





# Dedication

*We dedicate this work to the women whose struggles it tells.*



# Acknowledgments

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# CONTENTS

About this Journal	5
Single Mothers, GBV, VAW/VAC, and COVID-19 Impacts in Zimbabwe	10
Abstract	10
Introduction	10
Methodology	12
	12
Making of a rural single mother	13
VAW/VAC a burden for rural single mothers	16
Commenting on the incident, Mlevu (2020) says	18
Conclusion	20
REFERENCES	22
Human rights violations by victims of human rights: Rethinking Lesbianism in the context of violence against women in Zimbabwe	24
Abstract	24
Introduction	24
Unpacking lesbian sexual violence	27
Methodology	27
Marshall's Theory of Intimacy Deficits and Sexual Offending	28
Summary of the case	29
So, who shepherds the flock when the shepherdess goes rogue?	29
Conclusion	32
REFERENCES	33
Abstract	35
Introduction	35
Theoretical and Conceptual Framework	37
Methodology	38
Analysis and Discussion	38
Conclusion	44
REFERENCES	45
Youth discourses on sexuality and disease in educational institutions: a representation of student graffiti in Zimbabwean urban areas	47
Abstract	47
Introduction	47
Sexuality, HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwean	48
Methodology	49
Theory	50
Discussion	50
Students' knowledge of heterosexual sex and its outcomes	50
Students' perceptions of sex, HIV and AIDS	52
Conclusion	56
REFERENCES	57

## ABOUT THIS JOURNAL

Violence against women and the marginalization of women's participation in decision making is on the rise in Zimbabwe and globally. This problem manifests itself in terrifying varieties throughout the world. Women and girls experience verbal, sexual, physical and psychosocial, and other forms of violations in the fabric of their everyday lives in societies around the world. They are excluded from the decision making spheres. Marginalisation, violence, and exclusion are affecting their efficacy in economic, social, and political spheres, leading to their underrepresentation.

As a new gender journal, one of the goals of *Gender Lens* is to unravel that thread by shedding light, not only on forms of violence that are already widely discussed, but also on lesser-known forms of violence, such as sexism, female enslavement in tourism, political violence, and rape as a weapon against female participation.

Efforts to deal with the crisis of marginalisation and violence against women in Zimbabwean political spaces, in their many forms, have been fragmented by the boundaries of class, culture, political allegiances, and increasingly, economic factors. Academics and gender activists are speaking to those most like themselves in relatively closed groups, not hearing the numerous voices that need to be heard if we are to understand the problem and develop tools for a comprehensive strategy for addressing these. A primary goal of this journal, therefore, is to foster dialogue among those working in various fields and disciplines, and the political actors, as well as in other settings such as government, and among those from diverse backgrounds in terms of ethnocultural and racial identity, sexual orientation, and experiences of victimisation/ survivorship.

To achieve that goal, contributions are featured from a variety of diverse perspectives, such as youth and sexuality, women in politics and public spaces, lesbianism, and violence against women, and gender-based violence in the context of COVID-19.

*Gender Lens* was launched in 2018 as part of a campaign of strengthening women's advocacy for inclusive governance in Zimbabwe. The first volumes, published in 2020, covered, respectively, *Proportional Representation for Women: the Way to Equality (Volume 1. No. 1)*, and *Gender Based Violence against Women and its Consequences (Volume 1. No. 2)*.

The *Gender Lens* is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal that focuses on women participation and gender-based violence against women in all forms and across cultural and national boundaries, publishing a wide range of articles, including:

- **Empirical Research** - Contributions from the cross-section of disciplines studying women participation and violence against women, using both qualitative and quantitative methodology.
- **Research Notes** - Empirically based papers containing a clear statement of a research problem.
- **Activist/ Advocate Notes** - A forum for activists and advocates to report efforts of increasing women's participation and fighting violence against women.
- **Book Reviews** - Insightful book reviews written by experts in the field.
- **Survivor Articles/ Poetry** – the story and subjective experience of the abused victim.
- **Legal Notes** - A forum for legal professionals and scholars to communicate current legal issues on violence against women and women participation.
- **Clinical Notes** - latest developments in law, clinical practice, medicine, social work, and activism, and their implications for women victims of violence.

Gender Lens is published by SWAG, a consortium of Research and Advocacy Unit (RAU), Women Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ) and Gender Media Connect (GMC) as a strengthening tool for women's advocacy for inclusive governance. It's a bi-annual publication which is peer reviewed. Gender Lens is supported by the Swedish Embassy.



## INTRODUCTION

Strengthening women's advocacy for inclusive governance is a process whose time has come. This is in pace with the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal Number 5 (SDG 5) seeking to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. The international policy framework is getting tighter and serious. The United Nations Security Council has adopted 10 resolutions on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS): Security Council Resolutions (SCR) 1325 (2000), 1820 (2008), 1888 (2008), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013), 2242 (2015), 2467 (2019), and 2493 (2019). The general international mantra is "leaving no one behind" in development. Elizabeth Stuart and Emma Samman explain the mantra to mean ending extreme poverty in all its forms, reducing inequalities among both individuals (vertical) and groups (horizontal), and the prioritisation and fast-tracking of actions for the poorest and most marginalised people – known as progressive universalism (Stuart & Samman. 2017).

The SCR guides work to promote and protect the rights of women in conflict and post-conflict situations. There is a strong recognition that gender is central to national and international peace and security. However, accountability, implementation, and action remain seriously lacking. There are many gaps, ranging from increasing the number of women at the highest levels of decision-making, covered in the first issue of the *Gender Lens*, to ending impunity for gender-based violence, covered in the second volume. Zimbabwe is unfaithful, it is not living to its vows on strengthening women's participation and their inclusion in all spheres of life.

*Gender Lens* seeks to make the voice of women louder until the decision-makers genuinely act. It argues that the law is in place, the norms are agreed upon and the concerns of women have been on the table since the Beijing Platform of Action 1995. These include Education of Girls and Women, Women's Role in Peace and Security, Participation in Decision Making and Governing with a Gender Lens, and Increased Action to End Women's Human Rights Abuses and Promote Women's Legal Rights. While there are achievements globally on some of the issues, the Strengthening Women's Advocacy for Inclusive Governance (SWAG) the campaign has been driven by gaps that are ignored by the decision-makers in Zimbabwe. With the outbreak of the COVID-19, the issues of women's participation and gender-based violence have taken a back burner. Women's issues have been tyrannized by the war on COVID-19 as governments focus on existential matters. This issue of *Gender Lens* argues that correcting the malaise of gender-based violence and women's participation MATTER!

Dr Umali Saidi, in *Single Mothers, GBV, VAW/VAC, and COVID-19 Impacts in Zimbabwe*, writes about the debilitating factors that impede women's agency. He notes that rural single mothers are generally ignored in research, government programmes, and most societal endeavours by their identity. There is no deliberate attention made to this specific category of women. Discourses on women, specifically dealing with Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Violence Against Women (VAW)/Violence Against Children (VAC) generally recognize them within a homogenous group, that of women, as vulnerable citizens in a given polity. He further argues that, although women are often enveloped in-group solidarity, there is no singular social challenges individual women face and navigate.

Against this background, rural single mothers are the worst affected sub-group of women by being single women and parents living in remote parts of the country where there are severe economic challenges as compared to their urban counterparts. Single women and parents residing in urban setups have advantages of the urban environment which offers some better economic advantages as compared to the rural with limited economic activities. Further, within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, rural single mothers have not been spared the effects of the pandemic. More so, government-inspired Covid-19 prevention strategies have worsened the socio-economic, and health challenges of the majority of the people and this category in particular.

Professor Hazel Ngoshi notes the structural weaknesses among the victims of human rights violations. She

argues, in *Human rights violations by victims of human rights: Rethinking Lesbianism in the context of violence against women in Zimbabwe*, that while homosexuality has received attention within the larger realm of human rights, there is very little that is known on the dynamics of violence emanating or connected to it in the context of violence against women (VAW). In countries where homosexuality, specifically lesbianism, is not recognised by law, yet secretly practiced, cases of VAW are a reality, but the complex nature of 'relations' place victims of sexual violence or other such, at the deeper end of psychological and physical suffering. Motivated by a reported case of a prophetess lesbian arraigned before the courts for sexually assaulting a vulnerable, assumed heterosexual female congregant, this paper revisits lesbianism in the context of VAW in Zimbabwe. She further argues that lesbianism is socially stigmatized in the country and, because it is not recognized at law; is socially and politically rejected, it creates complexities in having to deal with forms of violence of a sexual nature, perpetrated against heterosexual members of the same sex. In heterosexual set-ups, similar assaults may be regarded as 'rape', thereby attracting punitive reaction from the law. Society has been grappling with the search for sustainable solutions against VAW in general. Against this background, she proposes a rethinking of sexual VAW perpetrated by lesbians on heterosexual women in Zimbabwe as this impacts on their participation.

In *Body-Shaming: An Albatross around the Necks of Women in Zimbabwean Politics and Public Spaces*, Professor Laurine Chikoko concentrates on what is often missed: the systematic body shaming of female politicians and females who hold public offices. Using online material, she peers into the discursive practices that objectify, sexualize, and shame the female body in response to women's entry into political and public spaces. This is rampant in Zimbabwean politics across the political party lines. Using online data collection methods, she gathered web user comments concerning female political and public figures. Using purposive sampling, she targets eleven (11) women from across the political divide, eight (8) of whom are politicians, two (2) public office bearers and one (1) entertainer-cum activist. The data collected is analysed using feminist and post-structuralism theoretical lenses.

She purports that the nation-building process is highly gendered and female participation in politics is complicated by body politics that position the female body as a site of struggle by way of policing it, disciplining it, intimidating, and labelling and othering it. In the end, she posits that this is an 'othering' process in which the woman is seen as the political other who is transgressing male spaces by daring to aspire for or enter public spaces considered masculine spaces. This is supported by quantitative data. The Afrobarometer surveys on Zimbabwe show that more than a third of men do not believe that women are fit for holding political office and that men should be elected in preference. The analysis of comments directed at these female participants in politics and public spaces demonstrates that the female body is sexualized while the woman's intellectual and professional capabilities are disregarded. Professor Chikoko's contribution is critical in closing the theoretical gap in the Zimbabwean discourse of female participation in nation-building. It is concluded that through the body shaming of female politicians and public figures, social differences that are gendered are being performed to the detriment of women.

Professor Hazel Ngoshi and Dr. Umali Saidi take on the role of the youth in participation in *Youth discourses on sexuality and disease in educational institutions: a representation of student graffiti in Zimbabwean urban areas*. The youth story is represented in murals drawn in different colours, crayons and ink-to emphasize a point. In this article, they argue that HIV and AIDS are both a medical and social reality. The latter reality is more fluid, as evidenced by the multiple discourses constructed around the same phenomena by different segments in their respective social milieu. Specific groups have their own constructions of sexuality, HIV, and AIDS. They explore how Zimbabwean students, from primary school to university level, discursively constructed sex, sexuality, HIV, and AIDS through toilet graffiti. They interrogate how the inscriptions reveal specific knowledge relating to the condition, its transmission, regulation of sexual behaviours (positive and negative), and contraceptive use, among others.



In this article, they are persuading the community to depart from the commonly-held assumptions of children as sexually and politically naïve. They further argue that students are a heterogeneous group with multiple discursive ways of participating in sexuality, HIV and AIDS discourses – as political expressions- which have been typically dominated by adult formalisation and policing. By not giving them free spaces, students appropriate the prodigal nature of the toilet walls and use them to express their own overlooked desires. The analysis is carried out using Critical Discourse Analysis.



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# SINGLE MOTHERS, GBV, VAW/VAC, AND COVID-19 IMPACTS IN ZIMBABWE

Umali Saidi, PhD

## Abstract

Rural single mothers are generally ignored in research, government programmes and most societal endeavours by virtue of their identity. Discourses on women specifically dealing with Gender Based Violence (GBV), Violence Against Women (VAW)/Violence Against Children(VAC) generally recognise them within a homogenous group, that of women, as vulnerable citizens in a given polity. Although women are often enveloped in group solidarity, there is no homogeneity when it comes to the social challenges individual women face and navigate. Against this background, rural single mothers are the worst affected sub-group of women by virtue of being single women and parents living in remote parts of the country where there are severe economic challenges as compared to their urban counterparts. Single women and parents residing in urban set ups have advantages of the urban environment which offers some better economic advantages as compared to the rural with limited economic activities. Further, within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, rural single mothers have not been spared the effects of the pandemic. More so, government inspired Covid-19 prevention strategies have worsened the socio-economic, and health challenges of the majority of the people. This paper, examines the lived experiences of rural single mothers, especially their exposure to GBV, VAW/VAC in the context of Covid-19 in Zimbabwe.

Key words: covid-19, rural single mothers, GBV, VAW/VAC, exposure

## Introduction

Zimbabwe, like most developing countries, is currently facing widespread instabilities which have caused insurmountable economic and social challenges. These challenges have exposed women to various forms of violence. While a number of interventions have been promulgated to address these social and economic instabilities, many of them have largely failed and by extension livelihoods of many people remain distressed. With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic livelihoods have further been exposed to human rights violations. Among vulnerable social groups facing the brunt of the challenges, most of which are violent in nature are rural single women in the country. Describing women of Papua New Guinea (PNG) Chandler (2014 p.1) says of them that they;

...endure some of the most extreme levels of violence in the world [and] continue to be attacked with impunity [in a] situation [that can be described] as a humanitarian disaster yet still does not receive the broader public attention it deserves, inside or outside ...a significant obstacle to PNGs development and prosperity.

Chandler's (2014) description of women in Papua New Guinea strongly resonates with the lived experiences of rural single women in Zimbabwe. In fact, there is no better way to describe rural single mothers in Zimbabwe than what Chandler (2014) did in the above quotation. There exists a serious humanitarian disaster in the country which calls for urgent interventions, especially in the remote parts of the country. In these areas, women encounter untold violence of various forms, Gender Based Violence (GBV), Violence Against Women (VAW)/Violence Against Children (VAC) included. The United Nations Women Africa, (2015) noted that

Zimbabwean women and girls experience high levels of domestic violence at the interpersonal level and deprivation of protection from social discriminatory practices that impact negatively on them. Zimbabwe has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world with up to 50% of young girls under the

age of consent in rural areas with the lowest being 10% in Bulawayo (an urban area). This is a criminal offense as Zimbabwe's age of legislated standards are clear on the matter, however the practice within traditional/customary settings and due to economically poor homes and communities make this a huge gendered social challenge.

While the above painted a gloomy picture on the condition of women five years ago, in 2020 reports continue to show a disconsolate reality for women largely because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Mlevu (2020) reported that research carried out by UNFPA and its partners at the end of April 2020 shows that domestic violence cases were anticipated to increase by 20% between May and July 2020. As such

Since national lockdown started in March 2020, over 2000 cases of Gender Based Violence (GBV) have been recorded across the country by various women's organisations. Before the lockdown, GBV cases ranged between 200 and 500 cases per month. However, between 19 April and the 1st of May 2020, police in Bikita recorded 72 GBV cases from wards 5,11,19,22, 24 and 30 of Bikita West constituency. Key factors driving the GBV incidences in the said wards include financial mismanagement among couples and arguments among married couples over conjugal rights. However, in most instances, given the fact that the courts are closed due to Covid-19 lockdown, police officers encourage couples in dispute to consider resolving their matters amicably (Mlevu, 2020).

Although Mlevu (2020) reports on married rural women and GBV during the Covid-19 lockdown, one can imagine what the picture is like for single rural women in the same areas in the face of GBV, VAC/VAW. Media reports have also documented some cases of the GBV, VAW/VAC, especially those that have found their way to the courts. The recent gruesome VAC is exemplified by the murder of a seven year old rural Murehwa district (Zimbabwe) boy (Maphosa, 2020), allegedly by a herder is a case in point. Emmerson Mnangagwa, The President, condemned the heinous act wherein the media reported that,

President Mnangagwa yesterday condemned the killing of children for ritual purposes, saying the Government was concerned with all forms of threats and abuse to children and vowed to end violence against them (Ziwira & Mapupu, 2020).

In light of the foregoing, the main question that comes to the fore is, how will GBV, VAW/VAC be mitigated sustainably in the country? Violent forms of GBV, VAC/VAW, some, if not most of which are never reported to law enforcement agents, are complex to arrest. GBV, VAW/VAC are not a crisis requiring deployment of security agents or the judiciary alone to solve. Law enforcement agents and the judiciary become involved when GBV, VAW/VAC practices are brought to their attention by victims or concerned members of the community. GBV, VAW/VAC, though occurring independently or in some cases jointly, are attitudes and behaviors which primarily require behavioral change. Therefore, exposure of violence against vulnerable groups in society is crucial in order to craft policies and interventions designed to stop GBV, VAW/VAC.

The understudied group of single mothers' (McGuigan, 2020 p.438), deserves critical attention in order to give agency to rural single mothers some of whom are teenagers and/or adolescent. In the face of the Covid-19 pandemic cases of GBV have been skyrocketing in the country. Mlevu, (2020) attest to this fact while Mutongwiza (2020) calls the increase in GBV 'a pandemic within a pandemic'; Chadambuka and Warriia (2020 p.2) report that the rate of intimate partner violence (IPV) in rural Zimbabwe is pegged at 69% 'with its array of negative effects affecting the welfare of women and children.'

