



# **The realities of romance**

How young women in Zimbabwe navigate the perceived norms and expectations of romantic relationships

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this thesis is to shed light on how young women in Zimbabwe navigate the perceived norms and expectations surrounding romantic relationships with men. The research questions are on the perceived norms and expectations are, how women are informed about them, and how they navigate these norms and expectations. Using the theory of changing social norms and the theory of patriarchal bargain, data consisting of answers from eight informants is analyzed. Coupled with information from five organizations to fully comprehend the results. The analysis illustrates a restricted and norm-controlled reality for women – women should not engage in pre-marital sex, but instead marry, have children, and primarily take on a supportive role to their male partners. The results also demonstrate that some women uphold these norms and patriarchal values. Yet, they also discussed how gaining financial independence, and therefore power, could influence the structures of romantic relationships.

**KEY WORDS:** Social anthropology, romantic relationships, Zimbabwe, norms, patriarchy

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## 1. Introduction

Interactions between men and women is a widely discussed topic around the world that is greatly influenced by local norms and mutual expectations. Zimbabwe is no different. One of the ways this is expressed is in romantic relationships with men. Cultural norms and laws of Zimbabwe today prohibit women's movement and autonomy. A report from *The Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA)* (Kågesten et al., 2021) shows that only 28% of Zimbabweans believe that pre-marital sex is justifiable, while 41% believe that a woman becomes a real woman only when she has had a child. Finally, 70% believe that it is the woman's responsibility to not get pregnant (Kågesten et al., 2021: 87 - 88). Abortion is not an option as it is only allowed in cases of rape, incest, fetal impairment, or if the pregnant person's life needs to be persevered (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2022). Last year, 2022, Zimbabwe changed the legal age of sexual consent from 16 to 18 with the purpose of protecting minors. While this was welcomed by many, it was also discussed that adolescents often have sex before the age of 18 years, the difference now is that they can be criminalized for it. There is also the issue of not being allowed access to and information on sexual and reproductive health and rights services (SRHR) until you are 18. If adolescents are sexually active before the age of 18 years - they can not only be criminalized for it but will not have the tools to be safe in terms of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2022). This proves the situation to be complex with various aspects to consider. The organizations I was in touch with spoke of working in a preventative rather than corrective manner.

Furthermore, men in Zimbabwe are seen as the final decision makers concerning family planning and sexual relations (Koster et al, 2015: 127). Zimbabwe has the goal of eliminating child marriages by the year 2030, in line with target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals, but there are obstacles in making that happen. Issues of poverty, education, religion, family honor and harmful cultural practices are examples of this (Girls Not Brides). The organization African Sexual and Reproductive Service mentioned that people hide behind all kinds of reasonings for discriminating women. Within the indigenous apostolic church, girls are married as young as ten years old with the motivation of spiritual guidance. Being financially stable and educated decreases the chances of girls being married young. Engaging in pre-marital sex and compromising your virginity – which is tested within some communities – are other reasons for early marriage (ibid.). However, challenging men on

their dominant position in their communities and families is also problematic as they might feel threatened (Gwatimba et al. (2021: 53). The norms and customs in place make it difficult to vouch for change, yet change is needed to improve the lives of women in Zimbabwe.

The aim of this study is to shed light on how young women navigate social norms and expectations surrounding romantic relationships in Zimbabwe. The research questions are:

*How do young women in Zimbabwe navigate the perceived social norms and expectations of romantic relationships with men?*

*What are the perceived societal norms and expectations of women in romantic relationships?*

*How, when, and by whom are women informed about these norms and expectations?*

*How do women aim to influence a change in these norms and expectations?*

Navigating social norms and expectations regarding romantic relationships is something the women of this study have to do constantly. Meanwhile they come to understand their role as women and adapt to the future. Sometimes they are also perpetrators of the subordination of women. Highlighting the norms and how they resist and uphold them aims to further develop a progressive environment for women to gain knowledge, understanding, and acceptance in society. Albeit small, hopefully this study will be a contribution to organizations in the Sub-Saharan region working with gender equality.

The study unfolds as follows. Previous research, theory and method are presented to demonstrate how the study has been conducted and within which context. Then comes the background section on Zimbabwe, focusing on ethnic groups, the country's financial situation, and colonialisms impact on romantic relationships and women. Within which environment are these women living in and how do these factors affect the norms and expectations of women. The analysis begins with a section on women's perceived role in society – sexually, in marriage, as mothers, as partners, and in relation to other women. This shows what norms and expectations these women believe they have to navigate in romantic relationships. This is followed by a section focusing on who informs young women about

these norms and expectations, and how that is done, seeing how information – or lack thereof - reaches women. The last section of the analyses aims to show how these women aim to change these norms and expectations, and other factors of change too. Mainly this is shown through financial stability but also with shift in mindset leading to a different perspective on norms and expectations of women in romantic relationships. Lastly the conclusion will tie everything together and highlight the main points of the thesis.

## **2. Previous Research**

This review limits itself by only discussing pregnancy, gender roles, and intimate partner violence. These topics were brought up by the informants themselves and are related to overall topic of romantic relationships between men and women.

### **2.1. Pregnancy**

Children have an important role in many African cultures, their significance and the conceptualization of the pregnancies have been the focus of several studies. Dyre (2007) and Liamputtong & Benza (2019) studied the value children have within Zimbabwean communities and African communities respectively, and the consequences of childlessness. They both emphasize the importance of children, pointing to the fulfilment of womanhood and a marriage, an increase of status with each child born, and a respect to be earned from the community. Dyre (2019) also includes the perspective of men, showing the consequences of being a childless man are similar to those of childless women – society views these men as failures. However, both articles (Dyre, 2019, and, Liamputtong & Benza, 2007) also illustrate that the consequences for childless women are worse, as they are often blamed for it. These studies only interviewed people who already had children - while this topic will be raised in this study through childless young women's perception of the norm surrounding having children.

Furthermore, Chikovore et al. (2002) studied men's perception of abortion and contraceptive use within marriages in rural Zimbabwe. Here, the double standards of men and women is evident as the men in the study condemn cheating for women yet engage in it themselves. Their own cheating is also the reason for their belief that a woman using contraceptives is a cheating woman. However, the wives still use contraceptives but in secret – exercising control of their own bodies. This lack of control their husbands feel frustrates them. Shown in

Tinago et al.'s (2018) study, women rarely decide alone on issues concerning their pregnancies - either leaving it entirely to their husbands, or, in conversation with them, their family, or the healthcare workers. Not only does Tinago et al. (2018) highlight the influence men have on their wives' lives, but also how there is a lack of knowledge among women concerning pregnancy, evident in the informants of this study as well. Chikovore et al. (2002) show women taking control of their bodies through secret contraceptive use, Tinago et al. (2018) point to women having a lack of control of their bodies – both studies reference the expected role of men being the head of the house and having the final say in any decision.

## **2.2. Gender roles**

Chidwira & Madziva (2023), Montgomery et al. (2012), and Gwatimba et al. (2021) show how gender norms can be displayed in different ways. Chidwira & Madziva (2023), discuss two cases of women navigating their roles as women, when they have left the traditional context in which these roles are expected. Montgomery et al. (2012) illustrates women's participation in an HIV-prevention trial in Zimbabwe – aiming to understand men's influence of their decision-making. Gwatimba et al. (2021) studied gender equality in customary marriages in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Chidwira & Madziva's (2023) studied women migrating for work and taking on the traditional male role of being the breadwinner. This is received by family with either support, or disapproval. Meanwhile, Montgomery et al. similarly demonstrate the grip gender roles have as their informants still accept men to maintain the role of having the final say in decision-making. Simultaneously they recognize that gender roles are more equal today and find this to be positive. Additionally, Gwatimba et al. (2021) point to gender roles of women being subordinate men and not having any decision-making power. This also relates to Tinago et al. (2018) where the husbands role of decision-maker, remaining unchallenged. Chidwira & Madziva (2023) and Gwatimba et al. (2021) display how when, or if, women challenge men in their roles, by financially providing – leads to men feeling threatened.

These examples show a complex relationship between moving forward while staying true to tradition. This has a negative effect on women's well-being and freedom.



### **2.3. Intimate partner violence**

Bengesai & Khan (2021) and Tenkorang (2018) have both studied the link between intimate partner violence and autonomy. Bengesai & Khan (2021) point out that one in four women in Zimbabwe have been subjected to some form of abuse, emotional violence being the most frequent. The informants of this study aim to be financially independent, to gain decision-making power, while Bengesai & Khan (2021) and Tenkorang (2018) both found in their studies that financial autonomy increased intimate partner violence.

Bengesai & Khan (2021) explained this as the result of challenging the gender norm of men being the expected breadwinner. As shown by Montgomery et al.'s (2012) norms and gender roles are highly valued and hard to change.

## **3. Theory**

### **3.1. The development of social norms**

This thesis aims to shed light on how perceived social norms impact young women in their romantic relationships and the theory on social norms by Ensminger and Knight help frame the study's findings. Ensminger & Knight (1997) studied the development of social norms influenced by Barth and Bourdieu. The former argues that people submit to social norms when it is beneficial for them, while the latter argues that people submit to social norms because it is the appropriate behavior of the situation (1997: 2). Through the case study of the Galole Orma, a pastoral population in Northwest Kenya, Ensminger & Knight identified three mechanisms through which they studied changing norms. These three mechanisms were *coordination on focal points*, *competitive selection among contracts*, and *bargaining* (Ensminger & Knight, 1997: 1, 6 - 9). The mechanisms are relevant to different scenarios but are not mutually exclusive and can be used to understand the same situation (Ensminger & Knight, 1997: 3). This thesis focus solely on bargaining as coordination on focal points and competitive selection among contracts are not of further relevance here. Focusing on property rights, bride wealth, and exogamy of the Galole Orma, Ensminger and Knight argue that bargaining and disproportionate bargaining power are the main drivers of social change (1997: 1, 6 – 9).

Within the act of bargaining, social actors aim to develop norms for increased resources. These resources can be material, or in the shape of social power, status, or the ability to apply personal ideological beliefs onto others (Ensminger & Knight, 1997: 4). A change in norms comes from the aim to achieve another goal – the norm is solely a byproduct, whether intentional or not (1997: 5). Uneven resource ownership in the community, such as the one between men and women, is valuable for bargaining. Social actors who are in possession of greater resources have more bargaining power and are allowed to deviate from existing norms or create new ones with little to no consequences. This is not the case for those with lesser resources (ibid.). Social norms that create unequal advantages amongst social actors should be analyzed using the bargaining mechanism (Ensminger & Knight, 1997: 14).

Ensminger & Knight present the bargaining mechanism through the practice of bride wealth of the Galole Omar. In combination with polygyny (a man with numerous wives) and arranged marriages, bride wealth is beneficial to the older and powerful men of the community. These men have the resources to attain numerous women for themselves and their sons (Ensminger & Knight, 1997: 11). However, the young men and women's bargaining power increased due to financial independence and by finding support in the civil and Muslim courts against 'forced' marriages. Because of young men and women gaining bargaining power, the elders are losing bargaining power, and bride wealth is on the decline (Ensminger & Knight, 1997: 11). The authors show the relevance of resources when bargaining for a change in social norms.

Within the context of this study, the uneven resource allocation exists between men and women in general. Men possess the power to do as they please to a greater extent than women. In trying to change perceived norms and expectations of women in romantic relationships, women navigate by bargaining, because they cannot have the cake and eat it too. Meaning - to achieve one thing, they have to give up another. The women increase their resources (and bargaining power) by attending university, getting a job, and becoming financially independent. The goal is gender-equality which includes more freedom in romantic relationships and within that goal - the norm of women entering education and work sector emerges.

### **3.2. Patriarchal bargain**

Kandiyoti (1988) shows how women maneuver their subordination within the structure of patriarchy. This affects their passive or active resistance to their subordination (1988: 275).

She highlights the *classic patriarchy* – a patrilocal system that promotes men to the highest position within a family. This structure also allows for senior women in a family to have more status over younger women within the same family (1988: 278). The young woman’s experience of subordination and suffering pays off only when she becomes the senior woman of the house and reproduces this by being the perpetrator towards the “new” younger woman. This is called a *patriarchal bargain*. The patriarchal bargain demands that women internalize their own subordination – which allows women security and recognition, instead of exclusion through resistance of the patriarchy (1988: 279 - 280). Furthermore, Chattopadhyay (2017) wrote about Kandiyoti’s patriarchal bargain, pointing to the pressure mothers apply to their daughters, because in the end, it is the mothers, not the fathers, that are held accountable if the daughter behaves badly. She also mentions ‘neighborhood aunties’ and female friends being the most vocal critics in a woman’s life.

The power relations between women in this study is not about age difference but mainly between the women who adhere to the norms and women who do not. The informants can be seen resisting but also upholding patriarchal ideas of norms and expectations surrounding women. Framing this thesis with Kandiyoti’s theory of the patriarchal bargain, highlights the power women lack within a patriarchal society and how they choose to exercise power over other women. The women of this study might have been, or are, scrutinized in their lives for their own actions and can only balance that power imbalance by asserting power over other women. Referring to Chattopadhyay, informants spoke of female friends, sisters, or even “random” senior women, policing and voicing their opinion of them. In doing so they uphold their own subordination. To understand this behavior, the theory of the patriarchal bargain is relevant.

#### **4. Method**

The organization, African Sexual and Reproductive Service<sup>1</sup>, hosted me during my fieldwork, focuses on gender equality in the region of southern Africa. They work towards fulfilling the UN Sustainable Development Goals by recognizing the existing gender and power structures in society and their consequences. The organizations aim is to ensure sexual and reproductive health and rights for everyone, end gender-based violence, protest inequalities and toxic masculinities, uplift feminist voices, and create a better life for women, girls, families, and

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<sup>1</sup> All names, including those of organizations are pseudonyms for anonymity and ethical reasons.

society as a whole. Before arrival my contact person, the executive director of African Sexual and Reproductive Service, supported me during the application period as well as with the overall plan and focus for the fieldwork. Upon arrival, they provided me with an office space and contact with other organizations working with women and girls in Zimbabwe.

Beside this, I had another contact in Zimbabwe, who assisted me throughout the process by connecting me to organizations who in turn got me in touch with informants. She will be referred to as my Zimbabwean contact throughout the thesis.

