

SEX, MONEY & POWER: CONSIDERATIONS FOR AFRICAN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

by Danai S. Mupotsa

Growing up in Zimbabwe, I was constantly forced to observe the "appropriate modes of conduct" for a young woman. Maintaining "respectability" was paramount and young women were policed constantly. The constant (and consistent) reminders of appropriate parameters for women's bodies and sexuality, as I experienced it in Harare, drew me to reflect on the historical underpinnings of what my peers described to me as "our culture".¹ Interrogating this national culture, it became curiously clear to me that at the crux of these constructs of "tradition" and "modernity" in these discussions were women's bodies: the success or failure of the project of "national culture" (if we are to call it that) appeared to reside in the "national family's" ability to manage and control the mobility and sexuality of women's bodies, be it through parents and kin at home, or through the police forces on the streets of Harare.²

When I consider the question of women's economic empowerment in Africa, these contentious issues immediately come to mind. A range of sexually violent relationships³ — from families accepting bribes to withdraw charges for sexual assault,⁴ to young girls (and their families) accepting money and gifts for relations with older men — are commonplace and commonly *accepted*.⁵ Regarding the latter issue, a social worker in Harare observed with despair, "How do you say to people, 'Stop having the relationship,' when they want food on the table!"⁶ In recent years, in a variation of the "sugar daddy" phenomenon, Zimbabwe has seen the emergence of the infamous "small house" — the second (or third, or fourth, etc...) young wife. Like a BMW, or Mercedes Benz car, it's a status symbol for every successful man! A cynical perspective, perhaps, but what is interesting is how women, women's bodies and sexuality have become increasingly commodified in the context of extreme economic inequality. In a country with an economy in crisis, women appear to be hardest hit by poverty, and transactional sex (by choice and otherwise) has emerged as one means of survival.



Silindeni Mpala, age 29, has a husband who is ill and little to feed her family of eight: "tradition" provides few economic options.

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All this begs the question, if women were economically empowered, would they be in a better position to negotiate sexual relationships?

What I want to do here is, first, to state my central thesis. Then I will use a personal anecdote to illustrate the complexities of the issues at stake. In conclusion, I will return to the question of women's economic empowerment by examining the close relationship between discourses on sexuality, culture and women's economic empowerment.

Dominant views on women's empowerment suggest that offering women economic independence and empowerment can enhance the cause of gender equality and women's sexual rights. I wish to extend this argument by suggesting that because of the manner that dominant discourses on culture have been socially engineered (in this case, in Harare), women cannot achieve economic empowerment if we take no account of the ways in which different gender and sexual relations operate. Whatever the economic conditions in different countries, women the world over continue to face the violation of our sexual rights because of a historically produced and artificially maintained gender discourse of "our culture" or "our tradition" — that not only entitles men to women's bodies, but also informs our views on economic activity. What I wish to interrogate are the multiple representations and interpretations of tradition and modernity as they are applied in relation to women under the present economic crisis in Zimbabwe. Taking one specific example, I want to consider how young women rationalize their choices (or lack thereof) and agency in these situations and how families use "culture" and "tradition" to defend or define what appears to be a fairly modern phenomenon. I also wish to consider the multiple legal frameworks under which these relationships occur. How does one protect the rights of young girls when there are laws defending them as minors that consider these acts to be statutory rape while another set of laws that have been defined as "traditional" can also be applied to counter such charges of rape? Given the implications of the constraint on women's mobility and bodies, what are the economic possibilities for young women?

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I have elected to focus on sexuality, as this is a topic on which African feminists have often been silent. Patricia McFadden speaks to this, describing the fear of sexuality amongst us African women as "socio-sexual anxiety". She says that "the intensity of this anxiety is generated by the fact that there is an extremely intimate relationship between sexuality and power, a connection which is manifested in a range of circumstances and experiences."⁷ Like McFadden, I am concerned that this socialization has depoliticized our discussions of sexuality when they do occur and most often such discussions do not even take place. Barbara Klugman endorses McFadden's position in an essay interrogating the discourses that took place in Beijing on sexuality in Southern Africa,⁸ noting how previous silences on sexuality are being challenged by the advent of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. While discussions on sexuality in Africa have emerged in recent years, in large part because of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, these discourses continue to fail to address the intersections of power, sexuality and culture. Some have noted that in fact what is produced is the notion of "African sexuality" as deviant and the producer of an "African AIDS".⁹ I want move away from HIV/AIDS, not because I do not see the importance of these debates, but because like many others I see the prevalence of the pandemic in Africa

as symptomatic of a pre-existing gender discourse of power: it is precisely this discourse that I wish to investigate.

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Members of the popular Zimbabwean TV drama 'Studio 263' after undergoing HIV/AIDS testing: Women's economic empowerment requires a much more radical commitment to sexual rights.

