

# A Theological Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 and its Implications for HIV/AIDS as a Gendered Epidemic in Zimbabwe<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*This article is an analysis of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 and its implication for HIV/AIDS as a gendered epidemic in Zimbabwe. The aim of this study is to examine the role of this text in perpetuating attitudes that precipitate susceptibility of women to HIV/AIDS infection. It employs a desk research method and African feminist framework as lenses to examine the text for its applicability in the African context. The study comes to three conclusions. First, if the behaviour prescribed for women in the text under examination is applied in today's context, it exposes women to HIV infections. Second, the Bible and some of the Zimbabwean cultures collude in the subjugation and manipulation of women. Third, there is a need to liberate both the biblical text and the receiving culture in an effort to protect women from vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections, including susceptibility to HIV infection. The article concludes by asserting that, though 1 Timothy 2:11–15 is often categorised as a “text of terror”, it can be an asset in curbing HIV/AIDS in men as well as women if it is read and interpreted in a liberating way – a gender-sensitive and HIV/AIDS-aware reading and interpretation.*

**Keywords:** Emancipation; Gendered Epidemic; Gender-sensitive; HIV/AIDS Pandemic; Vulnerability

## Introduction

Researchers like Dube & Kanyoro 2004, Chitando 2008, Igo 2009 and others acknowledge that the Bible has the potential to make women vulnerable, also sexually, thereby making them vulnerable to HIV/AIDS infection. On the other hand, the same Bible can be an asset for the emancipation of women. Therefore, it is important to read the Bible from the perspective that God is a God of life not death, as is made clear in Okure's (2000:194–124) article entitled: First was life and not the Book, in which she says that “any explanation that does not uphold life in its abundance is questionable and should be declared not authentic”. African women theologians like Masenya (2004) furthermore argue that the biblical text can be redeemed either through re-interpretation

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the information used to compile this article is derived from Annamore Zimunya née Chikukwa's master's thesis: 2012. *An analysis of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 and its implication on HIV/AIDS as a gendered epidemic in Zimbabwe*. Unpublished MTh thesis, University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe.

or using a gender-sensitive approach as in Masenya's (2004:6) re-reading of Proverbs 31:10–31 offering a model of *bosadi* (womanhood) for a South African context. This method, according to Nkabala (2013:393), is based on an African woman's emancipation in studying the Bible and takes into consideration the African-ness of an African indigenous woman and her qualities. The hermeneutics of Masenya is an attempt by an African woman to describe and reposition herself and her colleagues, empowering them to call themselves by their individual names and articulate what they want to express in biblical explanation using their own voices (Nkabala 2013:393). Dube and Kanyoro (2004:3–4), for example, provide a re-interpretation of Luke 18:1–8, discussing how New Testament readers can place themselves in the biblical accounts looking for healing and justice for everyone.

In the face of HIV pandemic, the work by Talitha Cum (on women hermeneutics), is useful. It engages the use of ideological analysis, race, gender, and class at the centre of re-interpretation of the Bible (Nkabala 2013:394). Njoroge aims to expose what is already tarnished in the texts so as to liberate the Bible from misinterpretation and find ways that lead to responsible healing, wholeness, and creativity (see Holter 2010:207–208). Dube and Kanyoro (2004) extend their emphasis to HIV/AIDS, which they regard as a disease brought about by social injustice, appealing to the world to address this.

We argue that, for 1 Timothy 2:11–15 to be redeemable in the devastating situation of HIV/AIDS, there is a need to find new ways of interpreting the biblical texts to promote life and not death. We, therefore, present a hermeneutical approach of interpreting 1 Timothy 2:11–15: a gender-sensitive reading and interpretation of the text that promotes life in the setting of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

When analysing the text under investigation, it presents a domestic message which exposes women to oppression, thereby making them vulnerable in the era of HIV/AIDS. 1 Timothy 2:11–15 supports what already exists in the African culture where the life of an African woman is that of total submission to their husbands. Denis (2003:75) confirms that "HIV/AIDS is a gender issue". This has been proven statistically. Being married increases the risk of being infected with HIV for any African woman in sub-Saharan Africa (Phiri 2010:425). As an African woman scholar, she also notes that the Bible as it is handed to us, is not gender-sensitive. A simplistic way of reading the Bible can lead to death; we need to engage liberating ways of reading the text that promote life in the light of this epidemic (Dube and Kanyoro 2004:3–24). In their advocacy for the full humanity of all women and the dignity of the whole creation, Dube and Kanyoro (2004:204) look at three areas of interpretation of the Bible and relate them to the HIV/AIDS pandemic: First, addressing texts of terror as well as their cultural contexts; second, focusing on texts about women and healing that counteract the damaging portrayal of women in the Bible which supports certain cultures; and lastly, emphasising the liberating aspects of a text that reveal God's love (Dube and Kanyoro 2004:204).

