



# The woman of Shunem (2 Ki 4:8–37) and Reformed Church in Zimbabwe women: Towards a recognition of oft-forgotten heroes



## Authors:

Canisius Mwandayi<sup>1,2</sup>   
Itai Shoshore<sup>1</sup> 

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>Department of Religious Studies and Ethics, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe

<sup>2</sup>Research Institute for Theology and Religion, Faculty of Arts, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Canisius Mwandayi,  
canisium@gmail.com

## Dates:

Received: 27 Sept. 2022  
Accepted: 13 Jan. 2023  
Published: 17 Mar. 2023

## How to cite this article:

Mwandayi, C. & Shoshore, I., 2023, 'The woman of Shunem (2 Ki 4:8–37) and Reformed Church in Zimbabwe women: Towards a recognition of oft-forgotten heroes', *In die Skriflig* 57(1), a2907. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v57i1.2907>

## Copyright:

© 2023. The Authors.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

## Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Historically, women have remained subjects of subordination by their male counterparts despite their critical social role. While they have continuously been entangled in the web of patriarchy, some of them, however, have been able to use their agency to re-assert themselves and influence how the world should positively think about women. This article interrogated the innovative ways in which the woman of Shunem and the Zvishavane women of faith of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ), have been at the forefront, proactively exercising their agency to confront the death-dealing and life-diminishing forces confronting them. Countering their portrayal as persons who simply did what was expected of them as women, this article recognised and celebrated their indispensable contributions towards the welfare of their communities. Grounded on narrative analysis, this article engaged the woman of Shunem's narrative and re-read it from her vantage point. Using a hermeneutic of identification, the narrative was put side by side with that of the RCZ women of faith. The overarching framework underpinning the study was that of the feminist liberating-seeking framework. In the pursuit of this framework, cultural and religious powers that influence the exploitation of women are acknowledged and effort is made to transform the society from the oppressive system of patriarchy so as to liberate women in particular. A re-reading of the woman of Shunem's narrative showed that she was a woman of great character. Despite the couple being childless, she never allowed community expectations to put pressure on her as she expressed contentment with her situation. Her greatness also is reflected through her hospitality, self-abnegation and determination. While what she did, is to some extent comparable to what RCZ women have done and still do today, she admittedly was a step ahead. As such, her tenacity can be used as a leverage to influence the majority of women still caught up in the web of patriarchy in this contemporary world. The long-standing perception of women as capable only of doing what is expected of them, needs to be challenged and biblical passages reinterpreted to ensure the liberation of everyone, especially women due to their vulnerability.

**Contribution:** This research contributed to the scope of *In die Skriflig* in that it brought on board the experiences of women in the RCZ against the background of the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4:8–37. In a scientific way, the research argued for the recognition of these often-forgotten heroes.

**Keywords:** RCZ women; women agency; patriarchy; Shunammite woman; ANE society; Hebrew culture; healthcare.

## Introduction

Since creation, women from all walks of life played and continue to play a pivotal role in the community. Be that as it may, it is a known reality that, due to patriarchy, their work has not been well acknowledged and credited. In this article it is thus endeavoured to revisit narratives about the Shunammite woman and the women of faith of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ), re-tell them from their own vantage points and, in that way, celebrate their heroism. To ground the discussion, it is important to begin by situating the problem of women's subordination in history. The Ancient Near East (ANE) world becomes of necessity our starting point given that the Hebrew culture developed against this background. This shall be followed by a discussion on women in Hebrew culture and then the juxtaposition of the woman of Shunem and the RCZ women of faith.

## Women in the Ancient Near East

Historically, women from the ANE were subordinated despite their critical social role (Kuklick 2018). In ancient Mesopotamia, there was a long-standing tradition of social injustice and

separation of the sexes. Men were considered more important and brilliant than women; thus, women ended up accepting the stereotype that men are better than them (Marsman 2021). Like most aspects of ancient society, scribal culture was predominantly male. This, however, is not to say there were no female scribes. Though they were not ubiquitous, more than a few managed to produce a sizable number of documents (Halton & Svard 2018). These documents, however, were not at the disposal of the larger community; hence, women's vital roles remained obscure (Snell 2001).