Research shows that single mothers are understudied in Zimbabwe. For instance, Agunbiade, (2014 p.24) declared that 'motherhood in many sub-Saharan African countries has remained daunting' and that 'lack of social policies aimed at empowering adolescent mothers have compromised their social position in a number of developing countries.' While Agunbiade, (2014) uses the Yoruba community in Nigeria as the case, there are similarities that can be observed when one compares the Nigerian case with the realities of single women in rural Zimbabwe.



Women in Zimbabwe are also under the control of cultural formulations, one being the oppressive patriarchal system. Chadambuka and Warria (2020) observe that high rates of GBV in Zimbabwe and Africa in general are due to the influence of patriarchal norms that condone the subordination of women. As such, single rural women struggle to ‘obtain help, and those who seek help reported being negated or treated in an unsupportive way (Chadambuka & Warria, 2020 p.2).

In spite of socio-economic backgrounds, women are largely still connected to power differentials based on sex and gender. A study by Visaria (2008) reveals that violence against married women in India was mainly perpetrated by their husbands. In fact, the study showed that 35-75% of Indian women face verbal, physical or sexual violence from either their husbands or men known to them. Parallels can be drawn with realities and experiences of rural women in Zimbabwe (Chadambuka & Warria, 2020), yet there is hardly any study to the knowledge of researchers to date, exploring statistical dynamics pertaining to Zimbabwean women’s experiences and exposure to verbal, physical or sexual violence perpetrated by their partners or man known to them.

Generally though, existing studies such as Chadambuka and Warria, (2020) offer sweeping and generic stand points on GBV. In this study therefore, we specifically explore rural single mothers noting various forms of violence they face in their everyday lives. The aim is not to merely explore or document but to also suggest innovative solutions that empower rural single mother victims first with knowledge about GBV affecting them specifically. Secondly, to accord them with mechanisms of reporting forms of GBV, protecting themselves as well as seeking further assistance within their communities in cases where the violence might have taken place. The idea is in line with the call Paz, Muller, Boudet, and Gaddis, (2020 p.2) make that any GBV research or programming must ultimately come up with ‘Innovative solutions to provide reporting mechanisms for women victims and to accommodate them and their children’ to which social awareness is very key.

While the challenge with GBV is not in any way new to women, especially rural single mothers, reports show that it has worsened since the onset of the pandemic (Mlevu, 2020). Interestingly, three phased periods are now observable within the grand matrix of the Covid-19. There is the pre-Covid-19 pandemic period (the onset), during the covid-19 pandemic period (the vortex) and the anticipated post-covid-19 pandemic period (the volatile new normal). Inspired by the need to develop a nuanced understanding of these three phases to GBV against rural single mothers, this article exposes features of violence against women (VAW) and violence against children (VAC) in a bid to promote sustainable solutions to these problems in Zimbabwe.

## Methodology

This study utilised the qualitative content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) described as a naturalistic, interpretative approach, concerned with exploring phenomena from the interior (Flick, 2009 in Ritchie et al., 2014). Qualitative content analysis is one of the numerous research methods used to analyse qualitative data (Elo et al., 2014) and in this study it was used to obtain GBV, VAW/VAC data for analysis. Hsieh and Shannon (2005 p.1278) submit that

Research using qualitative content analysis focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text... Text data might be in verbal, print, or electronic form and might have been obtained from narrative responses, open-ended survey questions, interviews, focus groups, observations, or print media such as articles, books, or manuals... The goal of content analysis is “to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study”.

More broadly, however, qualitative content analysis was chosen in the context in which GBV, VAW/VAC data from reports, electronic and print media was ‘reduced to concepts that describe the research phenomenon’ (Elo et al., 2014 p.1). In this case the research phenomena were instances of GBV, VAW/VAC practices exert-

ed on rural women. The exercise was done informed by the notion that ‘some aspects of the process...readily described, but...also partially depends on the researchers’ insights or intuitive action’(Elo et al., 2014 p.1).

## Making of a rural single mother

While Zimbabwe continues to grapple with political, economic and public health challenges, there have been attempts to devise some solutions to arrest the problems. However, in this quest for solutions, rural single women have largely been excluded in the process. Worse still, these women are generally exposed to political and gender-based violence. Further, they are not even cushioned from the economic violence exerted on them. Exclusion from mainstream public health interventions, exposure to various forms of violence and side-lined from economic cushioning expose single rural mothers to physical violence as well as psycho-social anxieties.

At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, the UNICEF Social Policy Programme Division (2020 p.2) identified seven gendered risks (GRs). These include economic shocks, policies of physical distancing and isolation; exacerbation of existing vulnerabilities and risk; child marriages, high male mortality, different gendered needs rate as well as longer-term and gendered impacts. Of the seven GRs, economic shock stands out among the other six as impacting hardest on the poorest in a context where women and children are disproportionately affected by poverty. Aspects of economics guarantee social protection or they expose people to ‘poverty and vulnerability across the life cycle’ (International Labour Organization, 2017 p.xxix). In fact, women and children are also less or poorly covered by social protection systems (UNICEF Social Policy Programme Division, 2020; International Labour Organization, 2017).

Given that most of African societies are patriarchal in nature, men are thus generally taken as heads of their families. In such cases, women largely depend on their husbands for survival and income. Hence, in cases of a husband’s death, women and children become exposed to a myriad of socio-economic challenges. Vulnerability and violation of women upon the death of their husbands, it aptly articulated in the television film-drama named ‘Neria’. In this film, the husband dies in a car accident leaving behind his wife and children. Relatives to the late husband quickly moved in to inherit the deceased’s estate against the will of the surviving wife.

Neria’s case and experience is not unique, but resonates with many widowed women in Zimbabwe and Africa more broadly. Mlevu (2020) observed that the Covid-19 pandemic would claim more male than female as such contributing in the making of widowed women are left vulnerable and face various forms of violence from the society at large. Although the government and non-governmental organisations try to establish interventions designed to improve single mothers’ lives and livelihoods, these intervention programmes are often top-down and urban biased. Therefore, they remain least helpful to rural single mothers. For instance, Western and other international Organisations recommend designing and scaling up cash transfer programmes in affected countries. While these may be meaningful, there seem to be no visible policy backing of such intervention programmes in Zimbabwe, especially those that target rural single mothers.

The Covid-19 pandemic has further expose single mothers to economic challenges. Such challenges are particularly pressing for rural single women in Africa. In the US, Quianta et al., (2020 p.1) found that single mothers are the most vulnerable population[s] and have been negatively impacted by the Covi-19 pandemic. While some single mothers are in the labour force, they are often paid very little and the likelihood to be in poverty is also very high. In fact, in Zimbabwe, most of the rural single mothers and their children are impoverished. Moyo and Kawewe (2009) proclaimed that there had been a sharp rise in households headed by women in the global South a situation they found likely to continue in the foreseeable future. Using the 1992 Government of Zimbabwe report which indicated that in communal areas (the reserves) 40% of all rural households were headed by women. This may explain challenges in the 21st century where,



...rural areas continue[d] to experience high levels of poverty, and it is women and children who represent the majority of rural dwellers...In 2000, the World Bank reported that 36% of Zimbabwe's 12 million people live on less than US\$1 per day, while 64.2% live on less than US\$2 per day [and] The rise in lone-parent households in Zimbabwe is occurring within a climate of increased deprivation, which supports the feminization of poverty thesis (Moyo & Kawewe 2009 p.162).

UNICEF Zimbabwe (2020) buttressed the above by reporting that the ...situation of women and children in Zimbabwe chronicles a story of progress, challenges, decline, and recovery for women and children. Today, poverty has a child's face in Zimbabwe. Of the 6.3 million boys and girls in the country, 4.8 million live in poverty, including 1.6 million in extreme poverty. Of the 13 million people in Zimbabwe, 48% are children. Most of them (72%, or 4.5million), live in rural areas which, on average, are the worst off in terms of health, education, nutrition, water and sanitation, access to information and other basic indicators of well-being and quality of life.

The above thus demonstrates the state and socio-economic condition of rural single women and their children in Zimbabwe –a condition that was also worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic from which not only are rural single women and their children exposed to vulnerability but to GBV, VAW/VAC as well.

It should, however, be stated that motherhood may be handled at different levels depending on context. For this study, motherhood is not one premised on 'radical womanhood' such as the one reported by Stevenson (2011) during the fight against apartheid in South Africa. While it is recognised that there are multiple discourses of womanhood and motherhood operating in the country, and that, identities locating mothers is complex as it encompasses more than their children. This study departs from considering political spaces where, sometimes, contradictory discourses and ideologies of motherhood intersect (Stevenson, 2011) especially during upheavals. In apolitical spaces, single mothers are usually caught up in a vicious cycle of gender violence which is the case with rural single mothers in Zimbabwe under study.

Mainthia et al. (2013) observed that becoming a single mother especially at an early age had a variety of negative consequences on individual women. On the other hand, Paz et al (2020) noted that covid-19 'lock-downs' or confinements exposed women, especially young girls to sexual exploitation. *The Sunday Mail* (29 August 2020), confirmed this reality when it reported that more school-going girls had fallen pregnant during the country's lockdown period. These pregnancies are often a consequence of sexual abuse and rape of young girls. A review of 141 studies in 81 countries reported that in 2010, 30% of women (15+ years older) had experienced some form of intimate partner violence (IPV) (McGuigan, 2020). Anecdotal evidence from newspaper reports reveal that there is a sharp increase in violence against women linked to the Covid-19 confinement measures in Zimbabwe and beyond. Clearly, this is what Chadambuka and Warri (2020) describe as a pandemic within a pandemic.

Approaching GBV has tended to either be based on womanhood perspectives. For instance, Mashiri and Mawire (2013) interest was to study GBV from a womanhood perspective where the scourge of GBV is to them very serious and the greatest cause of death and incapacity among women of reproductive age. They argue that what kills women more in Zimbabwe in particular is GBV which they find as 'rooted in the historically unequal power relations between men and women' (Mashiri & Mawire, 2013 p.94). Mukanangana, Moyo, Zvoushe and Rusinga (2014) reflected on GBV's negative impact on women's reproductive health (R.H). They observed three forms of GBV, namely, physical abuse; rape and forced marriages which they found as negatively impacting on the reproductive health status of women.

Placing the Zimbabwean experiences in the global scale on GBV, Ramisetty and Muriu (2013) took a comparative study of Zimbabwe and El Salvador. Noting that women in these two societies continued to experience

high levels of gender-based violence, Ramisetty and Muriu (2013 p.489) report on ‘the strategies and partnerships used by the Zimbabwe and El Salvador campaigns, including community outreach, mass mobilisation, and legislative lobbying, to achieve a positive shift in national policies and practices, to prevent gender-based violence’; with some positives noted on achievement policy and legislative change to end GBV in both countries.

While the above is reflective of the common stance or approach to GBV that does not single out variables among women in a society, there are a number of studies which specifically on rural women in the context of GBV. Notably, Teaster, Roberto and Dugar’s, (2006 p.636) studied intimate partner violence experiences of aging rural women. Moyo and Kawewe (2009) explored the nature and characteristics of lone motherhood in both rural and urban Zimbabwe. For Teaster, Roberto and Dugar (2006) rural communities, geographic isolation, economic constraints, strong social and cultural pressures significantly compound VAW. The other studies are exclusively concerned with GBV issues against married women at the hands of their husbands even into old age such as Mukanangana, Moyo, Zvoushe and Rusinga (2014); Mukanangana, Gore & Muza (2015) and Wekwete et al (2014). Fidan and Bui, (2016), for instance, examined intimate partner violence (IPV). In that study, Fidan and Bui (2016), found that although effects of structural and family contexts as well as gender ideology vary with types of IPV in Zimbabwe, husbands’ patriarchal behaviours were noted as significantly associated with an increased likelihood of all three types of IPV.

This could have prompted Chadambuka, (2020) to investigate coping mechanisms especially among rural women. It was reported that revealed that women’s understanding of IPV in rural areas is varied and that given economic hardships evident in rural areas, deprivation of financial assistance was provided as the main form of IPV. Furthermore, Chadambuka, (2020 p.10) says that

previous victims of IPV residing in rural areas adopt various mechanisms to avoid and minimize the occurrence of IPV. Most participants could not openly challenge the abusive partners or report the incident to the police. Instead, they had to cautiously establish strategies that ensured relief from abuse and its consequences, by trying not to infuriate the perpetrator and risk further victimization. Based on the findings, women residing in rural areas reported higher rates of emotion-focused coping, which shows how social norms cannot be discounted as plausible explanations for the response of women residing in rural areas to IPV situations.

Similarly, Waterman et al., (2020), driven by the desire to develop GBV prevention using a community–research partnership in Matabeleland North, used Victoria Falls as their case region. Results showed that stakeholders’ perceptions of the reasons for GBV were consistent with the empirical literature on GBV risk factors.

What is common in the above studies and efforts is general bias in up taking the womanhood perspective and not the motherhood perspective. This demonstrates how studies and efforts to address GBV generally show that single women are brought into the discourse categorised as girl children or mere young girls. Single mothers –adolescent, divorced women or (aged) widows rarely receive attention in GBV discourses. Single mothers, as a variable among women, in rural spaces are assumed to be equally, if not, violated more compared to their married counterparts; based on their gender and social standing. If this is not significantly addressed, rural single mothers will remain victims of ‘lifetime violence’ (Visaria, 2008 p.61) posing a grim humanitarian disaster. This should be read alongside Moyo and Kawewe’s (2009 p.161) argument that

...endogenous and exogenous forces associated with failing economies and gendered public policy structures, practices, and initiatives exacerbated by HIV/AIDS and intermittent droughts have worsened national poverty with much more devastation experienced by lone mothers and their children.

What Moyo and Kawewe (2009) were short of adding was the Covid-19 pandemic which however was not in force in 2009 as it only came to be a decade after their study but the fundamentals that have worsened the condition of single mothers (whom they call ‘lone’ mothers and their children in their study), still exist, wherein rural women tend to have an extended exposure to GBV.

## VAW/VAC a burden for rural single mothers

Inclusive gender-based Covid-19 intervention programmes, policies and support systems such as those initiated by Waterman et al., (2020) or Chadambuka (2020), cannot be formulated and implemented without first understanding the impact of the pandemic. Further, tired 'one-blanket-fits-all' models designed to alleviate, integrate, empower as well as rehabilitate victims of GBV now call for critical re-engagement as there is evidence of the prevalence of violence against women (VAW) despite existing so called alleviation or integration models.

Existing models and policies are not conscious to existing gender variables where women can be single, married, single-mothers/parents, while living in rural parts of the country. Most studies mostly address GBV issues from a womanhood perspective which ultimately causes appreciating a phenomenon that takes all women as a homogenous group yet there are or could be certain internal variables as noted above. These internal variables have either been used generically or have been completely ignored. They are the same variables that are then ignored when coming up with programmes or interventions such as is the case in Waterman et al., (2020) or in the purported successes reported by Ramisetty and Muriu (2013).

During the Covid-9 lockdown pandemic, some vulnerable groups in selected rural areas may have received assistance in terms of food and other requirements. As Khorsandi (2019) rightly noted, the country experienced drought the previous year meaning food security was already a threat by the time Covid-19 lockdown was imposed. The politics governing food aid in rural Zimbabwe is captured by Chingono (2019) who noted that there is

...insensitivity to gender ...especially to the plight of young single mothers. In traditional Shona society, women are considered minors, and this means that poor single mothers living with their parents are not eligible for food aid in their own right. Rather, whether or not they receive food aid depends on the eligibility or otherwise of their guardian. In one such case, a poor single mother, her child and two orphan cousins all had to depend on the meagre pension of their great grandfather, who they live with – all pensioners (and workers) are ineligible for food aid. Poor, vulnerable and discriminated against, some of these young women end up as sex workers, thereby exposing themselves to HIV/AIDS and premature death (as happened to the young woman in this case). All this gives further momentum to the vicious circle of poverty.

The narrative above reflects the cycle, not only of poverty, as Chingono (2019) puts it, but the vicious cycle of violence perpetrated through food aid interventions designed to ease food security. Because of socio-economic insecurity, rural single mothers seek the care of their parents. Their being single or unmarried is assumed generally to mean that they do not have their own space given the patriarchal nature of the society which favours men more than women (Mashiri & Mawire, 2013). This explains why they are culturally considered minors by society because a married person is what society culturally considers an adult as such he or she is expected to have his/her space or family therefore independence.

Deprivation of food aid on the basis that society considers single mothers as minors (Chingono, 2019), exposes them to sexual violence as they resort to sex work from which they are further exposed to health challenges and even premature deaths. Deprivation of food aid on the basis of one being a single mother is thus an act of violence as well as a human rights issue.

