Still Caught-Up in the Cultural Abyss: The Plight of the Girl Child

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Abstract
The study sought to establish the prevalence of harmful cultural practices which disadvantage women in general and the girl child in particular. The research was carried out in Huchu, a remote place in Gokwe South District. The Feminist Sociological theory informed the research. A descriptive survey and ethnography were used as research designs. It was established that despite all the sensitisation programmes that seem to have enveloped the social, political and economic realms, intended goals are far from being realised as harmful cultural practices still abound. These cultural practices include marrying off young girls to affluent persons, chiramu/sibale, chimutsamapfihwa, incest and intra-denominational marriages. Also significant was the impact of patriarchy on the vulnerability of the girl child. Incest was also practiced though in a distorted way between fathers-in-law and daughters-in-law. The most prevalent harmful cultural practice was noted to be intra-denominational marriage of young girls especially brothers-in-law marrying sisters-in-law. Stakeholders are urged to empower the girl child to have freedom of choice despite all religious or cultural pressures. The conservatism of communities has to be broken into. There is need for a functional and binding legal framework that protects the vulnerable girl child. In addition, the law enforcement agencies and civic groups with related scope of operations have to decentralise to these remote areas. Media coverage also has to be spruced up in these areas to broaden the coverage base. Quite significant therefore, is the fact that this research empowers all the stake holders to redirect their efforts to address the plight of the girl child in a social system where abuse is sanctioned by society. This paper is particularly significant in that it urges policy makers and the community at large to begin to walk their talk.

Keywords: harmful cultural practices, intra-denominational marriages, child abuse, girl child vulnerability, polygamy, gender disparities, patriarchy, lobola

INTRODUCTION
Post independent Zimbabwe has made remarkable strides in addressing issues of gender inequality. To some sections, addressing the skewness of gender relations is a myth, while others cherish the impact which electronic media, printed word and live campaigns have had (Mutsvangwa, 2010). The other view contends that modernity has distorted African culture deeming it primitive and uncivilized. Modern civilisation has trashed African culture as evil and demonic. Egalitarians see it as a barrier to equal rights whereas philanthropists and development theorists see it as an impediment to development (Somanje, 2005). Education and religion have been used as social transformative agents reconstructing our culture to what it is like today. One wonders if the transformation has benefited all communities. Our culture seems to have been adulterated so much that what we call ‘African culture’ is a distorted mirage of original culture. Some communities are caught up in conflicts between tradition and modernity. McFadden (1997) (ed) notes that, most African traditional practices were known for sexual explicitness, which was meant to prepare teenagers for future life, marriage, birth and passage from one stage to the next. Sexual innuendoes which were inherent in traditional art such as dances, songs and drawings have been misinterpreted and undervalued in contemporary society. The sense of pride, identity and belongingness which used to characterise our ‘ubuntu’ measured against some forgone cultural practices but reactivated in another version largely by sections of the community adamant to positive change led the researchers to undertake this research. These cultural practices in general constitute child-sexual abuse whose gravity is glossed over by culture. Despite UNICEF (2001)’s advocacy for a multi-sectoral approach to address this topical issue, remote areas devoid of electronic media and printed word have witnessed a phenomenal increase in child sexual abuse. While children in urban settings get empowered on their rights, the rural folk remain disadvantaged. The urban child is kept abreast of child sexual abuses such as incest, crimen injuria and pornography yet his/her counterpart lacks such valuable knowledge. A number of laws have been amended to deter would be perpetrators from abusing children like the Sexual Offences Act (2002) and the Criminal Law and Codification Act (2006). Statistics from the Zimbabwe Republic Police’s (ZRP) Victim Friendly Unit (VFU) at Gokwe show that forty cases of child sexual abuse were reported in 2010. Out of
these, six were perpetrated by teachers and the rest by close relatives save for two by strangers. Most of these cases came to light after children developed health complications and sought treatment from clinics. It is highly probable that some cases go unreported and become shrouded in the cultural practices such as polygamy, incest, kavarira (marrying off young girls to affluent persons in the community), chiramu/sibale (culturally sanctioned sexually suggestive play between brothers in-law and sisters in-law), and chimutsamapfihwa (marrying one’s sister or aunt’s husband following the sister/aunt’s death).