There are very limited accounts in which women's private and public contributions are mentioned. For instance, the wife of King Nabonidus played a pivotal role in the community which was recorded after her death. The recording, however, distorts her positive contribution to the community in the sense that she is portrayed as an unjust person, a 'pious deception'. Despite of her contribution, the authors did not bother to mention her name, but rather called her by the name of her husband: 'Wife of king Nabonidus', and this clearly highlights how women were side-lined by the ANE system. Ackerman (2016) acknowledges how the great contribution of the majority of the women in ancient times were recorded after their death.

Van de Mieroop (2015) clarifies how some women's names were of significance in the ANE. As he puts it, some names carried some beneficial status to the community or to the goddesses such as 'she is my mother', 'my protector' or 'my happiness'. Women's names were basically referred to at a later stage of their lives after their occupation was noted: whether they were free or slave women which indicated a change of status. The names were also used to communicate the social status of women. For example, princesses and women of the royal family possessed names with political messages (Ademiluka 2018). One finds names such as Taris-matum [the country is glad] (Ademiluka 2018). Housewives or slave girls who served in the court of Mari had names such as 'May my father continue'. This phrase would address her position as a slave and, at the same time, declare a blessing (Marsman 2021).

## Women in Israelite society

Belonging to the same world as the ANE characterised by socio-cultural, economic and political ties, Hebrew women were hardly different from other women in this shared world. Although Hebrew Scriptures in Genesis 1–3 lay a foundation for an egalitarian existence between a man and a woman given their being created in God's image (Mwandayi 2022), practical life at times reflected a distortion of God's original design. Due to an embedded patriarchal system, marriage in some cases meant the 'possession' of a woman by her husband. There existed an oppressive divorce system which allowed only husbands to divorce their wives, even for trivial reasons. This later finds expression in Matthew 5:31

where Jesus castigates such an oppressive system. Another passage which clearly shows how women were possessed by men is a case in the Book of Judges (19:22–30) whereby a Levite thrust out his concubine to the men who had besieged the host's house demanding to 'know' the Levite himself. The very fact that the host chose to offer his daughter or the Levite's concubine to the men to do whatever they wanted rather than expose his male guest to the base men (Jdg 19:24) shows that women were at times considered as expendable property.

Due to an internalised system of patriarchy, women ended up embracing the society's positioning of them as subjects of men as normal. This subordination was expressed through addressing men as 'my Lord' (Gn 18:12) or 'my Master' (Ex 21:22). Although an argument is often made that, when a woman addressed her husband as 'my Lord', it was a way of showing some respect and not really a sign that she was subordinate to the husband (Davidson 2007), it is difficult to deny an element of subordination implied in that form of address.

It was the burden of mothers to make sure that the young girls were properly educated and socially instructed in the womanhood. Women were made responsible for domestic chores such as washing, cooking, making clothing, care giving for the sick and so on (Gn 27:9). Sometimes young girls could extend their responsibility from house chores and took care of the flocks and watered them like Rachel and Jethro's seven daughters (Gn 29:9–10). All these events show how women played a critical role in the Israelite society. After all the work done by the women in the Old Testament times, hardly do we have records of them being recognised and appreciated for such good work to the community. Of interest in this article is the unique case of the Shunnamite woman who exercised her agency. Not only did she show hospitality to the man of God, Elisha, she went on to mobilise the construction of an upper house for him, cared for the sick boy and with determination sought Elisha's attention on the dead boy. Although the narrative is silent about her achievements, her determination and self-renunciation deserve recognition if read from her vantage point.

## The Shunammite woman

The city of Shunem was located between the Sea of Galilee and the Mount Carmel, and it was about seven kilometres north to the village of Jezreel. As Lemche (2014) observes, people in Shunem lived in peace and harmony which is clearly supported by the narration of the Shunammite woman in her conversation with Elisha (2 Ki 4:13). She initiated the conversation while Elisha was passing through to Mount Carmel routinely. She urged him (Elisha) to eat bread before he proceeded with his journey and whenever he came by, he stopped there to eat. This act of urging strangers to sit for a meal was last witnessed in the Pentateuch (Gn 18:2–5).

With her hospitality to the man of God, the Shunammite woman demonstrated a lesson that a home should not be treated as private fortress where only a few are welcome. The Shunammite was a woman with a strong character who acted independently to achieve her goals. The action she took, highlights her agency as she tapped into her religio-cultural resources to show hospitality to the man of God. In other words, the story highlights the innovative ways in which some biblical women proactively exercised their agency independent of men when times of need arose. This action on its own deserved credit, but the story is silent about the great deeds performed by this woman.