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The decision to focus on young women is another methodological choice because young women are rendered particularly vulnerable in Zimbabwe. Recent statistics with regard to HIV/AIDS bear this out. In sub-Saharan Africa young women have substantially higher rates of HIV infection compared to young men of the same age. In Zimbabwe specifically, it is estimated that 26% of females aged 15-24 years are infected with HIV, compared to 10% of males in the same age range.¹⁰ Such statistics reflect the particular vulnerabilities faced by young women. Richard Mabala, who coined the term

"Genderation", argues that "If women are a disempowered majority and young people an invisible majority, girls and young women stand at the interface of gender and generation. They have far less power and resources than older women and are even more invisible than adolescent boys and young men."¹¹ Like Mabala, I contend that there is a need to focus on the lives of young women. As a young woman myself, I am able to reflect upon my own daily experiences.

I will enter this discussion with a personal anecdote to demonstrate the complexities I have outlined above. In conclusion, I will return to the question of economic empowerment by examining the close relationship between discourses on sexuality, culture and women's economic empowerment.

Living in a world that hates women!

What unfolded in my family when my 13-year old cousin became pregnant illustrates the ways in which calls to "tradition" are often fought over the bodies of young women. The father of my cousin Susan's child was a man more than twice her age and the second *older* boyfriend that she had had, or that my family had got to know about. When asked why she was sleeping with anyone at all, let alone someone so much older, she simply said "I also want to be loved." This was on the previous occasion and her boyfriend had been charged with statutory rape that time. Not surprisingly, the charges were dropped after another family member accepted a bribe from the accused man without informing the extended family. This time she was pregnant and my mother reported the case to the police.

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My mother soon became the target of an onslaught of criticism from the majority of the family. Many thought that she should have approached the situation more "traditionally," especially since the man wanted to marry Susan. Additionally, Susan insisted that she was in love and wanted to marry this man. While my mother and I insisted that this was a case of gender-based violence on the girl-child, others in the family defined my cousin as a *woman* and, for their part, insisted that the appropriate course of action was for the man to marry her. In their opinion, since the man was not denying his responsibility, there was no need for legal action. What I found most interesting was the fact that my mother's decision to pursue the legal avenue in which Susan was defined as a minor was considered to be "non-traditional", even *against* tradition. On the other hand, an alternative legal system defined her as a woman/mother/wife and considered her situation to be not only culturally justifiable, but almost desirable. Susan herself refused to be viewed as a victim of assault, embracing this "traditional" discourse as it offered her a means to her desired end: marriage.

This situation involving Susan and my extended family prompted me to pose some questions about the kinds of gender discourses men *and* women invest in, in Zimbabwe. Almost all those who proposed that customary law be pursued were women, despite the prevailing view that customary law is more discriminatory to women.¹² As Joy Ezeilo offers, "universal human rights are used to assert that universal norms of standards are applicable to all human societies. Yet women's freedom, dignity, and equality have been grossly eroded in law and fact. Inequality emanating from cultural patterns deprives women of the opportunity to full and equal participation as citizens within their own societies and within international society."¹³ She continues, "This paradox recuperates the perennial jurisprudential questions about the universal cultural legitimacy of human rights."¹⁴ The paradox Ezeilo presents occurs because under the guise of "our culture", both men *and* women produce and reinforce the discourses which many of us may view as disempowering. Defining cultural practices as either "traditional" or "modern" perpetuates this gender-power discourse, despite the fact that this binary is not always stable. As a way forward, Sharita Samuel suggests that,

"Disputes under customary law must not be seen as a contrast between equality and culture in the sense that one of them must 'win' over the other. It is in intra-cultural conflict when a woman comes to court to argue about her status. In doing so, she does not dislodge herself from her culture. She just brings an internal cultural dispute to an alternative tribunal in order to be heard. The fight is no longer between equality and culture. Rather it is between two different interest groups battling to retain or change power relations within their very culture — a culture which is constantly evolving."¹⁵

This view of a constantly evolving culture is the key to addressing this peculiar paradox.

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I take the view that one must investigate the history of social engineering to begin to understand why people would adopt a particular set of discourses concerning sexuality. Mudimbe holds the view that it is "because of the colonizing structure, [that] a dichotomizing system has emerged, and with it a number of current paradigmatic oppositions have developed: tradition versus modernity; oral versus written and printed; agrarian and customary communities versus urban and industrialized civilization; subsistence economies versus highly productive economies."¹⁶ If we examine the process of colonization, urbanization and the post-independence development of urban areas in Zimbabwe, one sees how these dichotomies emerge and also how they inform the discourses on femininity and masculinity. Rekopantwse Mate notes the role of religion in this project, stating "from the colonial era the Christianization of women was driven by the need to train a corps of women who as wives of already Christianized men could facilitate the creation of 'Christian homes' through teaching about Christian domesticity, Christian wifehood, housekeeping and motherhood. The gendered religious messages were part of a social engineering project of changing social relations and ways of life, that is civilizing and modernizing locals."¹⁷