As mentioned above, 1 Timothy 2:11–15 reinforces gender inequality in receiving cultures, therefore, both need to liberate. This article explores the impact of this text on women and girls in the face of HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe. It starts by discussing the methodology of the article and the exegesis of 1 Timothy 2:11–15, followed by examining the implications of re-reading the text and suggesting ways of interpreting the text that will not expose women and girls to HIV infection.

## **Methodology and theoretical framework**

This study employed a qualitative research methodology of re-examining existing data through a desk research analysis method. According to Creswell (2009), a desk study involves gathering data without fieldwork. The use of available information presents a viable option for researchers with inadequate resources and time for field work. A desk research analysis is a practical method that employs similar essential research ideology to studies using primary data. Though secondary data enquiry is defined as a logical research method, not many frameworks are available to direct researchers as they carry out desk research data analysis (Andrews et. al 2012:13; Smith et. al 2011:920). Information used in this study was gathered from published Bible commentary books, journals, the internet, and articles.

An African feminist perspective is of major interest in this research as the study focuses on African women. According to Goredema (2010:35), African feminism is a feminist epistemology and a form of rhetoric that has provided arguments which validate the experience of women of Africa and of African origin as opposed to mainstream feminist discourse. It aims to create a discernible difference between women who were colonised and those who were deemed the colonisers, and a social movement that strives to raise a global consciousness which sympathises with African women's histories, present realities, and future expectations. This branch emerged from the weaknesses of European feminism as African women continue to experience oppression from white counterparts.

This theoretical framework is vital in this research since the text under investigation addresses issues of women in Africa. There is a need to interpret the text from (African) women's point of view in the light of their vulnerability to HIV and AIDS.

## **An exegesis of 1 Timothy 2:11–15**

An exegesis will be undertaken to establish what 1 Timothy 2:11–15 meant to the original readers with regard to the behaviour prescribed for women. The aim is to see whether the text was gender-sensitive or became an unholy alliance with the Greco-Roman culture in buttressing the subjugation of women by men.

**1 Timothy 2:11–12:** After dealing with the physical appearance of women in the previous verses, in vv. 11–15, the author goes on to deal with the behaviour of women. In the first two verses, the author states that women must learn in silence and with all submission. It seems unclear whether at the time these instructions referred solely to religious gatherings or were to be applied to life in general. Scholars are divided on this matter. Dunn (2000:801), for example, argues that the command is precise and concentrates on the gathering for worship. On the other hand, scholars like Dibelius and Conzelmann (1975:246) believe that the instructions refer to both religious life and to life in general. These scholars contend that these regulations were doubtlessly intended for the worship service, but originally it also referred to the behaviour of women in general. They base their argument on the stories related by the author to justify the behaviour of women (the creation story and the fall of humanity in Genesis 2 and 3). The stories in Genesis 2 and 3 refer to the place of women in creation as well as their behaviour in life in general and not specifically to their behaviour during worship

services. If Dibelius and Conzelmann's (1975:246) position is correct, it follows that the author of the text was influenced by the social and cultural background of his time.

Dunn notes that:

The life of a Greek woman was that of confinement and submission. In the Roman-Greco world, the public sphere belonged to men while the private sphere was for women. In the primeval family order, the paterfamilias of the household, the male head, possessed all power and authority and this was reckoned to be fundamental for the benefit of the family itself, the basic unity of city and state. (Dunn 2000:801)

As the church was planted at a time when these societal values applied and the first Christians met in private homes, it is likely that confusion arose on whether to follow the norms of behaviour of the household or of the church. Dibelius and Conzelmann point out that:

Women were granted the right and freedom to exercise their gifts in the early church, hence, there was a clash between the teachings of the church and the societal household codes with regards to the status and role of women. As the church was granting women freedom to exercise their rights, this practice was believed to be rebellious to the good order of the family and the authority of the male head. The church was then regarded as a deviant; hence, the solution was to adapt the church order to that of the Greco-Roman household since the church was expected to uphold the fundamental values of the Roman society. (Dibelius and Conzelmann 1975:48)