#### **4.1. Organizations**

During my fieldwork the Private Voluntary Organization (PVO) Amendment Bill was passed, with the purpose of supervising the funds of non-governmental organizations and how they are used in Zimbabwe. This is to prevent money laundering and to disable a possible promotion of foreign political propaganda (Machivenyika, 2023). In practice this will severely restrict non-governmental organizations and how they operate as well as allow for them to be monitored (OHCHR, 2023). This only affected my field work by having to anonymize the organizations and the name of the people I met there.

The organizations are presented in the Table 1, pseudonyms are applied for anonymity. I met with six different non-governmental organization in Zimbabwe, all of them involved with women’s and girls’ rights in different ways. These organizations were chosen as they all work with the issues relevant to this thesis, such as relationships, women’s empowerment, sexuality, and reproductive health. Meeting with these organizations helped contextualize and understand the informants’ realities better, and the answers from the organizations and the informants often aligned. They all worked in both urban and rural areas, some are more established than others.

| <b>Organization/Pseudonym</b>           | <b>Contacted via</b>     |
|---|--------------------------|
| Young Women of Zimbabwe Alliance        | Zimbabwe contact         |
| Southern African SRHR Organization      | Host organization        |
| Girls and Women of Zimbabwe Foundation  | Host organization        |
| Worker’s Rights Zimbabwe                | Zimbabwe contact         |
| Empowering Women Zimbabwe               | Contacted directly       |
| African Sexual and Reproductive Service | Was my host organization |

Table 1. List of organizations and how I got in touch with them

Although Worker’s Rights Zimbabwe did not work with women or girls specifically, the gender perspective was relevant for them as well. They also got me in touch with two of my informants. I got in touch with Young Women of Zimbabwe Alliance and Worker’s Rights Zimbabwe via my Zimbabwean contact. Southern African SRHR Organization and Girls and Women of Zimbabwe Foundation, was contacted via my host organization and the final one, Empowering Women Zimbabwe, I reached out to on my own through research prior to arrival. These meetings were each approximately an hour long without being recorded - I only took notes. I did not have questions prepared for any of the meetings but as the meetings progressed, the answers I received led me to more questions.

## 4.2. Interviews

### 4.2.1. Informants and sampling

| Name/Pseudonym |
|----------------|
| Netsai         |
| Alyson         |
| Panashe        |
| Ivy            |
| Mercy          |
| Theresa        |
| Michelle       |
| Vimbai         |

Table 2. List of pseudonyms of the informants, anonymity and confidentiality is applied

Officially I interviewed eight women in total. During the interview with Ivy, her friend Mercy joined in towards the second half of it, and therefore she is included as an informant.

The length of the interviews varied from 45 minutes to almost two hours. Some informants were more concentrated on the issues of the thesis whereas some spoke more generally about their life and Zimbabwean society.

The sampling criteria for the informants was broad which widened the scope and reach. The informants are women from Zimbabwe, based in Harare or Bulawayo (the capital and largest city in Zimbabwe, and the second largest city, respectively). They were between the ages of 20 – 30, except for two older women, who although outside of the age scope, contributed with other perspectives as they are married with children. The age group being 20 – 30 is because these are years considered relevant to forming romantic relationships with men. One of the eight informants were of the ethnic group Ndebele and the rest were Shona. The focus being on romantic relationships and not specifically marriage is because some informants were in a relationship, others were not, and a few had never been in one either. This broadens the perspective to include a varied range of experiences of romantic relationships. All the informants between the ages 20 – 30 had finished university or were currently studying. The two older informants were working and did not have higher education. The majority of the informants were religious. The informants were found via Young Women of Zimbabwe Alliance, Worker's Rights Zimbabwe, and my Zimbabwean contact.

Besides the chosen informants, I met various people throughout my stay in Harare, such as my driver, the guards at my house and at the office, and taxi drivers. They were almost always men (whom I found hard to ask about norms of women in relationships). Nonetheless, they contributed to my understanding of the country, in a historical and political aspect.

#### *4.2.2. Structure*

The interviews were semi-structured, almost free conversations at times. In preparation for the first interviews, I first wrote down specific questions to ask but later turned them into an interview guide of general topics (Appendix 9.1.). I had both the interview guide and specific questions with me during the interviews but only ever looked at the interview guide if needed. To create an open and comfortable space, I aimed to have more of a conversation than a strict interview, answering any questions the informants might have about the situation

in Sweden or my own life. With all my informants I was open about the focus of my thesis sampling, masters subject, nationality as well as the name of the course.

Although the topic of social norms within romantic relationships can be considered private, I found my informants easy to talk to, Bourne & Robson wrote of informant's reflections on being interviewed about risk and sexual behavior. Their informants spoke of the importance of contributing to research, but also feeling free to discuss things that they cannot with others or gaining therapeutic support from the interview (2015: 109 – 110). I can see that these factors apply to the informants of this study as well – specifically having someone to talk to about these topics. Some informants spoke of people in their lives with whom they were free to discuss romantic relationships, but many spoke of a lack thereof. Because of this, some might have taken the opportunity to speak on these sensitive topics and traumatic experiences. This relates to how interviews can be used as therapeutic means for the informants and in those cases, it is important for the interviewer to know their own boundaries (Bourne & Robson, 2015: 114). Although the latter part was not relevant in the case of this study – it is important to reflect on how to respond and handle situations like that. Moreover, two informants appeared to view the interviews as mutually beneficial – seeing it as an opportunity for them to share their own knowledge and experience on the topic.

After the four first interviews I began transcribing, which led to new follow-up questions and reflections. The idea was that these questions (Appendix 9.2.) would be used for the upcoming, more structured interviews. This allowed me to further explore topics that had previously been mentioned and sharpen the data generation as I got a clearer idea of what my research was about. However, I only got to use it for one interview, occasionally skipping a question or asking a follow-up question.

All interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed, and lastly hand coded. The recording was done on my iPhone, and the transcription was done with the help of Word dictation. After the dictation was done, I would read through it while listening to the audio - doing this twice to make sure it was correct. I hand coded 23 codes in total.

#### 4.2.3. *Location*

A coffeeshop was the place I held four of the interviews at and although I worried about it not being private enough, it did not seem to affect the informants as they all spoke freely during our conversations. I met with three other informants at their workplace. I asked the informants if the chosen spot was okay by them and was aware of my privilege of having a driver which made it easy for me to get places, but they all seemed okay with where we met. One interview was held in the living room at the informant's house and was a comfortable setting as it was quiet around us.

#### **4.3. Observation**

I had one formal observation. I was invited by Young Women of Zimbabwe Alliance to join them on a Gender-Based Violence workshop for a university class in Harare. I was there with three people from Young Women of Zimbabwe Alliance and two people from another organization I had not met before, whose focus is youth's health issues, drug abuse, and SRHR issues. The workshop would be in Shona but my contact from the organization said she would translate for me throughout. However, understandably, this did not happen - as it would be disruptive to sit and translate everything being said throughout. Therefore, I could not take part in much of what was said but it was nonetheless an experience.

For International Women's Day I attended an event for a few hours, on women within the Tech industry. I attended and took notes and spoke to the women at my table. These two observations, like all informal conversations during my Harare stay, offered insights. Additionally, I constantly made informal observations and conversation with people I met along the way.

#### **4.4. Limitations**

The geographical aspect of the sampling was one of the limitations. Harare and Bulawayo are both big cities, making the setting of this thesis an urban one and not rural. The reasoning for this was mainly practical: as I lived in Harare it would be expensive and inconvenient to continuously travel out to rural areas during my stay.



University-education was something all informants had, except for the two older women, possibly affecting their knowledge and perception of romantic relationships. The degree of education can be expected to affect an informant's access and knowledge of for example contraceptives or marriage laws. A motivation to become financially independent and find work is another factor that can be expected to be more prevalent within the group of educated women.

Language is another limitation worth mentioning. Although English is the official language of Zimbabwe and the informants spoke it fluently, there were instances where they could not find the English word for something in Shona. This meant that I could not understand some words or sayings as I do not know Shona. However, I believe it only had a small effect on the data collected. Michelle mainly answered in Shona while another woman translated. Her quotes are therefore re-written to the first-person perspective of Michelle.

As I only interviewed eight women the results of this study cannot be used to make conclusions of a larger group. The aim was to get a glimpse of how young women navigate perceived norms of romantic relationships through interviews. Oftentimes their experiences and answers overlapped.

#### **4.5. Ethics**

All informants were told they would be anonymous, that confidentiality would be applied and that they can withdraw from participating at any time. Furthermore, they gave their consent for recording the interviews. To properly allow anonymity, I do not specify any of the informants age, how I got in touch with them, or where I met them. Since the informants were spread out in ages I believe it is not an issue to specify the age group as 20 – 30. Netsai did ask for her name to not be anonymized and while I wanted to respect that, it is safest to anonymize as I cannot know the consequences of not doing it.

Reciprocity was another ethical issue I dealt with during my fieldwork. The relationship between a researcher and their informants could be considered quite one-sided. The researcher extracting what they want and then leaving, without any regard for the

informants and the disruption it might have on their lives. This is especially true when there is a difference in gender, race, socioeconomic status. As someone who is white and middle class this is something I had to consider. Giving gifts or financial compensation as a thank you can create an awkward and unsustainable situation as well as raise the issue of fairness (Russell, 2022: 4 – 5). The lack of financial compensation should have been better communicated at the beginning as Netsai asked about this after the interview. Since then, I was clear about this to the other informants.

Michelle did message me after our interview asking if the study would benefit her and if so, how. Although this study is small, my hope is it will contribute to the field with an added insight in how women view their role in romantic relationships and society.

#### **4.6. Reflexivity and positioning**

My age and gender helped the informants discuss the topic of romantic relationship, creating a mutual understanding. However, I am also white, middle class, and from Sweden, lived in a guarded house and had access to a driver. This could have affected not only their reason for participating but also their answers. My purpose as a researcher, and especially a white foreign one, is not to judge or inflict my own personal opinions on the informants. My hope is that the informants did not feel a need to impress me or say the “right” thing. I refrained from giving them the impression that I ever disapproved of what they were saying, at most agreeing with them on something.

### **5. Zimbabwe**

#### **5.1. General facts**

Zimbabwe is located in Southern Africa, neighboring to Mozambique, South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, and Namibia, with a population of 14 million. Of its people, the Shona make up 80%, the Ndebele 14%, along with a white population of 0.2% and others of 5.8%. Zimbabwe’s capital city is Harare, located in the Northwestern part of the country. Bulawayo is the second-largest city and is in the Southwestern part of the country. English is the official language, but Shona and Ndebele are the first languages of most. Zimbabwe is a religious country, and the main religious faith is Christian or traditional or a mix of the two (Syncretic)

(Murray & Hubbard, 2020: 2). Zimbabwe was colonized by the British from 1890, gaining independence in 1980 by electing Robert Mugabe as prime minister 1980 – 1987 and later as president 1987 - 2017 (BBC News, 2022).

## **5.2. The Shona and the Ndebele**

When Mugabe gained power, he was head of the political party *The Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front* (ZANU-PF) who won against Joshua Nkomo of *The Zimbabwe African People's Union – Patriotic Front* (ZAPU – PF). They are Shona and Ndebele, respectively. Early on in his position as prime minister he began feeling threatened by ZAPU and decided to handle the situation by removing Nkomo from his cabinet and arresting ZAPU supporters. Additionally, he conducted what today would be considered an ‘ethnic cleansing’ of the Ndebele and other civilians – named *Operation Gukurahundi* (Murray & Hubbard, 2020: 17 - 18). It has been mentioned that there has been, and occasionally still is, some hostility between the two groups. All informants in this study are Shona except one who is Ndebele.

## **5.3. Financial situation**

Finances were often mentioned during interviews and in conversation with Zimbabweans, referencing the difficulty to find a job and earn money. The financial situation of Zimbabwe began to deteriorate in the 1900s, and the land reform between 1980 and 2000 is often cited as a main reason for that (Britannica). The aim of the land reform was to redistribute farms to black Zimbabweans living in poverty, but instead catered to the wealthy people, those who were close to, and in support of, the then-president Robert Mugabe (Murray & Hubbard, 2020: 18 - 19). This led to a decline in productive farming. Although today the agricultural sector produces about 15% of the country’s gross-domestic-product (Britannica). Zimbabwe produce and export tobacco, cotton, and sugar, as well as gold and metal alloys. They mainly import ‘fuel, petroleum products, electricity, machinery and transport equipment, food, and miscellaneous manufactured goods’ (ibid.). However, Zimbabwe’s domestic manufacturing takes a hit from the Chinese importing of everything from cars to clothes. As for tourism, it is difficult to predict but since the resignation of Mugabe in 2017, it has increased. The formal unemployment is at 90% but is misleading as most Zimbabweans work within the informal

sector. The economic situation today is hugely impacted by inflation with the last hope being to reach out to other countries for international aid. Even so, Murray & Hubbard believe Zimbabwe will have to prove their ability to properly handle money for the country to get an investment big enough to make any difference (Murray & Hubbard, 2020: 28 - 29).

#### **5.4. The impact of colonialism**

The country's colonial past has great effect on today's structures of romantic relationships. British colonialist dispossessed the people of many African countries, Zimbabwe included, of their land, which was their main source of livelihood. As a result of this – indigenous men had to seek out work elsewhere, often in the urban areas (Mtombeni, 2021). This led to the normalization, still relevant today, of women staying at home with the children while the man left for work to provide (Chikwira & Madziva, 2023: 41). Additionally, work migration could lead to men never returning, leaving behind their wives and children. This separation of men and women affected the structure of their relationship and the family. It changed the sacredness of marriage. Pre-colonialism, the family institution was highly respected and those who had children outside of marriage were harshly criticized (Mtombeni, 2021). Single motherhood increased as many relationships could not withstand the long distance and couples would separate. Because of this, single motherhood could be considered a 'relic' from colonialism (ibid.).

Further influences on the institution of marriage were colonialists view of the African custom of polygamy. The practice of polygamy was on the decline as colonizers did not agree with it and thought African women to be dependent on their men. It was assumed African women needed to be saved from it (Barnes, 1992: 589, Mutseta, 2016: 2 - 3). Contrary to their belief, polygamy was considered a 'great socio-economic asset' within the Zimbabwean culture (Mutseta, 2016: 3). Furthermore, colonialists considered African women to be naturally sexually deviant and immoral. Through colonial order and missionary teachings, the ideal of a respectable woman was presented (Barnes, 1992: 586). Missionary women's craft groups taught African women how to be good wives and mothers, which included heterosexuality, childbearing, and sexually satisfying one's husband (Horn, 2006: 9, Chikwira & Madziva, 2023: 41).

