




# Women in Pentecostal churches and mental wellbeing during the COVID- 19 pandemic: The case of the Apostolic Faith Mission of Zimbabwe

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 <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.105.412>

## Abstract

Pentecostalism, to which the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe belongs, is one of the fastest growing brands of Christianity in Zimbabwe. Most Pentecostal churches promise divine health, deliverance, miracles and prosperity to their members. In the Apostolic Faith Mission of Zimbabwe, women constitute the greater percentage of the church membership. Despite the fact that Pentecostal churches make promises of a good life, a church is generally expected to be a safe haven to its members. This paper wished to examine whether the Pentecostal church response to COVID-19 helped to build or destroy the mental health of its majority members, the women. The findings however show that the church mostly affected women's mental health in a negative way as it grappled with the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. This article therefore contests the claim of providing a good life as done by some Pentecostal churches. This was a qualitative study and utilized findings from a sample of 15 members of the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe who were selected using purposive sampling. The findings suggest that the women were stressed by the teachings on marriage and emphasis on collection of money, discrimination against single women, the prosperity gospel, and patriarchy.

**Keywords:** Apostolic Faith Mission of Zimbabwe, Church, COVID-19, Coronavirus, mental health, pandemic, Pentecostalism, women.

## Introduction

Sweeping across the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic caused numerous deaths and unprecedented disruption (Manyonganise, 2021). Health organizations were unprepared for this sudden emergency, including those in the Global North, which is typically considered to be far more advanced than the Global South (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic affected people including their mental health. Statistics shows that mental health issues such as depression affect women more than men (Chitereka & Takaza, 2020) and yet it is women who constitute the greater percentage of church membership (Kwaramba, 2019). A study by Almeida, Shrestha, et al. (2020) observed that worldwide there is a greater possibility for women suffering from depression than men. Religion played a significant role in making sense of the pandemic across various cultures and contexts. This scenario validates Mircea Eliade's (1959) observation that human beings are inherently religious. Pentecostal churches played distinct roles influencing how people experienced and responded to COVID-19. The Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe also played a part in addressing the challenges brought by the pandemic. Pentecostalism in Africa attracts many, due to its promise of a good life through the power of the Holy Spirit (Chitando, 2020). This study aims to provide a depiction of how the church impacted the mental health of women during the pandemic.



## **History of Apostolic Faith Mission of Zimbabwe**

This Apostolic Faith Mission of Zimbabwe came into existence as a result of a split which occurred in the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe over a disagreement on the amendment of the constitution. The faction that wanted to maintain the old constitution as it was, is the one now called the Apostolic Faith Mission of Zimbabwe (AFMOZ), and the one that wanted reforms to the constitution, maintained the name Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (AFMZ). This study focusses on the mental wellbeing of women in AFMOZ. The history of the two churches is basically the same until the separation in 2018. Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe was established in Zimbabwe in 1915 (Togarasei, 2016). Before the split, women comprised the greater percentage of the church (Kwaramba, 2019). According to an interview with one of the pastors in the top leadership even after the split, in AFMOZ, women were the majority (Interview, February 2024). Like any other Pentecostal church, AFMOZ emphasize o healing and men being in leadership roles (Pavari, 2021). In Pentecostal churches, healing is holistic. It not only relates to the physical body but also encompasses the mental health of a person.

## **Mental Health and Gender**

The probability of suffering from mental health issues is higher among women during a pandemic (Hao et al., 2020). Research which was conducted in China, where COVID-19 was first reported, have shown that women are associated with higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression, (Wang et al., 2020a; Liu et al., 2020a). The severity of depression may also be greater in women than men. According to Chitereka and Takaza (2020) gender is an influential social determining factor of health. Gender plays a significant role in shaping the varying degrees of control and power that individuals, both men and women, possess over the socioeconomic factors influencing their mental well-being and overall lives. It also influences their social standing, societal treatment, and the degree of vulnerability and exposure they face concerning specific mental health risks (Chitereka & Takaza, 2020).