Apart from engaging in sex work to ease their social, economic situations and deprivation from accessing resources, many rural single mothers have also developed what Muzvidziwa (1997) referred to as 'rural-urban linkages' from which urban centres are used either as a market for their horticultural produce from village gardens or a supplier of stock for resell in their villages. Thus, single mothers, in pre-covid-19 period engaged

in manual menial jobs, vending, cross-border trade and selling of petty wares they would have got from urban centres or neighbouring countries such as South Africa, Mozambique or Botswana. Part of the wares sold include second-hand clothes despite the ban on the same by the government as a measure to stop spread of the Covid-19 virus.

One notices a complex give-and-take relationship (Muzvidziwa, 2001), from which female heads of household in rural areas used, to balance their relationship with urban centres. Sadly, due to Covid-19 stay-in policies, movements were restricted either between the countryside and towns/cities or cross boarder activities exerting an imminent economic burden to those involved in such activities. Although vending is widespread, as it is not restricted to single mothers or women alone, abrupt announcement of the lockdown, as noted above, gave vendors in general little time to organise their savings and stock up on food (Gukurume & Oosterom, 2020). In other words, it created economic shocks (UNICEF Social Policy Programme & Division, 2020). In some cases, imminent ban on selling of certain goods such as second-hand clothes left vendors without supplies and with restricted movement they could not get to markets thus leaving them with no income. Although unavoidable under the circumstances, Covid-19 restrictions became ‘an attack on poor people’s livelihoods and economic rights’ (Gukurume & Oosterom, 2020). The United Nations [Zimbabwe] (2020a) noted that women reported an increased burden in taking care of children, performing household chores among other routine duties they have at household and community level. As such, young female-headed households became particularly vulnerable to shocks and stresses, as their mobility as well as livelihood options came to be limited to caring for younger siblings in the home.

Further, Covid-19 lockdown confined people in their domestic spaces and this meant that rural single mothers, most of whom had lost their income one way or the other, had to find ways to get food and other provisions. While food aid programmes excluded them from benefiting thereby vulnerability exposing them to various forms of violence, mostly sexual by other members from the community, Scoones (2020) provides a glimpse of other experiences rural farmers during Covid-19 lockdown in Zimbabwe faced. Scoones (2020) submits that constrained movements impacted on rural farmers in that they were restricted from getting crops to the markets as doing so required public transport which at the time had been grounded. Horticultural produce such as cabbage and tomatoes were rotting in farms forcing some to resort to vegetable-drying creating ‘*mufushwa*’ in large quantities’ (Scoones, 2020) while income from markets such as boarding schools, restaurants and other centres could not be realised as they had closed down.

It should be noted that 56% of communal farmers in Zimbabwe are rural women (United Nations [Zimbabwe], 2020a). From a projected population of 16.2 million, 52% of whom are female and 67% living in rural areas (United Nations [Zimbabwe], 2020b). This alone makes one assume the condition of rural single mothers against the above statistical realities. Ranscombe (2020) also observed that as the official lockdown dates came to pass, a considerable number of city dwellers flooded out of cities or urban centres returning to their traditional homes in the countryside. The remote areas were probably chosen for their sparse densely-populated both in terms of immediate spaces as well as the community at large. But the increase in population as most people returned to rural areas exposed single rural mothers to various forms of abuse such as sexual exploitation, molestation and other various forms of abuse by the returnee urban migrants. Scoones (2020) noted that, generally, because people cannot go out due to restrictions

...tensions rise. Some are consuming illegal brews – including spirits made at home. This can be dangerous, just like we are seeing increased drug use among the youth. Normal life is disrupted.

These conditions of having people confined or sudden disruption to life became fertile ground for GBV. The United Nations [Zimbabwe], (2020b p.15) predicted at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic that

Women and girls are also more likely to suffer from sexual and gender-based violence during crises like the current pandemic, especially during periods of lockdown and restricted movement. Additionally,



women's and especially adolescent girls' reproductive rights are likely to remain unmet as the government re-prioritizes expenditures, including health sector expenditures, towards the fight against the pandemic. In addition, the resultant economic stress on families due to the pandemic is likely to give rise to negative coping mechanisms. The anticipated economic fallout of COVID-19 could result in more child or early marriages, transactional sex, child labour and gender-based violence as a coping strategy to financial and food insecurity.

And true to the above, Msasa, an agency that runs toll free GBV help lines, reported that there had been a 100% increase in calls related to domestic abuse since the start of lockdown (Naughton, 2020). This could also have been worsened by the assumed urban-rural sudden movement as urbanites returned to their rural homes hopefully as a preventative measure to contract the virus based on spatial aspects since the remote areas generally are spaced. But the sudden population influx in rural set-ups had its own challenges to rural dwellers.

A documentary relaying prison experiences at Chikurubi Maximum Prison aired on the national television, ZBC TV, sometime in 2019 revealed a male rapist prisoner narrating how he got incarcerated. In the narration, he reveals that his brother during one festive season returned home for the holidays from his South Africa base. In the village was one teen woman who was a staunch Johanne Masowe church congregante. The prisoner and his brother relayed that the two hatched a plan and hid behind bushes where the teen lady used to undertake her prayers and spoke to her the way biblical angels spoke to God's chosen ones. The plan re-laid information that convinced the teen girl to return at the same place in the evening alone, to which she did, following all clandestine instructions meant to cheat her into surrendering herself sexually. The vulnerable lady was made to lie down and was raped thinking the angel of God had been instructed to have an intimate relationship with her. She fell pregnant as a result and it was after the birth of a 'fatherless' child did the rapist return to the village and confessed to her what had transpired from which a report to the police was made leading to his arrest and eventual imprisonment.

The narrative above reveals a clear instance of sexual violence or VAW enacted by male members of the society who used religious manipulation or 'quasi-mystical force' of religion to sexually abuse devotees by wearing away any meaningful consent to sexual activity. Chireshe (2015 p.381), studying Christian women's experiences of domestic violence in Zimbabwe, noted that the concept of violence relates to a wide range of 'coercive behaviours aimed at controlling a victim and includes physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuse.' The narrative is thus a clear instance of coercive behavior by men who sort to control their victim by sexually abusing her and sadly it was done to a single rural Christian woman. However, religious beliefs and indoctrination in the above case also played a part in exposing single rural women to GBV. It thus reflects that a combination of a myriad issues, in this case manipulation, religious beliefs and indoctrination fuel GBV.

Most rural areas in Zimbabwe have no piped water and villagers rely on rivers or dams for water. Further, given the patriarchal strict division of social roles, even in set-ups where single mothers live in extended families with male siblings most domestic chores remain bestowed on women such as household gardening. Because of water challenges, household gardens are usually located at the banks of rivers and dams exposing women, especially rural single mothers who do not have male figures to assist in some respect. During the vortex period of Covid-19 in Zimbabwe, Naughton (2020) explained the burden bestowed on women in general in having to look after their families in the rural areas. Mupesa (2020) provides sad realities as exemplified in a case in which an 18 years old woman was attacked and killed together with her 11 month baby strapped on her back, by a crocodile whilst fetching water for watering her garden in rural Mhangura. The report reveals that the woman was alone, save with her baby strapped at her back, and no villager was nearby to assist. Thus, 'She was dragged into the dam where both she and the baby drowned' (Mupesa, 2020).

## Commenting on the incident, Mlevu (2020) says

The woman died while fending for her family, a role that has been systematically assigned to women by capitalism which exploits cheap labour of men in the mines and plantations across the country. This week another woman made headlines for bravely pursuing a crocodile into the river to rescue her child who had been snatched by the reptile whilst she was fishing. These stories flag up the hazardous nature of women's unpaid and unrecognized labour in Zimbabwe and the region which continues despite the national lockdown announced by the government.

What is clear from the above is that rural single mothers are pushed to the deeper ends where their security is at risk not only against their male counterparts or other members of the society, but they are also at risk of carnivores that populate the various spaces where they risk their arms and limb to fend for themselves and their children. In the two cases, it is clear that society members, especially men, are nowhere to be found to assist or offer some degree of protection when rural single women's security is threatened.

Rural areas in Zimbabwe are also generally agro-based spaces where people's livelihoods are commonly sustained by either growing of crops or rearing of livestock or both (Naughton, 2020). Chidakwa, Mabhena, Mucherera, Chikuni and Mudavanhu, (2020) describe rural livelihoods as agro-based. Because agriculture relies heavily on climate change, any challenges to climatic conditions presents a considerable threat to human security '...with women likely to be the most affected group' (Chidakwa et al., 2020 p.261) because as noted above, the majority of these women

...reside in rural areas and rely heavily on agriculture. Rural women depend heavily on agriculture and natural resources and they are the backbone of sustainable livelihoods that provide food security for their families and communities (Chidakwa et al., 2020 p.261).

Therefore, reading the above in the context of Covid-19 pandemic, one reads that reliance of women on natural resources for food, income, energy, and their combined disadvantaged position in a patriarchal society, increases their vulnerability to covid-19 pandemic as well as existing climate-change-induced distress. In other words, the prevailing public health crisis affects their health, safety and security. Rural single mothers' families are found to be in distress, especially in already vulnerable rural communities such as in Chivi, Bikita, Buhera, among others, considered perennial drought-stricken areas. Recurrent El Nino and La Nina induced droughts are reported to have weakened rural women's capacity to grow food and keep livestock (Chidakwa et al., 2020). What makes women more vulnerable is the fact that some are sexually exploited as they seek other for instance food rations during say food distribution exercises or are forced to engage in risk practices such as prostitution for food. In other words, they are left at the mercy of those with power over food distribution. Mlevu (2020) rightly notes that

Government and humanitarian NGOs interventions in these disaster situations have often added to the misery of women through sexual exploitation in exchange for food and favours.

Further, the Zimbabwe's Civil Protection Act (*Ch 10:06*) of 1989, which is usually used in a state of disaster, ...does not offer women protection from abuse in the course of being rescued. It does not have grievance reporting mechanisms in case people's rights are violated by those distributing humanitarian aid (Mlevu, 2020)

This is what was witnessed in the Tugwi-Mukosi (Masvingo) induced displacements where most victims were single rural women who lost access to land and livestock and were temporarily housed in Chigwizi Camp in Naunetsi Ranch in the Mwenezi area. There were reports of sexual abuse of single mothers by humanitarian officials and security personnel in the camp in exchange for favours as well as food (Saidi, Mashingaidze & Mwandayi, 2020). Some single rural women lost their children or were maimed themselves by scorpions as the area was reported to have been heavily infested by very poisonous scorpions.

Closely linked to the foregoing has been rural single mothers' violent experiences at the hands of machete-wielding male gangs (*MaShurugwi*) in the pre-covid-19 and during the lockdown periods. These machete wielding



gangs, (*MaShurugwi*), went around, mostly in remote parts of the country terrorising vulnerable members of the society, rural single mothers and their children included. In Ameva farm (Chegutu), Nkomo (2020) reported of a woman aged 80 years old and a girl aged 16 years old who were raped and brutally killed while three others who include minors were seriously injured. Dube-Matutu and Mthabisi (2020) also reported in *The Sunday News*, that *MaShurugwi*, armed with an AK-47 rifle and a pistol besieged five homesteads in Fort Rixon area in Insiza District where they also got away with money and cell-phones from suspected gold dealers. Further, it was indicated that the nine-member-gang

...on Thursday night first kidnapped a woman who was relieving herself in the bush before force-marching her to the homesteads where they stole money amounting to ZW\$2 000, US\$300, P10 and four cell-phones.

Media reports above reflect various incidences from which rural people in general are subjected to various forms of violence. Judging from the victims by gender, one notes that for women, the situation appears worse and this points to their lack of security of all forms either food, economic or social security.

## Conclusion

This article has shown that GBV problems rural single mothers face are usually side-lined yet their situations are even worse. Studies on IPV proclaim that married women are exposed to GBV, VAW/VAC as exerted by the male patriarchal members of the society they know or live with under the same roof. In the context of this paper, it can be noted that rural single mothers are victims of sexual exploitation, physical and psychological violence from which their reproductive health, economic, food and social security are seriously threatened.

Based on the above, it appears that attacks are exerted on vulnerable rural single mothers due to their already compromised security. Further, one assumes that the rural set-up exposes single mothers to physical and or sexual violence as noted in the media reports above. When a woman was kidnapped as she was relieving herself demonstrates that, unlike in urban set-ups and homes with bathrooms inside the home, generally rural people often use Blair toilets. But, this is usually for those who can afford to build them.

Studies above have indicated that single mothers suffer serious financial challenges due to a myriad of problems as such find themselves and their children having to use the bush to relieve themselves. It follows therefore that at night, such women may be attacked by criminals who usually favor the night for their operations. Rural spaces also lack of tap water forcing single mothers to have homestead gardens along the banks of the rivers in order for to make it easier to grow crops for their families. Sadly, they are exposed to dangerous creatures such as crocodiles. Dams and rivers are also used as sources of food in terms of fishing which again exposes them to crocodile attacks.

It has also been noted that the Covid-19 pandemic, if anything, has worsened the condition of single rural women as for instance lockdowns limited their movement which was a key issue for their economic survival. Given that most rural women survive on agriculture, it follows that they could not sell their produce to various urban or peri-urban centres. Further, for those who would partake in the complex relationship of linking the urban and rural centres by bringing goods for sell in the cities and returning to the villages with suppliers for resell in communal spaces meant such movements for economic and other social engagements were limited or totally blocked.

Moreover, in other areas where climatic changes have had a toll in such areas, perennial droughts posed a threat to food security. Food distributions, as noted above, had its own politics as rural single mother were denied access by virtue of having to be living with parents and thus treated as mere children who had to benefit

through their elderly parents. Further studies are thus required to engage and unearth as well as document experiences of single rural mothers so that intervention programmes can be initiated by government, churches and other NGOs in order to bring some agency to single rural mothers despite their age.



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SWAG

STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S ADVOCACY  
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# HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS BY VICTIMS OF HUMAN RIGHTS: RETHINKING LESBIANISM IN THE CONTEXT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN ZIMBABWE

Professor Hazel Ngoshi, PhD

## Abstract

Homosexuality has received attention within the larger realm of human rights, yet very little is known on the dynamics of violence emanating or connected to it in the context of violence against women (VAW). In countries where homosexuality, specifically lesbianism is not recognised by law, yet secretly practised, cases of VAW are a reality but the complex nature of 'relations' place victims of sexual violence or other such, at the deeper end of psychological and physical suffering. Motivated by a reported case of a prophetess lesbian arraigned before the courts for sexually assaulting a vulnerable, assumed heterosexual female congregant, this paper revisits lesbianism in the context of VAW in Zimbabwe. The paper argues that lesbianism is socially stigmatised in the country and because it is not recognised at law; is socially and politically rejected, it creates complexities in having to deal with forms of violence of a sexual nature, perpetrated against heterosexual members of the same sex. In heterosexual set-ups, similar assaults may be regarded as 'rape' thereby attracting punitive reaction from the law. Society has been grappling with the search for sustainable solutions against VAW in general. Against this background, the discussion in this paper proposes a rethinking of sexual VAW perpetrated by lesbians on heterosexual women in Zimbabwe.

**Key Words:** gender, lesbian, VAW, homosexual, heterosexual, Zimbabwe

## Introduction

This study is motivated by a case involving a 29 year old Gweru (Zimbabwe) prophetess who was arrested and arraigned before the courts in June 2020 accused of aggravated indecent assault of a vulnerable 32 years old congregant. The congregant had come to the city looking for accommodation sometime in January 2020 (The Chronicle, 2020a) and was temporarily offered help by the prophetess during which time the sexual offence was committed in February of the same year.

In the case, which at the time of writing of this article was still before the courts, it is alleged that the accused and the victim lived together and shared the same bed. The victim alleges the prophetess had given a prophecy to the effect that the complainant was soon to be married to a suitor whose name was given, but which turned out to be a hoax. The victim was sexually assaulted or violated by the accused through 'kissing the complainant all over the body and caressing her'(Midlands News, 2020) where upon the prophetess 'sucked her breasts while putting her fingers in her privates on three different occasions'(The Chronicle, 2020a). Taking this story as a point of departure, this paper seeks to provide a nuanced analysis of sexual violence perpetrated against heterosexual females by homosexual women.

Epprecht, (2005) and Epprecht, (1999) proclaim that Zimbabwe experiences homophobia as

Denunciations of homosexuality by prominent African leaders [Such as the late Robert Mugabe] have sometimes been taken as evidence of a deep, perhaps essential homophobia in African society. On closer inspection, however, the real issue behind these denunciations seems not to be the sexual choices of the men and women involved, but their lack of discretion. This fear of the public transgression of sexual norms (rather than of the sex acts themselves) is more accurately termed transphobia than ho-

mophobia or heteronormativity (Epprecht, 2005 p.254)

More importantly for Epprecht, (2005), homosexuality has not been tolerated as far back as the colonial period in Zimbabwe. In the study, Epprecht, (2005) uses qualitative content analysis to trace expressions that provide evidence of the experiences of same-sex sexuality much of which came to be captured by legislation which pinned its reason on religious morality, hygiene and other moral social aspects. Muparamoto, (2020 p.2) however, submits that ‘dominant social categorization of homosexual identities in Zimbabwe can to some extent be linked to the denunciations made by Robert Mugabe.’ Despite the above, Muparamoto, (2020) proclaims that Zimbabwe has witnessed an emergent queer mobilisation and sexual identities politics.

