

**“Be fruitful and multiply” –reflecting on Genesis 1:28 in light of the proposed mandatory 8 kids per couple policy in Zimbabwe: A retro/progressive African identity issue.**

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**Abstract**

*Parliamentary debates in Zimbabwe have often been tugs of war with battle lines being drawn between the ruling party ZANU PF and opposition parties (MDC-T, MDC-N and Independent legislators). One of the rare moments, however, which has seen the house find some common ground was during a motion which was pushed by Mashonaland West Senator Mike Byton Musaka urging government to encourage Zimbabwean couples to produce a minimum of eight children so as to extricate the problem of poverty and underdevelopment. While the controversial motion received overwhelming support from male and female Senators from both Zanu PF and MDC-T, it leaves one wondering the direction we are taking as a nation in shaping our national identity. While we need to cherish our African ways of thinking, there is need to interpret Genesis 1:28 in the present context of Africans. Engaging a pragmatic reading of Genesis 1:28, this paper argues that at creation, humans received God’s blessing that empowers them to transmit life but to transmit life should be seen as involving a serious responsibility. African couples, in other words, have to consider in their given context whether they would be able to give the necessary care to their offspring before they transmit life.*

**Key Words:** poverty, underdevelopment, African couples, African identity, contextual reading, Genesis 1:28

**Introduction**

The discussion in this paper has been motivated by a debate in the Parliament of Zimbabwe during the first quarter of 2017 where Senators called for couples to produce a minimum of eight children so as to extricate the problem of poverty and underdevelopment and the response to the motion by Chief Charumbira that we need to move with time and not remain fixated in our old African ways of thinking. What is evidently missing, however, in the debate is reference to the Bible as a support to either side of the argument. Reference to the Bible is critical here given that it is widely accepted in Zimbabwe as the last ‘court of appeal.’ This is evident in the oft-asked question *Bhaibheri riri kuti chii?* (What does the Bible say?) when people are discussing contentious issues. Given that it is a central and critical manual for daily living to multitudes of people (Gunda, 2010) in Africa and in Zimbabwe in particular, I find it a worthy guide to shed light on this debate. Possibly there is no other passage in the Bible that resonates well with the current debate other than Genesis 1: 28 in which God says to our ‘first parents’ Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful and multiply.” Before I rope in the Bible to shed light on the matter, there is need to begin with a re-look at the debate, weighing the pros and cons of the either side of the debate.

**The mandatory eight kids per couple policy**

The motion to have Zimbabwe adopt a mandatory eight kids per couple is said to have been ignited by the Mashonaland West Senator Mike Byton Musaka who argued:

Concerned with difficulties to attract effective investors to Zimbabwe for sustainable profitable investment due to Zimbabwe's low population; Further concerned that most non-governmental Organisations diligently promote birth control down wards instead of encouraging family planning for prolife that is population growth; Current world trends in population are to encourage large families so as to grow market for products; Now therefore, this House resolves that the Zimbabwe Government should encourage large families as follows;

- a) Give incentives to families to have a minimum of eight children;
- b) NGOs and Organisation promoting birth control should now be requested to promote family growth.

Taking an interest in the proposed mandatory eight kids per couple policy was the Zanu PF Chegutu-Mhondoro Senator Hilda Bhobho who came to the support of Senator Musaka saying:

*In our time, we gave birth to a number of children. If our generation comes to pass, there will be no children...We are saying, those of child bearing age should bear more children, not one or two because we need these children to be in the Defence Forces.*

The Mashonaland East Senator Rosemary Goto weighed in on the matter arguing from the perspective of productivity. She averred:

*If people are few in a country it is not a nation. My husband always says a child is a goblin because when we were in the fields with the children during school holidays, we would finish work on one hectare in no time. If you have one child, it will take time for you to finish ploughing a hectare.*

Equally taking an interest in the matter was the MDC-T senator Morgen Komichi who accused Western nations of joining cohorts with the IMF and the World Bank and indoctrinated Zimbabwean women on the need to balance the number of children against the cost of living. Quoted verbatim, his argument was:

*When we de-colonised Africa and won the liberation struggle, they sat down with IMF and World Bank and they came up with human rights issues and started teaching our women and children that you do not need to have many children because of the cost of living. That is a lie.*