Mental health is not just about mental health problems and mental illness, but it encompasses things like how people feel about themselves and other people around them; the ability to make and keep friends and relationships; and the ability to learn from others and to develop emotionally (Chitereka & Takaza, 2020). Furthermore, being mentally healthy is about having the strength to overcome the difficulties and challenges that a person faces in a life cycle, having confidence and self-esteem, in order to be able to take decisions and to believe in one's capability (Chitereka & Takaza, 2020). A mentally health person leads a fulfilled life, makes decisions, creates and keeps relationships. A mentally sound person generally copes with challenges of life and interacts well (Chitereka & Takaza, 2020).

## **Pentecostalism and COVID- 19**

Pentecostal churches are a fast growing brand of Christianity in Africa (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2021) and Zimbabwe in particular (Mwenje, 2016). They preach a gospel of prosperity and depend on tithes and offerings as their sources of money (Ukah, 2023) and they teach their members to move away from their dependence on donations from the west (Mwenje, 2016). However, Asamoah-Gyadu (2021) criticizes the way they preach a gospel of prosperity without emphasizing putting in some effort and working to acquire some wealth.

Thibaut and van Wijngaarden-Cremers (2020) observed that COVID-19 pandemic affected women more profoundly than men at home with an increased workload due to lockdown and quarantine measures. Staying together which must increase a bond among families and between couples proved to be toxic in some homes. In Zimbabwe there was a 70% increase of domestic violence which was reported by June 2020 (Manyonganise, 2023; WILDAF, 2020). If the home does not provide enough domestic support, women's mental health may become disturbed (Yu, 2018).



Despite having negative impacts, the lockdown had a positive impact in that it disrupted some gendered norms as some men began to help with household chores (Mwiine, 2020). The pandemic challenged the normally accepted view of being a man. To avoid the boredom some men began to help their wives in the home. Some cultural boundaries were resisted and discarded during the pandemic as masculinities were being reconfigured (Manyonganise, 2022).

Socio-economic development has been a persistent problem in Africa (Ukah, 2020). For that reason, many African Pentecostal churches especially the prosperity variant, to which the AFMOZ belong, have been making promises to their membership on issues of divine health and economic development through divine means. Divine health includes mental health. For Pentecostals, it seems that development is evidenced by acquiring material things such as cars, quality clothes, acquiring houses. Most Pentecostal leaders own prestigious houses, aeroplanes and motor vehicles, whilst the general members of their churches are suffering in poverty (Ukah, 2020). Ukah (2020) argues that the COVID-19 pandemic came as a challenge to the Pentecostal church for it to prove if it can deliver its promises of providing divine health to its members. Pentecostal responses to the pandemic were not structured, hence it failed to adequately mobilize resources to meet the needs of its members (Ukah, 2020). Ukah (2020) concluded, though arguably, that African Pentecostalism does not have the capacity to deal with the developmental problems Africa is facing, including health issues. Contrariwise, Tom and Chipenda (2020) are of the view neither politics nor religion will be able to address the health issues in Africa adequately. Concurring with Tom and Chipenda (2020), Wanjiru Gitua (2018) notes that Pentecostalism is a movement of positive social transformation without which “the whole continent [of Africa] would be worse off.” Asamoah- Gyadu (2020) however does not completely condemn the Pentecostal churches on preaching about prosperity because the Holy Bible speaks of prosperity. What he condemns is the love of money whilst neglecting the poor, and the sick, especially during a pandemic. Since research shows that the COVID-19 pandemic affected women more than men, it is important therefore, to examine how the Apostolic Faith Mission of Zimbabwe was able to deliver the promise of mental health to its female membership during the COVID- 19 pandemic period.

### **African Women Theology**

This study is grounded on the African Women’s Theology. African women’s theology supports equality and justice between men and women. This theology questions the treatment of women as ‘outsiders’ in the church (Kanyoro, 2001). For Kanyoro (2001), God created man and women as equals from the beginning. Men leading and participating alone in church evokes an image of a one-winged bird that cannot fly properly (Oduyoye, 2001). African women’s theology is a theology of relations replacing hierarchies with mutuality (Oduyoye, 2001). Hence, women should be included in all church activities to balance gender disparities in church. Men and women complement each other if they work together.

