

A Theological Reflection on Inequality and Marginalization in Africa: A Call to Ubuntu and Diakonia

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Abstract

Inequality and marginalization remain pervasive challenges across Africa, with Malawi exemplifying the structural and gendered dimensions of this crisis. Despite the rhetorical appeal of communal values like Ubuntu and the active presence of Christian communities practising diakonia, faith-based responses often default to charitable relief rather than transformative engagement with systemic injustice. This article addresses a critical gap in African theological scholarship: the absence of an integrated framework that synthesizes indigenous ethical resources with liberative Christian praxis to confront gendered economic marginalization. Drawing on qualitative interviews with seven women in Mzimba District, Malawi, the study employs reflexive thematic analysis within a theoretical framework bringing African women's theology into dialogue with Ubuntu philosophy and diakonia scholarship. Three interconnected themes emerge: the gendered burden of economic survival, wherein women's lack of financial contribution nullifies their decision-making authority; the paradox of women's centrality yet marginalization, where those sustaining community development are excluded from resource control; and a praxis gap between the church's charitable diakonia and the community's expressed need for economic empowerment through group-based lending and skills training. The article argues that authentic Christian engagement requires a liberative Ubuntu-diakonia model that moves beyond palliative charity to actively dismantle patriarchal barriers and foster women's economic agency. By centring the voices of marginalized women, this study contributes to African contextual theology, Christian social ethics, and the practical reorientation of ecclesial mission toward justice-oriented transformation.

Keywords: African Theology, Diakonia, Gender Inequality, Liberation Theology, Ubuntu/Umunthu, Women's Economic Empowerment.

Introduction

Inequality and marginalization constitute one of the most pressing moral and theological challenges confronting contemporary Africa. In Malawi, these realities are starkly visible: 51.5% of the population lives below the national poverty line, with rural communities, women, and youth bearing a disproportionate burden (National Statistical Office [NSO] Malawi, 2019; Chirwa, 2022). This is not merely an economic statistic but a profound crisis of human dignity, a systemic fracture in the fabric of communal life that demands sustained theological reflection and faithful ecclesial response. Yet, despite the continent's deep religious commitments, faith-based engagement with inequality often remains at the level

of charitable relief rather than transformative action against structural injustice. This introduction establishes the theological significance of this problem, situates the inquiry within relevant scholarly conversations, identifies the specific gap this article addresses, and outlines the argument's structure.

The Empirical Context: Inequality as Multidimensional Reality

Contemporary Malawi presents a critical case study of entrenched inequality. Recent data confirms that poverty is multidimensional, marked by significant disparities in access to assets, education, healthcare, and economic opportunity (Mussa, 2017; Mtocha et al., 2024; Mariotti et al., 2018). These disparities sustain cycles of disadvantage across generations, resisting purely technical interventions. Despite development frameworks like Malawi 2063 (Government of Malawi, 2020), translating political commitments into tangible improvements for the most vulnerable remains an ongoing concern (Lwanda, 1996; Mvula & Ross, 2022).

Crucially, this poverty is deeply gendered. Women face entrenched barriers to land ownership, credit access, and formal employment, and these are systemic obstacles curtailing economic agency and reinforcing dependency (Zingwe et al., 2023). Research demonstrates that 60% of female-headed households live in poverty compared to 49% of male-headed households (National Statistical Office of Malawi, 2018), a disparity rooted in intra-household power dynamics limiting women's control over productive resources (Zingwe et al., 2023). These constraints are compounded by limited access to education and decision-making structures (Chirwa et al., 2013). The persistence of this gendered divide challenges the inclusive development ideal of leaving no one behind (Bhatia et al., 2017).

The Religious Landscape: Faith Communities as Sites of Paradox

Within this context, the role of faith communities is both foundational and paradoxical. Churches are central social infrastructures, providing spiritual guidance and critical educational and health services (Phiri, 1996). In areas with limited state capacity, these communities often constitute the primary social safety net (Chunga & Tostensen, 2020). Yet their potential to address structural causes of poverty remains incompletely realized. Theological interpretations sometimes align with societal structures that reinforce gender inequality rather than challenging them (Kanyoro, 2001; Mvula & Ross, 2022). Scriptural interpretations emphasizing wifely submission can sanctify women's exclusion from financial decisions, thereby theologizing economic disempowerment.

Compounding this is the underutilization of a profound indigenous ethical resource. The cultural philosophy of Ubuntu/Umunthu encapsulated in the axiom "I am because we are" (Mbiti, 1969, p. 141) remains a vital framework for conceptualizing justice and communal responsibility. Ubuntu posits that personhood is inextricably social: one's humanity (*umunthu*) is realized through relationship with others. This communitarian ethic prescribes mutual responsibility and an imperative to restore the dignity of every community member

(Musopole, 2021; Makepeace, 2023). Yet this framework is seldom systematically integrated into faith-based initiatives for social change.

