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*“Culture, Femininity and Sexuality”.*

***Femininity, Sexuality and  
Culture: Patriarchy and  
Female Subordination in  
Zimbabwe.***

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper examines the interplay between Femininity, sexuality and culture within the Shona culture in Zimbabwe. The three variables are interwoven intricately to the extent that any efforts to separate them are fruitless. In the Shona culture, patriarchal practices shape and perpetuate gender inequality and strip women of any form of control over their sexuality due to the fact that:

Custom in Africa is stronger than domination, stronger than the law, stronger even than religion. Over the years, customary practices have been incorporated into religion, and ultimately have come to be believed by their practitioners to be demanded by their adopted gods, whoever they may be (Lightfoot-Klein 1989:47 cited by Okome, 2003:71).

Seventeen years after Lightfoot-Klein made this important assertion, it is only appropriate that we continue to assess how culture continues to impact negatively on feminine sexuality despite all efforts that have been made to minimize its impact by challenging the status quo. Radical Feminism will be used to explain the interplay between femininity, sexuality and culture in the African society. Radical feminists argue that culture imprisons women leading to their subordination because of the patriarchal nature of society. Culture is a broad term that refers to the 'customs, institutions and achievements of a particular nation, people or group' (South African Concise Oxford Dictionary, 2002:282).

This paper will focus on one aspect of culture, namely, patriarchy. Attempts will then be made to highlight how patriarchy is bred through the socialization process, which begins in the family, and how it (patriarchy) infiltrates into other sectors of society like religion, education, the economy and politics. Lastly, patriarchal practices which lead to the control of female sexuality by males will be highlighted. The main argument in this paper is that patriarchy leads to gender inequality and subordination of women to the extent that females do not have control over their sexuality.

Radical feminists define patriarchy as a social system in which men appropriate all social roles and keep women in subordinate positions. They further state that this social system

has managed to survive for so long because its chief psychological weapon is its universality as well as its longevity (Charvet, 1982). Patriarchal attitudes are bred in the family through the socialization process as will be highlighted below.

## **2. The Family**

The family, as a social institution, is a *brewery* for patriarchal practices by socializing the young to accept sexually differentiated roles. In the Shona culture, from a tender age, the socialization process differentiates the girl child from the boy child. Shona males are socialized to view themselves as breadwinners and heads of households whilst females are taught to be obedient and submissive housekeepers. The cause of such differentiation and discrimination is the fact that society views women as sexual beings and not as human beings (Charvet, 1982). McDowell and Pringle (1992) further state that, women are not only constantly defined in relation to men, but are defined as dependent and subordinate to them as well. As a result, women are socialized to acquire those qualities, which fit them into a relationship of dependence on men. These qualities include gentleness, passivity, submission and striving to please men always.

In the Shona culture, once a girl reaches puberty all teachings are directed towards pleasing one's future husband as well as being a gentle and obedient wife. Her sexuality is further defined for her, as she is taught how to use it for the benefit of the male race. Furthermore, these cultural teachings foster a dependence syndrome this is why most African women depend heavily on their husbands for support. As a result, once a husband dies, the woman quickly remarries so as to find another pillar of support to lean on.

Interviews with Shona women who visited Harare Central Hospital's Social Work Department during the period from January 2006 to June 2006 revealed this dependence on males. Most women who sought grants from the Government answered the question "Why do you need assistance from the Government?" with answers like "My husband died so I have no-one to look after me" or "I was deserted by my husband, so I have no-one to look after me" or further still, "I do not have a husband". All the answers given by these women spelled out how patriarchy creates dependence on males to the extent that in the absence of males, many women cannot manage to support themselves financially as they were socialized to believe that, that role should be played by males.

In the family, the male child is preferred to the female child. In fact, males rule females by right of birth and even if the male child is not the first born in a family, he is automatically considered the head of the household who should protect and look after his sisters. The female child is further discriminated upon due to the fact that eventually she marries out and joins another family whilst the male child ensures the survival of the family name through bringing additional members into the family (Human Rights Monitor, 2001). This attitude has seen some parents preferring to educate boys to girls, because of girls' capacity to bear children

The toys that parents buy for their children also aid the socialization process, for instance a girl child is given dolls or kitchen utensils to play with whilst the boy child is given toy cars, puzzle games and all toys that require physical energy or mental ability. As a result, the girl child is socialized to become a mother, soft, emotionally sensitive, and to have all motherhood features. Furthermore, boys who cry easily, are shy or avoid fights are often scolded by their parents for behaving like girls.