There is also advocacy for scripture to be interpreted in a life-giving manner by African women theologians (Gabaitse, 2012). Such interpretation of the scriptures will challenges defining a person from a patriarchal male vantage point (Oduyoye, 2001). They call for the drawing out of themes in the Holy Bible relating to justice and for the removal of discrimination against women in the church. An analytical reading of the Bible challenges constructs that propagate the suppression of women. Saint Paul teaches us that we should have an image of a church that is integrated and which embraces diversity. When he discusses the various gifts of grace within the church in Ephesians (4:11), he is by no means suggesting that the roles of the gifted are linked to gender as such (Nicolaidis, 2021).



African women's theology encourages women to tell their own stories; hence, this study draws from the AFMOZ women telling their own stories of how their mental wellbeing was impacted by the church's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Methodology**

The study was predominantly qualitative. Interviews were the main data collection tools. Purposive sampling was used because the selected women were considered to be rich sources for the objective of the study to be achieved. Individual interviews were conducted with 15 women who are all members of the AFMOZ. The interviews were conducted over the WhatsApp platform because all participants were not comfortable with having visitors in their homes even though the lockdown regulations had been lifted. An interview guide was sent to each participant's inbox and they had a choice to audio record, type their responses or to do a WhatsApp call. They could freely leave anytime they chose to do so. The purpose of the interviews was explained to the women and they were informed that their participation was voluntary. The data was coded, leading to the generation of the themes presented in this paper.

## **AFMOZ and the mental wellbeing of women during the COVID-19 pandemic**

The objective of this paper was to assess the impact of the activities of the church during the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of women in the Apostolic Faith Mission of Zimbabwe. The impact will be discussed below.

### **Financial issues**

The AFMOZ is not involved in any income generating projects. It heavily depends on the tithes and offerings it receives. This is causing a lot of stress on women. MW1 said:

During the lockdown most of us were not working and not being paid. I am stressed by the demands on money that are made at church. Not all of us are financially sound. (MW1, 48 years, WhatsApp, 15 February 2023)

Furthermore MW7 is stressed by the fact that the church projects which need money continued even during the lockdown period:

I have been a member of this church since the 1990s and the projects that need money never cease. We would like a situation whereby we have a breathing period and we stop being asked for money at church. Even in this lockdown they continue to ask for money. We need a break. (MW7, 46 years, WhatsApp, 10 March 2023)

In addition they are stressed by the fact that the preachers tend to abuse Bible verses when they want to take money from the congregants. WM5 had this to say about this:

The demands for money even during COVID did not stop. They use Haggai 1v3-4 which states that God is not pleased with us when we live in good houses and yet God's house is in ruins. I feel they are abusing the verse because, as for me, I do not even have a house of my own. I am struggling and yet they make such demands during lockdown. (WM5, 36 years, WhatsApp, 9 March 2023)

The church comes up with projects that require a lot of money without any planning. MW6 said:

Without expecting leaders ask for money required at provincial or national level. Most of the time, I would not have budgeted for such impromptu demands. I end up taking money that is meant for school fees or for food sometimes to meet these demands. Replacing that money then becomes a problem for me. So you end up getting stressed. (MW6, 47 years, WhatsApp, 28 February 2023)





Women are carrying the greater part of the financial burden. MW10 lamented this fact by saying:

The financial burden is generally too much on women in the church compared to men. As a result some women withdraw from church to ease the burden and protect their emotional and psychological well-being. (MW10, 55 years, WhatsApp, 4 March 2023)

What stresses most of the women is that the money is demanded. MW11 expressed her frustration:

The church should do projects that generate money so that they stop demanding money from congregants. In this lockdown, where do they expect us to get the money? (MW1, 50 years, WhatsApp, 1 March 2023)

Supporting weddings and funerals should be voluntary but in the AFMOZ it seems that is not the case. MW9 said:

Social issues such as funerals, weddings, conferences and general upkeep of the church facilities is said to be voluntary but that is not the case in our church. It is mandatory for every woman to contribute towards these activities. You get stressed sometimes because the funerals happen one after the other, especially during this time of COVID, and you are expected to contribute towards each one of them. (MW9, 40 years, WhatsApp, 5 March 2023)