The Theological Problem: Why Inequality Demands Christian Reflection

The persistent realities of inequality and gendered marginalization constitute not merely a socio-economic crisis but a distinctively theological problem requiring sustained Christian reflection. Three interconnected questions arise.

First, how can Christian affirmations of the *imago Dei*—that all persons bear God's image and possess inherent dignity be reconciled with systemic inequality that denies this dignity to rural women? Any social arrangement that systematically impoverishes persons based on gender constitutes a theological contradiction demanding prophetic address.

Second, what does Scripture's witness to God's concern for justice require of Christian communities in contexts of economic disparity? The prophets' denunciation of those who "trample on the poor" (Amos 2:6-7), Jesus's proclamation of good news to the poor (Luke 4:18-19), and the early church's practice of economic sharing (Acts 2:44-45) together constitute a biblical mandate that challenges spiritualized interpretations of poverty. Yet the hermeneutical task of moving from ancient texts to faithful contemporary application in Malawi remains undertheorized.

Third, how should African Christians understand structural injustice and the church's responsibility toward it? If sin is understood not merely as individual moral failure but as embedded in social systems, what liberation theologians' term structural sin (Gutiérrez, 2023)—then ecclesial mission must encompass engagement with the powers that sustain marginalization.

The Scholarly Gap and Study Purpose

While substantial scholarship addresses each dimension of this problem individually, a significant gap exists at their intersection. Empirical studies document the gendered dimensions of Malawian poverty (Mussa, 2017; Mtocha et al., 2024; Zingwe et al., 2023) but operate within economic paradigms that overlook indigenous theological resources. Philosophical works elaborate Ubuntu as a normative ideal (Musopole, 2021) but offer limited insight into its practical application within religious communities. Theological scholarship engages diakonia and social ethics (Collins, 2009; Gutiérrez, 2023) but rarely grounds this reflection in African cultural frameworks. Furthermore, while African women's theologians have critiqued the intersection of culture, religion, and patriarchy (Oduyoye, 2001; Kanyoro, 2002), their insights remain unintegrated into constructive proposals for faith-based economic empowerment in specific local contexts.

This study fills this integrative gap. It asks: How can the deliberate synthesis of Ubuntu and liberative diakonia, critically informed by African women's theology, equip Christian communities in Malawi to move from charitable assistance to transformative action against the root causes of gendered economic marginalization?

The purpose is threefold: (1) to document the lived experiences of gendered economic marginalization among women in Mzimba District; (2) to interpret these experiences

through an integrated framework bringing Ubuntu, diakonia, and African women's theology into dialogue; and (3) to articulate a constructive proposal for a liberative Ubuntu-diakhonia model guiding faith-based praxis toward sustainable transformation.

The study's scope centers the voices of seven women in one rural district, offering deep qualitative insight rather than broad generalizability. This reflects the conviction that faithful theological reflection must be grounded in attentiveness to particular, embodied experiences—a commitment shared by liberation theology's "preferential option for the poor" (Gutiérrez, 2023) and African women's theology's emphasis on lived experience as a source of theological authority (Oduyoye, 2001).

The central argument is that Christian communities in Malawi possess, in the synthesis of Ubuntu and liberative diakonia, a culturally resonant framework for confronting gendered economic marginalization. However, realizing this potential requires a hermeneutical commitment informed by African women's theology that guards against patriarchal distortions of Ubuntu and transforms charitable diakonia into empowering partnership.

Structure of the Article

The article proceeds in six sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 establishes the conceptual framework, reviewing literature on inequality in Malawi and defining Ubuntu and diakonia and the Theoretical perspective that guides the study. Section 3 describes the qualitative methodology. Section 4 presents the findings. Section 5 discusses these findings in relation to the theoretical framework. Section 6 concludes by synthesizing the argument and offering recommendations.

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Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

This section establishes the scholarly context by reviewing literature across three interconnected domains: empirical and theological scholarship on African poverty, Ubuntu/Umunthu as ethical framework, and diakonia as theological praxis. It identifies key debates, synthesizes findings, and integrates these strands into a coherent conceptual framework guiding the analysis.

The Landscape of Poverty and Inequality in Africa

The Structural and Gendered Dimensions of African Poverty

Research documents poverty across sub-Saharan Africa as structural rather than merely individual inadequacy. In Malawi, over half the population lives below the poverty line, with

rural-urban disparity resistant to policy interventions (World Bank, 2020; Chirwa, 2022). This poverty is multidimensional, encompassing limited access to education, healthcare, and productive assets (Mussa, 2017; Mtocha et al., 2024; Mariotti et al., 2018).