Gwabanayi (2011) reports of a conference where Apostolic sects bishops embraced circumcision and other means of safe sex, notably barring polygamy in their churches. Considering that polygamy is a deep rooted practice in the Apostolic sects, that ruling was indeed a milestone. The more than seventy (70) leaders under the Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa (UDACIZA) said that the umbrella body was formed after the realization that if positive change was to be achieved among churches, a participatory approach had to be adopted. The Government, National AIDS Council (NAC) and Population Services International (PSI) reached out to UDACIZA leadership in Harare. Bishop Washington Guveya of Nyenyedzi Nomwe cited by Gwabanayi (2011) lamented that, “many of us in these churches have resorted to polygamy for different reasons. What is painful is the stubborn fact that not all of us have remained faithful in our multiple relationships. It is about time we took the initiative to protect ourselves and our children. After all, some of our wives would be very young, so promiscuity on their part cannot be ignored.”

It is a pity that such crucial workshops are centralised to people who are already well-informed. It remains a mystery whether one at the periphery of the least developed districts has any knowledge of such issues. The fact that the bishops concurred that promiscuity was rife even in church is a clear indication that perpetrators target young girls. Sachiti (2011) cites a story of a 14 year old girl who became the latest ‘trophy’ of a 51 year old Garwe who ‘yoked’ her with other seven women, senior to her in both age and experience in the matrix of polygamy. This scenario sanctifies early marriage. The key argument among these girls is, ‘what is better to be a prostitute, or married to a husband who loves you?’ It does not matter how many wives he has, but what is important is the security one gets in terms of food, health and happiness. There is nothing peculiar about a 14 year old girl marrying the 51 year old man, nothing sinister about marrying at a tender age for it is normal for old men to marry girls young enough to be their great-grandchildren, (Sachiti, 2011).

Given the goals of UDACIZA and the story of the 14 year old girl, one wonders what the progress is all about. It is one step forward and two steps backwards notes, Sachiti (2011). The research arose from the need to determine the prevalence of cultural practices which disadvantage the girl child.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
This study is informed by Feminism. This is a conflict oriented perspective that is characterised by women’s search for liberation from a sexually repressive patriarchal system. Feminism concerns the systematic oppression of women and the historical dominance of men within most patriarchal societies. The various forms of Feminism include liberal, radical and Marxist Feminists, (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008). Feminists generally argue that men tend to monopolise positions of influence and the decision making machinery both in the family and in the wider society much to the detriment of women. The ultimate goal of Feminism seeks to end the oppression and exploitation of women by men, (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008). Great strides have been made towards this goal. Haralambos and Holborn (2008:646) postulate that, “the women’s movement and Feminism have achieved considerable success in improving the rights and raising the expectations and self-esteem of women.” However, the trends are not the same across the globe as some women still endure the wrath of patriarchy. It is the plight of such women who live in the doldrums of gender equality and equity that intrigued the researchers to embark on this quest.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Bacossi: (Basic Commodities Supply Side Intervention) An economic initiative instituted by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe to ease supply of basic commodities literally taken by locals to denote things easily obtained or acquired.

Bush-boarders: Students who resort to lodging near the Secondary School because of the long distances they travel to school.

Chibondwa: Unmarried and youthful young sister to one’s wife, especially one vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Crimen injuria: The serious impairment of the dignity of the person of another.

Ubuntu: The moral values that denote the personhood of a person.

Umazakhela: A widow, who by virtue of her widowhood is free to sexually entertain any man.
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM
According to the Girl Child Network, an estimated 8000 girls in Zimbabwe have been forced into early marriages or were held as sex slaves since 2008 (Sachiti, 2011). Some were married off before even completing primary education and this is in direct conflict with Millennium Development Goal number 2, (MDG #2) which is to achieve universal primary education. Even the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women (MDG#3) is also compromised hence the task at hand is to investigate the prevalence of cultural practices which tend to abuse the girl child in particular and women in general.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY
The research seeks to:
- identify cultural practices which disadvantage the girl child.
- determine the prevalence of these cultural practices.
- suggest ways to eradicate these cultural practices.

