

The family as a social institution

[Sociology](#), [Human Rights](#)



The family as a social institution is a brewery for patriarchal practices by socializing the young to accept sexually differential roles. In the Shona culture, from a tender age, the socialization process differentiates a girl child from a boy child. Shona males are socialized to view themselves as breadwinners and heads of households whilst females are taught to be obedient and submissive housekeepers. The cause of such differentiation and discrimination is the fact that society views women as sexual beings and not as human beings (Chavet 1982). McDowell and Pringle (1992) further states that women are not only constantly defined in relation to men , but are defined as dependent and subordinate to them as well . As a result , women are socialized to acquire those qualities which fit them into a relationship of dependence on men. These qualities include gentleness, passivity, submission and striving to please men always. Culture is the impact of societal traditions and values. Culture has also been defined as a way of life. The UN Security Council Resolution (SCR) 1325 reaffirms the importance of the role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace building and stress the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace . It also emphasizes the role of women in decision — making processes at all levels. Porter 2007 maintains that gender based exclusions cement cultural stereotypes such as the idea that men are suited to the public realm, are dominant in the household and valued and that women can only operate in the domestic sphere are naturally subordinate and inferior. This stereotype is a major stumping block to empowering women and encouraging their capacities to flourish. Within cultures, gender is tied

intricately to other aspects of identity such as ethnicity and religion. Anthropologist Koltak 2004 defined culture as an integrated patterned system. He goes further to maintain that culture encompasses features that are sometimes regarded as trivial or unworthy . However the most significant cultures are those that affect people in their everyday lives. In Shona culture , once a girl reaches puberty all teachings are directed towards pleasing one’s future husband as well as being a gentle and obedient wife. Her sexuality is further defined for her, as she is taught how to use it for the benefit of male race. These cultural teachings foster a dependence syndrome this is why most African women depend heavily on their husbands for support. As a result , once husband dies the woman quickly remarries so as to find another pillar of support to lean on. According to interviews with Shona women who visited Harare Central Hospital’s Social Work Department during the period of January — June 2006 , it exposed women’s dependency on men . Most women who sought grants needed assistance from government because their “ husbands deserted them” better still , “ because they did not have a husband” . All these answers spell out how patriarchy creates dependency on males to the extent that in the absence of males , many women cannot manage to take care of themselves financially. In the family, the male child is preferred to the female child. In fact males rules females by right of birth even if the male child is not the first born in the family , he is automatically considered to be the head of the household who should protect and look after his sister. The female child is further discriminated upon due to the fact that eventually she marries out and join another family whilst the male child ensures the survival of the family name

through bringing additional members into the family. (Human Rights Monitor, 2001). This attitude has seen some parents preferring to educate boys to girls because of girl's capacity to bear children for another family and carry their name. The toy that parents buy for their children also aid socializing process , for instance a girl is given a doll or kitchen utensils to play with whilst the boy is given cars , puzzle games and all toys that require physical energy or mental ability. As a result a girl is socialized to become a mother , soft , emotionally sensitive and to have all motherhood attributes. Issues of sexuality are not openly discussed with girls and if by any chance they try to bring it up they are quickly hushed lest they are to be labeled as prostitutes or sexually loose. However as one grows up. Biological body is acting up she cannot openly enquire from elders because guilty conscience is working against her as he disobeyed the cultural cultivated norms and attitudes . That is when she says " yes" when she means ' NO and NO she means Yes ' . Along the process a lot of mistakes do happen like unwanted pregnancies or forced abortions and society does not spare such women as they are labeled as " spoilt" . (Human Rights Monitor, 2001). Many cultures express leniency on male sexual behavior but are very prospective when it comes to female sexual behavior (International Center for Human Rights , 1996). Males are free to experience sexually at will before marriage whilst females have to preserve their virginity for marriage or risk to tarnish the image of the family since the son in law will pay " mombe yechimanda". (This is a cow offered to the in laws as a token of appreciating for ensuring that his wife preserved her virginity .) This custom holds much value in the Shona culture in some parts of the country virginity test are carried out traditionally. Marriage is a