The changes that came with colonialism and the ideas enforced during that time might not remain the same to this day, but it is important to acknowledge the effect it had on the customs regarding relationships in Zimbabwe.

## **6. Women's role in society**

To answer the question of how young women in Zimbabwe navigate the social norms within romantic relationships with men, we must first understand the first sub-research question. This question concerns young women's perception of the social expectations of women in these relationships. The roles of men and women are defined in contrast to one another. The role of the woman is primarily to emotionally support the family and provide in the areas in which her husband needs her. (Montgomery et al., 2012: 800). The social position men have allow for greater resources and therefore, bargaining power of social norms. In general, I found in the interviews that men have the power of deciding which norms to uphold, but also the privilege of deviating from said norms, without suffering any consequences (Ensminger & Knight, 1997: 5). One of the differences is how men and women are expected to behave sexually.

### **6.1. Women's sexual self**

In sexually intimate relationships, women are expected to restrain themselves. They should not have numerous sexual partners or be forthcoming in sexually intimate contexts. This contrasts sharply towards how the informants spoke of their perception of men's sexual role.

... It's okay for a man to have five wives, it's okay for a man to sleep with ten ladies at once, but it's not okay for a lady to have two boyfriends, it's not okay for a lady to sleep with two guys, it's not okay for a lady to just talk with you, you here - you're a guy and then I talk with that other guy, and then I talk with that other guy without doing anything, we're just talking, if another Zimbabwean lady sees us, they will start saying that lady ... She's something else, that lady is probably a whore, she's a bitch ... – Netsai

Notice how Netsai specifically said that if a 'Zimbabwean lady' saw her talking to men – this lady would call her names. She is insinuating that the ones who judge would be women. This

relates to the patriarchal bargain and Chattopadhyay saying that ‘neighborhood aunties’ and female friends are the most critical in a woman’s life (2017). These judgmental women are then internalizing patriarchal beliefs while exercise power and status over women who do not conform to the norm and expectation of being sexual (Kandiyoti, 1988: 279 - 280).

While men are considered naturally promiscuous, women are not – they are expected to repress their sexual desire and each sexual act should be initiated by the man. Only in marriage are women allowed some sexual freedom (Makombe, 2015: 191, 193-194). Although, Masvawure informants spoke of a newfound sexual freedom during their university years, because they were no longer under the same amount of parental or adult scrutiny when living on campus (2013: 256). This could relate to Ivy’s experience of her university campus being liberal and non-judgmental regarding sex. Ivy spoke of having an on-campus health clinic to inform and cater to the students on issues of sexual and reproductive nature. However, the norm and expectation still seem to be sexual restraint for women. The teaching of abstinence is mainly directed at girls. Although Theresa had experience of it being directed at boys as well. Ivy spoke of the teaching of abstinence for girls and condom use for boys.

I don’t know, I think it’s our tradition, like Africans, we just believe in abstinence for your girl child until she is married, but they're forgetting that they're teaching the male child to use condoms and he’s going to do it with the female, but they just forget it –  
Ivy

Pregnant girls in school are considered ‘loose’ and ‘immoral’ and a bad influence on other students, while the boy who impregnated the girl is allowed to stay in school (Chiweshe & Chiweshe, 2017: 125). This illustrates the privilege of social actors with greater resources being able to deviate from norms without consequences (Ensminger & Knight, 1997: 5). Netsai and Alyson spoke of how the communities view women who are sexually active as promiscuous, a prostitute, and someone who steals husbands.

... Because the culture says, promiscuity starts if a lady sleeps with a man, they will say, if they go, they will say I have an STI ... That would be a problem itself, they will torment you, they will harass you ... - Netsai

Personally, I think it's changing, but there's still that stigma ... [Being labelled as] the one that takes away people husbands, being labeled as a prostitute, even here in urban areas you can find everyone say this girl is too much, something like that ... I think people are accepting, it's just that the generation is changing, these children - they're changing, they're no longer the same like what our parents used to be like, you see –  
Alyson

Although Alyson is aware of the names women get called for having sex, she also sees it changing. Alyson insinuates that older generations are accepting of the fact that younger generations are more sexually active than they themselves might have been. On the other hand, Theresa spoke of virginity testing of girls being practiced within some families, although not her own.

Most is just don't have sex outside marriage, that's basically all they preach ... Because they feel that if they encourage you to use contraceptives, they're now contradicting themselves altogether not to have sex, so they would rather just tell you not to have sex ... I mean, for our church at least, it's preached to both men and women so, but I understand in most cases, even socially, it's mostly common for it to be preached to just the girl and that's why even some people still get like a virginity test done by their own family members every so often, and it's like so weird because it's only done on the girl and there's no way you can like do it on the guy, but apparently that is common in some families – Theresa

Theresa's experience is that abstinence is preached to boys and girls, in comparison to Ivy's experience of it being more relevant for girls. Yet Theresa is also aware of abstinence being more common to teach to women than both men and women. However, Theresa also points to the practice of virginity testing of women being relevant in some communities. Even if a broken hymen is not a guaranteed to see if someone is a virgin, an unbroken hymen has the significance of virtue and womanhood (Matswetu & Bhana, 2018: 2). Breaking the hymen and losing their virginity is linked to the transition from girl to woman, and doing so before marriage can have negative social consequences for a girl (Matswetu & Bhana, 2018: 4). Not engaging in pre-marital sex is the norm and expectation for girls, while it is not applicable for boys. This is an example of social actors with greater resources being able to deviate from social norms (Ensminger & Knight, 1997: 5). Even if a man has been sexually active with

various women before marriage, he can still demand of his future wife to be a virgin. Because women's dignity and value on the marriage market is tied to their hymen being intact, she is unlikely to go against this norm (Matswetu & Bhana, 2018: 2, 5).

Ivy spoke of the norm and expectation of abstinence not lining up with reality. She mentions the consequence of feeling shame and being unable to be open about being sexually active.

I think our tradition, our tradition contributes a lot ... We are taught to just abstain, no sex, that's why I was saying people are becoming sexually active at maybe 14 but they don't come out like openly to say I'm sexually active because they are ashamed because our backgrounds, our tradition, do not allow us to be sexually active at that age - Ivy

This adds pressure to girls and women having to become sexually active in the "right" context. This also contributes to norms and expectations aimed at controlling women's sexuality. The case is not the same for men, which is illustrated in the culture of cheating as well.

## **6.2. Faithfulness**

Both men and women are expected to stay faithful to their romantic partners, but while men seem to partake in extramarital affairs more often than women – the consequences for women cheating are harsher than those of men. In Zimbabwe the custom of polygamy has been around for a long time and up until colonialism, it was accepted and considered a great socio-economic asset. Having many wives was seen as a marker for wealth and social status within Zimbabwean communities (Idang, 2015: 108). However, colonialists viewed polygamy as an oppressive sin towards women and instead wanted to enforce monogamy (Mutseta, 2016: 2 - 3). Today polygamy is more common in rural areas than urban ones, but it seems to be on the rise in urban areas too (Masiyiwa, 2018). Polygamy is practiced today for reasons of love, financial stability (*ibid.*), or, as spoken of by Theresa, if the first wife cannot give the husband children.

Nevertheless, although polygamy is practiced in Zimbabwe, it was rarely specifically asked about it during the interviews. Instead, informants spoke of cheating – which is different as it



a relationship hidden from their partner. The informants spoke of men cheating as something common while remaining critical of it. Sometimes they seemed more critical towards men getting away with it rather than the deed itself.

Mercy and Michelle spoke of cheating as a norm that has been around and accepted for a long time. Michelle, being one of the two married informants and currently in her second marriage, spoke of the hurt the wife feels when her husband cheats and betray her trust in this way. Additionally, Ivy mentioned how an affair can lead to men leaving their first family to create a new one.

Because it's - you go to your parents and say my boyfriend is cheating, my husband's cheating – they say just stay, men do that and it's really common and they believe that men do that, so you have to accept it because you'll never find a man who doesn't cheat, that's what they tell you – Mercy

I'm not in support of that, it's painful, especially for the wife to see your man going out there with another wife, you need him back home but he's going there, so I'm not in support of that tradition from back then, as the woman in the now yeah – I'm not in support, it's painful you know - Michelle<sup>2</sup>

... They tend to neglect their family sometimes, sometimes they just marry another woman – Ivy

As social actors with less resources (Ensminger & Knight, 1997: 5), the wives and women do not have much bargaining power to confront their male partners on their unfaithfulness. Women are more inclined to accept this behavior. Challenging their partners on this can cost them more than they would gain from trying to condemn and change their behavior.

While remaining critical of men's cheating, Ivy and Theresa mentioned an increase in women cheating. Although, the case is different for women than for men, cheating women are considered immoral and 'deserves what is coming to her' (Hove, 2017: 173). Ivy also spoke

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<sup>2</sup> Mentioned under 2.3. *Limitations*, Michelle's quotes have been re-written to first person after being translated by another woman.

of the double standard in reaction to this, while Theresa offers a possible explanation for women cheating.

Yeah cause we're hearing a lot of stories of women cheating, they're like – men used to cheat and it was acceptable in the community, but because now we're cheating, they don't accept that – Ivy

I've heard about it but apparently, we're better at hiding it haha ... I mean especially for young people, some people say it's because of the financial situation so you have a guy that you genuinely like but who can't provide for you financially and so you have someone much older, you're just with because they're able to just give you a few dollars just for your upkeep ... – Theresa

Through increased cheating, women can be seen changing the norms and expectations of women in romantic relationships. Theresa's quote points to women upholding the norm of men being the financial providers by choosing their "official" partner based on financial capability. Although the prospects for women within work and education are increasing (Montgomery et al., 2012: 801), the financial situation in Zimbabwe is difficult, and entering a relationship with an older man who can provide financially is a practical option. Ivy and Mercy spoke of The Blessers – older men who cheat on their wives with younger women at university and financially support them. The women are then provided for, 'they buy you food, they buy you things so that you look good in college' – Ivy.

However, even if the informants spoke of women cheating becoming more common – the social consequences and critique that comes with it remains intact, as Ivy mentioned. The community, and even men who cheat themselves, judge on cheating women (Chikovore et al., 2002: 325).

Theresa and Ivy gave examples of this double standards. Theresa's boyfriend is open about how his reaction to her cheating would be different to how he expects her to react if he cheated. Furthermore, she goes on to say that seemingly women have an easier time moving on from their partners cheating. Although, this could be interpreted as having more to lose as a single woman rather than a woman in a relationship.

And I'll give an example of my own boyfriend, he said that if I cheated, he could never forgive me for that, so it becomes weird because like how does that work, if you cheat you expect me to forgive you but if I were to do the same thing you were just done completely ...

I guess we don't take it as harshly, I don't know, we're somehow able to move past it easier ... Maybe it's just how we are as women ... Cause men apparently view it as disrespect that another man slept with my person, and we don't view that as such ... You did this, okay, as long as she's not pregnant hahah, you know that's like the thing that we are fussy about so yeah, I don't know if it's actually like attached to our genders, like I'm saying that men would take it as disrespect and they're done and we might be able to move on from that ... – Theresa

Ivy spoke of her family who believes that it is always better to break up and find someone new than to cheat – for women at least. While men 'will just come to your family and complain about you' to try and justify their cheating and the family's response will be to try to convince you to stay with him. Whereas women are 'wrong straightforward' in the case of cheating.

They don't allow us to cheat, they don't want us to cheat, sometimes like my family just tell you to - if you're not satisfied with your relationship just leave, there's no need to cheat, find another boyfriend that you think is right, it's better than to be ashamed, like an embarrassment to the community – Ivy

Ivy's reference to her family, emphasizes the differences in gender norms and expectations. Their social standing lets men deviate from the expectation of remaining faithful (Ensminger & Knight, 1997: 5).

If women get cheated on, it is challenging to confront their male partners about it, considering the above-mentioned double standard of men being allowed to cheat while women are not. Moreover, if the anger or hurt women feel when cheated on cannot be aimed at their men, they will take it out on the Other Woman. Within a patriarchal society, Kandiyoti speaks on women's subordination to men being handled by exerting power and status over other women, specifically younger women within the family. This is called a patriarchal

bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988: 278). Women taking out their anger on the Other Woman can be viewed as an example of this. The girlfriend or wife should be considered senior the Other Woman, as is customary if a man takes a second wife in a polygamous marriage, ‘She needs to respect me and not think that she's better than me because I am still your first wife’ – Theresa on the customs of polygamy. Theresa explained the complexity of the situation, that although women might be aware they are ‘taking it out on the wrong person’, this reaction is common. There are even social media trends where videos display women fighting over men, where whomever can comment and judge the competition.

... I won't approach my boyfriend for cheating on me, I'll approach the other girl and I will hit her because she slept with my boyfriend even though it was the two of them who agreed - so you always do, you see a lot of those trends on social media and there's a video of two women in a physical fight because apparently one of them was sleeping with the other's husband ... I really have no idea why, maybe it's a jealousy thing or not feeling like you're enough, because if he's married to you, you'd expect him to be loyal to you, all of a sudden you feel inadequate and then you just vent out the energy to the wrong person, so it's hard maybe for women, for us to confront our partner ... To actually realize that they don't view us like that ... – Theresa

Seeing as men have a dominant status in Zimbabwe, as well as the luxury of deviating from norms and expectations without facing any consequences, attacking another woman is more attainable. Kandiyoti mentioned how the patriarchal bargain demands women to internalize patriarchal ideas (1988: 279 - 280). In the Shona culture, women are expected to exercise control of their sexuality, while ‘excessive’ sexual desire has been associated with psychological problems (Makombe, 2015: 194, 196). Hence, the Other Woman is perceived as promiscuous and mentally ill - exhibiting unacceptable behavior, making it easier for women to confront them instead of their male partners. This is an internalization of the norms and expectations these women have been taught growing up and is now harshly directed at other women.

### **6.3. In a relationship**

In the Shona culture, women step into their role as women through marriage and children (Dyre, 2007: 73). Marriage is considered a sign of ‘belonging’, while unmarried women are

viewed as uncontrollable (Mungwini, 2008: 206). Panashe and Netsai have both experienced this pressure to get married, although none of them see marriage in their plans right now, preferring to take it in their own time.