Dibelius and Conzelmann (1975:250) further postulate that in these instructions for women, rules for the worship service and injunctions for daily life seem to stand side by side. The statement "I suffer not a woman to teach or to usurp authority over the man" (1 Tim. 2:12) reveals that there were women who were exercising teaching and prophetic roles. A closer look at 1 Corinthians 11:5 shows that women were assumed to have the right to pray aloud at Christian worship. The right and freedom granted to women during the apostolic age was restricted. Newson and Ringe (1992:354) note that the command that women should be silent in church came just as women were acting on par with men in the church. This implies that the author of 1 Timothy was not Paul since the writer countered other traditions about Paul. It is important to note that women were given freedom to participate publicly in the Pauline churches.

It can be observed that 1 Timothy 2:11–15 which restricts women from participating in the public sphere is close in language and sentiment to 1 Corinthians 14:33b–35, which is considered to be unauthentic Pauline material. It is highly probable that these texts emerged from the same circle, hence this section in 1 Corinthians can be treated as an interpolation (Newson and Ringe 1992:354). A possible reason for this interpolation is that the author of 1 Timothy might have been forced by the context of his day to restrict the freedom of women, which was contrary to the Pauline position. So, the writer interpolated similar instructions into already widespread genuine Pauline epistles to lend authority to his words in 1 Timothy (Newson and Ringe 1992:354).

**1 Timothy 2:13–14:** In his prescriptions regarding the status and role of women, the writer uses the creation story to justify the place of women. It is notable that the writer deliberately chose the second creation story (Gen. 2:4bff) where Adam was created first and then Eve – driving home the point that Adam was superior while Eve was inferior. Two major points are implied in this creation story: First, the male has priority because Adam was created first; and second, since a female (Eve) was deceived, women are more likely to be led astray and so they should not be teachers. With this interpretation of the creation story the writer manages to justify the supremacy of men as God-ordained. Moreover, the author justifies his stance that women must learn in silence (Gealy 1955:103). Gealy summarises the author's line of thinking:

Since the woman (Eve including her daughters) was deceived and became a transgressor, she is permanently disqualified as a public teacher and must be given no authority over men. The writer swore that women shall by no means lead in prayer and teach or in any way be put in a position of authority over men in the church. (Gealy 1955:104)

This way of interpreting the scriptures is patriarchal. For instance, Oduyoye (2004) compares a number of texts originating in the African setting with Old Testament texts. This exercise aided her in framing related characters from the African setting, making the scriptures alive and accessible to women in Africa. Deliberating the place of a woman, which is in most circumstances described in terms of an attachment to a man, Nkabala (2013:392) references Genesis 1:27 which says that both male and female were created in the image of God. Oduyoye's argument from this text is that male and female are equal, and no man holds sway over destiny for any woman. She further mentions African legendary creation stories to prove that creation is a shared ideal in which people appear on earth as pairs (Oduyoye 2004:13). Nasimiyu (1992:101–118) alludes to Genesis 2:18 in confirmation of monogamous marriage. She utilises this text which shows God making one partner for Adam, pointing out that monogamous marriage appears in the Old Testament as God's first and last will for humanity. She further cites this Genesis story in relation to many African human origin creation stories that echo the same sentiments that God created one man and one woman to fashion human life on earth. Since the writer of Timothy aimed to make the church conform with the already existing household order, he needed to use the second creation story which supports the paterfamilias system. In his comments on this issue, Wilds (1997:893) stresses that the injunctions reflect the misogyny presented in 1 Timothy 2:11–14.

Furthermore, the author highlights in v. 14 that it was Eve who was deceived and not Adam. Dunn (2000:89) points out that the author not only argues from the position of the prior creation of Adam (Gen. 2:7, 21–23), as in the more openminded 1 Corinthians 11:3, and goes on to choose the Genesis narrative of Eve's first deceit in Genesis 3:1–6, also as in Corinthians, but goes on to deny that Adam was also deceived and places the responsibility exclusively on women. This opposes Paul's previous narrative of Adam's transgression (Rom. 5:15–19, cf. Rom. 7:11). Paul prefers to assign blame to Adam since he was a type of Christ. It is observed that the theology of the author appears to be twisting his words in an attempt to be in harmony with the social customs regardless of

the biblical texts mentioned and Paul's use thereof. It is in such theology that we notice the social background of the text at play (Dunn 2000).

