customs, though deeply embedded in society, often conflict with the church's teaching of mutual dignity and respect. For instance, lobola, while traditionally understood as a gesture of appreciation to the bride's family, is frequently misused as a justification for controlling or even abusing wives. The SDA Church, while opposing polygamy and overt gender oppression in principle, has at times failed to directly challenge these cultural patterns, resulting in women being silenced or excluded from decision-making roles.

## Violence and Abuse

Reports from ADRA (2021) and UN Women (2022) indicate a significant prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) in Malawi and Zambia. In some Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) communities, women have shared their harrowing experiences of domestic violence, including battering and marital rape. Additionally, practices such as ritual sexual cleansing following widowhood have been reported, which starkly contradict both biblical teachings and fundamental human rights principles.

The church's response to these issues has often been reactive and transactional, focusing on immediate interventions rather than proactive and transformative strategies. This approach has resulted in limited pastoral support for addressing abuse and insufficient resources for helping survivors. There is a critical need for the church to adopt a more comprehensive and compassionate response to GBV, prioritizing the safety and well-being of women within its communities.

## Economic and Social Disempowerment

The burden of poverty and illiteracy disproportionately affects women. In rural Malawi and Zambia, female literacy rates lag behind those of men, limiting women's opportunities for economic independence (World Bank, 2022). Migrant labor practices further complicate family dynamics, as men often leave for extended periods to work in South Africa, leaving women vulnerable to exploitation, infidelity, or poverty. The intersection of these socio-economic factors with patriarchal theology intensifies gender inequality.

## Ecclesiastical Limitations

Within the SDA Church itself, debates on women's ordination and leadership continue to polarize congregations worldwide. While regions such as North America and parts of Europe affirm women's ordination, African Adventist communities, including Malawi and Zambia, tend to resist, often citing cultural or biblical headship arguments (Kim, 2020). Consequently, women in these contexts are frequently relegated to auxiliary roles in children's or women's ministries, while decision-making positions remain dominated by men. This perpetuates a cycle of exclusion that undermines the theological truth of the Imago Dei.

## Purpose of the Study

This study aims to critically examine the interplay between theological ideals and social realities regarding gender equality within the SDA Church in Malawi and Zambia. By exploring the theology of human sexuality as articulated through the doctrine of the Imago Dei, the research seeks to establish a framework that affirms the equal partnership of men and women in God's mission. This framework will engage classical Protestant

theologians and SDA thought leaders to challenge interpretations that sustain gender inequality, while simultaneously uncovering the cultural, economic, and social dynamics that perpetuate such disparities.

Furthermore, the study will provide actionable insights for the SDA Church, advocating for structural reforms in leadership and ministry that uphold women's dignity and contributions. By aligning this inquiry with global discourses on gender justice, particularly in relation to Sustainable Development Goal 5, the research aspires to position the SDA Church as a proactive agent for change, demonstrating that faith and theology can serve as powerful allies in promoting justice and human flourishing for all.

## **Theological Foundations**

### **Creation and the Image of God**

The creation narrative in Genesis underscores the equality of male and female. Genesis 1:27 declares, "So God created mankind in his own image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." This foundational verse highlights that both genders are integral bearers of the divine image. Unlike hierarchical readings that prioritize male headship, the Imago Dei affirms mutuality and partnership. Genesis 5:1 reiterates this theological claim by recording that both men and women were created in God's likeness, reinforcing equality as God's original design (Jewett, 1975).

The implications of this reading are profound. If both male and female equally manifest God's image, then systems of oppression, subordination, or exclusion of women contradict the divine intention. In the African context, this calls the church to critique patriarchal traditions that marginalize women and to promote a relational anthropology grounded in dignity and justice (Oduyoye, 1995).

### **Ellen G. White's Contributions**

Ellen G. White, a co-founder of the SDA Church, made significant contributions to the church's theology of human dignity and equality. In *Education* (1903), she stresses that both men and women are entrusted with God's image and called to live out their potential in service. White's writings frequently affirm the indispensable role of women in ministry, particularly in teaching, evangelism, and mission. She argued against narrow cultural interpretations that restricted women, instead urging the church to recognize their divine calling (White, 1903).