Homosexuality is not recognised by law or openly accepted by society in Zimbabwe. Robert Mugabe, then the President of the country at the height of the land reform programme, described homosexuals as worse than pigs (Muparamoto, 2020; Du Plessis, 2014). But this does not mean that it is absent in practice thus explaining how such individuals react by assuming queer identities (Walsh-haines, 2012; Epprecht, 2005), expressed in certain forums but practiced underground. Similar sexual offences should be weighed equally in the face of law. Further, interventions on GBV will also find better surface area of operation to include aspects that emanate from female homosexual encounters.

Female sexuality is no longer a new subject in contemporary human rights discourses, but in most African countries, homosexuality is condemned at various levels of society making it socially unacceptable and taboo (Marching, 2008). There is general acceptance that homosexuality is foreign to African culture and practices, and that, it is an immoral Eurocentric practice. Evaristo (2014) finds connections of homosexuality to colonialism as a myth. Evaristo hence refutes this claim noting that people in history have globally explored and experimented with their sexuality in history. Thus, desire to experiment with sexuality issues has never been confined to particular geographical locations. In fact, for Evaristo it has been a political manoeuvre to endorse anti-gay legislation and stir up homophobia and persecution in Africa as there is evidence to the effect that Africa practised homosexuality during pre-colonial periods as

You cannot argue with rock paintings. Thousands of years ago, the San people of Zimbabwe depicted anal sex between men. The truth is that, like everywhere else, African people have expressed a wide range of sexualities. Far from bringing homosexuality with them, Christian and Islamic forces fought to eradicate it. By challenging the continent’s indigenous social and religious systems, they helped demoralise and persecute homosexuality in Africa, paving the way for the taboos that prevail today (Evaristo, 2014).

Thus, dominant social norms render being a gay or lesbian in Africa at the same time ‘ungrammatical’ with each other in the public sphere’ (Marching, 2008 p.8). What incenses African appropriation of same-sex sexual behaviours are cultural and social disparities existing between the West and Africa, which makes most African countries view homosexuality as stamping on the moral fibre of the African people following the devastating colonial experience.

There is general agreement that Africa’s rejection of homosexuality is purely political (Evaristo 2014; Schäfer & Range, 2014); Lennox & Waites 2013). This is because following formation of post-colonial nationalisms in many states of the global South, definitions of nation-state witnessed occurrences of ‘moral discourses involving the exclusion of certain same-sex sexualities and gender forms which become defined as Western and alien....’ (Lennox & Waites, 2013 p.6) As such decriminalisation of same-sex sexual behaviours continue to be a struggle in Africa (Epprecht, 2005; Epprecht, 1999). However, forms of criminalisation on the basis of same-sex preferences have in contemporary human rights discourses come to be regarded as a human right violation. Howard, Dunton and Palmberg (1998) buttress this point in their review of participation of gay



and lesbians at the 1995 Zimbabwe International Book Fair (ZIBF) in Zimbabwe. Thus, the The Independent Advisory Group on Country Information (IAGCI) (2018) noted that Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) had indicated that ‘General homophobia and restrictive legislation make it difficult for LGBTI people in Zimbabwe to feel safe about being open about their sexuality in public spaces.’ Whether read as political or social, ultimately, the Zimbabwean society has a general negative attitude towards same-sex relationships in the country.

Within the broader context, therefore, by year 2012, 78 states worldwide, most of which are African states such as Uganda, Kenya and Zimbabwe, were reported to have been criminalising same-sex sexual behaviours on the basis that most of them, at least fifty percent, had existing criminal laws on homosexuality because they were once British colonies following criminalisation of the behaviours in the 19th century British Empire (Lennox & Waites 2013). In Spain, however, Sala and Benítez (2009) believe criminalisation of same-sex relations, like in Africa was political rather than a social act; traditional rather than a modernity issue given that matters related to sex were given to moral or government authority, as a matter of ‘public order.’ For Spain, this was because from as early as 1939 to 1979, the country was under a catholic ideologically inclined dictatorship from which ‘the dictator, Francisco Franco, gave the ecclesiastic authorities the control of public and private moral’ (Sala & Benítez, 2009 p.824). But from 2004, Spanish society experienced spectacular progress both in the economical and the social plane and the country became the third country in the world to legalize homosexual unions, after the Netherlands and Belgium.

Lennox and Waites (2013 p.5) posit that

Criminalisation of same-sex sexual behaviour implies a major form of state stigmatisation, sustaining social prejudices and accompanying violence and discrimination. The impact of such criminalisation, applying even in private, is to generate inequalities between individuals and groups. It degrades the relationships and intimate lives of those affected as international gay, lesbian and bisexual movements have long argued.

Prohibition, legislative restrictions or impediment of same-sexual behaviours in Zimbabwe has tended to drive same-sex relationships expressions underground thereby undermining challenges that might be associated with in any relationship. For instance, prevention and treatment measures in the fight against sexually transmitted illnesses, (STIs) as well as HIV and AIDS could be hampered as homosexuals cannot freely ‘march onto the streets in numbers and celebrate’ (IAGCI, 2018 p.21) or campaign against other challenges such as gendered violence that may be observed in their relationships. By default, it means forms of violence manifesting in such undergrounded same-sex sexual practices or violations will be difficult to mitigate. The thinking in this regard is one aligned to decriminalising same-sex sexual behaviours so that issues connected to it may be openly discussed. Miller, Greene, Causby, White and Lockhart (2014) presented evidence that the presumption that lesbian relationships are free from violence is a myth as there are studies demonstrating that there are instances of verbal harassment, physical harassment, rape and beatings in lesbian relationships.

The other important notion is the call that there be harmony between same-sex sexual behaviours and gender identity in order for human rights to be guaranteed. Studies by Howard, Dunton and Palmberg (1998); Eprecht, (2005, 1999), Muparamoto (2020) advocate for this position. Perhaps the call for harmony is premised on the notion that Sala and Benítez, (2009 p.823) observed which is that

Heterosexuality and homosexuality are not essential categories, but merely two of the possible ways in which a society may think, talk, and feel about the relations between sexes and the distribution of power between genders.

Therefore, the hope is that patterns of violence such as the killing of gay people and activists in Jamaica, and Uganda or imprisonment of citizens under sex offense laws, as was the case in Malawi (Lennox & Waites, 2013; Howard, Dunton & Palmberg (1998); Epprecht, (2005, 1999) and other countries where similar human rights abuses have been recorded, be controlled. However, the preoccupation of pushing for homosexuality to be officially recognised by society at large overshadows forms of violence existing in practice as Miller et al., (2014) demonstrate.

One notes that the same-sex relationships discussed above are a phenomena which preoccupies human rights defenders in Zimbabwe and globally. Miller et al., (2014) rightly notes that within the same-sex relations forms of gender based violence are observed as such calling for due attention. But based on the case given above which is the point of departure in this paper, a complex scenario is read in which a lesbian prophetess sexually violates a purported heterosexual congregant. Despite this complexity a reasonable submission is that sexual offences remain as such despite one's sexual orientation, creed, culture or social status. Most importantly, sexual offenses are forms of violence against vulnerable members of society and have detrimental effects on victims. Some of the effects may be psychologically taxing as well as life traumatising to the victims. This paper, therefore sheds light on issues of VAW far removed from the generic patriarchal antecedents on which gender based violence (GBV) is usually pinned.

## Unpacking lesbian sexual violence

The idea in this article is not to engage the moral, philosophical and political debates over homosexuality, but to crack open the same-sex canon to unearth aspects of VAW therein. This is premised on the understanding that GBV and VAW pervade day-to-day living. As such, despite its unofficial acceptance by society or law, homosexuality is practiced. The GBV and VAW perpetrated in such spaces may be difficult to detect since homosexuality in countries such as Zimbabwe, and most African countries for that matter, is practised underground due to political and social prohibitions. It is, therefore, important to document and analyse struggles for human rights by victims of sexual offenses from such situations despite campaigns for criminalisation or decriminalisation of same-sex sexual relations in a wider gender identity terrain.

In any union or relationship or where humans engage, conflicts are bound to exist. In other words, as Sala and Benítez, (2009 p.819) rightly note, 'humans are social beings, not only because of the way in which our beliefs and behaviours are socially influenced, but also because our capacity for thinking and acting is constructed socially.' Hence, the desire to identify and gain a stable view of one's place in the world often encounters negotiations much of which may result or create conflict. This may explain why Muparamoto (2020) proclaims that same-sex relations are gaining visibility in Zimbabwe and in the world at large. Thus, when conflicts lead to the suppression of one by another or exertion of power over another, red flags need to be raised in order to safeguard the rights of all parties involved.

## Methodology

In order to interrogate the sexual abuse of women in lesbian relationships and abuse perpetrated by lesbians on heterosexual women, this article uses a qualitative methodology that relies heavily on desktop research. Content analysis was employed in which media reports and studies on debates focusing on same-sex relationships were extensively consulted in order to obtain data and analyse the phenomenon at hand. Motivated by a case involving a prophetess accused of having sexually abused a vulnerable female congregant in Zimbabwe, the article further uses Marshall's (1989 in Ward, Polaschek, & Beech, 2006), theory of Intimacy Deficits and Sexual Offending to unravel the prophetess' violent actions in the context of female homosexual violence



against a supposedly heterosexual vulnerable woman. Thus a case study approach was also employed from which the study is pinned.

The aim is to view the reported case as a tip of the iceberg in matters on VAW within private spheres that seem closed by virtue of the nature of homosexual behaviours existing ‘underground’ by virtue of the Zimbabwean society having a negative attitude towards individuals who may be lesbians or gays. VAW is a human violation despite the context within which it may be perpetrated. As such there is need to rethink the seemingly broader problem in Zimbabwe as there could be cases of a similar nature that are going unreported but creating victims who are traumatically suffering the scourge of abuse they may find difficult to report for redress. Given the Covid-19 lockdown, this scenario could have been exacerbated as people remained confined in domestic spaces (Naughton, 2020; Moyo & Kawewe, 2009).

## Marshall’s Theory of Intimacy Deficits and Sexual Offending

Marshall (1989 in Ward, Polaschek, & Beech, 2006) recognised that sexual offenders had problems in social functioning. In other words, Marshall argued that such deficits arose either from problems in sexual satisfaction or the need for power, control and recognition. For Marshall, adult intimacy is a function of the attachment bond between two people that involves three relationship states: closeness and inter-dependence of partners; mutual self-disclosure and warmth and affection for one another. While the theory observes that development of intimacy is shaped by parental influences and early attachment relationships, Ward, Polaschek, Beech, (2006 p.182) report that for Marshall,

...intimacy confers upon adults both a sense of well-being and life meaning. He further stated that individuals who score highly on measures of intimacy are viewed by others as warm and sincere, and less self-centred than those who score low on such measures. Marshall made the argument that adults with well-developed intimate relationships are more resilient than those who lack intimacy, because they have a greater sense of purpose in life, show a greater resistance to depression, and are in better physical and mental health.

In other words, it means people who have suffered sexual, emotional or physical abuse, rejection, lack of support, emotional coldness or disruptive experiences with their parents in childhood were insecurely attached. Thus, experiences of insecure attachment during childhood are handled by the theory as responsible for the problems aligned to relating to others since they suffer emotional loneliness.

The theory also notes the role of social and cultural influences as inhibiting or facilitating development of adolescent and adult intimacy. Hence, social and cultural influences may encourage inappropriate intimate behaviours and the kinds of influence that Marshall describes relate to ‘perceived images of intimacy in the media, such as macho attitudes, and the portrayal of purely sexual intimate relations in adult pornography’ (Ward, Polaschek & Beech 2006 p.182). Ultimately, the theory claims that failure to achieve intimacy can lead to sexual offending. While this theory reflects dynamics as well as attempts to proffer an explanation behind sexual offending, the bias is enshrined on intimacy based on parenting and child development. It suggests that either an individual is introduced to intimacy aspects from childhood or deprived of it. This means those who have been deprived of intimacy aspects in childhood are likely to make amends in adult life thus leading them to violently demand intimacy using unbecoming means.

In the context of this paper therefore, Marshall’s Theory of Intimacy Deficits and Sexual Offending helps unpack homosexuality and heterosexuality offenses. As studies have extensively shown, (Lennox & Waites, 2013; Howard, Dunton & Palmberg (1998); Epprecht, (2005, 1999, Miller et al., 2014; Muparamoto 2020)

same-sex relations are not mere social constructs as lesbian identities may be out of birth rather than mere personal choices (although in some cases this may be a factor). The other factor is that, female homosexuality faces its own acceptance hurdles exposing lesbians to other social constructions of gendered forms of intimacy that finally manifest themselves in adulthood as the lesbian private sphere may be a lonely sphere for those that partake in it. The following section discusses the complex same-sex sexual violence in which lesbianism is implicated.

## Summary of the case

This study is motivated and based on a case involving a Gweru based-lesbian-Pentecostal-church-Prophetess who sometime in January 2020 offered accommodation to a heterosexual vulnerable congregant (Midlands News, 2020). The congregant was looking for accommodation and the Prophetess offered her temporary lodging while she was looking for her own space. It was alleged that, during that time, the Prophetess offered a prophecy to the effect that the unmarried female congregant would be married to a man whose name was supplied (The Chronicle, 2020a). To accord fruition of the prophecy, the congregant is said to have been asked to 'seed' something to which a cell phone was surrendered as seed. The Prophetess is further accused to have four times sexually exploited the congregant by inserting her fingers in the victim's private parts while squeezing her breasts after overpowering the victim. Amidst these acts, the Prophetess is said to have been 'possessed' (as the Prophetess would speak in a hoarse voice) by the spirit of the man whom the prophecy had indicated would be her future husband. To conceal the grave sexual offense, the Prophetess is said to have bribed the victim with money (The Chronicle, 2020a). The arrest of the Prophetess came to be after the victim shared the experience with another congregant leading to the report of the matter. The Prophetess was arrested sometime in April 2020 charged with indecent assault and was found guilty of the offense and sentenced to nine years in prison (The Chronicle, 2020b) after two years were suspended on good behaviour.

## So, who shepherds the flock when the shepherdess goes rogue?

Reports on lesbian identity creation,

indicate that the moment of awareness of one's own "mismatch" with the culturally dominant model of compulsory heterosexuality is a critical time, characterized by the conflict between different forces: the need to know yourself and understand why you feel like this versus the discourses that stigmatize any sexual identity that does not coincide with heterosexuality, making the process difficult (Sala & Benítez, 2009 p.828).

The above questions or exposes the case under scrutiny since it is reported that the prophetess sexually forced herself on her congregant. Assuming this to have been the case, one reads aspects of intimacy attraction on the part of the prophetess towards the victim and/or lack of mutuality from the victim.

Marshall's (1989) adult intimacy is observed in the above case grossly expressed by the prophetess whom the media quickly labelled homosexual or lesbian (*Midlands News*, 2020). However, the three relationship states namely closeness and inter-dependence of partners; mutual self-disclosure and warmth and affection for one another, are clearly absent and cannot be accounted for as articulated in Marshall's theory. In other words, there was no function of the attachment bond between the two save for the vulnerable victim desiring protection in the form of shelter and food from a female clergy. Additionally, by Zimbabwe's cultural standards, the victim is long over-due for marriage which heightens her vulnerability since she looks up to the prophetess to facilitate her social redemption by spiritually facilitating a marriage.



Following Marshall's theory, background research is required to establish the prophetess' childhood to determine if indeed she had been deprived of intimacy or not since according to Marshall, failure to achieve intimacy can lead to sexual offending (Ward, Polaschek & Beech 2006); which might explain the sexual offence. However, a broad analysis of the case above presents some complexities assuming that indeed the matter is enshrined in the female homosexual realm. This paper does not seek to judge, ascertain or pinpoint that the prophetess is indeed a lesbian. However, the media which extensively reported on the case projects her as one as noted in the stories carried by Midlands News, (2020); *The Chronicle*, (2020a, 2020b). In fact, the paper is premised on the probability of such being a reality thereby opening doors to what appears as trivial or hidden aspects involving same-sex sexual behaviours in Zimbabwe.

Violence against women has extensively been pinned on heterosexual relations where vulnerable women are violated in one way or the other. Rape, indecent assault, verbal, physical abuse, assault (*Great Dyke News*24, 2020) deprivation of access to food and shelter among others are cited as indicators of VAW from which interventions are called upon in order to eliminate such gendered human rights violations in the broad context of GBV. The victim is reported to have been exposed to sexual exploitation due to her lack of accommodation. The prophetess offered her accommodation and the two were sharing the same bed (*The Chronicle*, 2020a, 2020b) hence making it rather easier for the victim to be violated. The above case, however, demands one to stretch appreciation of VAW as also manifesting itself in contexts where the male figure is absent.

Over-subscribing to heterosexual relations and patriarchal scenarios tends to project VAW as merely existing or aligned to misogyny. It is, therefore, inadequate to claim that VAW is founded on patriarchy and masculinity (Miller et al., 2014). Lesbian contexts as the above case suggests reflect the existence of VAW equated to rape in heterosexual relations. Clearly, this has eluded public debate in the broad realm of GBV and VAW and at another level, same-sex sexual violence has also not received critical attention. There is, thus, general lack of theory to adequately explain this complex phenomenon.