As Elisha and his servant, Gehazi, continued to pass by the Shunammite woman's house for a meal, the woman decided to build an upper house for him. At this point, the mention of her husband comes into play for the first time when she informed him about Elisha as a true man of God and her proposal that they build an upper house for him (2 Ki 4:9–10). The narration clearly shows the boldness and innovativeness of the Shunammite woman amid a patriarchal society where men were mostly the initiators of key family decisions and having the final word. When the narrative is re-read from her vantage point, several things can be pointed out which bring her praise and honour. In the first place, the Shunammite woman introduced her husband to Elisha. She used a powerful title 'man of God' in reference to Elisha – a title which was only associated with influential characters such as Moses, Elijah and Samuel. The woman treated Elisha as one of the most powerful and influential characters. A reader can thus easily draw a conclusion that the woman's generosity and acts of love towards Elisha was a form of respect and worshipping God.

The woman's request to build the upper chamber for the man of God was a result of discerning the degree of Elisha's need and their responsibility to the prophet because of the ability that God had given them (Studies in the Life of Elisha 2023). The woman was not simply satisfied with a place where Elisha could turn in; she knew he needed some kind of privacy, and she knew they had the capacity to provide this. It is undisputed that the woman was so devoted to Yahweh because, from the narration, it is clear that Elisha passed continually for unspecified trips, but she remained committed to look after him and his servant. Most men would not have been capable of such patience and reverence to Yahweh for a long time. Therefore, the Shunammite woman deserved to be treated as a heroine and should be given credit for her efforts. Her action also reveals that she was a person who exercised her agency as a woman, had self-efficacy, spoke for herself and made decisions which benefitted her and the entire community.

The fact that Elisha continuously passed by this house during his unspecified trips, shows that his ministry in the region of Shunem and the surrounding areas was made easy by this woman. Therefore, she contributed to the ministry of Elisha during that particular period. The Shunammite woman's contributions to Elisha's ministry should thus be remembered

and mentioned in conjunction with Elisha's great work, because she complimented Elisha's ministry.

As alluded by Jackson (2021), Elisha wanted to do something to show his appreciation for what they had done when he requested the woman to tell him what she wanted them to do for her (2 Ki 4:12–13). Although it appears that the couple did not have a child of their own and the husband was already advanced in years (2 Ki 4:14), the woman did not want to take advantage of this as she responded that all was well with her (2 Ki 4:13).

Upon Elisha's insistence, the narrative has Gehazi helping his master by offering a word of advice to him that the woman had no son. This suggestion of a son rang well with Elisha who immediately promises a boy child to the woman (2 Ki 4:4–6). Both Gehazi and Elisha, however, intentionally perpetuate a patriarchal worldview of giving value to a boy child. In the society of the time, a boy mattered more than a girl child. Elisha never bothered himself to ask either the woman's preferences in terms of the sex of the child or even the woman's name; rather he preferred to call her the 'Shunammite' – a name after her village. Elisha was probably not interested in doing this, because it was the life of a socially marginalised person – a woman.

Be that as it may, the initial response by the woman, namely 'I am living among my people' (2 Ki 4:14), has a lot to teach about the great character of this woman. The response literally meant that she was content and satisfied with her present state of life and the situation she was in among friends and kindred. She did not have any cause to seek relief from dignitaries. While they did not have a child to their name, the woman even challenged the oppressive norms of her community which valued a boy child more than anything else. This was the environment in which this Shunammite woman lived, but she never allowed the community to put pressure on her. Historically, women could go to the man of God for help or asked their husbands to pray for them if they were barren or without a boy child as the cases of Rebekah, the wife of Isaac (Gn 25:21) and Hannah, wife of Elkanah (1 Sm 1:10–11). In the case of the Shunammite, it was a different story: she had refuted help from Elisha and showed that she was comfortable with her situation and prepared to withstand any possible reviling accusation that she did not have a boy child. This boldness should not go uncelebrated within and outside Israel; it should be a role model to all women.

Wyatt (2019), supporting the above assertion, says that the description of this Shunammite woman's refusal of Elisha's offer, demonstrates clearly that she challenged the common long-standing Hebrew norms and practices that considered a woman as a man's property. There was a teaching held that a woman should always be under a man's control and protection. The woman belonged to her father before marriage and to her husband after marriage rituals, and when her husband died, she belonged to her son. Therefore, the man figure was very important within every Hebrew



family for the sake of the life, security and survival of the women. Hence, the woman's response indicated that she was an independent character who did not need to depend on man's security and provision; she relied on herself instead.