For the SDA Church in Malawi and Zambia, White's counsel provides theological legitimacy for greater inclusion of women in leadership. Her vision of equality challenges churches to transcend cultural biases and align with biblical truth. By integrating her writings with contemporary feminist and liberationist theologies, the church can more effectively advocate for justice and inclusivity.

## **Contemporary Theological Interpretations**

### **Emil Brunner and Karl Barth**

Emil Brunner's *The Divine Imperative* (1947) situates human sexuality within relational ethics. He contends that male and female identities exist for one another, not in domination but in fellowship. Similarly, Karl Barth in *Church Dogmatics* (1961/2004) emphasizes covenantal partnership between man and woman. For Barth, genuine humanity is realized only in community, which necessarily involves equality between male and female. These theologians challenge the church to resist patriarchal hierarchies that distort God's design.

### **Helmut Thielicke**

Helmut Thielicke's *The Ethics of Sex* (1964) reflects on the rapidly changing gender roles of the twentieth century. He acknowledges that sexuality is not merely biological but theological, shaping vocation and community. Thielicke's recognition of social shifts offers valuable insight for today's African context, where women increasingly engage in education, leadership, and economic activities. His writings affirm that theology must respond to changing realities while remaining grounded in Scripture.

## Paul K. Jewett

Paul Jewett's landmark work *Man as Male and Female* (1975) critiques traditional hierarchical readings of gender roles. He argues that Galatians 3:28—"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"—abolishes distinctions that promote inequality. For Jewett, subordination contradicts the gospel's liberating message. His perspective resonates in contexts like Malawi and Zambia, where religious and cultural traditions often perpetuate the subjugation of women.

## Implications for the SDA Church in Malawi and Zambia

Taken together, these theological voices establish a compelling case for gender equality within the SDA Church. The creation narrative, Ellen White's prophetic writings, and modern theological insights converge to affirm that both men and women share equal dignity and calling. Yet, within Malawi and Zambia, cultural practices such as lobola, gendered division of labor, and restrictions on women's leadership undermine these theological truths (UN Women, 2022).

By affirming the *Imago Dei* and embracing theological perspectives that emphasize equality, the SDA Church has the potential to be a transformative agent. It can address issues of abuse, marginalization, and exclusion by modeling justice and inclusivity in its leadership structures, ministries, and community engagements. Such a move not only enriches the church's theological practice but also aligns with global commitments like the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5, which seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (UN, 2015).

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The study's results are drawn from a synthesis of field testimonies, reports from ADRA and other NGOs, and theological analysis of lived experiences in Malawi and Zambia. The findings highlight persistent gender injustices, as well as emerging pathways of empowerment and transformation.

### Domestic Violence and Cultural Justifications

One of the most pressing findings is the prevalence of domestic violence within SDA households in Malawi and Zambia. Many women reported experiences of battering at the hands of their husbands, who often invoked cultural customs as justification for control. The practice of lobola (bride-price), when misinterpreted, fosters the idea that a woman becomes the "property" of her husband, thereby legitimizing abuse (ADRA, 2021).

According to ADRA Malawi's 2021 evaluation report, women in rural communities repeatedly expressed that their husbands used lobola as a means of asserting dominance, silencing dissent, and excusing violence. These practices not only perpetuate cycles of abuse but also erode women's sense of dignity and worth. The SDA Church, while condemning abuse at an official level, has often been slow to provide proactive *transformative* pastoral interventions, leaving survivors with limited support systems (ADRA Denmark, 2021).

### Ritual Practices and Widow Cleansing

Testimonies also revealed the persistence of harmful widowhood rituals, including ritual sexual cleansing, where widows are forced to have intercourse with a relative of the deceased husband to "remove impurity." This practice, though condemned by health authorities for its role in spreading HIV/AIDS, persists in rural communities. ADRA's community-based interventions have documented women who were coerced into such rituals under the threat of being ostracized if they refused (ADRA Denmark, 2022).