Upon reaching puberty, aunts, grandmothers and mothers play an active role in ensuring that the girl child understands her sexuality and the implications it brings upon her life. “Don’t play with boys” is a favorite phrase that characterizes the puberty stage, however the Shona culture is very conservative to the extent that sexual issues are not discussed openly. As a result the phrase becomes so confusing for girls who begin to treat their counterparts with a wary eye without full information on why they should do so. This state is so confusing also due to the fact that as one grows up, she is taught the merits of a good wife, so how does one get married if she is suddenly taught that males are to be treated with a wary eye?

Furthermore, as one grows up, biological instincts win the battle and the female enters into sexual relationships and there is always the ambivalent feeling that at one end it feels good to be in a relationship whilst at the other end one feels guilty because of culturally cultivated attitudes and norms. Along the process a lot of mistakes do happen like unwanted pregnancies or forced abortions and society does not spare such women as they are labeled as ‘spoilt’ (Human Rights Monitor, 2001).

Many cultures express leniency on male sexual behaviour but are very proscriptive when it comes to female sexual behaviour (International centre for Human Rights, 1996). Males are free to experiment sexually at will before marriage whilst females have to preserve their virginity for marriage or risk tarnishing the image of the family since the Son in law will not pay ‘*mombe yechimanda*’. This is a cow offered to the in-laws as a token of appreciation for ensuring that his wife preserved her virginity. This custom holds much value in the shona culture and in some parts of the country, virginity tests are still carried out up to this very day.

The socialization process in the family which instills patriarchal practices into the young does not end within the family but infiltrates into the other social institutions like marriage, religion, education, politics and the economy.

### **3. Marriage**

Marriage is sacred and a married woman is treated with respect, in fact the desired destination of most Shona women is marriage. In marriage, the husband can have as many wives as he wants and can have extra-marital affairs as a bonus. When such a scenario happens, however, it is the wife who is blamed for failing to satisfy her husband or for failing to curb his desire to do so. “All men are the same” is a favourite phrase of older women as they try to make young women accept the inevitable (male infidelity).

However, if it so happens that a married woman engages in an extramarital affair, she is not spared, she is labeled as 'loose' and has to be sent back to her parents so that they can instill some discipline into her or she is divorced straight away.

In addition, married women are expected to be sexually passive and submissive to their husbands, men are the initiators of sex and also set the conditions for the sexual encounter. On the same note, Messer (2004) states that women are expected to satisfy the sexual desires of their husbands. As a result, when a husband wants sex, the wife should comply because that is part of the marriage contract (Leclerc- Madlala, 2000). This scenario has seen HIV and AIDS spreading like veld fire because women cannot insist on safer sex measures as men control the sexual encounter.

#### **4. Religion**

Patriarchal attitudes are also found in Christianity and these have strengthened the traditional customs, which men use to control women's sexuality (Human Rights Monitor, 2001). To exemplify, Eve's alleged creation from Adam's rib has made women occupy a subordinate position in the Church as well as in the family. Women are therefore viewed merely as second-class citizens who were created as an afterthought. This is to say that if God had seen it fit for Adam to stay alone, then Eve would never have been created and hence women would not exist in this world. Such patriarchal attitudes have seen women being forced to be submissive to males. To make matters worse, once Eve was created she wreaked havoc by giving in to the Devil's temptation and pulling Adam into the sin. This portrayal of women as the weaker sex has made men to treat women as people who have to be kept under constant supervision lest they err.

St Paul's letter to the Colossians is one example of the letters which Zimbabwean men quote as a justification of their control over women. The woman is expected to "submit to her husband" (Colossians 3:18) whilst the husband has to love his wife (Colossians 3:19). Now love is much more difficult to measure than obedience or submissiveness. As a result, men control their women and justify their actions basing on Christianity.