Looking closely at the argument being raised, there is so much one can appreciate. The motion brings to surface critical issues that we as a nation cannot afford to ignore. One critical issue, for example, raised in the motion is the need to attract effective investors to Zimbabwe for sustainable profitable investment. Surely, we cannot go anywhere as a nation if we do not have investors who come to invest with us. It is a known fact that when developed nations invest in the developing nations, it results not only in the creation of job opportunities for the poor people but also opens the nation to bigger markets around the world. A globalised world, as noted by McCubrey (2017), creates greater opportunities for firms in less industrialized countries to tap into more and larger markets around the world and allows businesses in less industrialized countries to become part of international production networks and supply chains that are the main conduits of trade.

Equally important is the clarion call by Senator Musaka and those who supported his motion for a pro-life attitude among Zimbabweans. While harsh conditions of life in Zimbabwe are justifiable excuses for people to exercise some form of birth control, people need not go to the extremes of n

ot having children at all or aborting unwanted pregnancies. That on its own is a disease that can surely destroy a nation if all people were to adopt such an attitude. Given that children are the future of tomorrow, Zimbabweans surely cannot expect non-Zimbabweans to beget for them soldiers, nurses, teachers, engineers and so many other service providing jobs. What it means is that if Zimbabweans are really serious about nation building then they have to begin today by being pro-life .

The other issue worth to appreciate in the motion is the proposal that the government should provide incentives to families with a high number of children. The provision of incentives to families is a common phenomenon in developed countries and it really shows oneness of the government with the people. Given that families are the foundation to any nation, it follows that it should be the responsibility of the government to take care of this important institution called family. Looking at Zimbabwe, there are so many couples who are doing a wonderful job by trying to bring up children for the nation but their love and effort is being curtailed by the financial constraints they are facing due to the sharp rise in unemployment in the country as well as the high cost of living. The cost of living as measured by Consumer Council of Zimbabwe shows that the monthly basket for a family of six increased from the December 2016 figure of US\$577,97 to US\$590,52 by end of January 2017, showing an increase of US\$12,55 or 2,17 percent (Staff Reporter, The Financial Gazette, 9 March 2017). Though CCZ later reported a slight decrease from the end of January figure of \$590.52 to \$585.07 by the end of February 2017, showing a decrease \$5.45 or 0,92 percent (Depute, Herald, 13 March 2017), it is an undeniable fact that prices of basic goods such as mealie-meal, meat, soap, toiletries, rice, sugar and vegetables are spiralling out of control due to a currency crisis precipitated by foreign currency shortages (Staff Reporter, The Financial Gazette, 9 March 2017). What all this translates to is that this will worsen the situation for families with a high number of children hence the justification for the call upon the government to provide incentives to such families.

While the premises upon which the motion has been built sound very well in order, it is the conclusion itself that sounds quite problematic. The demand that the Government of Zimbabwe ratify a minimum of eight children per couple policy appears easier said than practiced. It is because of this flaw in the argument that the Zimbabwe Chiefs Council President, Fortune Charumbira had to challenge female legislators who were in support of this motion to demonstrate to other women by first becoming pregnant themselves if they were really serious with their push. Chief Charumbira questioned even the spirit in which this whole issue was being proposed. He challenged fellow Senators to move with time and be abreast with what is happening around the globe when argued:

As someone who is learned and is a chief, I want to say that the idea that the bigger the population, the more the country is developed is a false phenomenon. We do not want to go out there and begin to talk about things that will make us a laughing stock as senators who are not learned. There are also some small countries like Switzerland which has a population of about 7 million, but their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is probably five times greater than that of Zimbabwe.

A fair analysis to the Zimbabwe Chiefs Council President shows that there is wisdom in what he said. It is not a guarantee that if a country has a big population the same will happen to its economy.

While it creates a big market for the products, it may turn even to be a big fight for these products if they are scarce as witnessed by 2008 long and chaotic queues for basic commodities like sugar, mealie meal and other basic needs. The basic issue I think is not about population size but rather the ability of a country to be a low cost producer. Once a country is a low cost producer it means it can be able to export its products and such products will have many takers given that they would be affordable and this would guarantee foreign currency to the nation, enabling thus a country to rejuvenate itself.