sacred and a married woman is treated with respect in fact , it is the desired destination of most common Shona women . In the traditional Shona culture , the husband can have as many wives as he can pay lobola for an extra marital wives as a bonus. When such a scenario happens , the wife is blamed for failing to satisfy her husband or failing to curb his desire to do so. However , if it so happens that the idea of an extra marital affair crossed a married woman ' s mind , she is not spared she is labeled loose, and has to be sent back to her parents to instill some discipline or she is divorced right away. In addition to the above , married women are expected to be sexually passive and submissive to their husbands ; men are the initiators of sex and also set the conditions for sexual encounter. On the same note , Messer (2004) states that women are expected t satisfy the sexual desires of their husbands . As a result , when men or husbands want sex , the wife should comply because that is part of the marriage social contract (Leclerc-Madlala2002). This scenario has seen HIV / AIDS spreading like veldfire because women cannot insist o safer sex measures as men control the sexual encounter. Patriarchal attitudes are also found in Christianity and these have strengthened the traditional customs , which men use to control women's sexuality (Human Rights Monitor, 2001). To exemplify Eve's creation from Adam's rib has made women to occupy a subordinate position in the church as well as in the family. Women are therefore viewed as merely 2nd class citizens who were created as an afterthought. It is argued that if God had seen it fit for Adam to stay alone, then Eve would never had been created and hence women would not exist in this world. Such patriarchal attitudes made matters worse once Eve was created ; she wreaked havoc by

giving in to the devil's temptation and pulling Adam into sin . This portrayal of women as the weaker sex has made men to treat women as people who have to be kept under constant supervision lest they err. St Paul's letter to the Colossians is example of letters which Zimbabwean women quote as a justification of their control over women. The woman is expected to " submit to her husband" Colossians 3: 19. Now love is much more difficult to measure than obedience or submissiveness. As a result , men control their women and justify their actions basing on Christianity. Arranged marriages are familiar within the Shona traditions and elsewhere in Zimbabwe and beyond. This can be based on religion such as the the Apostolic sect where young girls are married off to older male members of the sect on prophetic revelations. These girls cannot deny getting married to these men who in some cases are older that their fathers for fear of being cut off their families. In some cases when there is a drought spell in the country parents marry off their daughters to affluent members of the community in exchange for money or grain. In some cases , some fathers marry off their daughters to their debtors when they fail to repay their debts. Furthermore in order to appease angry spirits following murder , a young girl (virgin) is given to the offended family as a wife . In all cases above , consent is not sought from the young woman concerned but they are forced to comply with cultural tradition. The education system in Zimbabwe is structured in a way that maintains the inequalities that exist between girls and boys . Firstly the textbooks used in schools depict boys as tough , rough and mentally skilled people who are adventurous whilst girls are soft , gentle and enjoy carrying out household duties. Even the uniforms for girls are not suitable for the

rough play or tree climbing that boys favor. Secondly, the educational system does not put into consideration the fact that when children start attending school they come with inequalities already shaped with them. The school curriculum should then be structured in a way that does not perpetuate them. The educational system in Zimbabwe has been criticized by Chirimuuta(2006) for being gender insensitive and gender blind as it encourages male models, male —authored textbooks and theories thus spelling out that women should be academically subordinate as well. In Zimbabwe the enrolment ratio for girls is lower compared to boys in high schools despite women being more in the country. This is due to the patriarchal attitude which views educating girls as a waste of money since she will marry and benefit another family (Human Rights Monitor, 2001). In some religions, like the Apostolic sect girls are married whilst still in primary school to older members of the sect. Education is one way in which women can emancipate themselves from the grip of culture through male domination however, a critical analysis of educated women reveals that education is not a true emancipator. This is due to the fact that even those women who are educated have to succumb to culture otherwise they get labeled as “unmarriageable” (Chirimuuta 2006), and will be shunned by prospective partners. Since marriage is a sacred institution in the Shona culture, it is society’s expectation that every woman should be married. Furthermore, parents get worried when their daughter do not get married to the extent of consulting spiritualists / herbalists to break the curse as it is believed. As a result, education fails to offer total liberation to Shona women. The low levels of female enrolment in secondary schools means that

fewer women make it into the cooperate world . However, for those who do so, they soon realize that men control the economy. Patriarchal attitudes also exist in the cooperate world and few women are allowed to occupy leadership positions. Most women occupy less challenging positions like secretarial or clerical positions. In the public ministry in Zimbabwe for example there are more males than females. Women occupy less challenging positions like gender, culture or education. Its unheard of in Zimbabwe for women to be ministers of finance or defense . If women are chosen to be leaders, they have to prove themselves twice as much as their male counterparts. “ The educated and professional women , no matter how capable , are never considered to be equal to their male peers and colleagues. She may be admired , humored , tolerated..... and if she plays her cards she might even make an inroad in her field of activity . But too often, it will be because a ‘ favor’ and rarely not because of her abilities (Buchanan 1993: 1070 cited in Okome 2003: 84) Still in the cooperate sector , women are victims of their sexuality as they are subject to sexual harassment or sexual violence by their bosses. This situation is due to the fact that women are viewed as sexual beings and not as human beings (Chavet , 1982). In some cases , in order to be considered for promotion women have to offer sexual favors to their bosses . The majority of women who are not employed are from rural areas where, “ they toil on the land they do not own , to produce what they do not control at the end of the marriage , through divorce or death they are sent away empty handed” (Former Tanzanian president Julius Kambarage Nyerere at the third World Conference on Women in1984). These women are discriminated upon by not