Crucially, this poverty is deeply gendered. Data reveals that 60% of female-headed households live in poverty compared to 49% of male-headed households (National Statistical Office of Malawi, 2018). Zingwe et al. (2023) demonstrate that intra-household power dynamics systematically limit women's control over productive resources, with direct consequences for food security. Women face entrenched barriers to land ownership, credit access, and formal employment, which are systemic obstacles perpetuating dependency (Chirwa et al., 2013; Misomali & Chirwa, 2025).

While this work provides crucial diagnosis, its prescriptions remain within economic paradigms. Du Toit (2016) critiques "theology and development" praxis for failing to engage the intersection between poverty, powerlessness, and power, resulting in programs that alleviate symptoms while leaving underlying structures intact.

Theological Engagements with African Poverty

A growing body of theological literature addresses poverty from African perspectives. Sele (2024) examines theology of development in Nigeria and Kenya, arguing that authentic Christian engagement must address systemic causes while remaining culturally attentive. Du Toit (2018) explores poverty in South Africa, emphasizing that theological response must reckon with the dignity implications of persistent inequality.

Thesnaar (2024) offers pastoral reflections on economic vulnerability, attending to the shame and diminished agency accompanying poverty. Okanlawon (2021) retrieves liberation theologies, arguing that the "preferential option for the poor" and critique of structural sin remain urgently relevant. Magezi and Tenai (2017) examine Black theology's response to poverty in Kenya, revealing both its resources for naming injustice and its constraints. Teklu (2024) provides systematic treatment, distinguishing approaches viewing poverty as violation of divine intention, occasion for compassion, or spiritualized virtue.

Identifying the Gap

This review reveals a significant gap. Empirical scholarship provides meticulous diagnosis but overlooks indigenous cultural and theological resources as transformative sites. Theological scholarship articulates powerful critiques but often remains at general principle rather than grounding analysis in community-based research centering marginalized voices.

Ubuntu/Umunthu: Philosophical Foundations and Critical Debates

Classical Formulations

Ubuntu (Nguni) or Umunthu (Chewa) constitutes a foundational African philosophical framework. Mbiti's (1969) classical formulation "I am because we are" expresses an ontological claim: personhood is constituted through relationship with others. Musopole

(2021) elaborates Umunthu theology, articulating an ethic prescribing mutual responsibility and imperative to uphold every member's dignity. Poverty, within this framework, represents communal fracture—failure in relationships sustaining human dignity. Makepeace (2023) demonstrates how Umunthu operates as lived ethical framework in contemporary Malawi.

Critical Engagements: Ubuntu's Distortions

African women theologians provide essential critique. Oduyoye (2001) argues that unexamined communitarian ideals can reinforce patriarchal hierarchies by privileging harmony defined by male authority. In distorted forms, Ubuntu becomes tool for enforcing women's subordination. Kanyoro (2001, 2002) develops "feminist cultural hermeneutics," demonstrating that appeals to "African tradition" often serve contemporary power interests. Phiri and Nadar (2012) document how religious and cultural discourses justify women's exclusion. This critique directly informs the present study.

Ubuntu in Dialogue with Christian Theology

Tutu (2009) exemplifies Ubuntu's integration with Christian theology, using it as a moral framework for South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Musopole (2021) develops Umunthu theology, interpreting Christian faith through Chewa cultural categories.

Diakonia: From Charitable Service to Liberative Praxis

Biblical and Historical Foundations

Collins (2009) demonstrates that diakonia is fundamentally commissioned service—action undertaken on behalf of another, often representing a sender's authority. This challenges reductions to charitable assistance, revealing diakonia as a practice with inherent authority. In the New Testament, diakonia encompasses table service (Acts 6:1-6), material support (Romans 15:25-31), and gospel proclamation. Jesus models the deacon (Mark 10:45), whose service culminates in giving his life.

Diakonia in Contemporary Theological Ethics

Gutiérrez (2023) articulates a vision where authentic service requires not only compassionate assistance but prophetic confrontation with unjust structures. This dual character of service is powerfully exemplified in the work of Nzayisenga (2019), who explores Dietrich Bonhoeffer's legacy to emphasize that authentic *diakonia* may bring the church into direct conflict with unjust powers, demanding hope and responsibility in times of distress. Recent scholarship further examines how contemporary faith-based organizations seek to operationalize these diaconal commitments in practice (Rickard, 2022; Daher et al., 2022)

Diakonia in African Contexts

African theological scholarship engaging themes central to liberative diakonia has emerged across several streams. Phiri (1996) examines Christianity's role in southern African development, arguing that authentic mission must address material poverty. Mvula and Ross (2022) analyze the church's prophetic role during Malawi's governance crisis, demonstrating how ecclesial diakonia extends beyond charity to advocacy and structural critique. Pembamoyo (2022) develops a "missional-theological response" insisting that authentic mission must engage concrete economic crises. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, through Oduyoye (2001) and Kanyoro (2002), articulates a vision of ministry attending holistically to women's material and spiritual wellbeing—implicitly developing a contextual African diakonia attentive to gendered poverty. African liberation theologians similarly insist that gospel proclamation entails confrontation with economic injustice. Mugambi (1995) articulates a theology of reconstruction with significant implications for diakonia, while Okanlawon (2021) affirms liberation theologies' relevance for integral development.