The sharp contrast between what Senator Masuku is pushing for and the need for caution raised in Chief Charumbira's argument, necessitate an appeal to the Bible as an arbitrator in this argument given that the Bible is widely accepted in Zimbabwe as providing answers to peoples' challenges and as the last 'court of appeal' (Gunda 2010). The centrality of the Bible to peoples' lives in Africa has also led John Mbiti to argue that the Bible, unlike many other books, is not a book for the literate only. It is a book whose influence does not spare the illiterate, paradoxically, the illiterate read the Bible because not only do they hear it read in Churches and schools, but more so in their own homes (Mbiti, 2005).

### **Reading Genesis 1: 28 in the context of multiple children debate**

The text, as earlier on pointed out, that probably would be of great relevance to the current debate is Genesis 1:28 where Yahweh tells our 'first parents' to "be fruitful and multiply." This text has often been used as a biblical justification for the human species to keep populating itself given its mandate to 'fill' the earth. In my appeal to the authority of the Bible I will distinguish between the semantic and the pragmatic dimension of Genesis 1:28. Semantics is the study of the meanings of words and phrases in a text and the pragmatic dimension looks at the intended effect of the text on the reader. This intended effect, as noted by Joachim Kügler, can be located in the realm of cognition, in the emotional sphere, in shaping attitudes and ethics or in stimulating direct action. The pragmatics dimension also has to do with the socio-religious context of a text and with its political relevance (Kügler 2013).

### **Semantics: The meaning of what God said**

The contiguous formula 'be fruitful and multiply' is initially used of all kinds of swimming creatures and winged birds when God said: "Be fertile, multiply and fill the water of the seas and let the birds multiply on earth (Gen.1:22). However, such a blessing is not pronounced on land animals which were created the next day (6<sup>th</sup> day). The only incident in which animals are let to abound is after the flood (Gen.8:17) as most had died due to the flood.

With regard to people, the formula is pronounced on three incidences in the text. The initial blessing to 'be fruitful and multiply' is pronounced to the male and female beings that God had fashioned in his own image (Gen.1:28). The blessing is reiterated to Noah and his sons after the flood (Gen.9:1) and is re-affirmed to them (Gen.9:7). The coordinated verbs constitute a composite description of a single action which means to be 'abundantly fruitful.' The imperative 'be fruitful and multiply' is better understood in the context of a divine blessing. As pointed out by C.

Westermann: “Fertility and increase point to abundance; abundance belongs to blessing; wealth and plenty are both signs and effect of blessing” (Westermann, 1984: 141).

The blessing formula employed for the first couple at creation was extended to Abraham (Gen.17:2, 6, 8; to Isaac (Gen.26:3-4, 24; and to Jacob (Gen.28:4, 14, 35). The blessing was upheld through the sustained promise of land and descendants. While in the case of Abraham the blessing appeared to have been already forfeited since they had been childless, it was renewed through the birth of Isaac to Sarah. Once again it came under threat when Abraham was asked to sacrifice his only son Isaac but was later upheld when God declared: “I will bless you abundantly and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore...” (Gen.22:17). The contiguous phrase ‘be fruitful and multiply’ can be traced also in the farewell blessing given to Rebekah when she departs her home to marry Isaac. Speaking to Rebekah, Laban and his mother said: “Our sister, may you increase to thousands upon thousands; may your offspring possess the gates of their enemies” (Gen.24:60).

As can be seen in the foregoing discussion, the general semantics of the verbs ‘be fruitful and multiply’ reveal a usage not only in the Genesis 1:28 case when Yahweh blessed the first couple to be abundantly fruitful but is also seen in various parallels. More specifically, as noted by Schmutzer (2009), the semantics show that the verbs as a pair are essential to communicate the notion of ample progeny; they form the ‘debut’ of creation. This finds support in J. Milgrom who argues that the verbs ‘be fruitful and multiply’ denote fertility yielding in increase, thus implying the continuity of progeny (Milgrom, 2001). Humans, in other words, received God’s blessing that empowers them to transmit the life that they received from God and in this way they participate in his work of creation.

### **The pragmatic dimension of Genesis 1:28**

The text, as is plainly clear, stimulates direct action. It tells humanity to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. What it means is that whenever there is a hostility to fertility, it is suicidal to the survival of man. If humanity purposely chooses to ignore the imperative to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ then it would be paving the way for its self-destruction.