**1 Timothy 2:15:** In this verse, the author presents a new meaning of salvation – women are saved through child-bearing. First and foremost, it should be noted that this doctrine of Soteriology is contrary to Paul's understanding; based on this, again Pauline authorship is disputed. What kind of salvation is to be brought by child-bearing? It has been argued that the passage about women's salvation probably relates to physical preservation and peace of mind through the ordeal of childbirth rather than salvation in the usual soteriological sense (Harrison 1971:361).

It can be deduced from the analysis that the author of 1 Timothy was influenced by the social and religious context in which this text was written. The church order of this letter was clearly regulated by the attitudes applied in family codes where the male head of the family (the *paterfamilias*) wielded all the authority and power. The place of women at the time can be summarised as follows: women should be learners, they should observe silence and be submissive. It is also important to note that the writer was upholding the patriarchal interpretation of the creation story (Gen. 2:4 ff.). Hence, feminist scholars like Oduyoye (2004) call for a hermeneutics of suspicion and theological analysis (Harrison 1971). It is important to ask what implications this text has for a woman who is infected and affected by the HIV pandemic.

### **The implication and reconstruction of the text**

The above discourse indicates that four issues are raised in the text which require investigation in terms of the implications and reconstruction. According to the text women:

- a) Should be learners
- b) Should observe silence
- c) Should be submissive
- d) Are saved by child-bearing

**Women should be learners:** As this principle is applied in a life setup, it implies that women must be taught, which in turn implies that they are ignorant, they do not know anything. They are empty vessels that need to be filled, and this applies to all aspects of human life. It also suggests that men know everything, and they are the teachers in all ways. If so, the learner (women) cannot correct or question the teacher (men) in any respect. Therefore, men regard themselves as experts, even in sexual matters (the major form of HIV transmission), and women are regarded as the fertile ground where men sow their seed without the ground questioning how, why, and what type of seed is planted. The soil cannot question the farmer. The woman, being a learner, is expected to do whatever is instructed by the husband, which can include death-dealing practices that expose her to HIV infection. Men often think that they know everything. Women argue that men and boys do not know everything. But both men and women should be learners, both are ignorant, particularly in this context of HIV/AIDS. Men should learn that women may not be forced into sex, and how to prevent themselves being infected and infecting others, protecting their families from HIV infections, and to acknowledge valued advice from spouses. Statistics reveal that the number of orphans due to this pandemic is on the increase; therefore, infected men should learn how to prevent

infecting their wives also for the benefit of the children. Men should also be equipped on how to treat their wives with dignity, and to respect their sexual desires on an equal basis.

When this issue of being learners is interpreted and applied in patriarchal and simplistic ways, it leads to making women vulnerable. But when interpreted and applied in other ways it can equip and empower them in their fight against HIV/AIDS and in protecting their families from behaviours that expose them to HIV infection. The conclusion is that women should have a zeal for knowledge with a view to empowering themselves and placing them at the centre and not on the periphery of society.

**Women should observe in silence:** 1 Timothy 2:11–15 teaches that women should observe in silence, and this applies to both religious gatherings and life in general as elaborated earlier. This makes women vulnerable; they are expected to maintain silence even if things are going wrong. For instance, women may be aware that their spouse is not faithful; however, they cannot negotiate or question the behaviour of their spouses. Similarly, women who are being sexually abused by their partners, are expected to remain silent, thereby condemning themselves to deadly practices. Moreover, most of the advice that an African woman gets from the community and the church is to be patient and silent. All that a wife is told is “*imba ndizvo zvainoita, chakafukidza dzimba matenga*” (that is what marriage is all about, and it’s happening in all these houses, only you cannot see it). This has resulted in women dying in silence due to HIV infections.