For SDA women, this creates a theological dilemma: the church's silence or lack of public condemnation of such practices risks complicity. Survivors testified to feelings of abandonment by their congregations, where local leaders were reluctant to challenge long-standing traditions for fear of offending community elders.

## **Divorce, Sexual Abuse, and Family Breakdown**

Another critical finding relates to the prevalence of sexual abuse and divorce. Women shared experiences of marital rape, incest, and coercion, often leading to broken families. Divorce, while stigmatized in the SDA Church, is increasingly sought by women seeking safety and dignity. However, divorced women often face social exclusion, as they are perceived to have “failed” their marriages.

Research indicates that sexual abuse within Christian communities is frequently underreported due to stigma and theological pressure to maintain family unity (Davids, 2023). The SDA Church in Malawi and Zambia has yet to develop comprehensive policies for pastoral care of survivors of abuse and divorce, leaving many women unsupported.

## **Women’s Empowerment Through Literacy and Economic Initiatives**

Despite these challenges, the findings also highlight encouraging examples of empowerment. In particular, adult literacy programs spearheaded by ADRA and local churches have transformed the lives of women in rural Zambia and Malawi.

In one testimony, a woman from rural Malawi described how learning to read empowered her to manage her small business and advocate for her children’s education. Literacy not only expanded her economic opportunities but also enhanced her participation in church life, as she could now read the Bible and contribute to Sabbath School discussions. Such stories illustrate that literacy programs are not merely educational initiatives but theological interventions, affirming women’s equal dignity as bearers of the *Imago Dei*.

These programs align with Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of empowerment, where literacy becomes a tool for liberation, enabling individuals to critically engage with and transform their oppressive contexts. Within the SDA Church, literacy initiatives can thus be understood as part of the mission of justice and restoration.

## **Migrant Labor and Family Vulnerabilities**

The phenomenon of migrant labor, particularly men traveling to South Africa for mining and other employment, continues to destabilize families in Malawi and Zambia. Women left behind often shoulder the burden of child-rearing, farming, and household management. However, this separation exposes women to economic vulnerability, infidelity, and, in some cases, abandonment (Naicker, 2025).

Testimonies revealed that some men who returned from migrant labor brought with them sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS, which devastated families. Women lamented that while the SDA Church teaches faithfulness, it has not adequately addressed the pastoral and social implications of migrant labor dynamics. Studies confirm that migrant labor exacerbates the spread of HIV and deepens gender inequality in Southern Africa.

## **Traditional Responses: Concoction Herbs and Ritual Practices**

A particularly striking finding was the way women creatively responded to abusive relationships. Some resorted to using traditional concoctions and rituals, such as *Zenje-Zungulira Khonde* (stay around the house), *Dekhani* (stop mobility), and *Palibe Kanthu* (no problem), as protective measures against abusive husbands.

These practices reflect both resilience and desperation. On one hand, they demonstrate women’s agency in attempting to control their circumstances; on the other, they reveal the inadequacy of church structures in providing effective support. Anthropological studies of Malawian traditional practices suggest that such remedies are part of a broader cultural system where women navigate patriarchal oppression through symbolic acts (Phiri, 2020). However, from a theological perspective, these practices raise concerns about syncretism and the church’s responsibility to provide alternative, faith-based responses to abuse.



## **Polygamy and Changing Marital Practices in the SDA Church**

Another significant finding is the persistence of polygamous practices within SDA communities. Although the denomination officially prohibits polygamy, in practice, leaders admit that men often maintain “hidden concubinages” or engage in serial extramarital affairs. While overt polygamy has decreased due to church discipline and education, informal arrangements remain widespread.

Church leaders in Zambia acknowledged that these hidden forms of polygamy create pastoral challenges, as they perpetuate gender injustice while evading formal accountability. Women in such marriages suffer from economic insecurity, emotional neglect, and social stigma, yet cultural silence often prevents open confrontation of the issue.

This reality underscores the need for renewed theological engagement. The church must address not only the official prohibition of polygamy but also the underlying patriarchal attitudes that sustain it.