Terence Ranger's essay, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa," examines this process of social engineering. He argues that European imperialism not only produced invented traditions in Europe, but resulted in the invention of traditions in African societies too.¹⁸ The process of "inventing tradition" in Africa resulted in the practical breakdown of many customary institutions regulating relations between the sexes, a breakdown almost always disadvantageous to women. Citing Caroline Ifeka-Moller, Ranger concurs with her assessment that "colonial records on African 'tradition', on which the new invented custom was based, were exclusively derived from male informants, so that 'indigenous female belief' remained unrecorded therefore 'male dominance in society, that is their control over religious beliefs and political organization' was expressed even more clearly in colonially invented custom than it had ever been before."¹⁹ Considering the role of social engineering, and social reproduction during the process of urbanization, Teresa Barnes' *"We Women Worked So Hard": Gender, Urbanization and Social Reproduction in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1930 – 1956*,²⁰ offers the testimonies of urban life by a group of early African inhabitants of Harare who recount their experiences of life in the city. By focusing on the impact of women entering the city, the book allows us to observe the process, described by Ranger, of "inventing tradition".

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It is absolutely essential that we begin to acknowledge that culture ("tradition") is a "gendered practice which excludes women from sites and statuses related to power (in both social and material senses), as it interacts with notions of citizenship, nation and development," as Patricia McFadden suggests, adding that "culture is a 're-invented' and heavily contested phenomenon."²¹ McFadden is correct when she notes that, "Through the re-invention of culture as the central trope of nationalist discourse, African men were able to position women outside of the most crucial social, political and economic institutions in both colonial and neo-colonial societies."²² As I have already noted, both men and women adopt and reproduce this culture, a culture that is patriarchal, not only in the terms of *agency* but as an investment. McFadden similarly concludes with the postulation that "by positioning women as the custodians of these sacred cultural texts, women themselves become trapped in an unchanging phenomenal reality which allows their exclusion in structural, ideological and other terms."²³

Economic Empowerment, Gender Relations and Women's Bodies

Let us return to the question of women's economic empowerment. How does this revision/examination of "culture" offer us, as activists and policy makers, an opportunity to consider the role of women's economic empowerment? Does women's economic empowerment allow women more agency in negotiating sexual relationships, if sexual relationships are so deeply based in economic transaction? I wish to turn to the reflections of Colletah Chitsike in an article entitled, "Culture as a Barrier to Rural Women's Entrepreneurship: Experience from Zimbabwe."²⁴ She writes:

"For some women, making large amounts of money is a dirty pursuit, full of all kinds of evil. In Zimbabwe, women are traditionally brought up to associate making money with immorality: the Shona expression *anoda mari sehure* ('she wants to make money like a prostitute') expresses utmost disgust. The predominant male view of business is that one has to be acquisitive and assertive — perhaps even ruthless — to be a success. Even where a positive aspect is recognized the titles given to women who are strong and decisive are based on male standards. For example, in one of the Shona dialects, the term *bambo mukunda* (father/daughter) refers to a daughter who takes male responsibilities. The language fails to acknowledge the female gender, and lacks words that express the strengths of women."²⁵

She continues,

"Money is an expression of power, and that culture is used by men as a way to keep women distanced from power. They [the women entrepreneurs she interviewed] said that in contrast to those associated with money-making (and

men), the social qualities associated with women in Shona society include skills in fostering peace and preventing conflict; fairness and equity in distributing resources so that society and the family benefit (even to the extent of denying themselves resources for the benefit of others); and the promotion of social justice and reduction in exploitation. With these attitudes within them and surrounding them, it is exceptionally difficult for Zimbabwean women to become entrepreneurs; they will not do so unless there are challenges to culture. They will continue to regard themselves as secondary earners who do not have the responsibility of being breadwinners. They will remain trapped in small-scale, low-investment businesses, which cannot lead to 'liberating economic empowerment' that provides independence from men."²⁶

"Men's economic advantage itself is premised upon a preceding set of gender relations that places women's sexuality in the control of men."

The relationship between money, power and women's sexuality is made clear in Chitsike's examination of the language used to describe women who pursue financial success. Like her, I do not believe that sexual relationships are transactional in Zimbabwe because men are potentially more economically empowered than women; men's economic advantage itself is premised upon a preceding set of gender relations that places women's sexuality in the control of men. We need to pay closer attention to the discourses that young women employ, as the victim/agent binary is insufficient. I return to Susan's lament that she just wanted to be loved. In her mind, it was romantic to be desired by an older man who could provide for her; and Susan's is not an isolated incident.