RESEARCH SUB-QUESTIONS
1. How does belief in patriarchy contribute to the disadvantage of women?
2. How prevalent is the practice of marrying off young girls to affluent people?
3. To what extent does religion disadvantage the education of the girl child?
4. What other cultural practices disadvantage the girl child?

LIMITATIONS
The nature of the topic itself was sensitive and there is a probability that researchers might not have accessed the crux of the matter regarding the harmful cultural practices. Research participants might not have readily opened up. Had time and finances permitted, the research could have been made on a large scale.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
The researchers used ethnography and descriptive survey in undertaking the research. Ethnography is a description of the customary social behaviours of an identifiable group of people. Ethnography allowed the researchers to get first-hand information. Participant observation as a technique was used to observe the “marriage plans” during Passover feasts by the religious sects. Questionnaires and interviews were administered to twenty (20) respondents to obtain data on the general harmful cultural practices. Purposive sampling was used to obtain input from preferred respondents like teachers who had stayed at the respective institutions for at least five years. Document analysis was also used to reflect on the pattern of withdrawal of girls from the schools (school drop outs).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS
Informed consent was sought from the participants as researchers clarified the purpose of the research, assuring them strict confidentiality and anonymity regarding presentation of data. The benefit of the research was highlighted to both participants and stakeholders. The researchers studied the practice of marrying off young girls within the same denomination for six months and naturalised the setting through participant observation.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS
The discussion throws light on what has been concealed, anecdotal or deemed culturally acceptable in the absence of girls’ appropriate rights. There are harmful traditional cultural and religious practices which are still practised and these have negatively impacted women. This research has revealed the unequal power play between men and women, whether they are in marriage or not and the position of women within the family. It emerged that men are protected by culture with freedom to marry, divorce and re-marry both in terms of monogamous civil marriage and unregistered marriage union while women are encouraged to remain in marriage against all odds. One respondent aptly said,

Zvingasiirwa imba here mwana wehanzvadzi yangu izvi? Gara iwe, chakafukidza dzimba matenga. Iyo shamhu misodzi yerudo mainini. (There is no point in divorcing on the basis of assault. Just soldier on, no outsider will ever know about it. Matrimonial bickering and tiffs is a sign of love).

The majority of marriages are not registered owing to unequal power relations subsumed in patriarchy. It also dawned that it was a worse abomination for a woman to engage in extra-marital affairs than the man. Patriarchal resistance has manifested itself in the belief that payment of lobola is a ticket to ensure that women are “owned” by their husbands. The Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) pinpoints that women are undervalued in society from early age. It is frequently argued that lobola demeans the status of women, making them servants rather than partners in marriage. Most of the polygamous families were discovered to be comfortable in terms of labour especially during cotton growing and harvesting. They could even be hired and boasted of being the most available source of labour. Though the rhetoric has been to ensure that no one ignores the women question, the dilemma remains; modernity or tradition, hence, Haralambos and Holborn (2010) lament that cultural norms and long held traditions are very difficult to change. There is a general belief that patriarchal relations are God given. Most women
tended to accept their positions in such a system unquestionably. Allegiance to their husbands is a token for security. Men capitalise on such a belief and can even marry more wives with blessings of the existing ones.

Mwilu (2010) notes that many African communities have a cultural provision for parents to marry off their daughters when and to whom they choose. *(Kucvariru* in Shona). Girls as young as twelve have found themselves married off as third, fourth or even fifth wife to polygamous men who are old enough to be their grandfathers. It was established that this practice is also common in the community under study though under a different banner. Grandmothers in Huchu look after HIV/AIDS orphans who become vulnerable to polygamous marriages. The peak of such marriages was during the economic meltdown of 2008 in Zimbabwe. The major reason behind the continued practice was the grandmother’s desire to cushion themselves during drought. Other grandmothers believed that marrying off their granddaughters that way was a way of securing their future. In so doing the grandparents secure a guardian for themselves and other grandchildren too. One respondent said;

*Taida chikafu, nhumbi dzekupfeka uye kuti vanwe vana vamai vake ava vaende kuchikoro.* (we needed food, clothes and money to send her siblings to school).