Recent scholarship addresses diakonia more directly within African contexts. Kyobya and Zehelein (2025) critically examine the conflation of diakonia with charity in African church practice, a concern directly relevant to the present study's findings. Dowsett and colleagues (2015) provide multi-authored exploration of evangelism and diakonia including African perspectives on holistic mission. Nissen (2023) contributes theological reflection on partnership spirituality, arguing that authentic diakonia requires mutuality between giving and receiving rather than one-directional charity, a framework resonating with participants expressed desire for partnership. Sojka (2021) examines Lutheran diakonia in relation to migrant service, demonstrating how confessional traditions can inform contextual responses to marginalization. However, systematic theological construction of an explicitly African diakonia synthesizing biblical foundations, indigenous frameworks like Ubuntu, and contextual analysis of structural injustice remains underdeveloped. This gap is what the present study addresses through its Ubuntu-diakonia proposal.

Synthesizing the Framework: Core Constructs Defined

Inequality and Marginalization

This study conceptualizes inequality as structured, systemic disparity in distribution of power, resources, and human capabilities (Sen, 2014). In Malawi, this patterning is deeply gendered. Marginalization follows Young (2014): active social process relegating groups to economic, political, and cultural fringes.

Ubuntu/Umunthu

Ubuntu/Umunthu is defined as ontological principle wherein individual humanity (*umunthu*) is constituted through relationship with others (*ubuntu*). Following Mbiti (1969), Musopole (2021), and Makepeace (2023) while incorporating African women's critique (Oduyoye, 2001; Kanyoro, 2002), Ubuntu functions as communitarian social ethic

prescribing mutual responsibility. The study employs a liberative Ubuntu hermeneutic: Ubuntu claims are evaluated by their impact on the most marginalized.

Servant Ministry (Diakonia)

Diakonia is understood as commissioned, intentional practice of attentive service oriented toward meeting needs of the suffering as faithful response to divine mandate (Collins, 2009; Gutiérrez, 2023). The framework distinguishes charitable diakonia (temporary relief without altering power dynamics) from liberative diakonia.

The Integrated Framework: Ubuntu-Diakonia

The study's distinctive contribution lies in deliberate integration into an Ubuntu-diakonia framework. Ubuntu provides the normative vision: community where all enjoy full dignity, marginalization recognized as communal fracture requiring communal healing. Diakonia provides the operative methodology: concrete practices through which this vision is pursued. The integration is mediated by a critical hermeneutic informed by African women's theology, continually interrogating both traditions for potential distortions.

Identifying the Research Gap

The literature review reveals a persistent gap at the intersection of three domains. Empirical poverty research documents structural and gendered dimensions but overlooks indigenous theological resources. Ubuntu scholarship elaborates ethical frameworks but offers limited guidance for practical application and insufficiently attends to patriarchal distortions. Diakonia scholarship develops rich theological resources but rarely grounds reflection in African cultural frameworks. African women's theology provides essential critical tools but has not been systematically integrated into constructive proposals for faith-based economic empowerment.

This study fills this integrative gap. It asks: How can the deliberate synthesis of Ubuntu and liberative diakonia, critically informed by African women's theology, equip Christian communities in Malawi to move from charitable assistance to transformative action against the root causes of gendered economic marginalization?

Theoretical Perspective: A Liberative Dialogue of Ubuntu and Diakonia

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework bringing Ubuntu, diaconal theology, and African women's theology into critical dialogue. Ubuntu provides the normative vision: its relational ontology understands personhood as constituted through community (Mbiti, 1969; Musopole, 2021). Poverty represents communal fracture, a failure in relationships sustaining human dignity.

Diakonia provides the operative methodology. Moving beyond charitable relief, liberative diakonia is understood as commissioned service that prophetically confronts unjust structures perpetuating poverty (Collins, 2009; Gutiérrez, 2023).

African women's theology supplies the critical hermeneutic mediating this dialogue. Oduyoye's (2001) feminist cultural hermeneutics and Kanyoro's (2002) framework interrogate how culture and religion can be distorted to justify women's subordination. This hermeneutic insists that appeals to Ubuntu must be evaluated by their impact on the most marginalized.