#### **5. Education**

The educational system in Zimbabwe is structured in a way that maintains the inequalities that exist between girls and boys. Firstly, the textbooks that are used in schools depict boys as tough, rough and mentally skilled people who are adventurous whilst girls are depicted as soft, gentle people who enjoy carrying out household duties. Even the uniforms for boys and girls are different with girls' uniforms not being suitable for the rough play or tree climbing that boys favour.

Secondly, the educational system does not take into consideration the fact that when children start attending school they come with inequalities already shaped within them. The school curriculum should then as a result, be structured in a way that addresses these

inequalities and not in a way that perpetuates them. The educational system in Zimbabwe has thus been criticized by Chirimuuta (2006) for being gender insensitive and gender blind as it encourages male models, male-authored textbooks and theories thus spelling out that women should be academically subordinate as well.

Thirdly, in the school environment, the girl child is a victim of her sexuality as well. Male teachers make sexual advances at her in return for cash, marks or other material gains and failure to comply may lead to violence. This offer however is irresistible for girls who come from poor families but at the end of the day it's the girl who suffers when she falls pregnant, contracts STI's or HIV. To add on to the burden, society will ostracize her for being 'loose' (Chirimuuta, 2006) whilst the male culprit who seduced her goes scott free without a label.

In Zimbabwe, the enrolment ratio for girls declines with the level of education, for instance in secondary schools, the enrolment ratio for girls is only 42% (UNAIDS, 2004). This is due to the patriarchal attitude which views educating girls as a waste of money since they will marry out and benefit another family (Human Rights Monitor, 2001). In some religions like the Apostolic Sect, girls are married whilst still in primary school to older members of the sect.

Education is one way in which women can emancipate themselves from the grip of culture through male domination, however a critical analysis of educated women reveals that education is not a true emancipator. This is due to the fact that even those women who are educated have to succumb to culture otherwise they get labeled as 'unmarriageable' (Chirimuuta, 2006) and will be shunned by prospective partners. Since marriage is a sacred institution in the Shona culture, it is society's expectation that every woman should be married. Furthermore, parents really get worried when their daughters do not get married to the extent of consulting Sangoma's in order to break the curse as it's believed. As a result, education fails to offer total liberation to Shona women.

## **6. The Economy**

The low levels of female enrolment in secondary schools means that fewer women make it into the corporate world, however for those who do so, they soon realize that men control the economy. Patriarchal attitudes also exist in the corporate world and few women are allowed to occupy leadership positions. Most women occupy less challenging positions like secretarial or clerical positions. In public ministry in Zimbabwe, for example, there are more males than females occupying ministerial positions. Moreover, the females occupy less challenging positions for instance Gender, Culture or Education. It is rare to find women occupying challenging ministerial positions for instance in the Ministry of Finance or State defence. Furthermore, even if women are chosen as leaders they have to prove their capability twice as much as their male counterparts due to the fact that:

The educated and professional woman, no matter how capable, is never considered the equal of her male peers and colleagues. She may be admired, humoured, tolerated....and if she plays her cards well, she might even make an inroad in her field of activity. But too often it will be because of “favour”, rarely because of her capabilities (Buchanan 1993:1070 cited in Okome, 2003:84).

Still in the corporate sector, women are victims of their sexuality as they are subjected to sexual harassment or sexual violence by their bosses. This situation is due to the fact that women are viewed as sexual beings and not as human beings (Charvet, 1982). In some cases, in order to be considered for promotion women have to offer sexual favours to their bosses. To be considered for a job, one might also be asked for sexual favours.

The majority of Zimbabwean women who are not employed are found in rural areas where they “toil on land they do not own, to produce what they do not control and at the end of the marriage, through divorce or death they can be sent away empty handed” (Tanzanian president, Julius Kambarage Nyerere at the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Conference on women, 1984). These women are discriminated upon by not being allowed to own land on the basis of custom and customary law since men have always been viewed culturally as land owners (Human Rights Monitor, 2001). This situation as a result forces rural women to be dependent on males through the cycle of marriage and reproduction (Human Rights Monitor, 2001).

## **6. Politics**

Politics is portrayed as a dirty game, which requires tough qualities that very few women are attracted by it. Those women who enter politics display have to really prove that they have tough caliber in order to withstand the pressure brought about by patriarchal attitudes which define women as weak citizens not fit for public office. Moreover, in politics women are only feely accepted without questions as singers, dancers, cooks and guest entertainers.