Women in different denominations must learn ways and means of liberating themselves from male dominance, which is pervasive in both the social and religious life of women. They are also encouraged to learn how to subvert each and every teaching and practice that condone the patriarchal dominance which led to making women so vulnerable. They should learn how to contextualise those texts regarded as texts of terror in such a way that they give life to women in the light of HIV/AIDS. Women should also learn how they can prevent themselves and their families from being infected with HIV. For instance, some women do not know that there are female condoms which they can use correctly in the event that their partners refuse to use male condoms. Women must also learn ways of letting their partners know the benefits of HIV testing and prevention. Statistics show that the majority of men refuse to go for voluntary counselling and testing unless they know how it will benefit them (Chitando and Chirongoma 2012:3). It is, therefore, necessary for women to be well equipped with knowledge about the benefits of using preventative methods; they should in turn be able to convince their partners. Women should realise that they have the power to convince their partners. In this regard, there are examples of biblical women who successfully convinced their partners to embrace their way of thinking (Delilah in Judges 16 and Jezebel in 1 Kings 21). If Delilah and Jezebel managed to do so, why should the women of today who are hard hit by the epidemic, not succeed in bringing their men to their way of thinking as well?

**Women should be submissive:** 1 Timothy 2:11–15 as one of the “texts of terror” (Trible 1984) reinforces the already existing African culture that women must be submissive to their partners. It can be interpreted literally without considering whether the context of women today is the same as that which the passage was meant to address. Seen like this, this message implies that men have total control over women as well as their bodies, even in sexual matters. Such submissiveness makes women vulnerable to HIV infections since they do not have any say or control over sexual matters. This has

led to the notion that men are sexual predators. They are the ones who decide when, how, and with who they have sex. It is evident that most married women who have HIV, were infected by their husbands who either have secondary wives or other sex partners (Shorter and Onyacha 2004:116). Even if a man is HIV positive, the woman has no position to negotiate for safer sex. This has added more women to the “grave train” of HIV/AIDS. In an effort to extract life from this text of terror which exposes women to the epidemic, the issue of submission should be applicable solely to a stable and faithful relationship. In this deadly pandemic, we urge women to rather be *subversive* to any teachings and practices that expose them to HIV/AIDS. It is in such a situation where textual contextualisation is applicable and should be adhered to. It is worthwhile noting that HIV/AIDS was not prevalent when 1 Timothy was written; we believe that the text was applicable to the historical context at the time. But we have a different context today, in which HIV/AIDS is a major threat. Though 1 Timothy 2:11–15 was written in a certain historical context, it remains important to analyse its meaning and impact for the present-day reader.

**Women are saved by child-bearing:** The patriarchal and the simplistic way of interpreting this text maintains that the dignity of women is enhanced by giving birth. The creation story used by the author of 1 Timothy justifies the secondary position of women. As previously discussed, the author of 1 Timothy chose the second creation story to justify the place of women. We urge Bible interpreters to acknowledge that there are two creation stories and they should be accorded equal treatment.

The value of child-bearing is significant in the African culture, as noted by Oduyoye (2004, 1995). As a result, women are expected to bear children no matter what their circumstances. In this age of the HIV pandemic, child-bearing calls for serious health awareness. Before getting pregnant, it is vital to ascertain whether the woman is safe, the partner is safe, and a child will be safe. The major challenge in this regard is men’s reluctance to undergo HIV testing. Child-bearing in this context of HIV/AIDS makes voluntary testing and counselling imperative, even more importantly, to prevent mother to child transmission. In an effort to maintain a liberating way of reading the scripture which gives life to women, child-bearing has to be accompanied by the above health/medical precautions.

## Conclusion

Reading and interpreting the Bible, particularly texts like the one discussed in this article, through a patriarchal and simplistic lens, exposes women to HIV infection. Therefore, there is a need to liberate the way in which we approach the Bible, with particular focus on those sections regarded as texts of terror. Christianity and the African culture are seen as combining forces in reinforcing values, practices, and teachings that oppress women. On a sad note, churches have not always tried to understand and respond to these vulnerabilities of women and even sometimes participated in patriarchal causes. We, therefore, in the context of HIV/AIDS, propose that the Bible must be read through a gender-sensitive lens that promotes life and not death.

In conclusion, the study notes that the behaviour prescribed for women in the text under examination, if applied literally in the Zimbabwean context and other African nations today, will expose women to HIV infections. Furthermore, the Bible, when read like this, works hand in glove with some Zimbabwean cultures in the suppression and

manipulation of women. We need to liberate both the biblical text and the receiving cultures in an effort to protect women from vulnerability, also to sexually transmitted infections, including susceptibility to HIV infection. The article concludes by asserting that, though 1 Timothy 2:11–15 is often categorised as a text of terror, it can be an essential asset in curbing HIV/AIDS infection in men as well as women if it is read and interpreted in a liberating way, that is a gender-sensitive and HIV/AIDS-aware re-reading and interpretation of some biblical texts.

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