It's boring, especially when you don't even have a boyfriend ... They have so many expectations ... It becomes boring even the kids were like - why don't you get married, it's not like an achievement, so just get used to it ... - Panashe

Where is your boyfriend? You haven't showed us your boyfriend, what is going on? ... So it's pressure from home, pressure from school, its peer pressure itself, and probably hormones ... – Netsai

Panashe is raising the issue of not even having a boyfriend - which is the first step. However, even when Panashe did have a boyfriend, marriage was not right at the time. The idea of being ready and taking their time before marriage was something all informants, except Vimbai, explicitly spoke about. Often, they defined being ready as having a job and being financially independent. However, this can also be viewed as a coping mechanism to deal with the fact that they are unmarried. Yet based on what they are saying, it is more about gaining personal autonomy. Because marriage holds a high position in Zimbabwean culture, being unmarried at a marriageable age, might not always be easy to handle, as underlined above by Panashe and Netsai. There is a Shona saying which translates to – ‘there is nothing good that you can learn from an unmarried woman other than being taught vices that would destroy your marriage, such as gossiping and unfaithfulness’ (Mungwini, 2008: 206).

The informants spoke of being independent so they can make their own decisions and not have a man do it for them. Waiting to be ready also influences the age at which women get married. Netsai spoke of her aunts all getting married before 19 and her not wanting to follow their footsteps.

Additionally, if you get pregnant outside of marriage – it is strongly preferable to marry the father. This is partly because if a girl is old enough to get pregnant, she is considered old enough to marry. A pregnancy is also considered a financial burden for the family of the girl and marriage is therefore an option to transfer that burden onto someone else (Kurevakwesu et al., 2023: 5, 8). Netsai and Alyson described two cases in which girls at their respective

schools got pregnant. The girl Netsai is referring to got pregnant with her teacher, Alyson spoke of a girl who got pregnant by a boy of the same age. In both cases marriage was the preferred next step. Alyson spoke of there being ‘no room for saying – ah I don’t want this pregnancy’ and this being something your parents would be ashamed of - a child outside of wedlock.

... He got her pregnant and he forced her to abort, after that, the man – the relatives of this lady forced the man to marry this lady ... They said she had to live with this man ... – Netsai

Michelle also speaks of the boy’s family having to take the girl in when there is an unwanted pregnancy. Furthermore, she does not want her sons around boys who have gotten girls pregnant before marriage, as they set a bad example.

...It's the parent’s responsibility, the parents of the boy have to take care of the girl ... and usually I wouldn't want my son ... to be friends with somebody like that... – Michelle

Daughters are likely kicked out from their parents’ house as punishment, which is not the case for sons, because a pregnant daughter is considered an embarrassment for the whole family (Chiweshe & Chiweshe, 2017: 124). This is another case of a double standard. Although both parties play a part in an unwanted pregnancy, the girl has to face the consequences of it. Though, there is pressure to get married once pregnant, it might only be relevant in cases where the woman is underage or young, as this was not mentioned in relation to men’s cheating. Michelle also spoke of how she would chase her son out of the house to let ‘him and her live alone, I will not take care of both of you’, if her son got a girl pregnant at his age (17). She said this jokingly, but I think there was some truth to it. Because of the stigma of having children outside of marriage, Michelle expressed disappointment of it, if it were to happen. However, in the right context – i.e. within a marriage, children are greatly appreciated.

#### **6.4. The status of children and the role of the mother**

Some norms, like the one of having children, are created with the purpose of increasing the resources of social actors (Ensminger & Knight, 1997: 4). This rings true for both men and women as their status is elevated with children and their social security increases (Dyre, 2007: 73 – 74). Having many children is seen as something desirable within African communities, traditionally because children were considered an economic and social asset (Idang, 2015: 108). Because of this strong wish and norm to have children, women would sometimes encourage their husbands to take a second wife, as to relieve themselves of having to carry all the children their husbands desired. The wives could even be considered selfish for not sharing their husband's ability to bear children (Idang, 2015: 109).

The norm, expectation, and desire to have children for both men and women seems to live on. The informants either wanted or already had children. Some would express surprise when I mentioned I was not sure about having children myself. Ivy made it clear that having children has always been in her plans, and Mercy agreed. They referred to their identities as Zimbabweans and Africans being a reason for this. Panashe also showed an eagerness to have children and a big family.

Of course [I want kids], who wouldn't want to, I love kids, I want to have kids –  
Panashe

A lot of them ... 6, 10, 20! Hahah ... I love kids – Ivy

For both genders, having children comes with a fulfilment of their manhood or womanhood. Dyer explains the significance childbearing has for women in Africa through a Chadian proverb - 'A woman without children is like a tree without leaves' (2007: 73). Childless women are often not granted the status of an adult. A report from *The Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA)* (Kågesten et al., 2021) emphasizes 41% of Zimbabweans believe that a woman becomes a real woman only when she has had a child. Therefore, there is a lot of respect to be gained from society for having children. Additionally, failure to do so can result in social shame, dishonor, and blame. Childbearing can be seen as a source of emotional fulfilment and socioeconomic stability. Without children, exclusion and the possibility of their husbands taking a second wife or divorce will follow (Liamputtong & Benza, 2019: e217, e219 – e220).

Michelle, Mercy, and Vimbai spoke of women being naturally connected to children in ways men are not. Michelle also spoke of the mother's responsibility of raising the child, saying men are at work or not present in their lives. Mercy spoke of this on the topic of divorce. When a couple divorces, it is custom for the children to stay with the mother instead of both parents or their father. However, this responsibility can be heavy on women.

I think it's kind of difficult, like maybe you are single mom, you don't go to work, don't do anything and you're supposed to raise about three kids alone and the father is not here to support you, so it's kind of difficult because women – for most women it's very difficult compared to men, cause in our culture we believe that children are supposed to stay with their mother ... - Mercy

Vimbai says that the 'burden' of children lies on the mother and if she would run away, she would be harshly judged. This does not apply to men. This again shows how the rules and expectations for men and women differ – men with greater social status and resources can deviate from norms and responsibility (Ensminger & Knight, 1997: 5).

Ahh they will call you a prostitute - you don't want to take your kids? And the burden is on the mother. They'll call you names if you run away from your kids, but as for the men I think - they think that it's normal – Vimbai

The informants point to an understanding that part of women's purpose is to bear and nurture children, as previously highlighted by the other sources (Dyer, 2007, Kågesten et al., 2021, Liamputtong & Benza, 2019). Women are equated with their reproductive ability to the extent that they are also blamed if a couple cannot conceive. The woman is always assumed to be at fault when a couple is struggling to procreate (Liamputtong & Benza, 2019: e219).

Insinuating otherwise, would be to 'point accusing fingers at his manhood and that is something no proud African male wants to subject himself to' Etuk (2002: 91). Theresa spoke of this too - it being the woman's fault when there is an issue of conceiving, '...Most cases yes, in most cases definitely yes'. Similarly, women are also believed to have control over the sex of the child, and if the preferred son is not conceived, she is blamed as well (Idang, 2015: 109). This is because sons have the power to elevate the status of mothers beyond the status of having children (Dyre, 2007: 74).



Theresa knew of two couples who had had problems conceiving, one of the two eventually managed but the other did not.

... So they don't have children together and then they separated, then after they separated I found out from my cousin ... That he has other children, that he had during their marriage, so I think maybe that were - those were some of the issues, that maybe she had a problem with that, maybe he cheated because she couldn't give him children, because he does have children with quite a few women, different women ...  
– Theresa

This is an example of the consequences women face when they cannot conceive, in this case being cheated on and left by one's husband. The expectation of having children is therefore not only a positively fulfilling experience for women, but also something she is meant to do, and failure to do so leads to beliefs of her being cursed and a failure (Liamputtong & Benza, 2019: e219).

For men, the number of children you have is considered an indication of your manliness and Michelle spoke of the tradition of having many children, as well as wives, being status related.

It's mainly the tradition, from long back it was like that, it's now a cycle where men believe that having many children, they are now showing that you are a man, you're also having many wives, you're proving that you're a man, you're man enough, so maybe it's just a cycle from back then – Michelle

There is also a Shona saying, '*Bhuru rinorwa rinoonekwa nemavanga*', which translates to 'A brave bull is identified by wounds'. This refers to men who has had sexually transmitted infections or diseases yet is viewed in a positive light (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2022: 171). Alyson and the organization Empowering Women Zimbabwe also spoke of this. They mentioned sexually transmitted infections or diseases and the act of having many wives or children, as the scars or wounds of a man. Alyson was asked about why she thinks men have more knowledge about sexually transmitted infections or diseases and the appropriate treatment for it, to which she said that it is a part of their manliness.

... Boys usually share their knowledge on these things because they know, in our Shona culture they say - *\*Shona saying\** - for someone to be considered a man he has to have wounds, somethings like these STI's you see, so they already have the knowledge and they can share their everyday experience ... - Alyson

Being manly within the Shona culture includes having wounds or scars in the form of STIs or experiences that can be shared amongst other men. Because this ideal also depends on how many children you have - there is bound to be social pressure to live up to that standard.

Panashe spoke of her ex-boyfriend's reaction to his younger brother becoming a father, and how he then felt stressed to become one as well. As the older brother, he is considered a second father within the family (Evason, 2017). Having his younger brother surpass him in the race to become a father, being the sign of manliness and status that it is, cannot have been easy to deal with.

I thought so, cause when the youngest sibling had a kid, he came to my house and he was like I feel like being a father, like my younger brother is now being a father, yet I'm not, but I'm the one working abroad and stuff, and I'm like - life is not a competition ... You need to plan right now, you don't – you're just working there and you're renting, maybe if you could build yourself a house and stuff, but he is not the kind of person that listens to me ... – Panashe

Furthermore, Theresa spoke of men who go as far as to not want a wife but *solely* children.

... I really don't know, I guess it's just a social status thing that they should know that I also have kids, because you even hear people saying that I just want a kid and not a wife, it's like okay so you're willing to have a baby outside marriage because you just want a baby, especially men, men say that a lot, so I guess it's just a social status - that someone thinks okay now I'm old enough to be known as someone's father so I'm willing to even do that outside of marriage – Theresa

This shows men's eagerness to bear children and disregarding women and their bodies, despite women carrying the main burden of the reproductive process. Men who are unable to have children, are often perceived as weak, unmanly, and are not allowed to speak at

community meetings (Dyre, 2007: 74). Hence, this norm becomes important to live up to in order to be respected within the community. Theresa's quote shows that for some men, it does not matter which woman bears their child or what their relation to her is – what matters is the respect they receive when having children. Theresa even refers to it as men wanting a child out of 'convenience', as fathers are often not present in their children's lives. Vimbai also spoke of men not taking responsibility for their children.

... It's like having a child just out of convenience and convenient for you the child is yours, so yeah I think that's how it works in most cases ... Especially outside of marriage, you have the child just out of convenience ... It's still very common for men not to be present in their children's lives especially if it's it was an unplanned pregnancy or pregnancy outside marriage, so it's still very common for men to get away with it and it's just a norm ... – Theresa

That's what men are, some of them ... They don't want to want to take their responsibility, they want to take the responsibility when the kids are grown up, when they know that my kid is now getting married ... 'Oh this is my kid' - that's what they do – Vimbai

Theresa and Vimbai point to the backside of the norm and expectation of having many children – men might not be able to provide for them. This contrasts another norm and expectation of what it means to be a man - the provider of the family. However, as Theresa also mentions, men get away with it. As they have a strong social standing, they have the power to deviate from norms and expectations without facing the consequences (Ensminger & Knight, 1997: 5). Men reap the rewards from society, or maybe specifically other men, for having numerous children, regardless of if they can take care of them. However, although men benefit from this norm, women could be considered upholding this norm as well. As women do not have as much bargaining power because of their social standing, they cannot argue. For someone with less resources, their best outcome in different situations will be decided by how much greater resources the opposing social actor has (*ibid.*). For women, being childless is not a favorable standing in Zimbabwe (Liamputtong & Benza, 2019: e219). Therefore, having children with a man who has children with other women, can be considered the bargain women are willing to make.

With this level of societal expectation to have children, it is not surprising the informants mentioned feeling pressured from partners and family. Although in different situations, Michelle, Panashe, Ivy and Theresa, all spoke of pressure and insinuations from people around them about having children.

Haha like now my husband wants a baby ... I'm saying no because I'm looking at our age, yeah it's past the time that we should have had a baby ... He doesn't [agree]! ... So the family planning method I have, I have the loop, I just put in the loop and I'm quiet – Michelle

... He wants a kid but I'm not ready, at least we have to agree right, and then we have a kid if we want to, cause right now he is telling me to be useful to myself, okay, what if I get a baby, then how will I manage the situation? So, I was just trying to make him understand but he never understood, he was just worried about himself, so we just ended up parting ways - Panashe

Once you get married, they are expecting a baby ... Mother-in-laws just come in, say two years into the marriage and you don't even have a baby? Yeah that's kind of Zimbabweans, they start questioning you – Ivy

... Otherwise, it's pretty normal now, it's almost not [not] normal to have a baby it's like - are you sure you're okay ... You don't have a baby like yeah, so it's almost too normal to have a baby by my age, at least one haha ... – Theresa

Michelle is older than the other informants and her husband even more so, and while both have children from previous marriages, her husband still wants more children. As she spoke of this, she also mentioned how in the Zimbabwean culture a wife should not disagree with her husband. Michelle's way of solving the situation was by using her contraceptives – the loop being an intrauterine device - and not bring it up again. Chikovore et al. also showed women hiding their contraceptive around the house, so their husbands would not find it (2002: 326). Women keeping secrets from their male partners was something African Sexual and Reproductive Service spoke of as well.

Panashe's situation differs in the sense that the disagreement of having children or not was one of the reasons her and her boyfriend broke up. Additionally, Panashe's boyfriend's comment of telling her to be useful to herself emphasizes the norm of women having to bear children to become a real woman. Theresa mentioned the increase in people having children at her age intensified the pressure on her as well. Statistics of the median age to have your first born child in Zimbabwe 2018, shows it being at 20.3 years for 25- to 49-year old women, while 22% of women aged 14 to 19 have already begun childbearing (Tinago et al, 2018: 1510). Michelle and Vimbai offered their perspectives as mothers. Neither of them wanting their children to be around other children who had gotten pregnant, or impregnated someone, or were married. Both viewed it as a bad influence on their teenage children. All three - Theresa, Michelle and Vimabi - mention the significance of norms and surroundings in the question of pregnancy, maybe more so for women. If people around them and at their age start to get pregnant, why would Theresa or Vimbai and Michelle's children not feel inclined to do the same.