The repercussions are too ghastly to contemplate on the part of the girl child. She has been forced into circumstances she did not choose and hardly ready for, psychologically and physically. According to Kachere (2010) these effects include disrupted childhood, trauma and difficult child birth that in most cases results in maternal death. Freud is also of the opinion that the puberty stage should be nurturant otherwise an individual is haunted by emotional instability the whole of his/her life. Poverty is a curse in this circumstance. Kachere (2010) cites a case of a 14 year old girl from Chakari who was forced into two marriages by her parents. This girl from Chakari is not alone in her plight as respondents narrated similar stories of some girls who had fallen prey to affluent polygamous men. Marrying off young girls violates the Child Protection and Adoption Act. It is disturbing that these violations go unreported because they are done in the guise of culture and religion.

According to Sachiti (2011) many child brides are not rescued from such marriages ending up in teenage motherhood and the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. Mwilu (2010) cites the case of a thirteen (13) year old Yemeni girl bride who died from internal bleeding after intercourse with a sixty-five year old husband. This is a gory example of vulnerability that ‘forced’ early marriages can expose to young children. The Zimbabwean case is no exception. Quite a number of deaths associated with this vulnerability are not reported and at the brunt of suffering is the girl child. The girls’ vulnerability to HIV/AIDS cannot be overruled as these men seldom get tested before taking them in as wives. After all, the young girl would not have been sensitized on the essence of HIV testing. If at all she has, she is too weak to ask the husband the need to do so. The young girl would have been literally thrown on the death bed. It was also noted that Grade six or seven as well as Form one girls were mostly married off to prosperous farmers. The young girl accepts this as a last resort because financially she is weak. These marriages are planned with the mother/grandmother knowing the circumstances behind the ‘rape’ of the child. This confirms what McFadden (1997) (ed) notes saying;

*women cannot always control how they engage in sexual activity or with whom.*

Studies have shown that significant numbers of women have been pressured into their first sexual encounter by older people.

It was further established that though the culture of silence surrounding sex may fade due to some sensitisation programmes, the plight of women was further exasperated because of this economic dependence. According to Lesly Doyal - a health expert of Africa, unless a woman is steadily and adequately employed, her economic security is dependent on the support of her husband. For the majority of women, survival depends on a relationship with a man. Women headed families were referred to as ‘*Umazakhela*’ indicating that any man was free to spend a night at that homestead. Where a financially independent woman may threaten to leave her husband if he does not comply with her wish to use a condom, a financially dependent woman knows that her only choices are to comply with his wishes which could lead to contracting HIV/AIDS, dying young or leaving the husband which is likely to lead to financial ruination, powerlessness and misery.