A boy child was considered of great importance to the family. Following one's death, a living son would bring food to his deceased father, grandfather or grandmother. This act had the effect of preserving relationships with family members even beyond death (McCane 2003). While a daughter could also bring food to the deceased family members, in patriarchally organised societies such as that of the Israelites, it was the eldest son who was expected to perform this filial task. The devolving of such a task upon the shoulders of the eldest son may in part explain why a double portion was given to the eldest son as inheritance (Dt 21:15–17). The desire by most Israelite parents to obtain after death those gifts without which one's soul could not find rest goes a long way to explain why childlessness was considered one of the greatest reproaches that could befall a person (Gn 16:1–3; 30:1–4; 1 Sm 1:4–20). Various strategies could be applied to make sure that either the woman gives birth to a boy child or the husband could take a second wife (Wyatt 2019). The Israelite women had accepted patriarchal oppression to the extent that women themselves could facilitate polygamy on behalf of their husbands. As reflected in Genesis 16:2 '... The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her'. This was the situation of Abraham and his wife Sarai, the pioneers of a patriarchal society. However, in the case of the Shunammite woman, the patriarchal childlessness conception was challenged by the woman, because there was no record of a second wife or any other efforts from her side to have a boy child. This finds support in Wyatt (2019) who avers that the description of this Shunammite woman's refusal of Elisha's offer demonstrates clearly that she challenged the common long-standing Hebrew norms and practices that considered a woman as a man's property. The Shunammite woman was a heroine, her works, her attitude towards socially constructed norms and values liberates women in various angles and she deserves to be remembered and credited for such wonderful efforts.

In the ANE and Israel, names carried a great significance among people. The community could agree on a name of a child or a person depending on the value and roles of that person within their faith community (Ademiluka 2018). However, in the case of the Shunammite woman, both Elisha and the author did injustice to her name. Undoubtedly, she played a vital role in helping to spread the message of the man of God. It is easy to forget the unnamed person within the narration and even within the society of origin. People will find it difficult to remember the works of people whose names were not mentioned at first. Elisha, because of being a figure with a name, was and is remembered in the community. He became the role model and mentor in Israelite community. It was easy for them (the society) to remember him, because his name was well spelt out and his heroic endeavours were

in accordance with Judaic traditions. What is clear, however, is that the Shunammite woman contributed almost as much as Elisha, the mentioned man of God. What she did, resulted in the success of Elisha's ministry. Because of all this, the unnamed Shunammite woman needs to be recognised and her efforts clearly spelt out.

Another attribute to equally remember her for was the ability to renunciate herself for the sake of the boy child who mysteriously grew ill and passed on the same day (2 Ki 4:19–20). The boy was initially with the father when he grew sick, but he ordered his servant to carry him to his mother. While society busied itself reinforcing that all critical issues of the family are handled by the male figure, the decision in contrast, taken by the Shunammite's husband shows that the woman was the unpronounced head of the family and better off than the man when things went wrong. In other words, the man implicitly admitted that his wife could manage the problem better than him; therefore, he transferred the challenge to her. It was supposed to be well recognised that this woman was the anchor of the family and her society. In this particular case, the Shunammite woman was the heroine, and her story should be talked about even after her death, because heroines will be immortalised due to the acknowledgment of their contribution to society.

The Shunammite's husband portrayed another weakness of the patriarchal society which was problematic in its form. The boy child can be with his father if and only if he is strong and sound, but when he gets unwell, he ceases to be the father's responsibility and becomes the mother's. This is what the Shunammite's husband demonstrated in his dismissal of the sick child, sending him to his mother. From the silence in the narrative one can assume that he continued with his business with the reapers. While, admittedly, he could not have anticipated that the child would die, he should at least have followed up on the sick child and decided, together with the mother, how best to assist the child. Out of motherly care, the woman sacrificed her time to be with the boy until he breathed his last. Spending the whole day with the sick boy on her knees caused, in one way or the other, her mental fatigue, illness and psychological disturbances, but she did not give up. Although she acted above and beyond what mere man can do there is alas, no appreciatory comment in the narrative.