O. Muchinguri, Zimbabwe's Minister for Women's Affairs, Gender and Community Development, speaks on promoting gender equality and women's empowerment at UN Headquarters: commitment is needed for women's sexual rights.
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Policies to address women's economic empowerment must be undertaken in tandem with policies on sexuality. As a young woman myself, I grapple with how best to inform policy in a manner that is meaningful. I also wonder how to define or describe what "sexual rights" should entail. Presently, policy on sexual rights in Southern Africa remains limited to that of HIV/AIDS. Barbara Klugman's review of SADC policy reveals that

"It is clear that the dominant discourse on sexuality within southern Africa attempts to deny it, avoid it, cover it in latex, or protect women from coercion, rather than recognizing it as a dimension of human experience — a dimension that can and should provide richness and fulfillment in addition to satisfying a reproductive function."²⁷

We must begin with a critique of such limited policies. I want to conclude by indicating that it is my strong contention that if we are to achieve women's economic empowerment, we need policy makers to take on a commitment to sexual rights for women in a manner that moves beyond HIV/AIDS and reproductive health. This will

require that we place on the agenda, the challenge of "culture" as Chitiske so aptly recommends.

References:

1. I draw this conclusion both from general observation, and a series of interviews I conducted in 2005 with a group of 12 women aged between 19 and 22, who grew up in Harare. The study focused on questions of sexuality and articulating the reasons for their decisions and perceptions of appropriate feminine and masculine behaviour as predicated on what they called "our culture". It is from these reflections that I began to think about the discourses of "our culture" as they have been produced in Zimbabwe.
2. For example a study on the status of women in Zimbabwe published in 1998 notes that "in the early years of independence women's human rights were constantly violated when they were picked up off the streets on the excuse that police were clearing the streets of prostitutes." (Tichagwa, W. 1998. **Beyond Inequalities: Women in Zimbabwe**. Harare: ZWRN. Page 38.)
3. I say "sexual violence", but what I hope becomes clear is the expanse of this spectrum: I am speaking here of a variety of experiences and the negotiations of agency that are involved in them. I call it sexual violence to underline the question of power related to them.
4. For example, on a list of the 1000 Worst Cases of Rape in 2005, compiled by Girl Child Network (www.gcn.co.zw) from more than 6000 reported cases, there are a number of cases where either the victim of rape or her parents/family have accepted money to prevent them from reporting the case to the police.
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9. See Jungar, Katarina & Onias, Elina. 2004. **"Preventing HIV? Medical Discourses and Invisible Women,"** pp.97-111, in Inge Arnfred, ed. 2004. *Re-Thinking Sexualities in Africa*. The Nordic Africa Institute and Patton. Cindy. 1993. **"From Nation to Family: Containing African AIDS,"** pp. 127 –138, in Abelove, Henry, Barale, Michele Aina & Halperin, David M, eds. 1993. *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Routledge: New York.
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11. Ibid.
12. See Samuel, S. 1999. **"Women Married in Customary Law: No Longer Permanent Minors,"** in *Agenda* no. 40: Citizenship. Pages 23-31.
13. Ezeilo, J. (Forthcoming) 2007. **"Feminism and Human Rights at a Crossroads in Africa: Reconciling Universalism and Cultural Relativism,"** in Waller, M., Cabezas, A., Reese, E., eds. *The Wages of Empire: Neoliberal Policies, Repression and Women's Poverty*. Paradigm.
14. Ibid.
15. Samuel 1999: 23-24.

16. Mudimbe, V. 1988. **The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge**. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. Page 4.
17. Mate. R. 2002. "**Wombs as God's Laboratories: Pentecostal Discourse of Femininity in Zimbabwe,**" in *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 72, no. 4. Page 550.
18. Ranger, T. 1995. "**The Invention of Tradition in Africa,**" in Hobsbawn, E., ed. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Page 212. Also see the work of Martin Chanock, who explores the historical production of African family law in Zimbabwe. Chanock argues that the African family laws which were established during the colonial situation were the product of the colonial state and of far-reaching economic changes. (Chanock, M. 1977. **Unconsummated Union: Britain, Rhodesia and South Africa, 1900-45**. Manchester University Press; and Chanock, M. 1987. "**Neither Customary nor Legal: African Customary Law in an Era of Family Law Reform,**" in *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* 3(1):72-88.
19. Ranger, T. 1995: 258
20. See, Barnes, Teresa. 1999. **We Women Worked so Hard: Gender, Urbanization and Social Reproduction in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1930 – 1956**. Harare: Baobab; and Barnes, T. & Win, E. 1992. *To Live a Better Life: An Oral Interview of Women in the City of Harare, 1930 – 70*. Harare: Baobab.
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22. McFadden 2001: 64
23. Ibid.
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25. Chitsike 2000: 72.
26. Chitsike 2000: 73.
27. Klugman 2000: 165.