From the narratives one can deduce that women are being stressed because the church is heavily depending on them for financial support. Whilst Pentecostal churches emphasise on avoiding depending on donations from the West (Biri, 2021) some have failed to start generating projects as an institution in order to lessen the financial burden placed on women. The church just like any organization, should have a proper plan on how to raise finances and not depend on its members to meet all its financial obligations. Financial management is vital in situations of lack. For church organisations to continue to be relevant and be able to preserve their membership, they should develop a plan on how to grow their financial resources and not just spend. Ukah (2020b) aptly states that Pentecostal churches do not want to take account of monies they collect from their congregants. Therefore, it becomes crucial for churches to take up good financial management practices in order to boost their revenue generation and control their expenditures. The church could be in this predicament because pastors lack the know-how on revenue generation techniques. Sound financial resources are not crucial only for the financial health of the church but also for the spiritual growth of its congregants as well. It is about time the church is run along business lines as well, even though it is a non-profit organization. The financial generation model that the AFMOZ is currently using seem to be unsustainable. Mwenje (2016) argues and rightly so, that the strategies used by Pentecostal churches to raise money are not always viable. Tithes and offerings cannot sustain a church indefinitely.

A paradox exists in the Pentecostal churches. Whilst they promise power to produce wealth to members, some also advance poverty by demanding too much from them. The women are enticed to give at the church to the extent of what happening resembling taking school fees money. This concurs with what Ukah (2020a) states, that demanding money from the poor adds complexity in Pentecostalism. The pastors imbue with a sacred character their demand for money from the church members and as a result they have become wealthy whilst the congregants generally remain poverty stricken (Acolatse, 2018). Money is involved in most of the AFMOZ activities, but it seems it is not always managed properly. If it was being managed properly, the probability that congregants would have a breather in terms of giving money at church would be high. If people are assured of attending church without expecting any monetary demands, AFMOZ will become a safe place, a 'hot house' as Russell (1993) puts it.



## Teaching on marriage

During COVID there was a lot of abuse that took place in marriages. The church's teaching on marriage is also one of the mental stressors to women in the AFMOZ. MW6 said:

We are taught that God hates divorce. Sometimes some women are in very difficult situations in marriage. Because of such teachings a woman may feel obliged to endure a really bad marriage. The mental stress comes when you are told to stay, and yet you are suffering. (MW6, 46 years, WhatsApp, 6 March 2023)

The husband is also considered as the head of the family and this is emphasized in the teaching of the AFMOZ on marriage. MW14 had this to say:

The teaching about the husband being the head made me suffer in the home. Because of that teaching he thinks that I am supposed to do everything for him. He cannot do even simple things like washing his pant. In decision making, it's always what he wants which prevails. When you complain he tells you that he is the head of the family and I am to submit. Sometimes you envy those who do not go to church because they can challenge their husbands and their views are also considered. For us who go to church you get limited by such teachings. (MW14, 44 years, WhatsApp 15 March 2023)

The narratives by these two women show that they are enduring marriage and their mental wellbeing has been affected negatively. They fear their husbands. Fear takes away all the happiness expected to exist in a marriage and it emanates from the fact that scriptures are not being interpreted in a life-giving manner (Gabaitse, 2015). This, they feel, gives the husbands the authority to control and subjugate women. African feminist theologians advocate for gender justice be in the home and in church (Oduyoye, 2001). Nicolaidis (2015) agrees fully with African feminist theologians and he states for example, that in the Orthodox church, in the Sacrament of Marriage, a man and woman have the ability to become one spirit and one flesh in a unique way that no human love can provide by itself and that the couple are equal partners with distinct roles and that gender equity in terms of treatment is important. Where there is justice a person's mental health is boosted and they feel good about themselves (Chitereka & Takaza, 2020) and can cultivate good relations even with children being in the home. The voice of MW14 was taken away that is why she envies women who do not go to church and who can voice their concerns in the home.

AFMOZ was not encouraging husbands and wives to complement each other. Gender exerts a substantial influence on the extent of control and power individuals hold over socioeconomic factors that impact their mental well-being and overall lives. This impact applies to both men and women, shaping their social status, societal interactions, and susceptibility to specific mental health risks (Chitereka & Takaza, 2020). The narrations above are contrary to what Manyonganise (2022) observed, that the pandemic in some homes reconfigured masculinities positively in the home. In most AFMOZ households that was not the case at all as the husbands held on to the teachings of the church on marriage. The church which is supposed to be exemplary in upholding flexibility and fluidity of duties in the home seems to be lagging behind. There is a possibility that the men who began helping in the house during the lockdown continued after the lockdown as they learnt that helping in the home does not reduce one's manhood in any way.