## **7. Patriarchal Practices which lead to the control of female sexuality by males**

Due to the fact that the African culture is patriarchal and patrilineal, female sexuality is largely in the hands of males (Khumalo and Garbus, 2002). The payment of lobola, arranged marriages, rape and levirate marriages will be used as examples.

### **7.1 Payment of lobola**

In the Shona culture, by virtue of the payment of lobola, children belong to the father and inherit the father’s surname, totem as well as citizenship. Furthermore, married women

cannot pass on their citizenship rights to their children even though single mothers can. This is due to the fact that, many Zimbabwean laws follow cultural customs, which are part of the patriarchal system in which women occupy subordinate positions. All the same, lobola gives a man all rights whilst the woman is stripped of all freedom and rights. She is even further reduced to the level of acquired property. The scenario is made worse in cases where the lobola was set at a high price as this can lead to abuse if the wife fails to be obedient to her husband even though she was 'paid for'. As a result, lobola, which is part of the patriarchal nature of our society breeds inequality and widens the gap between men and women, thereby placing women in a subordinate position.

### 7.2 Levirate Marriages

According to Shona custom, when one's husband dies, the widow is expected to marry one of her late husband's brothers. If the woman fails to comply she risks being sent back to her parents leaving behind her children and all that she toiled for. On the other hand, if a man is widowed, he is given his late wife's young sister as a wife. The wife he is given must be a virgin and consent is not sought from her, she just has to comply because that is culture.

### 7.3 Arranged marriages

Arranged marriages are familiar within the Shona traditions and elsewhere in Zimbabwe and beyond. These can be based on religion such as in the Apostolic sect where young girls are married off to older male members of the sect based on prophetic revelations. These girls cannot deny getting married to these men who in some cases are old enough to be their fathers for fear of being cut off from their families.

In some cases, when there is a drought spell in the country parents marry off their daughters to affluent members of the community in exchange for money or grain. In extreme cases, some fathers marry off their daughters to their debtors when they fail to repay their debts. Furthermore, in order to appease angry spirits following murder, a young girl (a virgin) is given to the wronged family as a wife. In all these cases, consent is not sought from the young women concerned but they are forced to comply with cultural traditions.

### 7.4 Rape

Women's lack of control over their sexuality is also displayed through the rape of young girls by male relatives (Human Rights Monitor, 2001). Following the myth that sex with a virgin is a cure for HIV, young girls have been in many instances subjects for that experiment. Married women on the other hand cannot use contraceptives if their husbands do not want them to do so. Furthermore, even if they suspect their husbands of infidelity they cannot insist on safe sex because men control the sexual encounter (Meursing and Sibindi, 1995). Prostitutes cannot insist on condom use with their male clients and this scenario of women's powerlessness has no doubt fuelled the spread of

HIV in the African continent. All women are ducks waiting to be shot, whether young, married or single.

### **Way Forward**

The patriarchal nature of our society has shaped and perpetuated gender inequality to the extent of allowing male domination and female subordination. This sad state of affairs has been fuelled by the socialization process, therefore to amend the situation this calls for resocialisation. All those who are involved in mass teaching or any form of public lecturing should aim at highlighting how culture has created a huge gap between men and women. Lectures and seminars addressing the impact of culture should be encouraged. Furthermore, men should also be involved in these lectures so as to make great impact. In addition, patriarchy should be seen as it really is, that is, as a social construction and not a biological construction. Women should also be educated so that they understand how culture imprisons them since the majority of them have accepted the status quo to the extent that they worship male domination.

The young should be socialized that men and women are equal because biological differences do not mean that the other sex is inferior. The family is a major social institution and if this re-socialization starts in the family it will permeate into the other social institutions. In addition, laws should be made and policies amended so as to accommodate women, to grant them the same sexual freedom that their male counterparts enjoy. In order for these changes to materialize it needs passion, determination and commitment of everybody in society, man or woman.

### **Concluding remarks**

It is my hope that social researchers will continue to inform the society and help make a difference by continuing this social investigation from where I have left and also fill the gaps that will come to realization.

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