Unsurprisingly, there is stigma around miscarriages as well – as it is viewed as something of a failure to not be able to conceive, leading to stigmatization (Dyer, 2007: 74). Theresa spoke of how there are not even proper words for stillborn children within their language as it is taboo to discuss.

... Some of these things are not talked about, especially within our culture, so they don't even have a name for them, so even when you're bearing a stillborn you don't have like a funeral, you don't say your condolences, you just don't talk about it, so that's just how our culture is unfortunately, which is very hard because those women do go through a lot and since we don't even talk about it, it's almost as if we just let them deal with it on their own and instead of being there for them ... – Theresa

Recognizing the difficulty of going through a miscarriage, Theresa questions the handling of it within her culture – letting the woman, or couple, bear this burden alone, as well as facing the stigma that comes along with it. Childless women within African communities are excluded and isolated by not being allowed to contribute to traditions regarding fertility and childbirth. They are believed to want to cause harm to children and are therefore not allowed near them (Dyre, 2007: 74). However, despite children playing a vital role within the Zimbabwean culture, there does seem to be a decline in how many children are being

conceived. Theresa referenced the absence of needing children for assistance in work on farms, being a reason for a decrease in the number of children people are having.

... I mean before of course they used to say that it was because they needed help in the in the farms and stuff because there's lots of you then you can get more done, but I mean now, a lot of people just have about three - two kids, like the average... –  
Theresa

The decline in wanting more children correlates with Zimbabwe's high contraceptive prevalence rate, which was at 68% in 2021, making it one of the highest in the region of Africa (UNFPA, 2022). Nonetheless, as demonstrated above, children remain highly desirable but there might be more planning around childbearing through contraceptives nowadays.

## **6.5. Violence against women**

The informants referred to men as abusive and they had either themselves been victims of their abuse or knew women who had. Bengesai and Khan found that one in four women in Zimbabwe have been abused, with emotional violence being the most common (2021: 937). Along with Ivy, Panashe spoke of past relationships or encounters with men who had sexually or emotionally abused her. Alyson, Panashe, as well as Vimbai, spoke of abusive fathers.

... Ah that's common yeah the gender-based violence yeah that is common, especially like the rural areas ... Especially when one is dependent on the man ... If I go to the police station, who will take care of my family, the father is in jail, who will do this ... So sometimes they just say it's okay, he loves me, but you can see there is no love, love doesn't hurt – Alyson

... My mom was actually abused by my dad like at one point I grew up like I didn't want to get married, why - because my dad, he's still even abusive, like now I think he's better now ... But each and every time he would come home he would just start scolding everyone ... He'll do it in our presence, the presence of his kids, so even in

the communities he's known for being loud and then at the end of the day we're hated for it but we're not blamed, that's him, that's his character ... – Panashe

Some of them respect me and this one ... Like he was so obsessed, like wants to know my whereabouts, what I'm doing at the moment like I – 'you're online not talking to me' and it's like kind of an abusive relationship, yeah as much as he's sweet on the other side, but that side was totally not good – Ivy

What Alyson said also ties back to the father's role as the provider. Although her father abused her mother, if they reported him, the family, and not the father, would be the one to suffer. The organization African Sexual and Reproductive Service also mentioned how sometimes the family and community will protect the abuser, making it harder for women to come forward. Panashe mentioned her family being hated for his actions, although pointing out that they are not blamed for it. This could be understood as women upholding problematic structures and norms because they themselves do not have the resources to fight them within a patriarchal society.

Alyson's mother encouraged her and her sisters to get an education and become independent so to not have them end up where she did. Alyson believed dependence on a man lead to increased risk of violence. However, Tenkorang (2018) and, Bengesai & Khan (2021), studied the connection between autonomy and intimate partner violence and found that increased financial autonomy correlated with abuse. This was assumed to be because it challenges the traditional gender roles of men as the financial provider (2018: 57, 2021: 938). Although it might be believed by Alyson and her mother to be a way out, it might not be. This shows the complexity of navigating the social norms within the Zimbabwean society, although the dire financial situation encourages women to go to work – they are punished for it as it is seen as a threat to the standing of men.

## **6.6. Woman to woman – friend or foe?**

Kandiyoti's theory of patriarchal bargain, focuses on how women navigate their subordination as women in a patriarchal society. She points to women exercising control and power over other women, as a way to handle their loss of power in the patriarchal society in

which they live (Kandiyoti, 1988: 275, 278). This theme was relevant through various relationships for the informants, but mainly Netsai and Panashe spoke of this. Netsai described women as ‘their own enemies’, claiming women in Zimbabwe will not help them, while being okay with helping men.

.... Women want to be on top of every women, like here I have to make sure that I'm on top of you, you don't have to be on top of me, or you don't have to be richer than me, or you don't have to be wiser than me, or you don't have to be cleverer than me, somehow you should be under me, so I feel with this, I think it's a belief, a woman's belief, I don't really know why most women are like that but then they just feel - this lady cannot be above me by any means, be it power, wealth ... - Netsai

Netsai gave various examples of this behavior, starting with her taxi ride to the interview – she was surprised by how accommodating her female taxi driver was, making sure she arrived on time and even giving her a discount. Netsai also spoke of her aunt who had complications during a pregnancy and how the male staff – not the female staff – being vital for her survival. Additionally, she spoke of influential women in politics who are not advocating for women’s rights. All these women Netsai spoke of were in positions of power – by driving the car Netsai was in, being a health care worker, and being a politician. Kandiyoti wrote of senior women of a family being controlling over the younger women to balance their own subordination to men (1988: 279). In the instances that Netsai mentioned, the women can exercise power over the fate of other women, especially as a health care worker and a politician.

In relation to Kandiyoti speaking of women’s role towards each other in a family dynamic, Panashe had sisters whom she spoke of as often being unsupportive. When needing someone to speak to – her sisters referred her to their priest instead of themselves being there for her.

... Like talking to my sisters or any of my family they just think that I'm spoiled - no I don't want to listen to you, like go to a priest and talk to him and then he understood so he said I should try talk to my sister's, but I'm only free to talk to the one I'm staying with, the other one ... She just passes out those comments that hurt ... - Panashe



Panashe also spoke of one of her sisters being in an abusive relationship and that being the reason for her behavior towards Panashe. This can be an example of the patriarchal bargain. Her sister is physically being oppressed by her partner and by dismissing her - she is exercising power that she lacks in her own romantic relationship. Furthermore, Chattopadhyay wrote of mothers - not fathers - being the ones to face criticism if their daughter misbehaves (2017). This can be applied to the case of this informant and her sisters. As senior women of the family, if Panashe does not live up to the norms and expectations of what it means to be a woman – her older sisters will hear about it.

Two of the informants also spoke of women judging other women. One informant<sup>3</sup> contacted me after the interview saying the presence of another woman, from the organization whom I got in touch with the informant via, led her to not disclose everything out of fear of being judged. While Panashe spoke of a traumatic experience as something that is difficult to discuss with her sisters because she might be judged.

... The other one might judge me she might think I'm lying cause she's just - I don't know maybe she just grew up with this kind of mentality, I don't know what really happened, like she is so bitter and she transmits her bitterness on me, but the other one, even if I share she'll just tell you to leave it like that ... - Panashe

Again, this shows a dismissal and lack of support from her sisters.

However, Netsai and Panashe can also be seen as reproducing this norm of women being 'their own worst enemies', through distancing and differentiating themselves from other women. Both spoke of women expecting everything to be handed to them.

... Most of the women we just want everything on a silver platter, we don't like working ... – we just expect everything to be easy and stuff, we don't want to work ...  
- Panashe

... Most women they are so lazy - they just think in as much as the country is advocating for their rights, they should also sit back and enjoy you see, so they're lazy

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<sup>3</sup> This informant's pseudonym is not mentioned to further anonymize her because of the incident mentioned.

- or I'm not saying I'm blackmailing the other women ... But upon seeing my age and how I work, I feel that somehow some other ladies they are a bit lazy, but at the same time the economy now it's not favorable for them ... - Netsai

In comparison to what Panashe said, Netsai is also being clear that although she sees herself as more accomplished than other women – she mentions that the financial context of Zimbabwe complicates the situation.

This attitude that women are described as having could be a result of lesser social resources in combination with the patriarchal bargain. Ensminger and Knight state that actors with lesser resources have less bargaining power and room to deviate from norms (1997: 5). Kandiyoti state women who have less power due to the patriarchy, gain access to power through internalization of patriarchal structures and the subordination of other women (1988: 279 - 280). The norms and expectations of women in Zimbabwe are that they should be sexually restrictive, be married, be faithful, have children, and be at home.

Pressure to adhere to the norms and expectations in romantic relationships is applied by family, friends, partners, and society. Deviating from the expected behavior comes at a price because women have lesser resources in comparison to men – they cannot move around as freely as men do. The patriarchy means women who follow the norms will be rewarded, doing so will entail internalization of patriarchal ideas. Women who do follow the expectations will therefore criticize the ones who do not – and benefit from it. Women who have many children and stay at home might look down on women who are childless and who instead prioritized education and work. Women who work are viewed as disregarding their womanhood. Educated women who work might believe the women who don't - 'want everything on a silver platter' as Panashe said, or are 'lazy', as Netsai said. However, the patriarchal bargain shows it is not women's fault they sometimes turn against each other – as the narrative often goes - but rather the patriarchal structures in place enable this behavior.

## **7. Knowledge of expectations and norms**

To understand how young women in Zimbabwe navigate the perceived norms and expectations within romantic relationships, looking at their knowledge and source of knowledge on the topic is important. The informants mentioned various sources of

information - church, school and university, healthcare clinics, family members, friends, and organizations. Together these institutions and people assist in teaching young women how they are expected to behave. What was mainly discussed during the interviews were expectations concerning sexual intercourse and pregnancy. For Theresa, she learned about contraceptives by chance in a particular situation where mothers were discussing it.

... So they started talking about the implant and the side effects of that implant, the side effects of the other contraceptive, and then that's when I was like oh ok haha but I've never had that conversation with any of my parents or my sisters or anything like that, it's just things I've heard in in social settings outside of home so I really have no knowledge about that ... - Theresa

However, the other informants spoke of more planned and specific sources from which they got information about their expected role within romantic relationships. One of these sources is the church.

### **7.1. The role of religion**

Most of the informants were religious and based on conversations with other Zimbabweans – many Zimbabweans are. A syncretic faith – a mix of Christianity and traditional faith – is the largest practiced religion by 50% of the population, otherwise, Christianity is at 25%, traditional faith at 24%, and the remaining 1% is Islam and others (Murray & Hubbard, 2020: 30). The informant's religion was mentioned as something very present in their lives and they visited church regularly. Because of this, their church influences their perception of norms and expectations. Ivy and Alyson showed that religion plays a big part in their lives, Ivy by giving it the credit of why she is an accepting person. While Alyson spoke of a life centered around Catholicism, with her upbringing leaving little room for much else.

My upbringing was great, yeah, I was raised in a Christian family, so it was great, I was to accept everyone whether male or female – Ivy

Ah I went to Catholic school, I went to Catholic high school, I went to Catholic university, and now I'm working at a Catholic institution, it's like - actually I'm not a

Catholic really, but I'm deeply rooted in it, I know everything, I think I'll end up being a Catholic because everything is Catholic, Catholic, Catholic – Alyson

Panashe was also Catholic and felt that the priest at her church was the only person she could turn to when she needed to support.

... I'm a Catholic so we got priests right ... so I went to one of the priests and tried to talk to him so that maybe he would understand what I was going through cause like talking to my sisters or any of my family, they just think that I'm spoiled - no I don't want to listen to you like go to a priest and talk to him - and then he understood ... -  
Panashe

As the church plays a central role in their lives, it will influence their perception of life and how a woman should behave in relation to men. Ivy and Michelle mentioned their churches organizing different seminars or conversation groups, partially with the purpose of speaking on the topic of romantic relationships.

But we do have those seminars where we gather these females and males and so we talk about - maybe our pastors talk about relationships but not mainly about sex ...  
Like don't date if you're not yet ready to get married, so that's what we talk about or maybe if you are dating and they'll tell you what to do and not to do ... - Ivy

Michelle talked about her son getting a lot of knowledge on issues of life, including romantic relationships.

There are some news gatherings at the church where they talk about different issues so that's where I noticed they get some - most of their education from, different topics are discussed there – Michelle

Alyson, Ivy, and Theresa all gave examples of the church being conservative when discussing the norms and expectations of women in romantic relationships. They underlined the idea of not having sex before marriage and expressing a more liberal attitude towards men and their behavior, than towards women. Theresa mentioned they preach abstinence from sex within her church, for both men and women, but is aware that this not the case everywhere. The

teaching of abstinence relates to Mpofu et al.'s study on teachings of HIV and sex in religious versus secular schools in Manicaland, eastern Zimbabwe. The religious schoolteachers of Mpofu et al.'s study were obliged to sign a contract on teaching about abstinence – the church endorsed prevention tactic – instead of condoms – the so-called secular tactic (2012: 355). Alyson mentioned how other universities provide condoms for their students, while her Catholic university does not – with the purpose of encouraging abstinence.

... Catholic institutions are the ones saying abstain, they don't allow the use of contraceptives, so in some institutions, which are not Catholic, such as The University of Zimbabwe ... They offer these contraceptives to university students - Alyson

This shows the church's verbal encouragement of abstinence but also the practical encouragement of abstinence by not providing condoms. This makes it difficult for students in Catholic or religious schools to access condoms easily and even speak openly of it. Ivy has experience of the other type of university, describing the environment as being accepting, while her church remains opposed to pre-marital sex.

They [Women who have pre-marital sex] are judged a lot, yeah, the society will judge, the churches will judge those people ... The campus just accepts everything so within the campus it's okay, yeah, we just don't judge – Ivy

When one informant spoke of her sexual assault, she mentioned feeling like she had sinned because of it. Partly she put the blame on herself, explaining it as a situation where she had 'lost her pride', fearing she had 'disappointed her mom'. She also implied that having pre-marital sex, even consensually, was sinning against God. The assault was something that kept 'haunting' her but speaking to her priest about it she said she just wanted to 'let him go, I just don't want anything to do with him.' However, she still felt bothered by it and felt like she was sinning even when she had consensual sex with a man she loved.

This shows the church having a major impact on how women relate to sex and the norm of abstinence specifically. Although conservative, the church is a source for information on issues of sex and marriage that have the attention of many. Ivy spoke on her church being conservative on the aspect of sex, but she also credits them to giving women a voice by allowing them to preach, which contributes to a gender-equal society.