After her futile struggle with her son, she laid down the deceased boy on the bed and travelled for some distance to look for Elisha without bothering to inform her husband about the death of their son. She kept it to herself, because she knew that if her husband had failed to help the sick son, he would be even more helpless with the deceased. Therefore, she kept soldiering on alone until she got what she wanted. When Gehazi met her to ask if everything was fine, she responded positively. While all along the man of God had been avoiding talking to her directly, she was bold enough to seek an audience with him. Because of her bold insistence, she managed to change Elisha's attitude and approach. Elisha ended having a direct conversation with her which

was something new in Elisha's ministry according to the Bible recordings. This incident can thus be used to celebrate the woman of Shunem as a strong and independent figure who was willing to do whatever was of great benefit to her and the family. Despite women's vulnerability, not only within the monarchy system, but also within the traditional Yahwistic village system, she breaks down the patriarchal bridge that has been perpetuated for centuries.

While the patriarchal systems of the time condoned the marginalisation of women, the Shunammite woman managed to challenge such systems through taking a bold stance and with unshaken faith in her plans. What the Shunammite woman did, is, to some extent, comparable to what women continue to do today, even though she was, admittedly, a step ahead, so her tenacity can be used as a leverage to influence the majority of women still caught up in the web of patriarchy in the contemporary world. The next task, therefore, would be to chronicle the unrecognised work of RCZ women of faith and find how their situation can be improved through appropriating insights from the Shunammite story.

## Women in Reformed Church in Zimbabwe

Women constitute between 60% and 70% of the total membership in the RCZ (Rutoro 2007). They are very committed to church activities, financial contributions and care giving. Women thus contribute much to the running of the church and fulfillment of the mission and vision of the church of being able to transform humankind through addressing human needs. There are only two fellowship groups that women are not part of: the men's league and the boys' league. Out of six fellowship groups, women participate in four groups which is a clear example of the commitment of women in the church. This finds echo in the words of Runyowa et al. (2001) who observe that women participate and are more active than any other group in the RCZ: 82.7% of women regularly attend Sunday services, and 81% spend a significant amount of time involved in congregational activities.

After the missionaries officially established the Dutch Reformed Church in Zimbabwe in 1891 at Morgenster Mission (Mujere 2013), women, through the leadership of Mrs A.A. Louw, formed a women's fellowship group in 1933 and named it *Sungano yeMadzimai* [Women's League] (Rutoro 2007). This fellowship group had its objectives and goals to meet. Initially, the group was introduced to oversee the smooth flow of church activities after they had discovered men's leadership to be insufficient leaving a lot of loopholes. Apart from the day-to-day involvement of women in the church programmes *Sungano yeMadzimai* targeted the vulnerable people, be it widows, orphans, old people and the less privileged people within the local communities of every congregation. Even after the missionaries officially handed over the church to the black people as the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe, the women's league remained strong and effective in the church.

At Mabasa, a village in the Zvishavane district, women took a leading role in negotiating with the local *Sabhuku* [headman] for a stand to build a church. This initiative to build a church was done without the involvement of men. The initiative alone is a clear testimony to the great work done by the *Sungano yeMadzimai*. Both men and women are now enjoying church services at that place which women fought for. However, it is unfortunate that the church is totally silent about such efforts. The same also applies to the community at Mabasa. They hardly give any credit to what women did, because it is patriarchally dominated, and they fail to acknowledge women. What only remains in the institutional memory of this community is that 'RCZ fought for this land to build their church', leaving out any explicit mention of the women pioneers.

During the church construction, most of the economically active groups (males) were busy in towns and business centres doing their business, while the old women (senators) carried water with buckets for the builders, and others were busy preparing food. Surely, their contribution needs to be acknowledged despite of the fact that they are women.

*Sungano yeMadzimai* created a sub-group within its main *Sungano* [League] for Widows and Single mothers and named it WISMO (Widow and Single mothers). This group was created to accommodate widows and single mothers in the church. *Sungano yeMadzimai* managed to create some activities that generated money for the WISMO to manage. Currently at the main church in Zvishavane RCZ, there is a canteen which benefits Wismo. From the profits of the canteen, WISMO give a small percentage to the church for the central box and another percentage is used each school term to pay fees for three orphans at Mandava High School. All this is amazing work done by women in the RCZ which deserves to be appreciated and acknowledged in the same way that men are.

