

# **The agency of the elderly women in indigenous responses to COVID-19-related mental health challenges among the Ndaou of south-eastern Zimbabwe**

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## **Abstract**

Pandemic-related stressors are many and they are known to cause mental health challenges to people. Research has shown that women are disproportionately affected by the effects of pandemics on mental health than their male counterparts (Manyonganise, 2022). It has also shown that the elderly people are at risk of the pandemic-related mental health challenges because of their advanced age that undermines their resilience. There is not much literature on how the elderly women in some cultural contexts form a formidable resource in mobilizing emotional and practical resilience in times of pandemics. The available literature has not emphasized the fact that every society has its own conceptualization of pandemics and unique strategies of mobilizing resilience. This study, therefore, explores the agency of the elderly women in indigenous response initiatives to COVID-19-related impacts on mental health using the case of the Ndaou people of south-eastern Zimbabwe. The study argues that ‘elderly people’ are not a homogeneous group. They are found in diverse cultural contexts that have a bearing on their response to pandemics. Therefore, there is need for sensitivity to religio-cultural contexts when dealing with the impacts of pandemics on communities’ mental health. The conceptualization, and strategies employed to mitigate the effects of pandemics on mental health are context specific. The African ecofeminist theory informs this empirical qualitative phenomenological study that takes an ethnographic research design. In-depth interviews were used to gather data. The Ndaou people were chosen on the bases of the researcher’s cultural familiarity and, the non-homogenous character of the religiocultures of African communities. The study makes a unique contribution to scholarship as it seeks to emphasize on the agency of the elderly women in building local communities’ resilience to pandemic-related mental health challenges, with less emphasis on the common narrative of their victimhood.

**Keywords:** African ecofeminist theory, African indigenous religio-cultures, Elderly women, Mental Health, Ndaou people, Pandemics