Because they're giving us the platform to know that we are equal to men, cause if there can be a male pastor then there is a woman – a female pastor as well, we are both given the opportunity to lead maybe the intercession maybe to preach ... We need 50/50 – Ivy

Based on these quotes, the church takes on an influential role in the informants' lives. It strengthens cultural norms and expectations of not engaging in pre-marital sex and date only with the intent to marry. The influence is so strong that going against it can bring out a feeling of shame, as the informant who had experienced sexual assault showed. The organizations Southern African SRHR Organization and African Sexual and Reproductive Service mentioned that getting through to religious leaders opens the doors to whole communities. The church and its leaders are key players in the discussion of how to behave in romantic relationships and in charge of the direction the conversation will take. As Ivy said, the church has the potential to be significant in the work towards gender-equality and respecting women. Another influential source of information is family.

## **7.2. Family members**

Although the informants for this thesis were within the age of 20 – 30, with two informants being in their 40's, their perception of marriage, sex, and relationships was heavily influenced by their families and what they have taught them. Family members role in teaching women about the norms and expectations of romantic relationships mainly concerned the topic of sexual intercourse. Based in Mbare, southern Harare, Chiweshe & Chiweshe studied parents being in denial of their adolescence having sex, much with the reasoning of it being rooted in religion and culture as something sinful and immoral (2017: 121). The organization Southern African SRHR Organization also mentioned how parents were in denial of their children being sexually active, only ever believing other people's children were sexually active. Most of the informants said their parents did not speak to them on these issues. An informant in Chiweshe & Chiweshe spoke of the parents only disclosing information on abstinence and pregnancy, while their aunts had the responsibility of teaching about intimate details, but only to women about to marry (2017: 125). Theresa mentioned this practice of solely engaged women getting to know the intimate details, while the single or not engaged women were not.

...So when we have bridal showers, it's both the young people and the old mommies that will be there to wish this new bride well and then when they're advising her on the sakes in marriage we get chased out because we're not married, so when they have that conversation we single ladies aren't part of that, you literally get told you guys can leave now, then they have their conversation as married women, with the older women, with just her and they all share their experiences or whatever and we just wait out until they are done ... You're basically not meant to know anything until you're married, so that's most common with bridal showers that are Christian led I guess, but maybe if it's a family one maybe they might have that conversation just casually but I know especially with my church, you would chase out all the younger unmarried ladies and we have that conversation just with the bride and all the older mommies ...

- Theresa

Netsai mirrored the view of aunts being responsible for teaching their nieces on these issues, but because of her aunts being too far away geographically, she instead expected this from her mother. Alyson said she could possibly discuss these topics with her parents but also said 'it's my family, I don't know', displaying an uneasiness towards it, especially with her father. Theresa only mentioned having spoken to her mother about having a boyfriend - she was 17 at the time and had not had a boyfriend yet, and she ended the conversation quickly. She did however mention that her relationship with her mother has gotten stronger through the years, saying she could probably ask her about these things now.

It is preferred and expected that women have sex and children once they are married. If they are sexually active before marriage, they are considered 'sinners' (Chiweshe & Chiweshe, 2017: 121, Makombe, 2015: 193). Parents sometimes combat this by using scaring methods or controlling behavior (Chiweshe & Chiweshe, 2017: 121, 123 - 124). Netsai spoke of her mother aiming to scare her into abstinence by showing her a book on sexual transmitted diseases and infections. This led her to believe that only talking to or brushing against a man would result in severe physical pain.

...Then I hated men cause what did she say - she said if you play with men this is what they do to you, she didn't say if you do it recklessly, and she didn't say if you don't wait for the right time this is what happens, she didn't say that, she just said men

do this ... So, in form three when we started learning about this thing that's when I realized, that you know it's the sexual intercourse, the intimacy, that causes all those things not just talking ... I had to open up now – mom, when they say sleeping with a man, what does it mean, does it mean we are laying side by side, what does it really mean? And if they're saying self-control, what does it mean? Yeah I do understand that I don't want to get pregnant but I don't even know how one gets pregnant ... How can I be able to make those decisions that I don't want to get pregnant at this age ... – Netsai

Vimbai spoke of being vigilant and keeping an eye on her daughters – to hinder possible sexual encounters.

They can have sex in our bedrooms if they are not monitored ... It might happen! ... If they think they know that anytime my mother or my father would be here, I don't think they'll do certain things, they'll be away or else I have to tell the neighbors to keep an eye on them so they will be afraid of them, of the neighbors, of the mothers, of everyone who's elder than them ... – Vimbai

There are also differences in how boys and girls are treated within these issues, girls are considered a bigger liability as they are the ones who will get pregnant – therefore more harshly judged and punished (Chiweshe & Chiweshe, 2017: 124). Theresa mentioned that although this was not her experience with her brothers, families usually have a stricter curfew for their daughters than their sons. Being more unforgiving towards daughters relates to what Chattopadhyay (2017) said about the patriarchal bargain, the mothers are the ones who will be criticized if their daughters do anything wrong - like getting pregnant outside of marriage. Chattopadhyay also argues that women in a patriarchal society need to constantly compromise their way to power and they do this partly by abiding by the set norms, hence, “allowing” their daughters to get pregnant reflects badly on them as women and mothers. This explains Chiweshe & Chiweshe’s finding of fathers believing mothers speak to their daughters about sex, because the mothers are seen as responsible for it. When the fathers were asked if they do the same with their sons, they referred to boys as ‘secretive’ and ‘boys will be boys’ (2017: 124). Michelle said the same thing – ‘boys will be boys’ - and spoke of the necessity of having a father around.



Girls are a bit more careful and usually they're closer to their mothers than boys ... Whereas boys are - you hardly find them near to their mothers, they're better off with their fathers ... Usually boys are very naughty, so they don't want their mother to be always on them, than girls - they are understanding, if mother says don't do this, girls are understanding but boys aren't very naughty ... – Michelle

Perceiving girls as naturally more careful and boys as naturally naughtier, influences the way each one is raised. If a girl does something naughty, the consequences might be harsher because she is supposed to be careful. While it is already expected from boys and might therefore be disregarded. Michelle upholds the privilege of men being able to deviate from norms as they have greater social resources (Ensminger & Knight, 1997: 5) with the narrative of 'boys will be boys'. For Michelle, who only has sons, supporting patriarchal ideas and being a bit more lenient with her sons could be viewed as a way for her to strengthen her relationship with them and ensure stability within the patriarchal society in which she lives. Kandiyoti mention sons being a significant resource for women to gain power - sustaining their son's loyalty throughout life, ensures that (1988: 279). Furthermore, Liamputtong & Benza illustrate that parents, particularly mothers, gain a higher social standing if they give birth to sons rather than daughters (2019: e220).

Not all informants had experience of their mothers being closed off or controlling when talking about romantic relationships, Panashe spoke of her mother as a friend.

... She taught me a lot of things ... My mom was more like a friend because even if I got into a relationship I would share with her, I would tell her in detail what exactly happened so she wasn't - like she wouldn't get angry, because she talked to you as a friend, as a sister, so that's why I just got used to her and not my sisters ... – Panashe

For Panashe her relationship with her mother enabled her to discuss romantic relationships, while her sisters, were often not available or open for discussion. Whereas Theresa and Ivy mentioned being free to talk about romantic relationships with their siblings. Ivy tries to stay connected and available for talk about sexual and reproductive health.

Yeah, its cause we are now living apart, so we don't see each other always but when we meet I do try - and even social media - try to talk to them about it - Ivy

From the perspective of the two mothers, Michelle and Vimbai seemed adamant about speaking to their children on the topic of romantic relationships. Michelle claims that as a mother you can tell when your child is sexually active and depending on which age or stage in life they are in – she adjusts what she has to talk to them about. She also used humor as a way to get through to her children.

I talk to my son at times, but not every time, but I notice a certain age where there's need to talk about these issue now, he's now grow up so I must talk to him about this issue, I know when it's time ... I asses first what to say at this age, it's now important to talk about this issue, so maybe for now it's not yet the time to talk to him about that issues – Michelle

Vimbai did not seem to have an issue with discussing romantic relationships with children. She mirrored what Netsai spoke of as aunts being the ones responsible for discussing these topics, but for her as well, they were not available. Vimbai would draw from her own experiences and referred to her oldest daughter as a role model for her younger one.

We just start by talking like you know when I got married, we did this, we did that, and I got married when I was 20 so after 18, it's now your decision, but I think it's good for you to get married when you are at this age, not a tender age ... I think my first child listened to me, I don't know about the second, so I just keep on talking to her and I will be telling her to follow your sister's path, so now she is getting married when she is 25, so i just tell her to do what her sister did – Vimbai

Feeling comfortable to discuss the topics of romantic relationships with family members can be tricky due to cultural expectations and norms. Netsai and Vimbai mention the aunts being the ones to do the job. For Netsai, because of geographical complications – her mother has to take on that role, although reluctantly. Some siblings of the informants were more open than others. This could be explained by an age gap but even so, the taboo to discuss these topics and a fear of being judged could influence this. However, both Michelle and Vimbai showed vigilance towards speaking with their children about these issues and maintaining an open relationship and conversation. Nonetheless, there seems to be lacking a lot of communication

on the topic of romantic relationships from family members – as Theresa said ‘You're basically not meant to know anything until you're married’.

### 7.3. Friends

Friends being a source for information surrounding romantic relationships was mentioned to a varying degree by the informants. Alyson spoke of her friends as being very open, ‘they talk, they talk’. Theresa knew which friends to go to with what issues, and Ivy mentioned her friend group being non-judgmental. However, Panashe spoke of a lack of friends, and therefore a lack of someone to confide in. Alyson said her own role as a friend is to listen and not to judge.

I think I'll give the space to talk freely, because I'm not there to judge her but to help her, so if someone comes with her problem to me, I just help you her, if I'm able to – [If not] I will look for help from someone else and not a person who will judge ... – Alyson

I think they would be very casual about it yeah, I guess also the right friends haha, because I feel like we all have friends we can talk to about certain things with and friends we can't really, because maybe they're a little more conservative about it, so yeah, I do know I can approach one friend about this and another friend about that, but it wouldn't be a big deal and be like - oh yeah I've used this before, haven't used this before, I heard this about this before with the side effects about the other, and so it would be a very chilled conversation ... – Theresa

Alyson considers herself supportive if any friend would turn to her for help. However, to build a relationship that invites each person to share their feelings and reflections – you might have to have these conversations without there necessarily being an issue in need of being solved. The conversation would instead come from a place of curiosity. Like Theresa mentioned how some friends are available for certain conversations while others are not, the friends that are - might be more vocal about their own feelings and reflections, which invites others to do the same.

During the interviews it was mentioned that the informants perceive that men speak about sex and romantic relationships more than women do. They did not specify why they think this but it could be because of the more lenient sexual expectations and norms surrounding men. Their own previous sexual encounters with men could also have led them to believe men have more knowledge than themselves. Theresa spoke of sex as something being ‘for the man’, which she thought would lead to them being more motivated to discuss and learn about it.

I don't know, I think men generally talk more than women, especially when they are together so yeah maybe they are the ones who don't even like the condoms to begin with, so they will help each other out on how they can then enjoy sex more and still not have to deal with the pregnancy thing so maybe they might know more in that regard, because I still feel like even with actual sex itself it's more for the man and him getting his pleasure than the woman getting her pleasure, so they will always - I guess know more about how they can enjoy it more without having to deal with the consequence of her falling pregnant, so then he might know more about that there's a morning after pill and she might not even know what that is, and he might know more about the implant and she might not even know what that is, because the most that's preached is just the condom and if people don't like the condoms, then I'm sure they will do their own research about how I can have sex without using the condom and still not getting pregnant – Theresa

Whereas Alyson spoke of herself not being so knowledgeable, she and Michelle showed a certainty about boys discussing amongst themselves. Michelle spoke of her son and his friends.

I think so, because personally I don't even know what it is, what can we do ... Boys usually share their knowledge on these things because they know ... – Alyson

I'm very sure, I'm very sure that they talk about that, I'm very sure that among his friends, there are some of his friends have maybe had sex with girlfriends ... –  
Michelle

It is more taboo for women and girls to be sexual and forthcoming in romantic relationships - they are expected to be more docile, in comparison to men (Makombe, 2015: 194). This could contribute to the idea that men are more open with each other on these issues, although, it could also be viewed as men bragging and even lying. It could also be a situation like where the fathers assumed mothers spoke to their daughter about sex regularly, as it would be the mother's fault if the daughters got pregnant (Chiweshe & Chiweshe, 2017: 124) - simply an assumption and not a fact. Nonetheless, women seem to varying degrees rely on their friends when discussing norms and expectations of them in romantic relationships. Some are more comfortable with it than others, but the general expectation is that unmarried women have no business knowing about these topics.

#### **7.4. School and university**

Schools and universities also play a role in educating women on romantic relationships with men. Panashe mentioned what her school called 'guidance and counselling' where nurses would have workshops on the topic of sexual and reproductive issues. Although Alyson believes the education around topics of relationships could improve, she similarly to Panashe has had some throughout school. She spoke of girls and boys being split up to discuss different topics.

... Even at school, teachers usually call girls in their own place and boys in their own place, then they will discuss issues like this, I think it's good ... Like this discussion is open to all to institutions or schools, to help us – Alyson

Netsai mention a lack of information provided by her high school when she was there. Furthermore Netsai insinuates that because of the lack of education, her aunts got pregnant at an early age.

... During my time we didn't learn about it, it was up to you to decide whether you want to get pregnant or not and you know my aunties they got pregnant as early as 13, 14, 16, only one reached 18 – Netsai

Theresa mentioned how it is more common now to supply condoms at high schools, as compared to when she went.

... Now like even with the condoms, having condoms in high schools and stuff, that's more common now, even though some people think it's a bit weird to have condoms in high school, but now it's like a norm and even parents will ask you - are you using protection or are you sure you're being safe - so I think contraceptives are being preached around a lot ... – Theresa

This demonstrates an awareness of young people being sexually active – which is sometimes ignored by parents or schools, hence why the supplying of condoms is debated by some. In 2010 the government of Zimbabwe implemented 3-months maternity leave instead of expulsion for girls who got pregnant while in school. However, due to complaints from parents and conservative groups, who believed this encouraged sex - they had to withdraw this proposal (Chiweshe & Chiweshe, 2017: 124). Although teaching about romantic relationships seem to be improving, the resistance by some parents and conservative groups is still powerful. Additionally, Alyson spoke of students poking holes in unused condoms supplied at university, although this seemed more as a prank – with dire consequences – and not a protest.