While the text stimulates direct action, it is critical to note that at the back of it lies not an invitation to do it irresponsibly. The gift of transmitting life that humanity has been endowed with involves a serious responsibility, it entails some moral obligations. What it implies is that couples need to seriously consider their responsibility before they transmit life. Some critical issues that they need to seriously look at is their capability to provide for the needs of the children such as food, education, clothing as well as even a free space and environment where they can successfully mature without so many hindrances and dangers.

While radical measures to de-populate nations are in themselves suicidal moves against the survival of humanity, irresponsible multiplication is equally a danger towards the survival of humanity. Irresponsible multiplication results in nothing other than a dog-eat dog situation and when a nation or society enters that state it spells the extinction of that very society or nation.



In view of the parliamentary debate in Zimbabwe which is under discussion, one finds that the pragmatic approach to Genesis 1:28 brings the much needed enlightenment that should shape the contours of the debate. As is evidently clear, it would be almost illogical to argue for a high number of children per couple if the couples themselves are not capable enough to bring up and provide the basic needs for their children. One cannot equally place trust in a government that is failing to run even its own affairs. The high rate of unemployment in Zimbabwe and under performance of many parastatals in Zimbabwe should be enough evidence that one cannot expect the government to take another extra load of providing incentives to families. Enforcing couples to have a minimum of eight kids is thus tantamount to an act of irresponsibility.

Memories of the distant past, reflected in Senator Bhobho's remarks that in their time they used to give birth to a number of children, may sure be something to treasure but there is need to admit that the present is no longer the same as the past. Education, for example, was not a priority in the distant past. As long parents had fields and produced plenty to fill the bared stomachs of their children it was regarded enough for the welfare of the kids. While eating plenty and having time to play *pada*, 'jumping game using marked lines on the ground,' *nhodo* 'a game that girls usually play with pebbles, whereby a player will toss one into the air and before she catches it, she should have managed to pick up another one out of the hole' or hunting mice may have defined the African child of that time, one cannot define the child of today in the same way. Education in today's world has become a non-negotiable priority. The education of our children, as noted by the Pan African Forum for Children (2001), is a responsibility that should be shouldered by all for it is a basic right that allows every child to develop to her or his fullest potential. Given that children are indispensable actors for the present and future of our African continent, the need to invest in them through education is highly called for. The unfortunate reality, however, that parents have to battle it out with is that it is no longer the age of 'standard six' as the epitome of one's education. It is now university education which counts if a child is to survive in a competing world and for parents it means money has to be there to educate the child. With university education calling for fortunes, it demands that couples really need to plan before they transmit life.

When one looks closely at this issue, one realizes that it is not so much the African thinking which has changed but rather just the times. Those who are pushing for the mandatory eight kids per couple policy are missing out one thing, namely: a true African identity of a parent is not measured by the number of kids one has but by one's capability of providing for one's own kids. In the days of old it meant being able to fill the bellies of your children with food and affording them opportunity to play children games during their leisure time. During those days, the number of children in a family depended so much on the ability of that family to feed them. If a couple had less fields or had other constraints, it never exceeded its number of children beyond what it could afford to take care of. Now that the times have changed, it is no longer the number of fields which are the determinant factor, the fatness of one's pocket is now the key factor. What all this sums up to is that it was never and should never be a prescribed issue to have a certain number of children in a family.

While Western nations may sure be blamed for other things like systematically annihilating African traditions and philosophies of life through their imported ideologies, it is a lie I think to say they sat down with IMF and the World Bank and came up with human rights issues and started

teaching our women and children that they do not need to have many children because of the cost of living as Senator Morgan Komichi would want to argue. What Senator Komichi is not realising is that he is giving credit to Westerners for what they did not do. African mothers and fathers knew the importance of balancing the number of children against the resources they had. While they may not have been exposed to some Biblical teaching in those early days, at least they followed the paradigmatic sense of the Biblical injunction ‘be fruitful and multiply.’ As for how they came live in the spirit of this Biblical teaching yet they had no one to teach them, Paul might be the answer here when he says: “When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts (Romans 2:14-15).

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