Divorce in AFMOZ even in the face of abuse seems to be viewed as evil. This is another indication that scriptures are not being interpreted in a way that is life giving. Scriptures, if they are not critically analysed and one does not consider the context in which they were written carefully, can be detrimental and especially so to women. Divorce can be a blessing in circumstances where abusive conditions arise towards a spouse. Divorce in this case can be a preventative measure to an unfortunate circumstances such as death, or disability as a result



of abuse. Since men in AFMOZ are the only ones who have the privilege to preach and interpret scriptures (Kwaramba, 2019) they tend to do so in a way that benefits them only.

### Singlehood

During the pandemic some women lost their husbands. In AFMOZ the married are seemingly more highly regarded than those that are single. This also stresses single women. SW5 said:

Sometimes you do not even feel like going to church because of the ridicule and disdain you experience at church. For you to avoid stress you do not attend church regularly. Such teachings that emphasize marriage tends to put pressure on us who are not yet married but expected to be married. (SW5, 49 years, WhatsApp, 9 March 2023)

There is also labelling that is taking place with regards to single women in the AFMOZ. SW1 a widow narrated:

My husband got infected by Coronavirus and died. Single women are seen as home wreckers and husband snatchers. When I am talking to a married man, usually the wife would come close by so that she can hear our conversation. This stresses us as single women. (SW1 45 years, WhatsApp, 10 March 2023)

SW4 who also lost her husband during COVID also echoed the same sentiments.

At one time, someone approached me and said that the way I was dressed, dancing and shaking my back will affect other people's husbands. They call us prostitutes. You feel lonely even at church. (SW4, 58 years, WhatsApp, 10 March 2023)

On parenting, the church did not help single women. SW3 also narrated:

We were also having problems with children during COVID and needed help. The church tends to give a blind eye to this. So I get stressed that the church is not helping at all. (SW3, 56 years, WhatsApp, 19 February 2023)

SW1 narrated how she was affected during a ladies conference.

During the conference after lockdown a leader said 'this pulpit is only for those who are married. The pulpit is not for the unmarried. Have you ever seen a single woman being a master of ceremony in this church? Some of us were still mourning their husbands and the wounds were still fresh. For someone whom you think is mature spiritually, to say that was devastating. (SW1, WhatsApp, 20 February 2023)

The stories of the single women create reservations on whether the Church has been caring for those hurting (Biri, 2021). The challenges faced by single women are being ignored. Mupangwa and Chirongoma (2021) observed that their challenges are either neglected or glossed over. Since men dominate the hierarchy of the church, the rules tend to be insensitive to the needs of single women. The rule that single women are not supposed to be master of ceremonies or to lead in anyway, and to emphasize it during a pandemic when they were facing a lot of challenges, is evidence of insensitivity in the church towards single women. Single women cannot view the church as a safe haven if they are exposed to such ridicule.

Chitereka and Takaza (2020) argue that mental health incorporates how people feel about themselves and other people around them; the ability to make and keep friends and relationships; and the ability to learn from others and to develop emotionally. The narration by SW1 and SW5 clearly show that their self-esteem was really affected by the way they were being treated by the church. The capability of making friends in such an environment in which you are suspected to be a potential 'husband snatcher' is destroyed. The fact that SW4 stated that she was feeling lonely in church may be a pointer that she is no longer making an effort



to build relationships in the church. Like Ukah (2020a) concluded, African Pentecostalism does not have the capacity to deal with the developmental problems Africa is facing, such as poverty, health issues and inequalities. However when you analyse the activities in the Pentecostal churches it is not that they lack capacity, but rather that they lack the will-power to address the problems of the widows in the church.

The scrutiny of single women imply that they are not considered as members the way other women are. When the church needs their money they are included, when not, they are excluded. Watson (2002) argues that every woman is the church, including single women. AFMOZ is seemingly putting women into classes. A woman is a woman, whether married or not. A woman does not need a suzerain to qualify to be a full human being (Oduyoye, 2001). The death of their husbands during the pandemic did not reduce their womanhood and humanity. The ladies department in AFMOZ is operating like a one-winged bird as well by excluding and discriminating against single women (Oduyoye, 2001).