being allowed to own land on the basis of customary law and custom since men have always been viewed culturally as land owners (Human Rights Monitor , 2001). This situation as a result forces rural women to be dependent on males through the cycle of marriage and reproduction. Politics is portrayed as a dirty game, which requires tough qualities that very few women are nurtured to do it. Those women who enter politics have to really prove that they have a tough caliber in order to withstand the pressure brought about by patriarchal attitudes which define women as weak and not fit for public offices. In politics women are freely accepted without questions as singers , dancers , cooks and guest entertainers. In Shone culture , by virtue of the payment of lobule , children belong to their father and inherit the fathers' surname , totem as well as citizenship. Married women cannot pass their citizenship right to their children even though single mothers can. This is due to the fact that, many Zimbabwean laws follow cultural customs which are part of the patriarchal system in which women occupy subordinate positions. All the same, lobule gives a man all rights. She is even further reduced to the level of acquired property. As a result , lobola , which is part of the patriarchal nature of our society breeds inequality and widens the gap between men and women , thereby placing women in a subordinate position. In most patriarchal communities , boys and men are socialized to believe that they hold keys to all activities that women partake even accessing health services. While men are believed to be key decision makers in all aspects of society and have the powers to protect their partners , they lack health seeking behaviours. Their unwillingness to access social negatively affects their spouses. Some married women face challenges in seeking

treatment as enrolling on prevention on mother to child transmission (PMTCT) programmes because their husbands forbid them. With HIV / AIDS being the leading cause of death among mothers and infants accounting for over 27% of all deaths (NAC) there is need to empower women so that they have access to health coverage of PMTCT Prophylaxis among HIV positive pregnant women at 59 % remains sub-optimal. In general , there is lack of knowledge and literacy on HIV and health issues. But what is putting women and girls more at risk of infection is social and cultural practices and beliefs such as gender roles in homes , power dynamics in sexual relations , poverty and dependence on men for money , biological make up and lack of knowledge of their own body as well as religious beliefs play an important role in women's vulnerability towards HIV / AIDS . Cultural practices such as early marriages and polygamy play a bigger role in the denial of access to health services for women. Women are at the receiving end of these practices as they lack power to voice their empowerment to sustain their choices. The Zimbabwean Council of Churches believes that the church has a responsibility in this issue and is involved in training different levels of church leaders to facilitate the removal of stigma and to make the church an inclusive home and place of refuge. Changing social and cultural practices demand a collective effort by all stakeholders including the government , civil society , the church and the media. But most importantly men need to change their health seeking behavior as it has a direct impact on their female partners' health , just as health is a basic human right , it is every woman's human right too. After all has been said and done , one can safely conclude that Zimbabwean women are greatly disadvantaged and let down

by their culture. The Zimbabwean culture precisely the Shona culture views women as inferior men so much that women suffer at the expense of the men. The Shona culture as a social contact binds women to abide by the dictates of their male counterparts as is expected in the patriarchal society. All these imbalances affect women from school, workplace, and homes and even in public places as women are seen second class citizens. References Charvet , J (1982) Modern Ideologies : Feminism. London . J. M. Dent and Sons Limited Chirimuuta , C. (2006) Gender and the Zimbabwe Education Policy : Empowerment or Perpetuation of Gender Imbalances ? Quite mountain Essays [http://www. quitemountainsessays. org](http://www.quitemountainsessays.org). chirimuuta. Human Rights Monitor , February 2001, Human Rights Forum , Harare International Center For Research on Women (1996) . Vulnerability and Opportunity : Adolescents and HIV / AIDS in the Developing World, Washington DC International Center for research women Lederc- Madlala , S. (2000) Silence AIDS and Sexual Culture in Africa . University of Natal: DIDS Bulletin Messer , D. E (2004) Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence : Christian Churches and the Global Aids Crisis. Minneapolis : Fortress Mcdowell , L. and Pringle , R (1992) Defining Women : Social Institutions