Handling of the VAW at two seemingly different levels also exposes complexities that exist in having to eliminate GBV and craft policies in that, in a heterosexual scenario, a sexual offender may be accused of 'rape' while a same-sex sexual offence of a similar nature is categorised as 'aggravated indecent assault.' Questions one puts across are whether the two seemingly different offences, labelled as such, but pragmatically the same, have different effects on the victim or not? In GBV, rape (although has its various versions) is generally considered a very serious human right violation. Indecency on the other hand alludes to moral offensiveness. Thus, treating the same sexual offense on one hand as a moral issue and on another as an unlawful issue is to trivialise the need for a holistic approach and mitigate VAW.

It should be noted that in the above case, it is not homosexuality which is under scrutiny but the sexual offence, which sadly, by virtue of parties involved draws attention to moral aspects given that homosexuality in general is primarily rejected on moral, religious and cultural grounds (Evaristo, 2014; IAGCI, 2018; Howard et al., 1998; Muparamoto, 2020). Nowhere in the case was homosexuality as an offense cited and the prophetess tied on it. In passing sentence, *The Chronicle* (2020b) reported that the magistrate noted that

as a woman of the cloth should have protected the complainant who was looking up to her as her shepherdess. The accused was the pastor of the complainant who placed her trust and faith in her and her prophecies. Instead of looking after her, she turned into her abuser and courts should give long custodial sentences to deter would be offenders. Concerns on VAW in situations reflected by the case above is noted where the prophetess was imprisoned for sexually exploiting a female congregante. This alone makes one ponder the broad as well as complex human rights issues that involve women and their rights in both public and private spheres. The case is also on record as an aggravated assault and not rape, which in a heterosexual perspective could have been handled as a rape case and not indecent

assault had the perpetrator been a man. Which somehow dilutes the form of violence based on moral aspects rather than criminal intent. The reason why the case could probably not be handled as a rape case was the homosexual nature of the case. One assumes therefore that this could be because of the difference in the legal definitions of as enshrined in the Zimbabwean law as homosexuality generally has no positive recognition.

At the same time, assumption of universal sexual subjectivity may pose the danger of pushing one towards orientalist misunderstanding of sexuality in Zimbabwe. At the same time, 'it also runs the risk of over-politicizing sexuality' (Bucar & Shirazi, 2012 p.417) since what makes Zimbabweans appear different from 'others' such as Westerners or those in countries such as South Africa that recognise homosexuality, is rejection of homosexual identities. The implication will not be on sexuality debates but will be directly exerted on VAW in that, on the one hand, Zimbabwe may be forced to accept homosexuality as a global challenge, while on the other hand, the context of its manifestation has its unique realities. How then can interventions to stop VAW in such spheres be policed, regulated and solved?

If the fight against VAW is to create gender equality and equal treatment of all citizens as well as promoting healthy societies, it follows that every instance where VAW may manifest itself require interrogation, research and appropriate interventions. The observation made by Morrissey (2013 p.73) that

South Africa has become exemplary as an African nation paving the way for equal treatment of all citizens—especially including gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender, and queer (GLBTQ) citizens...

means that South Africa has a framework of approaching VAW in lesbian circumstances or contexts. Such a framework is important in that it places citizen behaviours within a well-crafted continuum where aspects of violence or human rights abuses, even those performed in private spheres, may be confronted without impediments that may be linked to one's sexuality.

The cited case confirms what Miller et al., (2014) submitted that GBV is observable in same-sex relations. The only slight difference in the case under study is that the relationship in question involves an assumed homosexual individual as well as a heterosexual one. Marshall's theory recognises that sexual offenders, in this case the prophetess could be judged as suffering for social functioning. Here the theory does not define the parameters of social functioning since the likes of the ten Robert Mugabe may read the prophetess' actions as indeed evidence of her suffering from social functioning. On the other hand, Marshall argued that if one is to be identified as having social functioning problems it means such deficits arise either from problems in sexual satisfaction or the need for power, control and recognition.

There is no straight jacket to reconcile the case in question from Marshall's theoretical perspective since the theory assumes that sexual offenders are always members of the opposite sex to their victims. The question one asks is therefore how best can one approach VAW aspects that seemingly appear to manifest in complex human relations? To attempt an answer is to first allude to Marshall's theory by intrinsically appreciating the universality of the underlying fundamentals characterising offenders. Secondly, it is to define the offense and against the case in question, it is sexual exploitation rape or sexual abuse which is a form of VAW. The nature of the relations ceases to matter since they do not moderate or dilute the violence and possible physical, psychological or social effects the victim ends up suffering from. Miller et al., (2014) reflect Marshall's theoretical underpinnings in that they observe that when people repeatedly choose violent behaviour, as is the case with the prophetess who sexually violated her victim four times, choose such behaviour as a tactic to achieve interpersonal power or control over their victim. While this may directly appeal to a defined relationship in which perpetrators of violence unleash violence to their partners, in the case at hand, there is no evidence of partnership instead relationship between a prophetess and a congregant. But all the same, this cannot be side-lined as



the prophetess might be found as having seeking control or exerting power over her congregates. Thus, using sexual violence is thus tantamount to be a search for control.

The case in point is similar to the Martin Gumbura rape cases. Geoff (2019) provides an interesting summary and analysis on the Martin Gumbura cases showing that religious and other cults are fertile environments 'for sexual abuse by powerful and persuasive cult leaders who are unaccountable for their actions' (Geoff, 2019). Although in the Gumbura cases one reads heterosexual engagements, in the case under study, the engagement is homosexual but has similar traits with those of Gumbura cases. The purported prophecy is a clear instance of 'religious indoctrination by charismatic, authoritarian and intimidating religious leader[s]' (Geoff, 2019) used to overbear and overawe the victim for easy preying upon.

Thus, VAW is noted above manifests itself in various ways. It appears that it has also become very complex in the modern world where relationships including same-sex behaviours are experimented upon, chosen or otherwise from which violent behaviours are observed. But what comes to the fore are cases that are reported. In cases where, religious leaders are involved, as is the case with the Martin Gumbura cases and the Gweru prophetess homosexual case (both of which were convicted), it follows that human rights violations need continued investigations in order to arrest any forms of violations in any form of domestic relationships whether heterosexually or homosexually.

## Conclusion

Motivated by a sexual offence involving a prophetess and a vulnerable congregant, this paper used the Intimacy Deficits and Sexual Offending theory to establish reasons behind the sexual offence. However, more broadly, preoccupation was having to appreciate VAW calls in order to crack open sources of violence within contexts where the male figure may not be active. Such contexts, as shown in this discussion, are the female homosexual private spheres. In a country where same-sex sexual behaviours are criminalised such as in Zimbabwe and socially unrecognised, it follows that whether criminalised or not, these are aspects of officialdom because in practice such acts are happening. The practice is thus undertaken underground where queer identities are assumed.

The challenge, therefore, within the VAW and broadly GBV, is that, such spheres are noted as providing breeding ground for VAW which somehow may be assumed to be exposing victims to continued abuse in cases where sexual offences may somehow be concealed by offenders and victims alike. Thus, to suggest sustainable GBV policies in a society where homosexuality is actually practised but not recognised becomes challenging or excluding since certain sections of the society may not be covered by the policy. Further, to teach VAW issues in schools for instance as a way of educating girls of such realities may also prove to be challenging as officially same-sex relations are not recognised. The paper has thus noted that studies on VAW need to be extended beyond heterosexual realms of relations since sexual offenses are not the preserve of the male figure and in fact such offences thrive in same-sex relationships as well as in contexts where the offender is lesbian and the victim heterosexual.

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# BODY SHAMING: AN ALBATROSS AROUND THE NECKS OF WOMEN IN ZIMBABWEAN POLITICS AND PUBLIC SPACES

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## Abstract

This paper takes as its point of departure the systematic body shaming of female politicians and females who hold public offices. The aim of the paper is to excavate the online discursive practices that objectify, sexualise and shame the female body in response to women's entry into political and public spaces. We use online data collection methods to gather web user comments in relation to female political and public figures. Using purposive sampling, we target 11 women from across the political divide 8 of whom are politicians, 2 public office bearers and 1 entertainer-cum activist. The data collected is analysed using feminist and post structuralism theoretical lenses. The paper argues that the nation building process is highly gendered and female participation in politics is complicated by body politics that position the female body as a site of struggle by way of policing it, disciplining it, intimidating, and labelling and othering it. We further posit that this is an 'othering' process in which the woman is seen as the political other who is transgressing male spaces by daring to aspire for or enter public spaces, considered masculine spaces. The analysis of comments directed at these female participants in politics and public spaces demonstrates that the female body is sexualised while the woman's intellectual and professional capabilities are disregarded. This paper is critical in closing the theoretical gap in the Zimbabwean discourse of female participation in nation building. It is concluded that through body shaming of female politicians and public figures, social differences that are gendered are being performed to the detriment of women.

**Keywords:** Female politician; body shaming; discursive; female representation; nation building;

## Introduction

This paper discusses the limits of female representation in public and political spaces that are occasioned by the discursive practices and acts of body shaming. McClintock's (1993, p. 60) proposition that 'all nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous – dangerous, not in Eric Hobsbawm's sense as having to be opposed, but in the sense of representing relations to political power and to the technologies of violence' is an instructive starting point for this paper. The paper locates body shaming as a technology of violence against women and amplifies the perennial problem of gendered violence that attends contestations for political power.

Critics of nationalism and nationalist projects concur that nations are both gendered and sexed. Sexuality and gender are thus at the core of how national politics are shaped. Historically, male subjects have always created nations from patriarchal positions and because of this privilege, women and particularly their bodies have been used in the service of political projects and national ends (Anderson, 1983, 1991; Jayawardena, 1986; Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989). To this end, the political space has always been dominated by men and the domestic space has always been feminised (Gaitskell and Unterhalter, 1989). The feminisation of nation-building projects has been confirmed by Nielson (2016) who argues that the trope of the woman-as-nation lies at the heart of national projects. Male governance of the domestic space extends to the public space where their patriarchal authority determines the extent to which women can participate in public affairs. Therefore, female mobility, in both literal and symbolic terms is largely determined by men who are the gate-keepers of the national project.

In essence, men have had the prerogative of circumscribing female mobility with the effect that women have



for ages been confined to the private domestic space. This however, does not mean that women have no agency and have been passive subjects of male hegemony. Evidence abounds of how women have over the years worked to fracture the boundaries of male authority, thus exercising their agency even though their representation in the political sphere, for instance, is still very low relative to men. According to Atske, Geiger and Scheller (2019) the percentage of women in national and legislative bodies globally stands at 24%, which is an acknowledged increase over the past decade, but which also remains smaller relative to their share of the overall world population. While countries such as Rwanda, Cuba and Bolivia have reached or exceeded gender parity, globally there is under-representation of women. However, the increase noted by Atske, Geiger and Scheller (2019) testify to female agency that cannot be ignored. This female agency, however, is not without contestation and therefore men have always deployed ideological, physical and symbolic means to police and curtail female participation in the public space in general and politics in particular. In doing this, men are aided by cultural institutions and women who have internalised patriarchal ideology, which is why the policing and shaming of women who vie for or occupy political and public offices is not entirely a male project. In essence there are women who do the bidding of men as they momentarily become honorary members of the patriarchy and participate in the shaming of women (van der Toorn, Pliskin and Morgenroth, 2020) as shall be demonstrated in the discussion.

The impact of female confinement to private spaces is that women for a long time have been providing unremunerated labour in the service of the family. While acknowledging that the category women is heterogeneous and some women are actually privileged because of class and education, and have voice, women have generally lacked voice in public affairs. With the gradual rise of women in the public political domain, business and arts, men and particularly the institution of the patriarchy feel threatened. In response to the ascendancy of women, the patriarchy has engaged in physical, psychological and symbolic acts of violence against women and body shaming belongs to this realm of violence.

The result is that fewer women have the courage to participate in public affairs implying that female representation in key decision making, policy formulation and governance is limited. The digital revolution, with its liberalisation of communication, increased dissemination of information and heightened interactive engagements, has enabled violence against women to migrate to virtual spaces. The impact is unprecedented in that while the digital age has democratised communication that virtual space has also turned into a site of performing toxic masculinities against women. Against this background, this paper seeks to interrogate how female public figures and those in politics suffer systematic abuse in the form of body shaming.

Body shaming has been defined as acts and discourses of humiliating someone or the self through disparaging comments about the body's shape or size or mockery based on an individual's appearance (Duncan, Zimmer-Gembeck and Furman 2018). We wish in this paper to stretch and therefore broaden the concept of body shaming to include physical acts of beating and displaying of battered bodies in digital spaces as well as the inadvertent shaming that comes when commentators unwittingly praise the bodily attributes of women thereby diminishing their intellectual and professional attributes. In discourses of body politics, body shaming has had serious implications on eating habits, psychological wellbeing as well as how citizenship is negotiated. According to Shefer and Munt (2019, p. 145-146):

Shame and shaming processes are personal and political, constituting powerful material and discursive performances of the long-standing and still salient feminist dictum, "the personal is political". Shame and shaming are also bound up with social inequality, both reflecting and serving to reinforce, reinstate and legitimise social injustice. Shame is closely entangled with gender subjectification and normative gender binarisms, which are raced, classed and enmeshed with other forms of intersectionalities.

The nation building project and its politics are characterised by gender, economic and social inequalities that are fertile ground for body shaming.

By participating in politics and also on digital platforms, women in politics and public offices desire to shape female citizenship as well as the discursive construction of the Zimbabwean nation. The question is: ‘is the public (read male trolls and political rivals who ironically can also be women) amenable to female participation in politics, business and public offices?’ This question points to the complexity of the body shaming practice and political violence in general. As discussed later in this article, men are not the sole perpetrators of violence; women also figure prominently, not only as victims of body shaming and violence, but as perpetrators.

## Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

In order to unpack how the body of the female politician is subjected to shame in the political discursive space, a theory of the body is required. That the female body is a site of struggle, is beyond contestation more so in contexts of conflict and political upheaval. This study deploys concepts about the body from feminist and poststructuralist thinkers. The body features prominently in Zimbabwe’s political discourse; it is attacked physically and verbally and it is marked as appropriate or inappropriate for politics and public office. Foucault (1990 p.94) remarks that “the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.”

While Foucault was discussing the body in the context of discipline and punishment and the birth of the prison, his thinking resonates with the intentions of this study to examine the discursive body shaming of the female politician. The female politician’s political identity is constructed by her detractors and opponents through foregrounding the (in)appropriacy of her political candidature. This has the impact of humiliating her and intimidating her as well as potential female politicians and public office aspirants by sending signals, real and symbolic, to desist from those aspirations.

Political detractors employ binary opposites to highlight the desirability of the female body or lack of it to equate that to suitability for political office. According to Brown and Gershon (2017 p.1) “Bodies are sites in which social constructions of differences are mapped onto human beings. Subjecting the body to systemic regimes – such as government regulation – is a method of ensuring that bodies will behave in socially and politically accepted manners. The body is placed in hierarchized (false) dichotomies, for example, masculine/feminine; mind/body; able-bodied/disabled; fat/skinny; heterosexual/homosexual; and young/old. Furthermore, these dichotomies illustrate that public/private borders are unstable.” By appealing to these binaries and dichotomies, the analysis in this study will demonstrate how the female political and public office aspirants and occupants are discursively located within the negative end of these binaries. This excludes women from the public and political spaces.

At the centre of these exclusionary practices is the notion of masculinities and how the national political project has always been conceived in masculine terms. Scholars (Slootmaeckers 2019; Elias 2008; Nagel 1998) argue that masculinity defines the nation state with women as symbolic reproducers of the nation (Ngoshi and Mutekwa, 2013). In this respect therefore, women’s bodies are sites where rival political groupings engage in discursive duels in pursuit of political power and ultimately control of the nation state. In this context, the female politician or public office occupant is ‘othered’, to speak in post-colonial terms.

The body shaming of women functions as some kind of diversion that is meant to divest female politicians of political aspirations and having a stake in the national project. Those who attack and body shame women on social media further the interest of their political godfathers and their masculine project. This study therefore interrogates how statements and comments made about women’s bodies serve to create and perpetuate nega-



tive perceptions about female politicians and public office occupants.

## Methodology

This study uses netnography as a method of data collection. According to Kozinets (2010) online observation is one of the many methods of data collection in netnography. Kozinets (2010) considers netnography as a participant-observation research into online communities involving online fieldwork. The method uses virtual communications as the main source of data that enables an understanding and representation of cultural as well as communal phenomena (Kozinets 2010). Online observation allowed the researchers an in-depth engagement with online as well as Twitter and Facebook texts on issues to do with political identities and how they are threatened by body shaming and the sexualisation of female politicians and public officers.