Chirawu, Muningu, Nzira, Chikwanda and Zunguze (2007) say the woman’s choice is of ‘social death’ or ‘biological death.’ Women are victims of a patriarchal system that robs them of freedom over their own bodies. A research in Mutsvangwa (2007) indicates that 50% to 80% of all HIV infected women in Africa have no sexual partners other than their husbands. Another research in Kigali, Rwanda found that women with no other risk factor except their long term partners formed the largest proportion of women with HIV/AIDS. These statistics reveal that the high rate of infection in women in the area can be attributed to the issue of their economic dependence.
They are placed at a high risk of contracting HIV from the behavior of men over whom they have little control. A common phenomenon related to the issue of 'disguised' child-sexual abuse is the practice of marrying off very young girls of the same denomination. Mugurungi (2007) in a research in Murehwa alluded to this practice as one of the major causes of child sexual abuse. The practice was mainly perpetrated by some Apostolic sects who claim that marrying off young girls was guided by the Holy Spirit. This study also indicated that the practice is so institutionalised that the parents of the children who are married are very excited. To them, nothing is wrong as they believe the marriage is guided by the Holy Spirit. It was also established that the girl child, according to such church doctrine cannot override her parent’s decision to marry her off, let alone report to the police. If ever she does that, she is disowned by the family as a disgrace and excommunicated from the church. The nature of the ‘deal’ is closely guarded as a family secret and anyone who pries into circumstances of the forced marriage invites the wrath of the family. Since the whole practice is shrouded in secrecy. Philanthropists only come to know of it a bit too late to intervene, though some indicated that they have rescued a couple of victims. The marriage is so confidential that there is no need for a go between (munyai, in Shona, sadombo in IsiNdebele). They believe the ‘deal’ may be exposed if too many people are involved. They often defend themselves quoting a verse in Genesis – “be fruitful and multiply.” The practice is a bit sinister if one intends to marry a young sister to one’s spouse (muraamu/sibale) in Shona and Ndebele respectively. The sect has even coined the term ‘Chibondwa,’ literally meaning ‘backyard garden’ to refer to these young sisters.

The in-law may claim to look after ‘this innocent girl’ yet intending to marry the ‘Chibondwa’ whom they loosely refer to as chipwanya namapfupwa (tender meat). Members of such sects have even given the young sisters a derogatory label – BACOSSL literally meaning ‘very cheap’. It emerged that one could marry as many as four members from the same family using the same ‘trick’ of claiming to send them to school, with the ulterior motive of later marrying them. The ‘courtship’ can even extend to the elder sister who has to convince her young sister that she joins her in the matrimonial train. This young sister will in turn invite yet another younger sister and so on until the whole family ends up married to one man. Manhood amongst the folk is defined by how many wives and children one has. The justification as given by one respondent was, ‘Handigari netsvimbo imwe’ literary meaning I cannot stay with one knobkerrie (knobkerrie meaning wife). As a result, many young girls have been ‘sacrificed’ to fulfill the much cherished status. Young sisters could also be given to their sisters’ husbands once the sister’s marriage is not blessed with children (Chimutsamapfihwa in Shona).

In general, incest laws prohibit marriage, cohabitation and sexual intercourse between individuals who are related by blood, marriage or adoption. The psychoanalytic explanation of Sigmund Freud speculated that horror of incest resulted from the combination of ambivalent emotions towards one’s immediate family and repressed forbidden desires to commit sexual acts with family members, (Oedipus and Electra Complexes). Most perpetrators were considerably older than their victims and predominantly male. Indications made were that incestuous abuse did not commonly involve physical force or violence. Verbal or implied threats were more often used by the perpetrator to ensure the victim’s silence and compliance, but the prevalence was slowly nose diving as cited cases were mainly linked to HIV/AIDS patients whose motive was driven by the myth that ‘sleeping’ with virgins cured the pandemic. In the Psychoanalytic view, incest is a form of chronic traumatic stress that can lead to a host of problems like hysteria, narcissism and over dependent personalities. Quite prevalent was incest between fathers-in-law and daughters-in-law. The perpetrators believed incest to be a charm to increase the fertility of the fields and maximise yields (divisi). The incest has to be done in the field for maximum yields. The moral fabric of society is thus eroded, hence Sachiti (2011) comments that, morals have gone to the dogs. Virginity tests were losing credibility among the respondents because by the time they are due for virginity testing, the girls would have been married off. The following graph sums up the prevalence of the discussed harmful cultural practices in Huchu.

