

Rape as an expressive form of sexism, sexual harassment, and gender-based violence¹

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A major expression of sexism, sexual harassment and gender-based violence is rape. Rape is a clear illustration of ways in which men exert control over women.² Different religious-cultural and social-economic norms contribute to sexism, sexual harassment and gender-based violence, which in many instances lead to the culture which manifests itself in rape. The address below is based on research conducted in Epworth and specifically confined to Shona religious and cultural practices in Zimbabwe, but it is certainly just a single manifestation of a global phenomenon.

Socio-cultural context

Within the scope of the research, respondents revealed some harmful Shona cultural practices which perpetuate the idea of rape but is seen as acceptable because of cultural norms. Some of these cultural practices, which are an acceptable norm, are described below; they perpetuate sexism, sexual harassment and gender-based violence.

1. *Kuzvarira* (girl-child pledging): During drought and in exchange for food, the poor family offers their innocent daughter to become the wife of a rich man or a member of his family in exchange for food, money or cattle.
2. *Chimutsamapfihwa* (sororate or sister marriages): When a wife is either deceased or unable to bear children, then the sister of the wife is forced to take her place. This practice is to atone for the humiliation of the wife who cannot bear children.
3. *Sexual intercourse with fathers-in-law*: A newly married daughter-in-law

1 Adapted from, and expanding on the unfinished thesis of my PhD student, Victor Chakanya.

2 Although this is the predominant view, the opposite argument should not be discounted, in terms of which women exert control over men!

has to have sexual intercourse with her father-in-law before she has sexual relations with her husband. This practice is mainly among Kalanga-speaking people, Kalanga being a dialect of the Shona tribe. This practice is to verify that the daughter-in-law is indeed a virgin.

4. *Muzukuru mukadzi* (female grandchildren playfully regarded as wives): This practice involves female grandchildren being playfully regarded as wives. Female grandchildren regularly sit on the lap of the grandfather, and this practice can result in sexual abuse, and even rape.

None of these practices take into account the emotions, psyche or views of the females involved.

Socio-religious context

42 Within the Shona religious context people strongly believe in various spirits, such as *midzimu* (ancestral spirits), *mashavi* (alien spirits), *ngozi* (avenging spirits), and *huroyi* (witchcraft), among others. From a religious perspective, one example is *kuripa ngozi* (appeasing the avenging spirit). The *ngozi* are understood to be the angriest and the most feared spirits. They are the spirits of people who were killed or who suffered an injustice during their lives, and who return to seek revenge. In so doing, they wreak havoc in the murderer's family through mysterious deaths and untold misfortunes. Appeasement, which is achieved through compensation, has been seen as the sole remedy in the case of such spirits. If the deceased was a man who was unmarried, the murderer's family must hand over an innocent young virgin daughter to the offended or deceased person's family as compensation. The innocent girl child becomes *mukadzi wengozi* (the wife of the avenging spirit). This practice does not take into consideration the informed consent of the girl. The girl is a hapless pawn in this socio-religious context.

Kurapwa (traditional healing) is exploited by traditional healers to take advantage of unsuspecting women. Some women who turn to traditional healers to help them with issues related to evil spirits that trouble them, are given certain types of herbs and the healers then engage in sexual intercourse with the women, convincing them that healing will only be complete if the sexual act is kept secret.

Other means of perpetrating sexual abuse of women are *huroyi* (witchcraft) and *mushonga*, where medicines are associated with magical powers (Baronov

2010: 141-145). According to Aschwanden (1989: 474) and Bourdillon (1990: 189), Shona society accepts the notion that rape is inextricably linked to immoral practices such as fertility rituals and witchcraft, in terms of which witches and sorcerers are believed to possess strong magical powers which they can use to mysteriously exploit other women sexually, even in broad daylight. The women are unaware that they are being sexually abused.

Last, but not least, are *kurotswa* (prophetic dreams). *Kurotswa* involves “prophets” who declare that through the medium of dreams, God’s spirit has instructed them to take young girls to be their wives. In many instances the young girls in question are members of their churches. According to Muridzo and Malianga (2015: 50), “this is related to the practice of *kutambidzwa* or *kupihwa pamweya* (receiving from the Holy Spirit)”. The “prophets” inform the church elders, who then formalise marriages with the young girls.

Language, as a construct of socio-cultural settings, can have a devastating impact when used advertently or inadvertently to entrench male dominance (although using words or phrases inadvertently certainly does not excuse the culprit). Mungwini and Matereke (2010) interrogate the language used when males recount sexual encounters with females. Words used reveal how constructions of masculinity in Shona culture render the female body the object of male dominance. Phrases used to recount sexual encounters include: (1) *Ndachirikita* (I severely thrashed her), (2) *Ndachidhonora* (I gave her a bitter thrashing), and (3) *Ndachibvumburudza* (I wrestled with her mercilessly and tore her to pieces). Such phrases exemplify males as predators who pounce on their prey and in so doing exacerbate expressions of sexism, sexual harassment and gender-based violence.

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Socio-economic context

Sex with virgin girls is seen as a cure for HIV (Leclerd-Madlala 2002: 92), or as a means of enabling accumulation of wealth³, which has increased the incidence of rape. Some men who are HIV positive, and who seek the counsel of witchdoctors, soothsayers and herbalists, are advised by unscrupulous “consultants” that, “... raping minors will increase male virility, cure HIV/AIDS,

3 Lillian Chikara, a Gender Justice Officer, presented a paper to the Methodist Church Bishop’s Workshop in Zimbabwe on 19 October 2019, which cited this trend.

boost business and increase financial stability and even ward off evil spirits" (*The Chronicle* 23 December 2019⁴).

Some traditional healers advise fathers to become intimate with virgin biological daughters in order to receive blessings which will ensure a good harvest. Innocent young girls in some communities in Zimbabwe, including Epworth and probably elsewhere, are married to wealthy men to avert starvation. This is a serious form of sexual violence which has a life-long negative impact on girl-children (Resick 2016). A breadwinner in the home is at times the perpetrator of violence (be it physical, mental and sexual), and this goes unreported for fear of losing the breadwinner.

Conclusion

44 If sexism is understood as an ideology expressed in men's domination of women and girls, then what has been described aggravates sexism and gender-based violence. While these findings are specific to Epworth in Zimbabwe, they are just one example of what we know is a global problem. The practices may not be rife in Epworth, but one is reminded of other forms of sexual abuse and gender-based violence such as female genital mutilation, female infanticide and female genocide. Some of these practices are still carried out in countries such as China (Lee 1981) and India (Tandom and Sharma 2006).

Finally, several types of rape entrench gender-based violence, including forcible rape, incapacitated rape, drug- and alcohol-facilitated rape, statutory rape, acquaintance rape, date rape, marital rape, incestuous rape, gang rape, corrective rape, prison rape, rape by deception, revenge rape, war rape (or politically-motivated rape), genocidal rape, payback rape, custodial rape, stranger rape or blitz rape, college campus rape and bottle rape. Each of these forms needs to be addressed and obliterated from society.

Society needs to come together and take an active stand, and hold governments, religious leaders and civil society accountable for not doing enough to eradicate such practices and behaviours.

4 *The Chronicle* is a daily newspaper published in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

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