Data was collected from a longitudinal study of Twitter and Facebook comments, as well as comments on online news platforms about Zimbabwean female politicians and senior public servants. Purposive sampling was used to target known female political figures from the political divide and senior female public officers. A sample of eleven (11) females were then purposively selected for focus in terms of comments about them by readers of online news sites and Twitter and Facebook users. The sample size was not determined at the start of the observations, but grew gradually as discourses on body shaming unfolded in the digital spaces.

The researchers observed online readers' comments and Twitter and Facebook comments for a period stretching from 2014 to 2020. This time frame covers the elections of 2013 and 2018 and was chosen for the reason that political contestation generates public debate as candidates vie for political office and political parties outcompete each other. These debates transcend the election plebiscite and this is why we observed the period after the 2013 elections and the period prior to and post the July 2018 harmonised elections in Zimbabwe. This period was also relevant in that there were changes in senior staff appointments that were made during this time and the two senior female judges selected as part of the sample of this study were part of these changes. Furthermore, the period marked a point at which the researchers began to notice patterns of debate relating to female politicians and public officers on both Twitter, Facebook and online news sites comments sections and therefore began to actively follow them for research purposes.

An ethical dilemma that arises with digital ethnography is whether one is dealing with private or public individuals and private or public spaces (Wijaya, Watson and Bruce, 2017). The boundaries are thin. Comments made by users of Facebook, Twitter and readers of online news are open for anyone to view and even respond to, which makes it problematic whether informed consent is necessary to use their comments. Added to this, some individuals participate in online activity incognito, but at the same time it is possible to trace their identities (Sixsmith and Murray, 2001). However, on our part as researchers, we have ensured that we respect the participants' identities and ownership of the comments they make without necessarily seeking informed consent.

## Analysis and Discussion

The implosion of factional politics in ZANU (PF) from around 2014 marked a new era of political contestation in Zimbabwe. This implosion is particularly useful in this discussion since the subsequent expulsion of Joice Mujuru, then State Vice-President and Party Second Secretary, inaugurates the politics of body shaming (at least in recent time in Zimbabwe) and is fertile ground to locate the discourse of how political contestation is problematized through the female body. At the height of the factional politics, Joice Mujuru became a victim of purging.

The process was premised on mobilising body shaming among other strategies to marginalise and subsequently expel her from the party. Grace Mugabe, then First Lady of Zimbabwe and later to become head of the ZANU (PF) Women's League, led the onslaught. Mujuru was accused of misdemeanours ranging from laziness, ineptitude, piggy backing the President, witchcraft, disloyalty, immorality, ugliness and possessing an undesirable body. It was the focus on her body which was said to be too fat and therefore not sexually appealing, that is emblematic of the sexualisation of women's bodies in politics. The derivatives are that if the female body is ugly and not sexually appealing, that body must not enter the political space and also that the ugly, lazy and fat body equates to moral unrighteousness which renders it unfit for high political office.

Body shaming against Mujuru was also based on the dressing of the body and Grace Mugabe was the main architect of Mujuru body shaming campaign. She (Grace Mugabe) is reported as having said;

I said her dressing in front of a young man was inappropriate. I was not impressed especially for someone of her stature... That's when I said she was inappropriately dressed, inappropriately attired. Displaying the thighs," – in Parliament women approached me about her dressing, saying they had talked to her but she persisted without mentioning any names... – "She wears mini skirts. She must change her style of dressing. Even some of us who have attractive bodies don't wear mini-skirts that show our thighs, especially in front of children. As mothers who have young growing daughters what lessons do we pass on to them? That is all I was unhappy about (Kache, 2014)

It is particularly disturbing that standards of morality are here tied to body shaming. In this case, Mujuru's supposedly unattractive body, coupled with her touted inappropriate dressing are conflated with immorality. Ironically, female parliamentarians are said to have complained about Mujuru's dressing, thus, taking part in body shaming her. Mujuru was further attacked on the basis of age when she was advised, in vitriolic language, to retire, move back to Dotito, her rural place of origin, and look after her grandchildren. Mujuru's celebrated liberation credentials were also put to question as her detractors began to deconstruct them. Her ultimate humiliation came with her final expulsion from a party she had worked for since the time she joined the armed liberation struggle as a teenager.

Ncube (2020 p.5) noted that:

In 2014, Mujuru was expelled from the ruling party because she was accused of plotting to dethrone Robert Mugabe. What is interesting is that upon her expulsion, the celebrated narrative that had been used to describe her role in the liberation war was subverted with new narratives that focused on how she had used sex and her body to get ahead during the war. Like Grace Mugabe, references changed from the respectable Amai Mujuru to whore and witch.

However, the paradox of all this is that even those bodies considered beautiful and sexually appealing also suffer a similar fate. The former First Lady herself, Grace Mugabe, who projected herself as more beautiful, with a sexually appealing beautiful body, has also been subjected to shame, accused of loose morals and using sexual appeal to rise both as First Lady while working as a secretary in the Office of the President, and in the ZANU (PF) power matrix.

Related to this is the further 'othering' of mature female politicians who are body shamed on the basis of age. Like Mujuru, whose body is shamed as old, Jessie Majome, former Member of Parliament for the Harare West constituency in Zimbabwe suffered a similar fate when her detractors within her own party, the Movement for



Democratic Change (MDC-T), accused her of old age. Old bodies in politics are here considered as deviant and threatening to both male hegemony and the supposed ascendancy of younger females. In the case of Majome, she was being challenged in the party's primary elections by a younger female Joana Mamombe, whose supporters touted her youth as more appealing than Majome's 'old' body. For a long time, young people, particularly female politicians, have occupied marginal spaces in Zimbabwe's mainstream politics, where the old guard consisting of liberation war participants dominate. While this promotion of a young female politician appears welcome, it is problematic in that it is inadvertently disadvantaging another woman.

This body shaming legitimates the marginalisation of women in politics and this is amplified by social media spaces that have widened and deepened opportunities for communication. Shefer and Munt (2019, p.1) argue that 'the contemporary proliferation of online communication and social media notably provides novel and increased spaces for the deployment of shame as a means both for control and regulation and for the political and pedagogical project of challenging injustices.' Both Mujuru's and Majome's cases reflect how commentators on social media use their anonymity to body shame female public figures in furtherance of their political agendas. Thus, body shaming of women who participate in politics has increasingly become normative in Zimbabwean society. In this context, 'the body is always subject to social, cultural, economic and political definitions and policies are based on these perceptions' (Schlyter, 2009, p. 12). By analysis the body shaming of women, we see how political power and citizenship are negotiated via bodies.

Furthermore, experiences of womanhood are intricately intertwined with everyday forms of body shaming. Female politicians are generally considered to be transgressing patriarchal boundaries and body shaming is a means of punishing them. In this regard, Thokozani Khupe, formerly Deputy President of the MDC-T, is another example of a victim of gendered body shaming and the sexualisation of the bodies of female public figures. At a time when the battle to succeed the MDC founding President Morgan Tsvangirai following his death, intensified, Khupe became the symbol of the sexualisation and body shaming of female politicians. Khupe was labelled a whore, fat and old. All these are markers of the undesirability of her body and hence its (in)appropriacy in the public political space. With advances in digital technology, we posit that the boundaries of what it means to body shame can be expanded. In view of that, body shaming has been extended to photo shopping of images of targeted women in politics to caricature them. The caricatured images are designed to fortify the perception of women as immoral and unfit for political office. This way, moral purity is implicated or tied to women's rights to political participation and nation building. One of the images circulated on Twitter shows Khupe in a compromising sexual position with President Mnangagwa. The image is apparently photo shopped. By being caricatured as President Mnangagwa's concubine, Khupe's moral purity is being challenged and therefore symbolically, she cannot participate in the national project; this is a means of policing the female body. The paradox however, is that it is the same body that at one time is considered fat and sexually undesirable. What this means is that the female body is assigned meanings in line with the exigencies of what detractors wish to convey. Detractors have a whole array of negative stereotypes at their disposal to deploy in support of any convenient narrative.

While old age can be used as the basis for body shaming, being young does not preclude one from being body shamed. This is even more pronounced in a polity used to having senior male citizens dominating the political space. Fadzai Mahere's rise to the position of Spokesperson for the MDC Alliance has opened her up to malicious and shaming attacks. Initially appointed as MDC Alliance Secretary of Education on joining the party, Mahere rose to become the Spokesperson when the party was restructured. Mahere was accused of dating the MDC Alliance President and her detractors pointed to her youth and beauty as factors that determined her rise. This is notwithstanding the fact that she has a successful legal career and had started a political career even outside the MDC Alliance, having contested as an independent candidate for the Mount Pleasant Parliamentary Seat in the 2018 elections. Furthermore, Mahere has been shamed on the grounds that she is still unmarried; by being considered by male opponents to be ripe for marriage, Mahere suffers the indignity

of being sexualised; being unmarried is weaponised and used to humiliate female public figures. In political discourse dominated by men, Mahere is here being bullied and seen as fit for the domestic space. Indeed, with the 'regulation of women's physical presence in the spheres of home, work, and politics, and, increasingly, in institutions, women would be confined to their appropriate place—both metaphorically and corporeally' (Fischer, 2016 p.836).

Female participation in the broad realm of politics in Zimbabwe has been met with disdain by fair minded citizens. It has evidently been used as a political card to silence or express oppositional views. The Justice Rita Makarau and Justice Priscilla Chigumba comparative is a case in point. During the era of President Robert Mugabe, Justice Rita Makarau was appointed Chairperson of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) and at the dawn of the Second Republic marked by the rise to power of President Mnangagwa, she resigned and was replaced by another female, Justice Priscilla. The ZEC is one of the Commissions provided for in the 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe. It is statutory that it must be headed by a Judge. The resignation of Justice Makarau and ultimate replacement attracted responses from the public who aired their views and reactions creating what in this paper we call the Makarau-Chigumba body comparative.

One of the significant issues regarding public discourse about the two Justices is that their complexions were used to compare the two and then stretched further to be the basis of weighing their capabilities in the role of Chairperson of ZEC. It is notable that ZEC has been accused of political bias and being a captured institution which has for years been used by the ZANU(PF) party to rig election outcomes in favour of ZANU(PF) candidates. Thus, the face of the political institution in this case was represented by two women whom society found unfit in one way or the other. Justice Rita Makarau's dark complexion is semiotically seen as representing the nature of her heart considered as dark, thus evil. The online newspaper (ZimEye, 2018) ran a story titled 'Makarau was dark inside and out', insinuating that Justice Priscilla Chigumba is light-skinned and beautiful hence good-hearted or professional. The projected image comparison used was also deliberately designed to visually capture this thinking which is tantamount to body shaming of both women.

To begin with, Justice Makarau is body shamed through being characterised as ugly and therefore evil. Ugliness and beauty are used to shame the judge as well as portray the view that her resignation was long overdue. She is shamelessly violated since she is forced to digest that she is evil based primarily on her skin complexion. The online audience of this news article picked this tempo and further elaborated this body shaming discourse. Readers amplified this discourse by mockingly suggesting that 'she needs no make-up to play a role in a horror film and that she can also make extra income by contesting in the Mr and Ms Ugly contest.'

The degree of body shaming is taken further to create a disgusting discourse designed to damage the female body and psyche. That her intellectual and professional capacities should be celebrated as representing successful women in society among whom Justice Makarau can be projected as a role model, is conveniently forgotten by these negative commentators. Additionally, both women are actually role models, who despite their looks, other women should emulate. It is however, significant to point out that these online discussions were not without a few positive comments in favour of Makarau. There were commentators who also put up a spirited defence of the judge, pointing out her unparalleled experience in the judiciary as well as in the legislature when she was appointed a non-constituency Member of Parliament in 1996. Both Makarau and Chigumba collectively symbolise the best of female public officers in Zimbabwe, and inspire other women to participate actively in politics, including assuming influential positions in public institutions such as those that govern political activities. However, all this is largely disregarded as body shaming takes precedence.

To demonstrate the body shaming of the two women, 'netzens' had this to say:

1. Judge vakatonaka zvavo ava (The judge [Chigumba] is very beautiful.



2. ZEC bae ([informal] ZEC's beautiful intimate partner [Chigumba])
3. Ah. All that beauty? Ndarohwa nehana (I am shocked). She can handcuff and sentence me anytime.
4. She looks beautiful, Makarau was ugly=heartless.(ZimEye, 2018)

From the comments, above, ugliness and beauty are contrasted, not in their abstract sense, but deliberately with Makarau and Chigumba in mind. Of the two judges, one had already resigned as ZEC Chairperson as indicated above, while Chigumba was the incoming Chairperson. In comment [1] above, the internet user gushes that Chigumba is a very beautiful woman, while in [2], ZEC is presented in masculine terms that are tied to the patriarchal ideology. She is thus, projected as a possession of ZEC, the man; this is an intimate romantic relationship. Subtly, it suggests that Makarau was 'divorced' by ZEC and replaced by the very beautiful Chigumba. No wonder netizen [3] is shocked by Chigumba's beauty. This shock is ironic since it appears to suggest that successful professional women who rise up to join politics and politically inclined institutions cannot be beautiful. The web user [3] further surrenders to the beauty by noting that 'She can handcuff and sentence me anytime' which insinuates a sexual relationship in which a man is willing to surrender to the dictates of a beautiful woman. Thus, Chigumba's anticipated ability is not linked to her professional capabilities but to what, in a sexual sense, she offers to ZEC and the country. The assumption we make here is that this is coming from a male netizen and that the sexual relationship implied is also heterosexual even though internet identities often come in disguised forms. We note the senselessness and insensitivity which locate Makarau and Chigumba in the discourse of body shaming for the pleasure of the patriarchy and those who feel threatened by powerful women (see Mutongwiza, 2019). This has the impact of discouraging women not only to be public figures, but office bearers of key public institutions entrusted with running the country's elections, and that monitor and promote democracy.

Further to this, the patriarchy has always deployed sex as an instrument of domination. This has served male interests in subordinating women and objectifying them. Therefore, sex is always implicated in political discourses that are often defined by power and domination. In this regard, numerous female politicians and political activists have been sexually violated. The alleged abduction of young MDC Alliance MP Joana Mamombe and her two colleagues Cecilia Chimhiri and Netsai Marova and their subsequent sexual assault at the hands of their abductors sheds light on this practice of body shaming women. Their testimonies after being found dumped outside Harare tell of a horrendous experience where Chimhiri had her breasts sucked and blunt objects used to sexually violate them. The nature of their abuse at the hands of their abductors point to gendered intimidation of young women so that they refrain from participating in national politics. The fact that they were allegedly abducted soon after taking part in a demonstration against the government for failure to create safety nets for the poor during the Covid-19 lockdown period is adequate to suggest that their abduction was politically motivated. Some of the comments that followed tried to trivialise their ordeal by suggesting that they had gone on a romantic escapade that went awfully wrong; the insinuation was that the three ladies had been battered by their lovers. There seems to be no feminist solidarity in political spaces.

Earlier, Samantha Kureya also known as Gonyeti had been similarly abducted by unknown men from her home during the night. Kureya was abused, made to drink sewerage while being reminded never to shame the government through her satiric videos and acts that often challenge government and the ruling party. She recalls: 'they started saying: "You mock the government and we have been monitoring you". They told me to start rolling on the ground. They would instruct me to roll from either side and each time I did, I would get beaten. They started stomping on my back' (The Guardian, 2019). Rather than engage ideologically with her satire, her abductors choose to abuse her body. The fact that she has been under the gaze of the state through being monitored reminds us of Foucault's arguments about how the body is policed and disciplined.

While historically Zimbabwean women actively took part in organising the nationalist struggle for independence and took up arms to join their male counterparts in the armed struggle, evidence abounds that women's

political identities remain largely tied to their bodies and to their morality, which are often labelled and defined by men. They are also part of the allegories and iconic identities that go into building the nation-state. Nielson (2016 p.102) has argued that,

For some time, gender historians have recognised that feminised allegories and icons have been deeply implicated in modern nation-building projects and national identity formation. The woman-as-nation trope has been appropriated by diverse polities that spanned time and place.

By body shaming women, supporters of male hegemony intimidate women who aspire for political and public office and also validate the age old thinking that nations and nation building are masculine projects. There is thus, what McClintock (1991) considers to be dangerous liaisons between women and the nationalist movements where women are not empowered at a time when nations, especially postcolonial ones are struggling for political liberation. Thus, McClintock (1993 p.60) posits that 'nationalisms are from the outset constituted in gender power, but, as the lessons of international history portend, women who are not empowered to organise during the struggle will not be empowered to organise after the struggle'. Commenting on what becomes of the nation-state if there is no transformation, McClintock adds that 'if nationalism is not transformed by an analysis of gender power, the nation-state will remain a repository of male hopes, male aspirations, and male privilege' (1991 p.109), which women will continue to reproduce.