As for the universities, the informants had different experiences of the availability of information and accessibility. Ivy agreed on school being cautious in their teachings on the topic but mentioned her college as liberal and free of judgement. She spoke of an on-campus clinic that provide education on issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights. This clinic is an initiative from the university, but a student is in charge as a gender minister within the student body. The clinic is available for services and education on sexual and reproductive health and rights. They provide group discussions as well, doing so called 'peer teachings', they let students express themselves whilst they help guiding them. Ivy compared the differences in school during her younger years to now at university.

At my school they teach us abstinence ... Then later, on campus at college, they teach us to like use protection, if you are now sexually active, use protection and you have to know - if you don't want to have sex, don't - you have the right to say no ... We have the gender minister, she's responsible for all - so she has the mandate to educate

other students about it – so they [the students] know where to get them and what time as well, and teach them to be free, do not be ashamed to call – Ivy

Students at a university campus might to a larger extent be married in comparison to younger students in school, which might explain the liberal stance. Ivy spoke of many of her university peers being married. Although her experience was that university was a more accepting atmosphere, she was also the only informant who mentioned that. Informants instead spoke of clinics or organizations being available for discussions on these topics.

### **7.5. Clinics**

Health clinics could be considered a natural source of information on sexually intimate relationships, yet the attitude and cultural beliefs of the people working there might get in the way of that. Southern African SRHR Organization spoke of younger people finding it difficult to visit clinics for help on sexual and reproductive matters because they feel judged. Girls and Women of Zimbabwe Foundation also mentioned how there is a fear of their visit being leaked to the rest of the community, gathering unwanted attention.

Netsai spoke of this as well, painting an image of an intimidating environment in clinics.

... You know the nurses are something else I tell you, they'll be saying what?! You've gonorrhoea?! At your age, where did you get it?! You are the women that we say that they are not organized ... They [the female patients] didn't have the proper guidance and counselling when they are growing up ... They'll [the clinic staff] torment you to an extent that, even if you're pregnant you won't even dare to visit the hospital, that's the reason why some ladies choose to die in their homes because they don't want - ... They just want to be helped ... - Netsai

Furthermore, Netsai mentioned how there are organizations that aim to teach nurses how to handle situations like these – where the nurses might not agree with what or how it has happened, but need to be supportive nonetheless. Panashe agreed with Netsai's statement, when asked about where she found women to be judgmental, she mentioned in school but in clinics as well.

Women in schools, schools mostly, at schools and also the clinics, maybe you come and tell them I'm sick or maybe it's an STI you tell them, they start judging you, like ah you should learn to have protected sex or abstain - but they didn't like hear the source of the story, they just start judging you so some people tend to just keep quiet ... Even when it's critical they'll go but still get the scolding, we were just scared to share - Panashe

Southern African SRHR Organization spoke of how the nurses take on the role of mothers and aunts – feeling entitled to express their opinion of the women seeking help. This ties into what Theresa mentioned of it being common for elderly people to weigh in on matters discussed publicly although it might not affect them. There seems to be an expected collective responsibility of raising the younger generations among older generations.

On the other hand, Michelle could not relate to nurses being judgmental. The key difference is that Michelle visited a clinic when she was married and had just had her first child. When she was asked if she agreed with other informants on nurses sometimes being judgmental, she replied 'No, they've always been very helpful'. Theresa mentioned similarly how only married couples are encouraged by the church to visit the clinic, while single women were not.

Yeah I think the most I've heard maybe was at church somewhere where they would usually advise a couple that's about to get married that you go to the clinic together so that you know about the options, since you're a married couple but that's just about it ... - Theresa

Ivy also spoke of the contraceptive pill being harder to obtain being single in comparison to when you are married, due to feeling shame.

Maybe the ones that get them like - are the ones that are married, yeah, because they know they are married so they just go and collect – Ivy

Although Ivy does not specify from whom this shaming would be coming from, getting a condom might not need to happen through a meeting with a nurse, whereas with other



contraceptives it does. Therefore, it might be easier as a single woman to get a condom than the pill. Being a married woman with children aligns with the norms and expectations of what it means to be a woman. As a married woman Michelle is expected and welcomed for being pregnant, which also gives her the right to know about contraceptives. These quotes show how the attitude towards married and single women vary.

This critical attitude some nurses seem to have relates to the patriarchal bargain. Female nurses taking on the role of mothers and aunts when addressing their patients is demonstrated in Langhaug's study of improving young people's access to reproductive health care in rural Zimbabwe (2003: 151). Acting like the patient's mother or aunt leads back to how mothers and aunts are the ones responsible if the daughters do something wrong, such as getting pregnant too young or outside of marriage (Chattopadhyay, 2017). The fear is that providing the proper services for young women to practice safe sex – will only encourage them to have sex. Ignoring the issue is expected to lead to young women not having any sex (Langhaug, 2003: 150). This complicates matters for women seeking support for sexual and reproductive issues as they get told of for wanting information and told of when lack of that information leads to unwanted pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases (Langhaug, 2003: 151). Nurses meeting with patients who are the same age as their own children could also trigger a feeling that they might be engaging in sexual activity too (ibid.).

The patriarchal bargain leads women to exercise control, which they otherwise lack, over other women due to seniority. This also means they internalize sexist patriarchal norms and expectations (Kandiyoti, 1988: 279 - 280). In this scenario with nurses and their patients, they use their power and seniority to implement the norm that young unmarried women should not engage in sexual activity. This then takes the expression of shaming, criticizing, and blaming young women for anything sexually relates. Because of this, the support and information offered by clinics are only available to some women, but arguable to not enough women.

## **7.6. Organizations**

I was in touch with six organizations during my fieldwork, including my host organization. The organizations focus varied slightly, but they had similar experiences and information of Zimbabwe in terms of norms and expectations of young women in romantic relationships. What the organizations mentioned in their meetings with me, was often mentioned during the

interviews as well. Many of them aimed to meet with the women, girls, or youth that they were helping through seminars, discussion groups, or meetings. They were active in urban areas such as Harare as well as in rural areas. The aim of the organizations is in general to provide information to, and support, marginalized groups in Zimbabwe, such as women. Their purpose was therefore to be available to their target groups – which seemed to be the reality according to the informants.

The informants spoke of attending seminars or discussions hosted by Young Women of Zimbabwe Alliance or similar organizations to ones I was in touch with, some even interned for them. The informants spoke of these organizations as important and necessary. Netsai spoke of an organization hosting a workshop promoting safe abortions, along with Alyson and Panashe who spoke of wanting to work for organizations with the purpose of helping people and women realize their capabilities. Alyson stated that Young Women of Zimbabwe Alliance and another organization, whom I was not in touch with, create a safe space for her and other young women to turn to if they need information or help with these issues.

During some meetings, or workshops, people just - we just decide on the topic that we want to do then ... People just talk about what they think about the issues of one making his or her decisions, what is hindering us from making our own decisions –  
Alyson

Vimbai spoke of what she has learned from Workers Rights Zimbabwe and how she knows she is supported in her decisions and rights.

... Because they are now engaging us with the information that ... no child labor, not to get married at the tender ages, so we just give thanks to them, cause they want to give us more information ... So they teach us about sexual harassment - that's what they do, so we just give thanks to them cause when I'm getting some of the information that we didn't know ... How to report the issues, how to handle those things, if the issue is not handled properly at the workplace, we have to go to them ...  
- Vimbai

Not only has Workers Rights Zimbabwe been there as a workplace presence implementing gender-equality, they are also teaching women to stand up for themselves. Vimbai mentioned

early marriages and becoming more aware of the problematics of it. This impact is visible through Vimbai's parenting style – she encourages her children to wait until they have an education before getting married.

However, Ivy also spoke of some feeling hindered to join seminars or discussions hosted by organizations because of shame and a feeling of awkwardness.

I think the biggest issue is people being ashamed, yeah you're not just free, I don't know what they think, they are not free to think or go into the clinic or to ask about ... because they think too much, sometimes when it's social media we are discussing this issue they think that people will judge them according to what they're saying so they are not free, sometimes they don't participate ... Ah most of them find it like awkward yeah or I don't know why they don't participate, or they think it's not relevant because maybe they want to concentrate more on their studies and they think it's not part of their studies, so they would rather give more time to their studies than sacrifice a few moments – Ivy

What Ivy said relates to what African Sexual and Reproductive Service spoke of, which is the importance of empowering the environment surrounding the woman. They mentioned it is not enough to solely empower the woman, because if her surrounding family, friends, community, country, does not support or agree with her choices – she cannot further implement those her choices. If a young woman is curious and in need of visiting a women's organization, the people around her must let her do so. A feeling of shame for attending discussions and speaking freely was the experience of Panashe at times.

Well I normally discuss to them indirectly, I normally share my experiences within an indirect way, so they won't know that I was the one who went through this cause telling them like the honest truth I don't know how they would react, so I'm just being indirect – Panashe

When asked if she thought it is hard to find organizations that she feels comfortable turning to for support, she replied that she thought it was. Additionally, she mentioned how it is assumed that women are the best people to turn as another woman, to be understood and supported. As mentioned earlier with Panashe's sisters – she does not share that perception,

but rather felt women would often be judgmental. Once more this relates to the patriarchal bargain as women seem to be exercising power over other women who, according to them, do not prescribe to the expectations and norms that exist in the Zimbabwean society. Panashe gives the example of being harassed in school – the woman harassed is assumed to have been dressed in ‘the wrong way’, maybe in a sexual or provocative manner. Therefore the blame is placed on her and not the perpetrator.

To empower the surroundings of women as well as the women themselves, the organizations I met with reach out to community leaders who hold a lot of power within Zimbabwean communities. African Sexual and Reproductive Service mentioned that although getting through to a leader can lead to great impact, it can also lead them to be ostracized. To ensure that it does not happen, African Sexual and Reproductive Service, for example, check up on their connections to make sure they are doing okay.

Furthermore, empowering a woman’s environment implies engaging with men as well. Empowering Women Zimbabwe has hosted discussion groups for men where they encourage them to reflect over norms and expectations of the women they are in relationships with. They do not intend to shame men for their behavior but rather make them reflect over why they act the way they do. This is similar to how Young Women of Zimbabwe Alliance engaged with the college students during their workshop on gender-based violence. The organization would let the participants reflect over the topic on the agenda and answer questions posed to them on this topic. The purpose of this strategy is for women, men, traditional or religious leaders – whomever, to come up with their own solutions to the problems that affect their communities, as African Sexual and Reproductive Service mentioned during our meeting. The work executed by organizations appear to be vital and utilized by young women – if they feel safe and supported by their surrounding network to do so.

## **8. Changes in expectations and norms**

Amidst the discussion on the existing norms and expectations of women in romantic relationships, the informants also raised changes in norms and expectations. Mainly they mentioned change through their own desire to have an education and a job, illustrating an increase of women having both those things. Additionally, a general change in mindset

revealed in both younger and older Zimbabweans demonstrate a development towards a more liberal stance on the roles of men and women in romantic relationships.

### **8.1. Financial independence**

The financial situation of Zimbabwe is unstable and greatly affected by inflation, additionally it is difficult to find a formally paid job. While in Zimbabwe I was often asked about both work and study opportunities available for internationals in Sweden. Zimbabweans would also ask what made me choose Zimbabwe and why I would ever want to come back for work or a visit. This painted a picture of many Zimbabweans struggling to make things work in their everyday life. During a night out I heard someone saying Zimbabweans are the most entrepreneurial, probably a result of the financial situation. Netsai spoke of working as a hairdresser to get by, 'I have to engage in those stuff for me to be able to find you know income'. Panashe said the same thing.

Oh I'm into business, just buying and selling, maybe I order some clothes, shoes, just anything just to get money, because it's kind of hard getting employed, so yeah I just make myself busy ... – Panashe

Panashe also mentioned that the main support she wanted from organizations was financial support, 'because just telling them maybe just provide sanitary or something wouldn't really help much, what I needed was financial help'.

The financial situation affects the premise of romantic relationships as well. Vimbai spoke of how the financial situation of the country affected the number of children she had, as well as how many years apart she had them.

... We felt that it was good to raise the other one so that we can just take care of her, like right now I'm taking care of one kid and paying fees for only one child, instead of three or four, like the situation here in our country, the fees they just ... So we thought that it was good to separate them like the other one is not going to school and the other one is still in school, so we can afford one child now – Vimbai

Michelle spoke of men's responsibility to make sure there is food on the table, that the children can go to school, that there is an inheritance for the children – yet said that 'very few' meet those expectations. If men have responsibility over more than one family, resources become scarce, and the first family suffer from the actions of that man. Chikovore et al. found something similar, as men immigrated to South Africa for employment, they would spend money on other women, and in combination with being underpaid – they would have even less money for their families back home in Zimbabwe (2002: 326).

Although the norm is that men should be the financial providers, but women have been "forced" into work because the financial situation is so unstable. This aligns with Ensminger and Knight on how norms sometimes develop through the aim to achieve another goal (1997: 5). In this case the goal is to make things work financially, to provide for the family, but in part because of the financial situation, men cannot fulfill that role and women must work as well. This increases the number of women working and financially contributing and changes the norm of women solely being at home taking care of the children.

Criticism towards men's fulfilment of the role of financial provider, was raised by numerous informants. Both Vimbai and Theresa paint a picture of men failing in being the provider, spending money on other things rather than their families or just not doing enough.

Like drinking beer, going out with their friends, and enjoying themselves ... I have to take care of the kids, I have to look for food, for everything, so it will cause like domestic violence again – they'll be fighting nearly every day or every month ... – Vimbai

...So women basically - they look after the husband and the children and then the husband is said to be the provider, but in most cases, even if he's not working formally, he just does nothing basically... – Theresa

Vimbai is one of the two informants who are married but she is not referencing her own marriage here, rather speaking of a general perception of men. Vimbai means that men do not want to spend their money on their families but gladly spend it on themselves – she called them 'stingy'. Zimbabwean men being stingy about money was something I heard outside of the interviews as well. However, despite their behavior, they do not seem to be reprimanded

for it – showing how social actors with more resources, in this case social status, are freer to do as they please without facing the consequences (Ensminger & Knight, 1997: 5). When asked if men are ever criticized, Theresa stated that ‘They get away with everything’. As mentioned, the situation in the country does not make it easier to provide financially but if men do not do it, women have to step up and take over.

Demonstrated above by Netsai and Panashe having jobs outside of their university studies, Theresa also spoke of this change.