Moreover, RCZ women agreed to donate food and clothes to the local old people's home, Jiros-Jiri in Zvishavane. During their mid-week service (*china chamadzimai*), they do fundraising activities and pledges to raise money for old people and the needy. On a monthly basis they send either clothes or food to Jiros-Jiri. This is what the prophetic church is supposed to do, and women are at the forefront carrying out *missio Dei* [mission of God]. In other words, women of RCZ exalt God's name each day through their works, but receive hardly any recognition.

## Women and pandemics

The presence of women in the community and, most specifically, in the church has helped our nation in Zimbabwe and even in the entire world to be safe and provide great healthcare in times of pandemics. The emergence of HIV in Zimbabwe caused a lot of challenges within the communities. For a long time, most people associated it with witchcraft and/or other misfortunes caused by God or the ancestors. As a result, the sick were regarded as outcasts in the communities and were therefore

neglected to the extent that they lacked love, care and support. However, there was hope when the women from the faith community sacrificed themselves and offered to take care of the sick despite all the social marginalisation from the society. This was due to women's caring nature, as well as teachings from the church. In other words, the presence of women of faith in Zvishavane saved the community. Their efforts should not go unnoticed but should be greatly recognised and appreciated. However, because of the patriarchal orientation of the community according to which women are looked down upon and their efforts neither valued or appreciation, their contribution and sacrifice were hardly given attention.

Women were exposed to great risk because of a lack of knowledge and expertise, as well as a lack of proper protective clothing. As a result, several of them were affected by the then deadly disease. It can be noted that the great sacrifice was more pronounced in women than men. Quite a few of the male population sacrifice their lives but, owing to patriarchy, their contribution received greater attention in the church when compared to the huge efforts of their female counterparts.

To contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, in March 2020, the government of Zimbabwe declared a total lockdown except for a few sectors which provided essential services. On 11 January 2021, the government announced a ban of traditional funeral rites as a way to control people's movement and association (Xinhua 2021). The lockdown rendered most people in the informal sector unemployed. Apparently, the informal sector employs more people than the formal sector because of the high unemployment rate in the country. Women were then faced with another task of taking care of all the unemployed men and children who did not go to school because of the lockdown. This increased the responsibility of women who were already burdened with domestic chores. They also became teachers at home, facilitating the new method of online school lessons. To add to that, married women were still expected to meet their conjugal responsibilities. On the other hand, many women were also still expected to go to work as most of the healthcare jobs are occupied by women. These were declared essential services which meant that again more women were exposed to contracting the disease. These are the same women who are active members of the faith community – the church.

In 2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic was at its peak and wreaking havoc in Zimbabwe, RCZ women of faith were again at the forefront in fighting against the deadly pandemic through taking care of the sick and affected. It is a fact that, in Zimbabwe, a greater percentage of healthcare providers are women. Nursing is generally regarded as a women's job because of their caring nature. This further exposed many women to the risk of contracting COVID-19. However, despite their immense contribution, the decline in the number of people affected by the disease was attributed

to vaccination, sanitisation and the use of protective clothing. No credit was given to the sacrifice of caregivers particularly women.

When COVID-19 restrictions were relaxed and the churches allowed only a few members at a time, women of faith were again at the forefront sanitising congregants and offering social services within the church; thus, exposing themselves again to health risks which were life threatening, but they did it with love and dedication. Again, hardly did their love and sacrifice receive any attention.

## Other contributions to the church by women of faith

It was the same women taking essential duties at work, carrying out home responsibilities who were now taking on church responsibilities such as teaching Sunday school, catechism and preparing Holy Communion. Each Sunday, RCZ women wake up as early as possible to prepare food for the family before leaving for church. They need to be at church well before others to get the church in order. Cleaning the church, setting out chairs, taking care of windows and the bathrooms are all within women's church responsibilities. The men just appear at church roughly 10 min to 15 min before the service. From all this it is clear that women are silent heroines who commit themselves wholeheartedly. Whether men recognise it or not, they just do it. It is unfortunate that the patriarchal mindset has traditionally influenced the church to view men's achievements worthy of praise at the expense of women who actually do great work. As for women, whatever they do, is considered their predestined duty.