While the genders of some of the online commentators are unknown, there is evidence that women also take part in the body shaming of fellow women. As scholars have previously noted, patriarchal ideology is so insidious that women are recruited to be members or foot soldiers of the patriarchy through socialisation, prevalent ideology and institutions (van der Toorn, Pliskin and Morgenroth, 2020; Szymanski, Moffitt and Carr, 2011; Maseno and Kilonzo, 2011). What therefore drives body shaming are misogyny, patriarchy and masculinity. The feminist thinking of sisterhood or the idea of a sister's keeper has no live roots since some strategically positioned fellow women are the ones who initiate body shaming on their counterparts for political ends, ironically in defence of men instead. The case in point already discussed is that of Grace Mugabe who resorted to body shaming Mujuru while defending her husband, Robert Mugabe's rule. Kache (2014) noted that the adage that 'mhandu yemukadzi mukadzi (a woman's enemy is another woman)' appears to be topical in fueling body shaming of women by women. Subjection of other women to emotional and psychological abuse, forcing others to endure painful situations, humiliation and breaking others' spirits are the hallmarks of the body shaming of women. Hence, Kache concludes

A friend once told me that true friendship is hearing people say something about a friend and you publicly defend your friend even without verifying if the issue is true or not. I am not saying women should not be admonished or reprimanded when they do wrong; quite the contrary. I am saying it should be done in sisterly love to build each other up instead of looking for a public platform and humiliating a fellow sister, Wisdom says you call her to the side and address your issues in a private space so that when you come out in public no one will know there was a private matter between you! Was it necessary, for Amai Mugabe to address issues of gossip and what happens in Dr. Mujuru's private life on the public state broadcaster? Dare I say Amai Mugabe painted a picture of herself far worse than that of the person she meant to discredit?

This discourse of blaming women for the downfall of fellow women is complex in that, in the context of ZANU (PF)'s factional politics, there were male figures behind the scenes. Events in Zimbabwean politics have since shown that the purging of Mujuru then was meant to pave way for the elevation of now President of Zimbabwe, Emmerson Mnangagwa, to the position of Vice President. In other words, Grace Mugabe and other party women including Oppah Muchinguri and Sarah Mahoka appear to have done the bidding of powerful men in the party. What is evident is that the effects and damage caused by body shaming are far reaching and have debilitating consequences for women's participation in public affairs.



## Conclusion

The systematic body shaming exerted against women, whether in the ruling party, opposition and activist movements has the impact of narrowing the public space that women occupy and intimidates them into abandoning political ambitions. Even those occupying important professional positions in various institutions monitoring political practice face the same treatment. Ultimately therefore, body shaming is a discursive practice that highlights how women are far from being accepted in the political realm and have no soft landing within the political land-scape of Zimbabwe. Body shaming far from other semantic connotations, reveals sexualisation as a mechanism used to thwart women politicians' ambitions and aspirants or holders of professional offices with direct links to political practice as framed within a patriarchal gaze which disregards their leadership qualities or potential. We conclude that body shaming is a deliberate mechanism of spirit murdering, which objectifies women along gender lines. The result is that society is forced to view female politicians, activists or professionals linked to political governance and practice as irrational and incapable beings. Ultimately, body shaming practices expose the male gaze, which is not necessarily masculine at all the times as seen through other women who support male hegemony, responsible for reducing women to non-entities that are merely the sum of their eroticised physical body parts. Without subverting the discourses of body shaming, women will remain handmaidens of the nation-building project.

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# YOUTH DISCOURSES ON SEXUALITY AND DISEASE IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: A REPRESENTATION OF STUDENT GRAFFITI IN ZIMBABWEAN URBAN AREAS

Professor Hazel Ngoshi and Dr Umali Saidi

## Abstract

HIV and AIDS are both a medical and social reality. The latter reality is more fluid, as evidenced, by the multiple discourses constructed around the same phenomena by different segments in their respective social milieu. Specific groups have their own constructions of sexuality, HIV and AIDS. The study explores how Zimbabwean students, from primary school to university level, discursively constructed sex, sexuality, HIV and AIDS through toilet graffiti. It interrogates how the inscriptions reveal specific knowledges relating to the condition, its transmission, regulation of sexual behaviours (positive and negative) and contraceptive use, among others. The article departs from commonly-held assumptions of children as sexually naïve. It argues that students are a heterogeneous group with multiple discursive ways of participating in sexuality, HIV and AIDS discourses – which have been typically dominated by adult formalisation and policing. Students appropriate the prodigal nature of the toilet walls and use them to express their own overlooked desires. Analysis is carried out using Critical Discourse Analysis.

Key words graffiti, sexuality, patriarchy, sex, morality, stigma, decadence patriarchy

## Introduction

Sex and sexuality are taboo and controversial in most African countries, which are predominantly conservative in nature. Whilst the assumption might be that adults are free to discuss sexuality, the reality is that the discussion of the topic is highly parameterized depending on with whom and where the discussions are held, among other factors. The discussion of sexuality has officially been done in specific parameterised ways (Mpofu and Salawu 2020). It is very rare to have issues on sex and sexuality openly discussed in both intra and inter group situations. Where these discussions are carried out they are either private or carried out from an ‘official discourse’ perspective centered on idealised ‘appropriate’ and ‘acceptable’ behaviours rather than on what is subsisting on the ground. This has resulted in an information gap between official or adult discourses on sexuality, HIV and AIDS, and prevailing attitudes on these topics held by people. This chasm is further widened by the fact that knowledge construction on such issues cannot be expected to be uniform across different demographic groups, even within the same nation. So, instead of making universal statements on sexuality and its link to HIV and AIDS, it is imperative to contextualise them according to the respective specific social segments involved in their construction. Student graffiti lend itself as one significant avenue through which we can tap into the views, opinions, anxieties, fears and curiosities children and young adults have about sex, sexuality, HIV and AIDS. We explore these issues based on a shared understanding that graffiti are a public participatory activity that is part of an increasingly visible trend of public participation invested in self-expression. Following Burger (2015), graffiti are thus conceptualised as one among many different forms of self-expression in youth cultures.

Critical to this discussion is the link between culture and space on these important issues. Whilst, on the one hand, culture dictates the words that can be expressed and topics that can and cannot be discussed in public, particular media used to discuss such issues can, on the other hand, significantly impact on the specific ways in which reality is brought to bear. In fact, these discussions can be held outside of constraints of culture. Generally, the more public the media, the more likely it is for individuals to stick to more officialised discourses.



Conversely, the more private the medium, the greater the chances for openness and the more likely they are to express sentiments that might otherwise be regarded as controversial, delinquent, or ‘unAfrican’ (Mangeya 2015). Toilet graffiti provide primary school to tertiary level students with a space to openly engage sexuality without any fear of reprisals from both their peers and school authorities. Hence, Alonso’s (1998) observation that graffiti provides a window from which specific attitudes of specific social groups can, more or less, be accurately assessed. In this regard, toilet graffiti marks both the student’s social construction and ideological response(s) to a policed discourse on sexuality, HIV and AIDS. This is then conceptualised within the context of the tragic reality of HIV and AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa.

Students represent a social group that is still developing its knowledge about sexuality, HIV and AIDS. As such, it may be characterised by gaps, misinformation, embellishments and exaggerations, among others. This necessitates an exploration of the sort of knowledge exhibited at any given time. Different media will offer spaces that enable the mediation of different kinds of knowledge, from informal to formal ones. Students have at their disposal a variety of private spaces on which to explore issues of their sexuality and their relation to HIV and AIDS. These include toilet graffiti, diaries and/or autobooks, among others. Unlike diaries and autobooks, graffiti offers an interactive and a much more public dynamic where peers prodsumers (Burger 2015). That is, they are both producers and consumers of the graffiti. Burger (2015) concurs with Kornblum (2011) and Rabiega (2014) in their characterisation of graffiti inscription as a youth subculture in which young people challenge mainstream social norms. Thus, graffiti enable a nuanced communal engagement of sexuality, HIV and AIDS by the students. The undistilled nature of the discourse constructed via these spaces entail that the study can access sentiments that the students might otherwise be too ashamed/embarrassed or afraid to express had they been elicited by other methods such as interviews, focus groups or even questionnaires. In the process, it is possible to then explore “how fear, ignorance, and a lack of basic knowledge” (Midtbo et al, 12: 261), for example, are reflected in their discourse as these inevitably shape a specific type of language of relationships they form with each other.

## Sexuality, HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwean

Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Southern Africa, has been characterised as the global epicenter of the HIV pandemic (Halperin et al 2011). According to the Zimbabwe Analysis of the HIV Epidemic (11). “with an estimated 1.2 million people living with HIV in 2009, Zimbabwe has the third largest HIV burden in South Africa after South Africa and Mozambique” (p. x). Since the first incidence of AIDS in 1985, Zimbabwe’s HIV prevalence has not remained constant over the years. It has undergone two distinct phases characterised by “one of the most severe HIV epidemics globally but, since the late 1990s, has also witnessed one of the most substantial and sustained declines in HIV prevalence” Muchini et al 2011, p. 487). HIV prevalence peaked to 26.5% in 1997 but declined and stabilized to 14.3% in 2009 (Halperin et al, 2011; Skovdal et al 11; Zimbabwe Analysis of the HIV Epidemic). The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2020) argue that Zimbabwe nears epidemic control” (<https://www.cdc.gov/globalhealth/countries/zimbabwe/annual-report/strategic-information.html>).

This trend follows the reduction of high-risk sexual behaviours such as multiple and concurrent partners, transactional sex, levirate (kugara nhaka), regarding STIs as proof of masculinity and wife replacement (chimutsa-mapfihwa), among others. These are complimented by official/government policies such as male circumcision, PMTCT and home-based care system of caring for HIV/AIDS patients. Sociocultural factors attributable to the decline of HIV prevalence include how Zimbabwe is a high marriage nation and high levels of secondary and tertiary education. Coupled with collapsing economic and political institutions, these combine to not only increase the age of sexual debut but to also ensure relative low levels of infidelity.

Thus, the motivation for behaviour change seems to largely arise endogenously from within the population partly due to events specific to Zimbabwe (Halperin et al 2011).

Of particular interest to the present study is the country's young population in a sociocultural context that places a high premium on sexual morality (Duri et al 13). An age limit is placed on those who can discuss and practice in sex-related matters and activities. Young people are not allowed to openly talk and engage in sexual activities. This also puts a limit on the kind and amount of sex-related information they need to be exposed to. Schatz and Dzvimbo (2001) state how "Overall, Zimbabwean society believes youths who talk sex are sexually active, and when youth talk about sex, they become aroused" (p. 132). The underlying fear is that they will then go out actively looking to satisfy their aroused needs. Implicit in this discourse is how youth are inherently devoid of any sexual feelings and should therefore not be thinking or talking about, or involved in, sex-related matters/activities. Resultantly, information on sex is predominantly obtained from informal sources (such as friends/peers and other interpersonal sources) rather than from formal media (Schatz and Dzvimbo, 2001; Halperin et al, 2011; Gregson et al, 2011).

Unfortunately, this does not mean that young people are not engaging in sex and/or risk behaviours. Muchini et al (11) identify schools and tertiary institutions, among others, as settings in which sexual attitudes and relations are established. Zimbabwe Analysis of the HIV Epidemic (2017) report that infections are found in the 17-30 years group – with both 15 year-old men and women reporting having sex with at least two partners, with a significant number reporting knowledge of condom use. Young women aged 15-19, in particular, engage in cross-generational sex or age-disparate relationships whereby they have sex with man 10 years their senior. This 'sugar daddy' culture is a key driver of HIV. Muchini et al (2011) reveal incidences of transactional sex that included group practices such as male students pooling funds for sex workers were rampant in tertiary institutions. Sadly, UNAIDS Statistics for Zimbabwe (2017) reports that less than half of this age group has ever tested for HIV. As such, prevalence among this group could be significantly higher. It is little wonder Schatz and Dzvimbo (2001) state that the virus is expected to halve the 15-year old population in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Mozambique.

## Methodology

Inscriptions for analysis were taken from male and female toilets made by primary and high school as well as university students in three Zimbabwean urban areas (Harare, Chitungwiza and Gweru). A combination of probability and non-probability sampling techniques were used in the selection of schools and tertiary and institutions used in the research. As a result of the general proliferation of primary and high schools in Zimbabwe, stratified random sampling was used to select three primary and three high schools from each urban area. The schools in each urban area were first classified into strata based on their physical location in terms of population density. The stratification analysis made by the researchers revealed three major strata; which are low and high density residential areas as well as the central business district. A school from each stratum was then randomly selected for the collection of data.

This resulted in sample consisting of nine primary schools and nine high schools. However, the distribution of universities in the urban areas is not as rich as the primary and secondary schools. Harare has significantly more tertiary institutions than its other urban counterparts. For this reason, a university each was conveniently selected from Harare and Gweru. In fact, Chitungwiza does not have a university yet. The researchers then recorded graffiti inscriptions from the male and female toilets. The data collected from this exercise were thematically organised. Inscriptions on sex, sexual behaviour and HIV/AIDS (both explicit and implicit) were then further sub-categorised according to their specific concerns.

## Theory

The analysis of the inscriptions is couched in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA enables the exploration of underlying micro- and macro sociocultural power relations in society in so far as linguistic structures is concerned. It reveals connections between people's use of language and the wider socio-cultural factors in which it is employed. For van Dijk (2008) linguistic practices can be used to create, recreate, transform, or challenge dominant societal norms and values held by dominant social groups. Thus, society is characterised by inequity. Resultantly, access to official media and discourses is highly constrained for dominated groups, like students, who, by virtue of their age and marital status, cannot openly access/participate particular sex-related discourses and behaviours. Thus, discursive practices, media access included, are seldom innocent. The specific type of media and language used by any given group at any given situation is implicated in power relations and can be better appreciated within their specific social milieu. The analysis of the specific power and nature of relations invested in any given discursive interaction can be broadly categorised into naturalisation and neutralisation processes, among others. Power in this research is broadly understood, but not limited to, access to 'privileged' sexuality discourse and the ability and freedom to freely.

Socio-cultural factors have always shaped understanding of sexuality, HIV and AIDS by placing a gag on their discussion, not only for young segments, but also by the generality of the population. Official sexuality and HIV-related discourses were characterised by so much denial to the extent that it took the Zimbabwean government up until the 1990s, almost a decade after reporting of the first AIDS case, for HIV and AIDS to be publicly debated. During this period, AIDS could not be cited as a cause of patients' deaths (O'Brien and Broom 2014). The Ministry of Health and Childcare framed those at risk in terms of sexual deviancy as "patients with multiple sexual partners ... promiscuous persons and prostitutes" (MoH 1987, p. 8) thereby reinforcing an emerging and dominant sexual deviancy paradigm in which, promiscuity, in general, and promiscuous women, in particular, were responsible for spreading of HIV. Zimbabwe, under the National HIV and AIDS Policy (2000) and the Statutory instrument (SI 202) of 1998 however later prohibited discrimination based on HIV status. All the same, it has led to the creation of highly moral socio-cultural environment which have constructed an othering discourse based on an 'us' (the morally upright, the HIV/AIDS-free) against 'them' (the sexually deviant and HIV-infected) dichotomy. It is therefore imperative to investigate how students' graffiti is implicated in this gendered discursive phenomenon.

## Discussion

Given the constructed nature of reality, coupled with the stratified nature of society in general, it is possible to envisage a varied/differential conceptualisation of sexuality, HIV and AIDS by various social groups. Different social segments construct and construe the same phenomena in varied ways. Attention is placed on how students from various levels of education have discursively conceptualised sexuality, HIV and AIDS. Specifically, how graffiti inscriptions made in the toilets are implicated in dominant sexuality HIV and AIDS discourses. Following Alonso (1998), an analysis of student toilet graffiti on the urban environment can serve as an excellent tool in understanding behaviours, attitudes and social processes of this social segment. That is, the inscriptions are much more than scribbles by deviant adolescents. Rather, they can provide insights into the minds of this critical group to any nation's development.

## Students' knowledge of heterosexual sex and its outcomes

Since illicit, unprotected heterosexual sex is considered the most dominant source of HIV and AIDS, domi-

nant discourse have mainly centered on the control of irrational human impulses (Campbell et al, 2011; Magonya-Achieng, 2013; Muzadzi, 2013). This is especially the case in the context of conservative sexual moralities where stigma, for instance, “is conceptualised as society’s symbolic punishment for those who deviate and challenge the sexual and gendered status quo” (Campbell et al 2011, p. 1005). The result is an environment that is intolerant to sexual transgression where such activities inevitably lead to deep humiliation resulting from a perceived loss of dignity – due to “‘laughable’ fall from grace of people who had ... been ‘proud’ and behaved ‘as if they were worthy of respect and dignity’” (Ibid). They are discursively-constructed as ‘devalued others’. The discourse of the devalued other is especially unkind to young sexual transgressors who, by virtue of their perceived sexual immaturity, engagement in education endeavours and marital status, have no business engaging in sex-related activities.

It is therefore imperative to assess the sort of knowledge and attitudes towards heterosexual sex coming out of student graffiti. However, the stratified nature of educational levels entails that the students do not have similar knowledges. It is important to appreciate heterogeneity in attitudes that subsists in student graffiti. The data reveals that, whilst there is a distinct difference between what comes out from inscriptions made in primary school toilets from their secondary and tertiary counterparts, there is very little distinction between inscriptions made in high school and university toilets.