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings from this study reveal a dual reality within the SDA Church in Malawi and Zambia. On one hand, systemic injustices such as abuse, violence, harmful traditions, divorce, and polygamy persist; on the other, pathways of empowerment, such as literacy programs, ADRA interventions, and women’s resilience strategies, offer hope for transformation.

Ultimately, these findings underscore the necessity for the SDA Church to engage in critical theological reflection and cultural reinterpretation. The church cannot merely affirm equality theologically while ignoring cultural realities; it must actively participate in pastoral care, advocacy, and empowerment initiatives to align theology with practice. By doing so, the SDA Church can fulfill its mission of promoting justice, dignity, and equality for all, thereby contributing to the broader struggle for gender justice in African society.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

To address the issues of gender inequality and violence against women within the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church in Malawi and Zambia, the following recommendations are proposed:

### **Strengthening Pastoral Care and Support Systems:**

Develop comprehensive pastoral care programs specifically addressing domestic violence and abuse. This includes training pastors and church leaders to recognize signs of abuse, provide support to survivors, and create safe spaces for women to seek help.

Establish partnerships with local NGOs and community organizations, such as ADRA, to enhance support services for women facing domestic violence, including counseling, legal assistance, and safe shelters.

### **Educational Initiatives:**

Expand adult literacy programs for women, focusing on financial literacy, health education, and legal rights. These programs should empower women to take control of their economic situations and understand their rights within marriage and society.

Implement educational workshops for both men and women that challenge traditional gender roles and promote healthy relationships based on mutual respect and equality.

### **Advocacy Against Harmful Cultural Practices:**

Actively engage in advocacy efforts to combat harmful cultural practices, such as ritual sexual cleansing and polygamy. The church should take a public stance against these practices and educate congregations about their negative impacts on women’s health and dignity.

Collaborate with local leaders and community influencers to reshape cultural narratives that perpetuate gender inequality.

#### **Promoting Women's Leadership:**

Encourage the inclusion of women in leadership positions within the church. This includes advocating for women's ordination and promoting women to decision-making roles in church governance and ministries.

Provide leadership training programs for women to equip them with the skills and confidence needed to take on leadership roles within the church and their communities.

#### **Addressing Economic Vulnerabilities:**

Support income-generating projects for women, particularly in rural areas, to enhance their economic independence and reduce reliance on male partners. This could include training in entrepreneurship, access to microloans, and skills development.

Create community support networks that facilitate the sharing of resources and knowledge among women, fostering solidarity and collective empowerment.

#### **Research and Continuous Evaluation:**

Conduct ongoing research to monitor the effectiveness of implemented programs and interventions. This will help identify best practices and areas needing improvement, ensuring that strategies remain relevant and impactful.

Encourage feedback from women within the church to better understand their needs and experiences, allowing for more tailored and effective responses.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study reveals a profound disjunction between the theological ideals of gender equality espoused by the SDA Church and the lived realities of women in Malawi and Zambia. Despite the church's teachings on the Imago Dei, which affirm the equal worth and dignity of both men and women, cultural practices rooted in patriarchy continue to undermine these principles, resulting in widespread gender-based violence, economic disempowerment, and social exclusion of women.

To bridge this gap, the SDA Church must engage in a critical re-examination of its theological foundations and ecclesiastical practices. By aligning its teachings with the lived experiences of its members and actively confronting cultural norms that perpetuate inequality, the church can become a transformative agent for justice and empowerment.

The recommendations outlined in this study provide a roadmap for the SDA Church to enhance its commitment to gender equality and the well-being of women. By fostering an environment of support, education, and advocacy, the church can fulfill its mission of promoting justice and dignity for all, contributing to a more equitable society in Malawi and Zambia.

Ultimately, this study highlights the need for an integrated approach that combines theological reflection with practical action. The SDA Church has the potential to lead the way in advocating for gender justice, not only within its own community but also in broader societal contexts, thereby embodying the principles of love, equality, and mutual respect that are central to the Christian faith.

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