The synthesis yields an Ubuntu-diakonia framework operating at four levels: ontologically, it affirms that human flourishing requires just community; ethically, it prescribes mutual responsibility for the vulnerable; theologically, it interprets faith through Ubuntu while subjecting Ubuntu to gospel critique; practically, it guides action toward empowerment rather than charity. The framework remains accountable to lived experience, emerging from and tested by the voices of marginalized women themselves.

Data and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how theological reflection, informed by Ubuntu and diakonia, can address gendered economic marginalization in Malawi. The qualitative approach was essential for capturing the nuanced, subjective meanings participants attach to poverty, community, and faith, allowing deep exploration of lived experience (Creswell, 2014).

The research was conducted in Mzimba District, an area marked by high rural poverty. Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven women, selected via purposive sampling for their direct experience with gendered marginalization. The sample included five women in various domestic and economic roles and two female traditional leaders. Interviews were conducted in person between November 3rd and 18th, 2024, using a guide structured around themes of lived experience, community, and theology. Each 30–40-minute conversation was audio-recorded with consent, and brief observational notes were taken. Strict ethical protocols ensured confidentiality (using codes 001-007), voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw.

Data analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). After transcription, the researcher engaged in repeated reading to familiarise herself with the data. Initial codes were generated inductively, then collated and reviewed to identify patterns and develop themes. This iterative process culminated in three core themes presented in Section 4. The analysis was guided by the theoretical frameworks of Ubuntu and diakonia, ensuring interpretation remained both grounded in participants' voices and engaged with the study's theological aims. The small sample size, while limiting generalizability, enables the deep contextual understanding this theological reflection requires.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis approach, the researcher's positionality requires acknowledgment. The researcher is a church minister, theology lecturer specializing in women's issues, and member of the Circle of Concerned Women Theologians in Malawi. This insider position, sharing cultural and gendered context with participants, facilitated trust during interviews. However, the researcher's academic and ministerial roles also created power differentials requiring ongoing reflexivity. Theological

commitments regarding women's dignity necessarily shape the interpretive lens. Reflexive practices included maintaining a reflective journal to document how assumptions influenced data collection and analysis, and peer debriefing with Circle colleagues to identify blind spots. This accountability allows readers to assess findings with awareness of the researcher's situated perspective.

Results: Lived Realities of Marginalization and Visions for Communal Transformation

This section presents findings from seven in-depth interviews with women in Mzimba District, Malawi. Through reflexive thematic analysis, three interconnected themes emerged: (1) The Gendered Burden of Economic Survival and Constrained Agency; (2) Systemic Barriers and the Paradox of Women's Central yet Marginalized Role; and (3) The Praxis Gap: Between Charitable Support and Transformative Empowerment.

The Gendered Burden of Economic Survival and Constrained Agency

Participants uniformly described a daily struggle for subsistence, characterized by precarious income sources and a direct link between economic contribution and decision-making power.

Precarious Livelihoods and Insufficient Income

Women's economic activities were described as fragmented, informal, and consistently insufficient. A mother of five engaged in casual labour explained: "I survive by doing piece works here and there... But my salary is just very little to manage my household" (Code 004). Another participant running a small trading business echoed: "I have a small business that aids my household, but the profits are never enough. Fertilizer is too expensive" (Code 002). A younger participant supporting her elderly mother described income unpredictability: "I work as a house helper... Some weeks they call me, other weeks they don't. When I don't work, we don't eat properly" (Code 007).

The agricultural context compounds these challenges. A subsistence farmer stated: "We depend on farming, but the rains are not reliable anymore. When the harvest is poor, we have nothing... The men can go to town to look for work, but we women must stay with the children" (Code 006). This reveals how gendered expectations tether women to place and household, limiting their economic mobility.

Economic Dependency and the Silencing of Women's Voices

Every interview revealed a direct link between economic contribution and decision-making power. An FBO leader articulated: "When you don't contribute financially, no one listens to you and you cannot make any decision. Even in the home, if you have not brought money, your opinion about how money should be spent does not matter" (Code 001).

A participant in a polygamous marriage described her exclusion: "I don't have any decision-making powers. My husband decides everything about money, even money I helped to

earn... He says it is his role as the head of the household" (Code 002). A widow raising children alone added: "Since my husband died, my decisions do not matter to anyone except my children. My husband's brothers think they should decide about my land... They say I am just a woman" (Code 004).

Even a traditional leader revealed constrained agency: "I can say I make decisions but with reservations since I am surrounded by men who sometimes force me to pronounce what I did not want to. When it comes to land allocation, they expect me to favor men" (Code 005). A participant summarized: "As a married person, some decisions need to consult your husband first. Even if it is about your own children, even if it is about your own body. That is how it has always been" (Code 003).