The data reveals that, contrary to the commonly held popular belief that girls don’t think about sex, primary school female students produced textual inscriptions that explicitly refer to sex and a desire to engage in it. This is illustrated by examples (1)-(3), below:

1. I like sex
2. sex is good for us
3. sex is important

Inscriptions (1) – (3) above are better understood in both the micro- and macro sociocultural context in which they are made. The school is a moralizing institution in which sex-related issues and discourses are defined from a specific parameterised ways. Magonya (2018) cites how educational institutions in Zimbabwe have adopted a sexuality education that is inherently moralistic and didactic that paints explicit and gruesome pictures of shame, disease and death. It emerges that pleasure is the most common positive outcome of sexual activity. Schatz and Dzvimbo (2001) note the school’s general proscriptive nature as it predominantly “issue[s] commandments about sexuality to adolescents rather than assist them in developing the critical skills necessary to make informed decisions” (p. 128). This is particularly the case for female students, whose sexuality tends to be more guarded and policed in comparison to their male counterparts. The inscriptions are then read as dialogic responses to both dominant educational and wider sociocultural discourses. With no other official spaces to express such sentiments, they appropriate the toilet as an equalising space on which to democratically participate in what are otherwise considered as adult discourses. They are read as a dialogic response to the adults’ assumption that children are not, at the very least, should not be interested in sex-related activities. Thus, it can be read as evidence that the children are aware of what sex is and, crucially, they are interested in engaging in sexual activity. It is then left to the school to address those concerns. In the process, (2) and (3) is then a defiant especially in light of the dominant discourses that construct sex as bad for the young population group. Much of the teaching (school, cultural and religious), that students, especially those in primary and high school, is centered on the ‘no-sex-before-marriage’ doctrine. Matasha et al (1998) establishes how adolescents are sexually experienced during the final years of primary school with most of the sexually experienced citing pleasure as one of the main reason they engage in it.

The sex-for-pleasure discourse is much more salient in female high school student graffiti. This is typified by the interactional text below:

4. ... akamamiswa na... aramba kumupa makumbo (... was [thoroughly] beaten by ... after she



had refused to give her legs [to be read as ‘refused to have sexual intercourse with him’]).

5. Girls dzangu potu hainyimwe munhu (my girls [read friends/colleagues] you must not be stingy with the pot)
6. Inonaka ndakambosvirwa hai [sic] (it is so pleasurable, I was really fucked).

The interaction above (4-5) captures a scenario where a particular girl (name rubbed off from the original text) is said to have been thoroughly beaten after refusing to have sex with her boyfriend. The two responses, by different individuals, highlight interesting aspects relating to sexuality discourses. The first is the rather euphemistic nature of the discourse (in 4 and 5). Whilst it is no real surprise that there is, at times, indirect reference to sex and genitalia (this is characteristic of conservative cultures), the choice of the metaphors is telling. The vagina, which the girl supposedly denied her boyfriend, is referred to as the legs. This becomes significant in a sociocultural context in which the vagina is much more than a reproductive organ but a symbol of fertility. Conservative cultures fetishise their fertility symbols to the extent that they are almost made sacred. It from this perspective that reference to the vagina as ‘leg’ or ‘pot’ is significant in that it has the effect of devaluing the cultural significance of the vagina. The pot is especially significant in a culture that places a high premium on hospitality and that also paradoxically regards stinginess as a vice. All the girl needs to is to ‘dish out’ her pot to her boyfriend. The inscriptions therefore subverts conventional cultural expectations by ascribing the vagina with a significantly weaker signification/significance that enables its discussion as something that cannot really be denied anyone who wants to have it.

However, of major concern is that fact that (5) and (6) blatantly overlook the gender-based violence implicated in (4). The inscription in (4) clearly states that the girl in question was beaten simply for refusing to have sex with her boyfriend. The inscriptions are significant in so far as female sexual rights are concerned. That is, the extent to which female students, for instance, feel that that they are in control of their own sexuality or whether it is entirely depended on the male. The inscriptions perpetuate hegemonic discourses in which a ‘girl/woman’ is said to belong to a ‘boy/man’. In this paradigm, it is the male who controls both partners’ sexuality. Sex is practiced at the discretion of the male, that is, as and when the male feels like it. Refusal on the girl’s part is interpreted as a lack of love or a sign of disrespect. Though not explicitly stated in the inscriptions, there is also the possibility of an involvement in cross-generational or age-disparate relationships. In such relationships, the girls do not have the tools nor skills to negotiate, in so far as sex is concerned. This highlights how such sugar daddy-type of relationships would inevitably be violent or abusive on the girl’s part. Either ways, this then leads to a ‘rape’ situation which the responses (5) and (6) are, at the very least, failing to see, or, worse, downplaying.

## Students’ perceptions of sex, HIV and AIDS

Up to this point a glaring omission in so far as the sexual outcomes emerging from the inscriptions is how there is no reference to HIV and AIDS. This is especially so given the fact that the school curriculum covers issues of HIV and AIDS. Tagwirei and Mangeya (2013) however reveal how the school system has generally adopted a predominantly didactic approach that treats the children as blank slates in so far as their knowledge and involvement in sex is concerned.

Since, the discovery of the first HIV case in Zimbabwe in 1985 (Nyatsanza 2014), people have associated the condition with certain death. This has mainly manifested through the discourse constructed on and around HIV and AIDS especially through what Mashiri et al (2002) refer as ‘naming the pandemic’. Two such names associated with certainty of death to those infected with HIV and AIDS are ‘shuramatongo’ (an omen for impending desolation/empty houses) and mukondombera (plague) where the condition is associated with the wiping out of entire households. They underscore how HIV and AIDS is as good as death sentence. Such discourse is a result of Zimbabwe’s “having experienced one of the most severe HIV epidemics globally (Muchini

et al 2011) exacerbated by the fact that it was medically unprepared and underfunded “for an epidemic which was to cause two million acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) deaths and an estimated additional one million or more HIV infections” (O’Brien and Broom 2014). Coupled with government’s introduction of the home-based care system, it meant that people were highly exposed HIV and AIDS morbidity and mortality. This then resulted in an “unrealistic fear of contagion and social embarrassment of the sexual nature of HIV transmission” (Campbell et al 2011, p. 1004). The stigma arising from it results in a negative social representation of HIV-infected people. Resultantly, social identities become heavily on whether one is viewed as contaminated or not. Discourse then becomes a representation of how relationships between the infected and uninfected are made.

Unlike in the inscriptions made in primary school toilets, those made in high school and tertiary institutions made reference to HIV and AIDS. Most of this reference is overt. Examples (7) – (12) below are representative of this phenomenon:

7. Zihure chenjerai kupera neHIV (beware of perishing from HIV)
8. Uchafa neAIDS hameno hako hure remakoko chinyenga vakomana (sic).  
(You will die from AIDS you bitch in the habit of courting boys)
9. Masturbation is advisable but not excessively. Aids kilss (sic)
10. Zanu pf yaora semhata ine AIDS  
(Zanu PF is now rotten like a vagina infected with AIDS)
11. Zanu pf is as good as fucking a USA without protection
12. Natsai chihure chine AIDS yaVince  
(Natsai is a bitch infected with AIDS by Vince)

One major issue emerging from (7) to (12) above is the ‘natural’ link between sexual deviancy, HIV, AIDS and certain death. It needs to be pointed out from the outset that the use of the term ‘hure’ (bitch/slut) is highly gendered. It is a social corrective label, a highly gendered pejorative, used almost exclusively by female students in graffiti. Scruton (2017, p. 7) defines a gendered insult as “any word or phrase which is disproportionately applied to a member of a particular gender, and which generally bears some connection to societal expectations or norms placed upon that gender”. Slut or bitch are ordinarily used to target or refer to women who are perceived as predisposed toward sexual promiscuity or morally loose. Chi (2017) adds that the terms are still offensive, even when used by women towards other women. The use of ‘hure’ above reflects an unfortunate situation in which women use hateful and offensive language to refer to each other. It serves to perpetuate patriarchal discourses meant to keep female sexuality in check. They reflect gender stereotypes that are used as powerful means to condition gendered interactions. As highlighted by (8) women are not expected to be subjects or agents in so far as the initiation of relationships is concerned. They are always expected to be the object of male desire, who then must be the hunter in courtship. Reversal of these gendered roles are seen as ‘naturally’ linked to HIV and AIDS infection. This attempted ‘slut-shaming’ (Ashwell 2016) is however nothing more than sexist language employed by female students targeted at each other.

Another relates to the blame game that has characterised HIV and AIDS since its discovery. That is, women bear the blame for HIV and AIDS infection in relationships. Inscriptions (8) to (12) epitomise this ongoing ‘raging’ debate. (10) to (12) seem to suggest that women are the source of the virus and, therefore, the condition. Therefore, men are actually victims of women’s spread of the disease. Inscription (10) is based on the ‘logic’, or assumption, that HIV and AIDS, are [exclusively] transmitted through heterosexual sex. This is in line with Kelly’s (2007) conclusion that heterosexual sex accounts for up to 70% all new infections worldwide. Hegemonic patriarchal discourses in Zimbabwe have essentially led to the internalisation of the ‘fact’ that it is only women who are capable of loose sexual morality. These are then labelled as mahure (bitches/sluts). It is these kind of women who are then blamed for spreading the infection. This is what comes out from (10) and (11) where the HIV virus is perceived to ‘inhabit’ the vagina of the female university students (commonly



referred to USAs – University Spinsters Association - in Zimbabwean university discourses) which then leads to the automatic contraction of HIV if the males have unprotected sex with them. It emerges that such social corrective labels are actually ‘technologies’ of control meant to serve patriarchal ideologies and hegemony. Gaidzanwa (2001) reveals how female university students have been stereotyped as ‘naturally’ predisposed towards sexual immorality. The implication in the inscription becomes very clear; the male university student (correspondingly referred to as UBA) can only remain free from HIV and AIDS if, and only if, they stay away from the USAs! The notion that it is the female student who infects their male counterparts with HIV and AIDS is reinforced by the inscription in (13) below:

13. maUSA haachasvirika ndinotorarama nemaform 4 kumusha kwangu kwaChivi

(USAs are now dangerous. I’m now surviving by having sex with form 4 students from my rural Chivi) Unfortunately, the inscription raises more questions than answers. Whilst it is very likely that the boy in question comes from Chivi (a rural area in Zimbabwe’s Masvingo Province), it reveals common stereotypes or misconceptions about young rural girls. They are generally seen as more innocent than female university students and are therefore regarded as an AIDS-free generation. Younger rural girls still in high school are nostalgically constructed as innocent virgins who are therefore free from sexually transmitted infections. Tragically, Zimbabwe Analysis of the HIV Epidemic reports that the Zimbabwean HIV epidemic is relatively homogenous whose HIV prevalence is similar overall across provinces and rural-urban zones. Duri et al (13) explain discourses constructing rural girls as sexually innocent/upright is in fact a relic of the coming together of traditional culture with the colonial legacy of men’s forced migration to cities for employment leaving behind their spouses. The rural women are then ‘sainted’ as chaste whilst their urban counterparts are ‘demonised’ as morally and sexually decadent. Chitando (2002) bemoans how some popular male musicians have perpetuated the “notion that the black female in the urban area is a ‘hure’ (prostitute) or loose in some sense ... The notion that ‘safe’ women are found in the rural area persists in the postcolonial period” (p. 71).

Inscription (9) tags on the idea that the vagina is the natural habitat of HIV and AIDS. This is also reinforced in other inscriptions in male student toilets as captured in (14):

14. Beche rinonaka chenjerai pakati parikuurayisa (The vagina is pleasurable but beware the vagina is causing deaths)

The inscription does not deny the inherent pleasure derived from the vagina. It however calls for the exercise of caution since ‘pakati’ (a euphemism for the vagina in Zimbabwe) is the cause of many death. This ‘fact’ then justifies the practice of masturbation ahead of heterosexual intercourse with women, as it is premised on the ‘logic’ that the elimination of women (who are pretty much seen as bitches) will, by extension, eliminate any chances of HIV and AIDS. The underlying implication is that males are inherently ‘clean’ of the virus and are therefore innocent victims of the vagina/women.

The promotion of masturbation towards the curbing or reduction of HIV infection brings in an interesting dimension in the context of legitimate sexuality discourses in Zimbabwe. Heterosexuality is the hegemonic sexuality in the country with any other form either socio-culturally frowned upon or legally unacceptable. Trying to justify the practice of masturbation on the grounds that it keeps men HIV-free challenges the morality standard used to judge the sexuality in question. The morality, and therefore legitimacy, of masturbation is subordinated to survival of the individual. It also emerges from the graffiti that masturbation is aptly referred to as mhandara mawoko (your hand is the maiden/virgin/girl) and hama mawoko (your hand is your relative). Mhandara mawoko is a purely sexual metaphor in which the boy’s hand is seen as the virgin or maiden you have sex with. The choice of mhandara (maiden /virgin) ahead of just musikana (girl) or mukadzi (woman) for example might not be as random as it might seem. Following the assumed logic consistent in the inscriptions which holds that girls are the ones inherently infested by HIV, a girl and woman might already be sexually

active and therefore HIV positive. A maiden/virgin on the other hand has no prior sexual experience and is therefore seen as incapable of having and spreading HIV.

Hama mawoko, is has a cultural import. A person's relative or kin's person is seen as the most important in their lives based on the assumption that your relative always has your best interest at heart and will be the person to help you in your hour of need when others will otherwise forsake you. Characterising the hand you masturbate with as your (true) relative is meant to capture how it does not infect you with HIV like what the vagina does. It can however alternatively mean that it will always be available to offer sexual pleasure when you cannot get it from girls. These two readings can both be encapsulated in an inscription advising boys to "Rambai muchibonyora kuti zvinhu zvifambe" (continue masturbating for everything to be well/OK). Implied in the inscription is that boys are already engaged in masturbation. There could be issues surrounding the legitimacy of the practice which could have seen individuals being negatively judged because of it. The inscription therefore is serving to giving courage and emboldening the masturbators to continue as it, one way or the other, will make everything OK. Kutu zvinhu zvifambe (for everything to be well) might also potentially imply that boys find it difficult to control their sexual urges. Their need to have sex combined with its outlawing in schools would make masturbation a sensible or viable alternative for boys at school. Thus the inscriptions challenge the normative morality standard used to judge the legitimacy of masturbation and justify its practice based on both medical and social reasons.

It is apparent from the inscriptions made in boys' and men's toilets in high school and universities, respectively, that they perpetuate the feminisation of HIV and AIDS. They seem to imply that men do not spread the disease. They are in fact victims of women's loose sexual morality. In the process, they naturalise the prejudice women (and sleeping with them) are the key drivers of HIV and AIDS. This refers to the commonly-held view that "the face of HIV and AIDS is progressively that of a woman" (Kelly 2007, p. 35). Women are thereby essentially diseased (HIV-infected/infested) bodies. There is however a certain degree to which such discourses meant to breed/install an unhealthy fear for (urban) girls. Hence the justification of masturbation as a way of ensuring both sexual pleasure and survival. For Shakeville (2008) this masturbation discourses are nothing short of misogynistic language that turn part of a woman's body into a slur to insult someone. The implication is necessarily that vaginas are fatal and should not therefore be associated with. In the process, it constructs the woman's body part negatively—and inexorably insults women in the process.

The inscriptions also offer important insights into the social formation of stigma and discrimination against people suffering from HIV and AIDS. In this case it is individuals suspected of either having the infection or indulging in perceived irresponsible sexual behaviours that are expected to result in such infection. The inscriptions, by directly associating various forms of loose sexual morality with HIV and AIDS, feed into discourses which stigmatise and discriminate people living with HIV and AIDS on the premise that they are fully deserving of their condition. (8) directly places the blame on girls who actively seek out relations with boys. This perpetuates hegemonic patriarchal discourses which demand that the female should a passive partner in any relationship who does not have the freedom to choose a partner of their own. Instead they have the freedom to be chosen. This is consistent with Kelly's (2007) assertion that "masculinity images in many [patriarchal] cultures portray the male as the controlling partner, the initiator of sexual [relations and] activity who is dominant in most sexual interactions" (p. 37). In the process, by suggesting that girls must be submissive, docile and compliant to the males, the inscription furthers the continued practice of feminism. Any departure from this cultural expectations is automatically expected to lead to the contraction of HIV. Resultantly, a simple personality trait like extroversion is then automatically implicated in HIV and AIDS issues, thereby constraining female freedom of association.



## CONCLUSION

It is quite erroneous and a massive show of denial for adults to continue assuming that adolescents are innocent and are not thinking about involvement in sexual activities. The inscriptions reveal that the children actively think about having sex, they find it pleasurable, they are afraid of contracting HIV from sleeping with girls and they would rather masturbate to avoid contracting the virus, females are the natural drivers of HIV and female university students are considered as inherently HIV-positive because of a perceived disposition towards loose sexual morality. Lastly, the inscriptions challenge Mashiri et al's (2002) assertion that politeness consideration make it impossible for the Shona to directly refer or discuss issues to do with both sex, HIV and AIDS. It depends on the medium that is being used to discuss the issue. It is apparent that the students have 'liberated' the discourse on sex and sexuality from the sociocultural sanctum of the matrimonial home to the toilet wall, at least.



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