... Now I think it's mostly women who do most of the informal jobs, so like having the little markets where they sell tomatoes or veggies, so women still have to make sure that their kids have something to eat even if the man is not eating and still take care of them by doing all the chores and everything especially if they are younger ...  
– Theresa

Though women going to work could be considered a good thing – there are possible negative consequences for women who work. Netsai spoke of financially powerful women being viewed as ‘uncontrollable’ and that men want a woman who are dependent on their men.

... Most powerful women, they don't get married, why - the culture now says if a woman is financially powerful you can't control her, and as a man you should control your wife ... – Netsai

... The men of the 60s, the 80s, the 70s, the 90s, they wanted a woman who does not do anything, the reason being so that they would beg everything from him, they'll appear inferior and below the man, cause the moment I come and say can I have this pen and you say no and then I say please please please can I have this pen and you say it's fine you can have it, you feel superior, that yes she begged, you see, that kind of thing, so that's what happens in Zimbabwe, the men they need the women to be submissive, to beg, to cry, beg and suffer before they grant their wishes ... – Netsai

Additionally, Theresa mentioned that while women are now leaving the domestic unit and going to work, they are still expected to carry on their duties as women – taking care of the house and children. However, Theresa is seeing a change in that as well.

... They still want the traditional with the modern but they're not accommodating all of the modern, so our generation has that problem where we say okay women should be able to fend for their own needs and all that, but they still expect her to do everything, so if a woman then like let's say for my - like my mom if she then gets house help, then she's viewed as a bad wife or something, because she's working too hard and she's not making time to clean her own house or to look after her own kids, so sometimes she will get pulled down for that but now it's like, it's okay to not have the time to do everything and I mean what good energy is there trying to clean your house every single day when you have work, so if you could get someone to help you with that, why not? ... - Theresa

What Theresa touches upon is the significance of social norms within the Zimbabwean society. Men appear to let women go to work, yet still cling onto the idea of women being responsible for the house and family. Montgomery et al.'s study shows that although the participants mentioned increased opportunities for women in terms of work and education, they still emphasized the importance of respecting the man's position with the family, allowing them final decision-making power (2012: 801 - 803). This relates to bargaining in social norms (Ensminger & Knight, 1997), women are "allowed" to go to work, but the bargain is that they should continue to perform their traditional duties as wives. The other option to have a maid – could lead to criticism as Theresa mentioned.

Montgomery et al. also highlighted the possible problematics of having a maid perform the traditional responsibilities of a wife (2012: 801). In their study, the issue was that the 'emotional meaning' behind these tasks led to men taking them as second wives or it breaking up the first marriage (ibid.) This can also relate to the patriarchal bargain, where women exercise power over other women as they are not allowed power within the patriarchal society (Kandiyoti, 1988: 278). In this case, the maid is being oppressed by the wife of the house, and the power and control might increase as the wives feel threatened by another woman doing traditional wife chores as shown in Montgomery et al. (2012) Leaving their role of cooking and cleaning - chores considered a way to show love (Montgomery et al., 2012: 801) – they lose some of their status as a wife – yet another possible bargain women have to make to go to work.



In Netsai's perception men want a woman they can control. Men cannot control a financially independent woman. For these women then the bargain of being financially independent is that they are left unmarried and "unwanted". Additionally, Bengesai & Khan (2021) and Tenkorang (2018) noticed a correlation between financially autonomous women and intimate-partner violence – as the men felt threatened in their prescribed gender role. This supports Theresa's statement of wanting the traditional with the modern, not allowing to "fully" modernize, further complicating the matter for women. Men benefit in both aspects.

Being financially independent was mentioned by nearly all of the informants - almost viewed as a criterion before getting married. Netsai spoke of this as something that allows her to stand her ground before a man.

... It's a bit of a relief I'll become independent you see, like there is natural independence, it's not like I'll be fighting for something but because I have my school, because I have my papers, I'm doing something, naturally, I become independent, you know when I meet any other guy, they won't toss me around because I don't have any level of education that they expect me to have so I will this natural independence that you have so we are trying to instill such a thoughts in the other ladies ... - Netsai

Panashe also emphasized this and pointed to her past relationship with an abusive ex-boyfriend as a motivator to not find herself in that position again.

Well it's hard to predict, but what I wanted maybe if I get a job, I pay for my school because it's just this year remaining right, once I'm done with my school then build something, maybe buy a car, build a house, then lent it out for rent so then I'll be having a flat income no matter what and maybe find a soulmate ... Maybe, I don't know which is which, which will come first but getting married with nothing, I really don't want because of the past experience that I've had ... - Panashe

Per advice from her mother, Alyson was also set on having work before getting married, to secure her standing in the relationship. Alyson thought that part of why her mother wanted this for her was because her daughters will be the ones to take care of her when she gets old. Vimbai taught her daughters the same - encouraging them to finish school before getting married – something she felt she missed when she was younger, and hoped the younger of the

two would follow the older. Which is something Alyson mentioned - that it gets easier for the younger siblings to follow the older siblings. Kaziboni mentioned something similar – women who returned to school to be role models for their daughters (2000: 232). The organization African Sexual and Reproductive Service also spoke of someone having to be the first, and then others will follow, leading by example. Ivy spoke of being an inspiration to other women too, due to there being challenges women face that men do not, she felt it was important to be a role model for others. Although there might be negative consequences from going to work or getting an education, men and others in society might come around as they see the benefits of it. One of Kaziboni's informants spoke of her husband realizing the perks of having an educated wife, saying he would have supported it long before if he knew that from the beginning (2000: 236). Allowing women to work changes the predefined expectations and norms of how women should act in romantic relationships.

## **8.2. A change in mindset**

As the younger population is growing up, they are forming their own views while breaking away from the views of their parents, grandparents, or other members of the community. The younger population has a great influence on how the future Zimbabwean society will be. Netsai spoke of changing the mindset of the Zimbabwean culture and maybe specifically, the older members of the community.

... Also the Zimbabwean culture now, the Zimbabwean culture that we are trying to evolve, that we are trying to remove from our mindset ... This mindset, should be erased from you know our mothers, our grandmothers mind, they say when a lady is 18 years old, they should be married, yet that is not it, they don't know that the ladies have their own rights, the ladies should be empowered ... - Netsai

Young women are gaining bargaining power through education of their rights, sexual and reproductive issues, and other subjects that lead to a paid job. Both education and financial independence lead to the power to change things that do not benefit them as young women. This was mentioned by Ivy.

I think right now because people are getting education, yeah so our generation, we now believe that women should lead and because of the equal rights that was introduced so people are now getting educated amongst those ones, that women should be listened to, women have the rights to do - to say no, to say yes, whatever time – Ivy

Alyson also spoke of this change in mindset is because younger generations understand each other in ways the older ones do not. There is therefore a freer and more accepting society that is being built. Challenging the norms and expectations of women in general, affects how the norms and expectations of romantic relationships too. Additionally, some of the older generations are changing their ways towards a more liberal stance. Theresa spoke of her grandparents accepting women for not being able to do it all – work and family, admitting to themselves having struggled to make it work.

... I think old people they are now more open, especially like how grandparents they are now more open to tell you that we struggled a lot trying to do everything and we failed so if you need help we are there and all that, so now I think that's why you get a lot of grandparents helping their children to look after their grandchildren because it's like oh if you're working it's ok just drop her off and then you'll come get her when you're done with work ... - Theresa

Within many African cultures and in Zimbabwe, elderly people are treated with respect and often have a say in what is to be done or not done. Mentioned by Theresa earlier, senior people have the right to add their opinion to whatever conversation you are having if you are out in public. An example of the elders position, is that elders are consulted in serious matters of the family. Vimbai gave an example of this on the topic of an unwanted pregnancy. When her niece had an unwanted pregnant, her husband was consulted as he was the most senior man of the family.

The idea of grandparents being more understanding towards their children and their families relates to Comrie-Thomson et al.'s study. They studied the impact of male involvement in maternal and health care in Tanzania and Zimbabwe (Comrie-Thomson et al., 2019). They show that in comparison to younger fathers, older fathers partake in household chores and take care of children to a larger extent (Comrie-Thomson et al, 2019: 730). For the older

fathers referenced in that study, and the grandparents references above by Theresa – both have the experience to understand the amount of work it takes to get everything done.

Considering elderly people, they have more social resources and respect within the community than the younger members of the community. Instead of shaming their children for not fulfilling their traditional role as men and women, they understand it. Their experience and knowledge will hopefully guide younger men and women in challenging their prescribed roles in romantic relationships.

At first this seems like a positive bargain for only women and not men, as women are relieved of their burden of domestic labor. However, as Comrie-Thomson et al. illustrate, equally sharing the responsibility of the house and family brings the couple closer (2019: 731 - 732). This is an example of how working together can lead to norms being mutually beneficial (Ensminger & Knight, 1997: 2). The norm of sharing the responsibility of the house and family is positive for both parties.

## **9. Conclusion**

The research questions are on the perceived norms and expectations, how women are informed about them, and what might influence a change. Using the theory of changing social norms and the theory of patriarchal bargain, data consisting of answers from eight informants is analyzed. This study shows that existing norms and expectations in Zimbabwe that put young women into subordination to men, and it being something the women must position themselves towards.

Furthermore, norms and cultural expectations hinders mothers speaking to their daughters on these topics. This can even be tough for friends to do as well. Schools and universities are sometimes prohibited to teach on the subject due to religious reasons or parental protests. The church remains quite conservative and furthers hinders gaining access to information. Additionally, clinics take on a conservative role as well and the staff, the role of a parent. Navigating problematic and sometimes harmful norms and expectations can be challenging, especially when support and knowledge on how to do so, can be hard to acquire. However,

organizations working with these issues inspire and educate young women and make a difference for the individual as well as the country and culture.

While the informants spoke of some norms as problematic, they would not always show how they oppose said norm and could therefore sometimes be seen as upholding them. Women can only gain some level of power through exercising it over other women as per the patriarchal bargain. They do this by upholding patriarchal norms that subordinate women, including themselves. However, having an education and a job is seen as a way out of traditional gender expectations but as the organizations spoke of - the environment around the individual needs to be empowered and changed as well.

The analysis illustrates a restricted and norm-controlled reality for women – women should not engage in pre-marital sex, but instead marry, have children, and primarily take on a supportive role to their male partners. The results also demonstrate that some women uphold these norms and patriarchal values. Yet, they also discussed how gaining financial independence, and therefore power, could influence the structures of romantic relationships. This contrasts the norms and expectations on men – whom with greater social resources have more freedom.

For the future, it is not enough for the individual to develop if the context in which they find themselves does not. They will be left treading water. Creating a dialogue and a supportive community between women is a start and something the informants could improve on. They have the intention of being open and supportive to their friends and other women, but actually reaching out to one another is the next step. Diving deeper into the aspect of challenging and changing the norms and expectations of women in romantic relationships would therefore be interesting for future research.

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## 11. Appendix

### 11.1. Interview guide

#### *General questions about life / Norms*

School

Work

Free time / interests

Family / friends

Church / religion

#### *Relationships (dating, marriage)*

Are they in one? Is it common?

What is important in relationship?

How do you date/meet people in Harare?

How are they feeling towards finding a partner?

Thought on marriage?

Friends?

Family constellation?

#### *Contraceptives / birth control*

What comes to mind? Thought on it?

Access and knowledge?

Usage among friends/family?

#### *Pregnancy*

Do they know anyone/friends who have fallen pregnant?

How did their surroundings react? How is it accepted?

Thoughts on it? Future plans?

## *Abortion*

Is this an option?

Access?

Thoughts on it?

Do they know of anyone who has had an abortion?

## *SRHR / women's health*

What comes to mind?

Feelings associated to it?

Have they been taught or told about SRHR and what it means?

Access to knowledge and services?

Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE)

Talked about with friends/family?

## *Bodily autonomy / power to decide over one's own body and choices*

What comes to mind? What does it mean to them?

Feelings associated to it?

Talked about with friends/family?

## **11.2. Structured interview questions**

### **Marriage/relationships**

- What is expected from men and women in a marriage or relationships – what is their role?
- Do you know anyone who has married young? Do you think there is an expectation to marry young?
- Other informants talked about men being likely to cheat if they marry young because they don't have time to "explore" – what are your thoughts and how do you think that differs from women?

- Do you consider cheating to be common? Does this differ between men and women?
- What options does a woman have if her husband was cheating / she wanted to separate?
- Is there a different perception of women who marry younger rather than older? (Education, work?)

### **Pregnancy**

- What are your thoughts on pregnancy?
- Did older relatives talk to you about having kids?
- Other informants talked about the African culture prioritizing children? Why do you think that is?
- Do you know of anyone who has gotten pregnant at an age below 20? How was that situation handled?
- What are the options if you get pregnant when you don't want to?
- Do you know anyone who has struggled with having children? How has that been? Or anyone who didn't want to have children? Is the reaction different depending on how many you want?
- Other informants spoke about women being the default parent to take care of children in a divorce? Do you have the same perception and what are your thoughts?

### **Sexual intercourse/SRHR in general**

- Abstinence has been mentioned – do you recognize it and is this recommended to both women and men? Why?
- Is the perception of being on contraceptives when single or in a relationship different?
- What are your thoughts on the laws of consent, access to SRHR, marriage? What role do laws play? (Access, implementation)
- Have you ever disagreed with someone's choice concerning SRHR issues – their handling of a pregnancy, marriage, sexual intercourse, etc.?

### **Information access**

- Is there a stigma when talking about these issues? With both men and women? Why do you think that is?
- Do parents speak to their children about it? Which parent and to which child? Do the mothers speak with their daughters? Do fathers speak with their sons?
- Have your parents had a different way of handling you in comparison to your brothers (if any)?
- If you don't get the information from home - how are women expected to know about SRHR? (Family, school, clinics, friends?)
- Are there different opinions on this within your friend group? Which?

### **Other questions**

- Religion's role – what have they been taught in relation to autonomy, gender roles, SRHR – what does the church say about women and men's role in relationships – how is your church in regard to this?
- Are there any cultural differences between the Shona and Ndebele?
- Other informants mentioned shame and being judged on issues of SRHR – do you recognize this? Have you ever worried about being judged? By whom?
- How do you think women are towards one another on these issues? And in general, how do women act towards each other?
- Other informants talked about alcohol and drugs being a means for women being assaulted or engaging in sexual activity – opening them up to the possibility of diseases or pregnancies – what are your thoughts on that?