Analytical Reflection: Ubuntu Fractured

These testimonies reveal a fundamental fracture in the communal ideal of Ubuntu. The philosophy's core tenet "I am because we are" envisions mutual recognition sustaining all members (Mbiti, 1969; Musopole, 2021). Yet participants describe a conditional reality where voice is contingent on financial contribution. The invocation of "headship" to justify exclusion confirms African women theologians' critique that unexamined communitarian ideals can reinforce patriarchal hierarchies (Oduyoye, 2001; Kanyoro, 2002).

Systemic Barriers and the Paradox of Women's Central yet Marginalized Role

The second theme reveals a profound paradox: despite economic constraints, participants overwhelmingly identified women as the linchpins of community survival, yet systemic barriers preclude their economic independence and authority.

Women as the Backbone of Community

Participants spoke passionately about women's indispensable contributions. The traditional leader asserted: "Women are the backbone of our communities. We wake up first, we go to bed last. We feed the children, we care for the sick, we work in the fields... Without women, nothing would function" (Code 005). Another elaborated: "Women are the engine of community development... Men sit and talk, women work" (Code 007).

An FBO leader offered a striking formulation: "The survival of this community is in the hands of women. If women stopped working for one week, this community would collapse... But no one recognizes this" (Code 001). Participants detailed their multiple roles: primary caregivers, managers of household food security, preservers of culture, participants in informal commerce, and organizers of community events. One summarized: "A woman's work is never finished. From morning to night, from one year to the next, we are always working for others" (Code 003).

Systemic Barriers to Economic Independence

Despite this indispensable contribution, participants identified deeply embedded barriers excluding women from economic independence. A small business owner explained: "The patriarchal system is the problem. It does not appreciate any contribution from women.

Even when we earn money, it is seen as 'helping' rather than as real contribution. The system is designed to keep us dependent" (Code 002).

Cultural norms were repeatedly identified as patriarchy's mechanism. One participant stated: "Culturally, women and youths are not part of decision makers. This is embedded in our minds. Our culture is the greatest impediment that holds women from achieving economic independence" (Code 004). Participants identified specific practices: girls deprived of equal education (Code 001); early marriages truncating girls' prospects (Code 003); disproportionate household duties (Code 003); land tenure systems favoring male inheritance (Codes 004, 005); and exclusion from credit (Codes 002, 006). A younger participant described the cumulative effect: "By the time a girl is fifteen, she is already behind... The system traps us" (Code 007).

The Paradox Articulated

The traditional leader captured the paradox: "they say we are the backbone, but they do not give us the resources to stand straight. They say we are the engine, but they do not give us fuel. They depend on our work but do not respect our voices" (Code 005).

Analytical Reflection: Structural Sin

The participants' analysis confirms poverty as multidimensional and deeply gendered (Mussa, 2017; Zingwe et al., 2023). Theologically, this exemplifies what liberation theologians' term "structural sin" (Gutiérrez, 2023)—injustice embedded in the normal operation of institutions and norms. Response must therefore be structural, addressing not only hearts but also laws, norms, and resource flows.

The Praxis Gap: Between Charitable Support and Transformative Empowerment

The third theme examines participants' experiences of existing support and their visions for transformative engagement, revealing a significant disconnect between charitable diakonia currently offered and liberative diakonia participants desire.

Existing Support: Spiritual Presence, Material Absence

When asked about support from churches, participants primarily cited intangible forms. An FBO leader explained: "The church gives us moral support. They pray for us, they encourage us... That is important, but it does not put food on the table" (Code 001). Another echoed: "When I go to church, I feel better spiritually... But when I go home, the problems are still there. The children are still hungry" (Code 004).

One participant stated bluntly: "I don't receive any support. Not from the church, not from the government, not from anyone. I am alone" (Code 006). Specific church activities included visiting the sick (Code 001); feeding programs (Code 002); disaster relief (Code 004); and prayers during funerals (Code 007). One participant summarized: "The church is there when someone dies... But for the living, for the daily struggle, there is not much" (Code 003).

Visions for Transformative Empowerment

When asked to envision genuine support, participants articulated a consistent vision focused on economic empowerment and skills development. The most frequent need was access to capital: "We need soft loans. Not handouts, but loans we can pay back. If I could borrow money to buy more vegetables to sell, I could grow my business" (Code 001).

Another specified: "We need Village Bank groups. When women save together, we can lend to each other. There is trust, there is accountability. But we need training on how to run them properly" (Code 003). Skills development was equally emphasized: "We need vocational training and business mentorship. Many of us have never learned how to keep records, how to price our goods, how to plan for the future" (Code 004). Another elaborated: "We need institutions that can help women in groups... Not just giving money, but walking with us, teaching us, holding us accountable" (Code 005).

Participants emphasized collective action: "We need to organize. When women work together, we are stronger. We can support each other and advocate together" (Code 002). The traditional leader linked economic empowerment to governance: "I wish I had a salary that could be sufficient for basic needs. Without money, we compromise the decisions we make... We need economic power to exercise our authority properly" (Code 005).