During the pandemic single women were facing real issues that needed real tangible solutions. The church offered prayer for such issues. SW2 narrated her frustrations:

The church tend to spiritualize everything and emphasize prayer on some things that require tangible solutions. If my child is taking drugs, I need assistance on how to help my child from coming out of the addiction, not prayer. This stresses because I am not getting the help that I need. SW2, 52 years, WhatsApp, 10 May 2023

While prayer is crucial, love is seen through deeds. Faith without works is dead. The relevancy of the church can only be seen when it puts the love it preaches into practice. The women are interrogating the notion of spiritualising everything. Practical issues have to be dealt with practically. Asamoah-Gyadu (2021) observed that during lockdown, Pentecostal preachers approached issues in different ways. He observed that one pastor took a pragmatic approach to problems whilst an Archbishop emphasized prayer. Prayer on its own is not enough, it has to be complemented with being practical and tackling the issue at hand. The challenges of the pandemic did not require prayer alone. The prayers required an accompaniment of practicality. The widows needed money, and help with taking children for counselling and therapy.

The assertion by Ukah (2020a) and Asamoah- Gyadu that Covid-19 was like a litmus test to Pentecostal churches to prove whether they can deliver what they promise, seems to be true when you follow SW2's narration on how the church failed to help single women with what they required, such as money, counselling and other tangible goods and services. The church leaders seem to promise a wealthy life, full of love, only if they want to receive from church congregants. The pandemic gave the church leaders a platform to reciprocate their love to the widows but it seems they failed.

### **Patriarchy**

The emphasis on Patriarchy during lockdown affected women both positively and negatively. As a result, some women were mentally stressed because it is a system that encourages the domination and discrimination of women by men. Though some were stressed by patriarchy others felt it worked in their favour. Their mental health was boosted as patriarchy apparently benefitted them. Their husbands took the responsibility seriously of being bread-winners and leaders of the family as they were taught during the lockdown. MW1 stated that at their assembly during the pandemic they had a theme that was upholding women's agency, but in the preaching periods, the pastor would emphasize that the husband is the head and leader of the family and has to rise up to the situation. MW13 said:

My husband took the responsibility of being the father. He would say at church we are taught that we are the heads of the family so I should work for the family to have food. How are you going to see my fatherhood, if I will not provide for you? He made sure





that he provided. I felt cushioned and had no stress at all during the lockdown. (MW13, 46 years, WhatsApp, 18 February 2024)

For MW7 the emphasis on the father being the head during the lockdown affected her negatively. She said:

I suffered during lockdown. We were with him (husband) the whole period. I felt dominated. He would just sit and I would do everything for him. He decided on everything. Before the pandemic he was working out of town and that gave me the opportunity to make decisions. When I complained he said please let us put into practice the word being preached by the pastor. It was stressful for me. (MW7, 36 years, WhatsApp, 17 February 2023)

The narration by MW1 shows that the husband interpreted the message of being the head positively. This resulted in the wife feeling loved and her mental health being boosted. The African women theologians encourage interpretation of the Holy Bible in a way that is life giving. The way MW1 applied the message shows the impact of interpretation of scripture. The word can act as a double edged sword. If scripture is interpreted in a life giving manner it benefits women (Gabaitse, 2012). Such interpretation of scripture challenges defining a person from a patriarchal male experience perspective (Oduyoye, 2000). There is need for the emphasis of the dominant theme in the Holy Bible of justice in order to eliminate the downgrading and discrimination of women in the church (Kanyoro, 2004). What happened to MW1 confirms what Manyonganise (2022) also observed that men and women were no longer used to staying together. This is a problem which was brewing unnoticed but COVID-19 brought it to light. For MW1 her husband being away gave her a voice over what happens in the house but his presence took her voice away. The circle advocates for men and women to complement each other. Hence giving a voice to both the wife and husband. Patriarchy takes away the potential of the church of becoming a safe haven and a life giving institution for women.