Prevalence Of Harmful Cultural Practices In Huchu

![Figure 1: Harmful Cultural Practices](image)

Frequency

Harmful cultural practice

**Figure 1:** Harmful Cultural Practices
Out of a sample of 20, only one (5%) indicated that some people in Huchu practiced virginity testing in spite of it being illegal under Zimbabwean laws. This seems to reflect that the majority of people are aware that virginity is not only lost through sexual intercourse. There was also a general belief that because girls marry at an early stage, there was no need for virginity testing. 70% indicated that young women were married off to wealthy individuals as a means to cushion grandparents or parents out of murky waters of poverty. From the school records scrutinised, it was observed that quite a large number of girls did not write their Grade 7 and that accounted for 90% of those who got married as a result of church beliefs. It was also established that the practice of marrying off young girls was rampant during Passover feasts held almost twice per term. Patriarchal cultural beliefs also accounted for a significant number (70%) and 40% still believed that incest is practiced in the area under study though greatly shrouded in secrecy. It was noted that 10% believed that Chimutsampa pfihwa was still practiced. About 40% agreed that wife inheritance was a common cultural cleansing ritual related to widowhood that involved obligatory sex for the widow with one of her deceased husband’s male relatives – usually a brother or a cousin. Since the community is largely polygamous, one could inherit even two or three wives who would be of child-bearing age. It was also established that the eldest son is traditionally eligible to inherit his father’s widows with the exception of his own biological mother.

Apart from the above directly related harmful cultural practices, respondents felt that one major reason that led to exploitation of young girls was the shortage of secondary schools in the area. As alluded to earlier, there are six feeder Primary Schools to only one Secondary School. Young girls cannot endure the long distance to and from the only Secondary School. The idea of satellite schools has not been forthcoming. The fate of those who fail to proceed to Secondary School exacerbated by lack of recreation sees them married off early or impregnated. Those who brave to go to school, end up being ‘bush borders’ near the Secondary School and that has expedited their vulnerability to sexual exploitation. Thus, they become easy prey to the lustful men especially when there is a hive of activity during ‘cotton sales’. The fact that there is a depot near the school for selling cotton indicates that these young girls become ‘coveted jewels’ to all the men who would be at the depot. This has seen a rise in ‘bush borders’ drop out at the school due to pregnancy.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the impact of sensitisation programmes, harmful cultural practices and beliefs still permeate the socio-economic life of people in Huchu. The patriarchal nature of society is exploited by men and accepted by women in general to their disadvantage. This goes in hand with what McFadden (1997) (ed) points out saying, theoretically women are equal to men but realistically, inequality exists largely as a result of gender biases. Polygamy is deep-rooted among Huchu residents and many wives are a source of cheap labour in this cotton-producing area. Many households are polygamous and manhood is measured by the number of wives one has, hence marrying off young girls is a common phenomenon. Apart from well-established Apostolic churches, other Pentecostal churches have mushroomed in the area. These too condone polygamy, thus promoting marrying off young girls. As in any conservative culture, permeating into these churches with ideas contrary to their cherished beliefs and practices ignited rejection. Incest also abounds in this ward. The majority of the incest is by fathers-in-law and daughters-in-law for productivity of the land. The issue of chimutsamapfihwa is linked to the payment of lobola. The general belief is that the in-laws have accepted bride price and in return the son in-law should get a wife from the in-laws as a token of appreciation for the lobola. The death of the wife does not negate the transaction between the two families. In the event of ones’ wife dying, the man is entitled to a chimutsamapfihwa (replacement of his dead wife) from the in-laws. Some sects are cunning for pleasing the son-in-law with his wife’s young sister if the wife proves barren. Despite pleas from the medical fraternity of possible HIV transmission, wife inheritance still abounds.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To circumvent the issue of economic dependence on the part of women, the Government should empower women on viable economic projects so that they do not fall prey to the marauding affluent men.
* The church has to rejuvenate its fight against oppression and abuse of women.
* The ZRP’s VFU to decentralize its operations from Gokwe Centre and work in liaison with the communities to set up posts not only in Huchu ward but other wards as well.
* Sensitisation programmes on human rights should be slogans at all public fora to ensure that even the hard hearted and lustful man gets the message. Thus all the concerned stakeholders such as the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture, communities and civic pressure groups should work hand in glove in the sensitisation programmes.
* Schools could hold annual theatre gala competitions with the theme-’Women empowerment’ and the community at large could be witnesses to these fora.
* There is need to establish more secondary schools to curb the problem of ‘bush-boarders’.
Media coverage should be revitalized such that remote rural areas get awareness.

REFERENCES