Envisioning a Transformed Community

When asked to imagine authentic Ubuntu and diakonia, participants envisioned women's independence and shared resources. An FBO leader envisioned: "Women would be more independent. They would have their own income, their own businesses, their own voice" (Code 001). Another imagined: "Resources would be shared equally. Not just money, but land, education, opportunities. Girls would go to school as long as boys" (Code 004).

A younger participant envisioned: "The community would thrive. When women are empowered, children are fed, families are healthy, the whole community develops" (Code 007). Another added: "There would be peace. So many fights in families are about money. If women had their own resources, there would be less conflict" (Code 003). The traditional leader offered a vision rooted in justice: "We would discourage all injustices towards women and give equal rights... Women would own land, women would lead" (Code 001).

Analytical Reflection: The Praxis Gap

Current practice operates within a deficit model: the church positions itself as giver and the poor as receivers. Participants' visions articulate an asset model: they possess capacities needing investment, not replacement. They seek partnership, not patronage. Moving across this gap requires a fundamental reorientation, shifting from seeing the poor as objects of ministry to recognizing them as agents of their own transformation.

Summary of Findings

Three themes reveal a coherent narrative. Women experience poverty as gendered and systemic shaped by structures that depend on their labour yet deny their voice. They name patriarchal culture as "the greatest impediment" to economic independence. They describe

existing faith-based support as spiritually present but materially insufficient. And they articulate a clear vision for transformative empowerment focused on access to capital, skills development, collective action, and structural inclusion.

Discussion: Toward a Liberative Praxis of Ubuntu and Diakonia

The findings from Mzimba District present a coherent narrative of marginalization, resilience, and the quest for a more just community. This section interprets these lived realities through the integrated framework of Ubuntu/Umunthu and servant ministry (diakonia), critically mediated by African women's theology.

Interpreting the Gendered Fracture in the Communal Fabric

The first finding—that economic survival is a gendered burden linked to silencing women's voices—exposes a fundamental fracture in Ubuntu. The philosophy's core tenet, "I am because we are," envisions mutual recognition sustaining all members (Mbiti, 1969; Musopole, 2021). Yet participants described a conditional reality where voice is contingent on financial contribution. This transactional distortion reduces Ubuntu's relational depth to economic utility.

This finding validates African women theologians' critique. Oduyoye (2001) argues that unexamined communitarian ideals can reinforce patriarchal hierarchies. Kanyoro (2002) demonstrates how appeals to "culture" serve contemporary power interests. The traditional leader pressured by male peers (Code 005) illustrates this dynamic. Theologically, this challenges the church's complicity when scriptural interpretations emphasizing submission sanctify women's exclusion (Code 002).

Confronting the Paradox of Centrality and Marginalization

The second finding captures inequality's systemic nature. Participants affirmed women as "backbone" and "engine" of community development, yet this indispensable role contradicts their exclusion from resource control. The traditional leader's lament captures this: "They say we are the backbone, but they do not give us the resources to stand straight" (Code 005).

This paradox is structural, what Young (2014) terms systemic marginalization. Participants named specific mechanisms: differential education investment, early marriage, domestic burdens, land tenure favoring males, and credit exclusion. Their identification of the "patriarchal mindset" demonstrates sophisticated analysis. This aligns with scholarship on Malawi's gendered poverty (Zingwe et al., 2023; Misomali & Chirwa, 2025).

For the church, this demands diakonia that transcends compassion and embraces prophetic function. As Gutiérrez (2023) argues, true service necessitates confronting unjust structures. A church that feeds the hungry while silent about structures that keep people hungry addresses symptoms while ignoring causes.

Bridging the Praxis Gap: From Charity to Transformative Partnership

The third finding—the praxis gap, is most significant. While participants valued spiritual support, their explicit requests pointed toward a different model: "soft loans," "village bank groups," "vocational training," and institutions that "walk with us, teaching us" (Codes 001, 003, 004, 005).

This vision shifts diakonia from one-way relief to investment in partnership and agency. It resonates with research identifying savings groups as critical for women's empowerment (Rickard, 2022; Daher et al., 2022). However, participants' vision is deeply theological, the request for institutions that "walk with us" echoes discipleship as accompaniment.

Here the synergy between Ubuntu and diakonia becomes transformative. Ubuntu provides the model of collaborative groups working toward common goals. Diakonia, re-imagined as empowerment rather than alms (Collins, 2009), provides theological motivation for equipping groups with skills and capital. This yields what this study terms Ubuntu-diakonia: a culturally resonant model for faith-based action toward economic justice.

The Critical Role of African Women's Theology

African women's theology has served as the essential critical hermeneutic mediating between Ubuntu and diakonia. Its contributions are threefold.