Those who did not take the message with a mind-set of being responsible thought it was time to rule with an 'iron fist' resulting in women being mentally stressed. This is in line with what Thibaut and van Wijngaarden- Cremers (2020) observed, namely, that COVID-19 pandemic affected women more profoundly than men at home with an increased workload due to lockdown and quarantine measures. The UN Women World Health Organization (2020) reported an increase in domestic violence after the COVID-19 outbreak in several countries. Requesting for assistance in the home can trigger domestic violence against women. During lockdown one's home was regrettably not always a safe space. The church AFMOZ through its teachings seems to have exacerbated the situation. The AFMOZ participated in the 70% increase of domestic violence which was reported by June 2020 in Zimbabwe (WILDAF, 2020.) According to Yu (2018), a lack of adequate domestic and emotional support can have very adverse consequences on a woman's mental health.

As observed earlier, African women's theology focusses on women telling their own stories. Hence this study draws from the women in AFMOZ telling their own stories of struggle and tenacity amidst the throes of patriarchy during a global pandemic. Through telling their own stories we can observe that they experienced patriarchy differently.

### **Prosperity gospel and work ethic**

Preaching of the gospel of prosperity did not stop during the pandemic. However the emphasis was on working to be prosperous. Widows MW 3 and MW12 in the rural areas stated that during the lockdown they had flexibility to move around and do their daily activities. She said:

We have a new pastor. Our pastor encouraged us to work hard during the pandemic and for us to make money. I am a widow but I now dress smartly just like a teacher because of the hard work as a result of the teaching. I feel great, that I am no longer



ashamed of my dressing at church. The pastor we had before would just ask for money but did not teach us on how to earn it. (MW3, 32 years, WhatsApp, 18 February 2023)

Our pastor did not just teach about prosperity but he taught us how to make money through working hard. The pastor and his wife included us in their poultry project and that how we generated money to start our own businesses too. They encouraged to go and revive our gardens and produce for selling not just for home consumption. A lot of people were just sitting but we worked and right now we are earning a living. (MW12, 30 years, WhatsApp, 9 March 2023)

There appears to be a realization in some Pentecostal circles that the prosperity gospel is simplistic and is not applicable in the real world. Like Asamoah-Gyadu (2021) observed preaching about prosperity is not wrong, but the failure to intentionally complement it with the gospel of a work ethic makes it toxic to the believers. However the teaching of the pastors in the rural areas encouraged them to go contrary to what has been believed about Pentecostal churches. Some pastors seem to understand that God blesses those who work. He is challenging the laziness which is encouraged by the prosperity gospel of miraculous wealth. It is true, like Ukah (2023) rightly noted, that the pandemic brought a test to the gospel of prosperity, however the pastor who encouraged the single women in the rural areas, seem to have passed the test. The narrative seem to be changing, there is an understanding that prosperity gospel is not enough on its own.

By boosting the mental health of women the Apostolic Faith Mission of Zimbabwe, though in a small way, was also contributing towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 3, namely to, “Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages,” This is in line with what Chitando (2022) stated - that the way religion responds to COVID-19 is a pointer as to how they will respond to all other development issues. It also addressed the goal of eradicating poverty as women were being taught to work and earn their own money. During COVID-19 the quest to achieve SDGS was made almost impossible due to the challenges the Coronavirus brought (Ekwebelem et al., 2021). However despite the impact of COVID the AFMOZ made an effort to achieve their goals.

### **The Way forward**

It is recommended that the AFMOZ find other ways of raising funds since a dependency on tithes and offerings is straining members, especially women. Flexibility and adaptability to situations is encouraged so that the church will be able to respond to pandemics in future in a way that will meet the needs of women. This will result in adjusting some of the constitutional clauses of the church in order to promote equality and justice, both in the home and the church. Since the church is lagging behind in achieving developmental goals especially those that address women’s issues, further research is required in order to find ways in which the church can participate fully in achieving such vital goals.

### **Conclusion**

It can be concluded that some women’s mental health was boosted whilst others were stressed by the way AFMOZ reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic. The mental stress for women also emanated from the church reactions. The church has a huge task to tackle for it to continue to be relevant to its female membership. The relevancy of the church to women in the Apostolic Faith Mission of Zimbabwe will be more recognized if the challenges highlighted in this paper are addressed as a matter of extreme urgency.

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**Conflict of Interest Statement:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.



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