Teaching the Sunday school class is not an easy task for just anyone and it needs someone who has children at heart and commitment to teach children. Failure to present Sunday school lessons as the fundamental word of God destroys the sustainability of the church of tomorrow. Teaching of Sunday school, additionally, demands of the Sunday school teacher to know the word of God. This means that more time should be spent on studying Christian literature and, of course, the Bible, because catechesis in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe aims to teach about the truths of the word of God so that the child can have a basic understanding of God's ways. In previous years, the church used to give a catechism teacher a token of financial appreciation called *Shambakodzi* [clay pot]. This token of appreciation was to acknowledge that the person had offered a great contribution to the church. However, as things came to be difficult and the country experienced some kind of economic meltdown, the church ceased to pay *Shambakodzi* to catechism teachers. It appears that it was an easy decision to implement given the nature of the church council which is largely constituted of men. It was not easy for women to win the argument of retaining *Shambakodzi*, because their number in the church council is much less than that of men. It is clear enough that women play a pivotal role in the RCZ and their presence



sustains the church and helps it to remain an organised institution.

## Leveraging the condition of Reformed Church in Zimbabwe women using insights from the Shunammite woman

The foregoing discussion about women in RCZ has made it abundantly clear that patriarchy does not leave room for women to be recognised because, whatever they do, is considered as fulfilling their obligations and calling. This traditional assertion is oppressive and retrogressive as it makes women less important members of society and reduces them to objects of oppression deserving no appreciation or recognition.

Picking from what the woman of Shunem did, we saw that, in the first place, she managed to challenge the long-standing patriarchal oppressive structure whereby, customarily, only men could invite, welcome and entertain strangers. Her bold move to show hospitality to the man of God highlighted her proactive exercise of agency when there was a need, independent of men, and her action clearly spelt that being a childless woman does not mean being a useless woman in the community. She went further to challenge a system whereby men were mostly the initiators of key family decisions and having the final word when she initiated the construction of an upper house for the man of God.

Her initial response that she was content and satisfied with her present state of life among friends and kindred when Elisha offered her a boy child challenged the oppressive norms of her community which valued a boy child more than anything else. This was the environment in which this Shunammite woman lived, but she never allowed the community to put pressure on her and was prepared to withstand the veiled, though reviling accusation about her not having a boy child. By doing so, she implicitly challenged a long-standing teaching that a woman should always be under man's control and protection, thus making a woman a man's property. Unlike the husband, she sacrificed herself when the child got sick, spending the whole day with the child on her lap. While the man of God had successfully managed to avoid talking to her directly from the start, she was bold enough to accomplish the impossible when she sought an audience with him following the death of the child. Through tenacity and insistence, she managed to change the attitude and approach of Elisha.

Taking the Shunammite woman's example, women of faith in RCZ also need to develop a strong inner conviction to pursue natural justice with regard to the appreciation of their efforts in the church. Women will undeniably face some sort of resistance from men to accept change; even resistance among fellow women and the entire society. In their journey,

tenacity should thus be a launching pad to keep them moving on towards the purpose until they achieve the intended results. In the case of women, tenacity is the supreme effort of a woman refusing to accept that her efforts and her heroism can be suppressed by someone, structure or a system (Dweck Walton & Cohen 2014). The women of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe must continue to persevere until justice prevails among men and women in the church and even in the society.

Just as RCZ women of faith may be empowered by emulating the tenacity of the woman of Shunem, they can also identify with her self-renunciation. They thus may find solace in realising that their self-renunciation and sacrifices when faced with pandemics is actually biblical. Before the advent of anti-retroviral drugs, most women sacrificed themselves to work as home-based health care providers to their family members. In addition, they sacrificed their time to become teachers for their children at home from 2020 until early 2022 when lockdown was introduced to curb the spread of COVID-19. Some women ended up getting infected by the virus due to lack of protective clothing and because of their caring hearts. Women gave up their motherhood privileges to save lives during pandemics as Jesus did, thus renunciate themselves.

As a result of their lower number in the church council, women's voices are often shoved aside in higher decision-making at meetings. They need not lose hope, but should rather follow the example of the Shunammite woman whose tenacity and insistence managed to change even the attitude and approach of Elisha. With tenacity, RCZ women could overturn the patriarchal system in the church that has treated them as guests in their own house. The church itself needs to realise that it cannot experience growth without women participating as full active members. The African way of life of Ubuntu or Unhu or communality, as observed by Munikwa (2011), should be central to RCZ's way of life so that all members can experience transformation. This resonates with Kritzinger's argument (2002) that the communal perspective of life must be treasured and affirmed as the only basis on which constructive human relationships can be built in Christian faith.