First, it provides tools for distinguishing authentic Ubuntu from patriarchal distortions. When participants name culture as "the greatest impediment," they demand Ubuntu's authentic expression. Oduyoye's (2001) feminist cultural hermeneutics insists practices claiming cultural authority be evaluated by their impact on women's dignity.

Second, it insists on lived experience as theological authority. Participants' testimony that "my decisions do not matter to anyone except my children" (Code 004) is already theological speech, a cry of lament, a protest against injustice.

Third, it provides the criterion for evaluating any proposed response. Kanyoro's (2002) insistence that theology be accountable to women's experience means the Ubuntu-diakonia model must be tested by its impact on the most marginalized.

Implications for Theological Reflection and Ecclesial Action

The findings carry substantive implications for how the church might embody liberative Ubuntu-diakonia and three areas require particular attention.

For theological education, the study suggests that seminaries should integrate African women's theology as central to ministerial formation, equipping leaders to recognize and resist the misuse of culture and Scripture to justify women's subordination. The research further indicates that theological education must teach diakonia as inherently prophetic, requiring not only compassionate response but critical analysis of and action upon sinful structures.

For ecclesial practice, the findings imply that churches are called to shift from charitable relief toward empowerment-oriented partnership. Establishing community-owned savings associations (VSLAs) with accompanying business training represents a practical and theologically coherent form of liberative diakonia grounded in participant expressed needs.

Churches are also positioned to leverage their institutional presence to create space for women's collective organizing and to advocate for structural changes addressing land rights, financial inclusion, and educational access (Misomali & Chirwa, 2025).

For prophetic witness, the participants' testimony suggests that the church is summoned to recover its voice regarding gender justice. This includes publicly condemning patriarchal power that diminishes women's dignity and proclaiming the full witness of Scripture including Deborah's leadership, Esther's courage, Mary's song, and Paul's affirmation that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Galatians 3:28). Such proclamation, grounded in the lived experiences of marginalized women, constitutes an essential dimension of liberative diakonia.

Limitations and Future Research

This study's small sample and single-district focus limit generalizability. Future research should include action research projects implementing Ubuntu-diakonia models, comparative studies across regions, longitudinal research on empowerment initiatives, theological construction of feminist Ubuntu theology, and research on men and masculinities.

Summary

The discussion has interpreted findings through the Ubuntu-diakonia framework. The gendered fracture reveals Ubuntu's distortion under patriarchy. The paradox of centrality exposes structural injustice. The praxis gap points toward liberative Ubuntu-diakonia investing in women's agency. African women's theology provides the essential hermeneutic, insisting on accountability to lived experience.

Conclusion

This study has undertaken a theological reflection on the persistent and gendered realities of inequality and marginalization in Malawi. By centering the lived experiences of seven women in Mzimba District, the research has moved beyond abstract diagnosis to ground its analysis in the daily struggles and resilient hopes of those most affected. The findings confirm that poverty in this context is a systemic fracture, deeply intertwined with patriarchal norms that economically disempower women while simultaneously relying on their labour for community survival. The core contribution of this study lies in its deliberate integration of the African philosophy of Ubuntu/Umunthu with the Christian practice of servant ministry (diakonia), critically mediated by African women's theology. Ubuntu provides the normative vision of a community where all members enjoy full dignity and mutual recognition; diakonia provides the operative methodology of concrete practices of service, empowerment, and prophetic witness; and African women's theology provides the essential critical hermeneutic guarding against patriarchal distortions and ensuring accountability to the most marginalized. The community's own testimony makes the required synthesis clear: participants seek not alms but agency, not temporary relief but

sustainable access to capital, skills, and collaborative structures. They envision a community where women are economically independent, resources are shared equally, girls receive the same educational opportunities as boys, and women's voices are heard and respected in decision-making.

These findings suggest substantive implications for Christian communities in Malawi and analogous contexts. The research indicates that churches are called to shift from charitable diakonia toward liberative Ubuntu-diakonia by investing in community-owned economic initiatives such as Village Savings and Loan Associations that build women's collective agency and economic capacity. Theological formation, the study suggests, must integrate African women's theology as central, equipping future leaders to recognize and resist the misuse of culture and Scripture to justify women's subordination. The participants' testimony implies that the church is summoned to recover its prophetic voice regarding gender justice, leveraging its moral authority to advocate for policy changes supporting women's financial inclusion, land rights, and access to education. By faithfully integrating the deep cultural wisdom of Ubuntu with the transformative mandate of Christian service, and by subjecting both to the critical gaze of African women's theology, the church can help forge communities where the words "I am because we are" are realized for all—where women's dignity is recognized not in rhetoric but in economic agency, voice in decision-making, and capacity to contribute to the common good.

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