## Conclusion

The above discussion has managed to bring to light how women have remained in the shadows despite them being the central cog around which human families and church life revolves. The discussion regarded RCZ women who are on the forefront carrying out *missio Dei*, lifting God's name each day through their works and yet hardly receiving any recognition. This was investigated against the backdrop of the woman of Shunem whose hospitality and agency resulted in the success of Elisha's ministry and yet was also denied a voice and appreciation by the biblical author. It is our argument that women should be celebrated for being able to 'self-renunciate' for the sake of the church and community at

large and that the Shunammite woman's tenacity can be used as a leverage to influence most women still caught up in the web of patriarchy in the contemporary world. Tenacity should be the launching pad to keep them moving on towards the purpose until they achieve the intended results.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

Both authors are equally responsible for the conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, coming up with the original draft, funding acquisition, formal analysis, review and editing of this article.

### Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

### Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article, as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

## References

- Ackerman, S., 2016, 'Women in ancient Israel and the Hebrew Bible', in *Oxford research encyclopedia of religion*, viewed 31 January 2022, from <http://religion.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-45>.
- Ademiluka, S.O., 2018, 'Patriarchy and women abuse: Perspectives from ancient Israel and Africa', *Old Testament Essays* 31(2), 339–362. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2018/v31n2a5>
- Davidson, R.M., 2007, *Flame of Yahweh: A theology of sexuality in the Old Testament*, Hendrickson, Peabody, MA.
- Dweck, C.S., Walton, G.M. & Cohen, G.L., 2014, *Academic tenacity: Mindsets and skills that promote long-term learning*, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Washington.
- Halton, C. & Svard, S., 2018, *Women's Writing of Ancient Mesopotamia: An anthology of earliest female authors*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Jackson, D., 2021, 'Faithful female financiers: A womanist way of leading change through financial means', *Review & Expositor* 118(3), 267–279. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00346373211073128>
- Kritzinger, J.N., 2002, 'A question of mission: A mission of questions', *Missionalia* 30(1), 144–173.
- Kuklick, B., 2018, *Puritans in Babylon: The Ancient Near East and American intellectual life, 1880–1930*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Lemche, N.P., 2014, "'Hebrew" as a national name for Israel 1979', in *Biblical studies and the failure of history*, pp. 77–94, Routledge, Copenhagen.
- Marsman, H.J., 2021, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their social and religious position in the context of the Ancient Near East*, Brill, Leiden.
- McCane, B.R., 2003, *Roll back the stone: Death and burial in the world of Jesus*, Trinity Press International, London.
- Mujere, J., 2013, *African intermediaries: African evangelists, the Dutch Reformed Church, and the evangelization of the Southern Shona in the late 19th century*, *Unisa Institutional Repository*, viewed 30 December 2022, from <https://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/13132>.
- Munikwa, C., 2011, 'The Binga outreach: The contextualisation of mission in the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe', doctoral dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch.
- Mwandayi, C., 2022, 'Implications of the imago Dei (Gn 1:26) on gender equality and agrarian land reform in Zimbabwe', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(2), a7688. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i2.7688>
- Runyowa, W., Rutoro, R., Erasmus, J.C. & Hendriks, H.J., 2001, 'Resource development and women in leadership positions in the RCZ', *Missionalia* 29 (3), 520–536.
- Rutoro, R., 2007, 'Lay leadership development in RCZ', dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Theology, Stellenbosch University.
- Snell, D.C., 2001, *Flight and freedom in the Ancient Near East*, vol. 8, Brill, Leiden.
- Studies in the Life of Elisha*, 2023, Bible.org, viewed 02 January 2023, from <https://bible.org/series/studies-life-elisha>.
- Van De Mierop, M., 2015, *Philosophy before the Greeks: The pursuit of truth in Ancient Babylonia*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Wyatt, S.M., 2019, 'Chapter nine, rupturing hermeneutics: A post-Shoah reading of the Shunammite woman's grief', in D.D. Hopkins, & M.S. Koppel (eds), *Bridging the divide between Bible and practical theology*, pp. 124–136, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle.
- Xinhua, 2021, *Zimbabwe orders localized burials to curb Covid-19*, Xinhuanet, viewed 27 December 2022, from [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-01/11/c\\_139658958.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-01/11/c_139658958.htm).