

**Traditional oral literature and the socialisation of the  
Shona (Zimbabwe) girl child: An agenda for  
disempowerment**

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**Abstract**

*This article looks at the role played by Shona oral art forms in conditioning the girl child for a life of docility and extreme passiveness. It is argued and maintained that certain oral art forms were deliberately crafted to socialize females in a way that would disempower them so as to make them serve the interests of the patriarchal order better. The paper establishes that there is a special category of folktales, proverbs and poems whose net effect is to disempower women either by 'persuading' them to remain a muted, docile, and at worst a people that fail to appreciate the value of the special qualities they were endowed with at creation. The effort to disempower women, it is argued, was meant to keep the independence of the female spirit permanently under check. However, in this paper it is feared that if trends in the globalized world are anything to go by then the efforts to thwart the independence of the female spirit have, by and large, been in vain.*

## Introduction

When we say that someone is ‘empowered’ we mean that someone is fully equipped to realise who s/he is and to realise his/her identity and full potential. We mean that the individual has power in his/her hands over all matters such that s/he can operate fully within any sphere or space s/he is entitled to occupy. He/she has the power in his /her hands to make decisions that affect him/her, to determine his/her future and to shape his/her life and destiny in a manner that suits and benefit him/her. In short, a person who is empowered has a voice. One has the freedom to determine, shape and influence the circumstances that affect his/her life, now and in the future. Since this article is about the disempowerment of the girl child we quote Devi (1998:61) who points out that:

Empowerment is an active, multidimensional process which should enable women to realise their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It should consist of greater autonomy in decision-making, greater ability to plan their lives, have greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives.

Anyone who cannot do these things is a disempowered person. But when he/she can do these things then s/he is empowered and can make meaningful contribution to matters of development. In this article, we argue that in order for this kind of empowerment to take place it depends on how the process of socialisation in the life of an individual has taken place since childhood. In Shona communities, as is the case in many other communities, this socialisation is achieved through the use of oral art forms. In this paper, oral art forms that are used to socialise citizens in a way that tends to disempower women are folktales, poems and proverbs. There is no intention in this paper to attempt an exhaustive approach. A few examples of folktales, poems and proverbs will suffice as examples.

When we talk of disempowerment of women we imply that women were or are rendered powerless and ineffective. To pre-empt any criticism let us hasten to point out that there have been very powerful African women in history, including Shona women. Joy Magezis (1996) points out that the resistance of black women in slavery was born out of their tradition in Africa and singles out Nsinga, the warrior queen who fought the Portuguese in the early seventeenth century and the Queen Mother of Ashanti wars against the British. To this list can be added the heroic Mantatisi, the warrior queen of a Sotho tribe called the Bahlokoa, which means ‘Wild Cat people’ in South Africa who reigned during the 1820s and Nehanda Nyakasikana of the First Chimurenga fame in

Zimbabwe. Many other African women have been known to be powerful religious leaders such as those mentioned by Lan (1985) and others who played leading roles as spirit mediums during the Second Chimurenga in Zimbabwe. These women were powerful and did not only shape their own destinies but also shaped the destinies of others (including men) and influenced the course of history(ies) of their nations, countries and communities.

These examples seem to negate the argument raised in this paper but we should realise that these are only rare and exceptional women who became powerful by virtue of having been born brave or, in the case of Nehanda, having been endowed with rare spiritual powers. These women of ‘power’ were socialised in the same way as other young women of their generation but became different from others by virtue of circumstances of birth or, perhaps, rare spiritual possession. Otherwise, the greater majority of Shona girls were socialised in a manner that would make them grow up into submissive, unassertive and narturant women, and in this process oral art forms played a crucial role.

### **The folktale teller as a marriage counsellor**

One of the major functions of folktales is to socialise children. Through folktales cultural values, norms, and beliefs are inculcated into the young minds early in their formative years. Telling and listening to folktales is one way of ensuring that the individual is schooled in the traditions of his/her people and that s/he is guided into adult life in accordance with family and societal expectations. Although these narratives were meant to provide entertainment and moral lessons there were other folktales that can be put into their own category because they were deliberately meant to groom the girl child into a life of docility and muteness in which she should accept suffering, ill-treatment and subordination without complaining. Such folktales, as shall be demonstrated in the ensuing discussion, subalternised girls. These “gender-linked roles [are learnt] from infancy and are reinforced as she goes through the various stages of life” (Mtuzze, 1990:49). One of the tools of reinforcement is oral literature, such as folktales.

A typical example is a category of folktales which tell the story of a girl child who is used as a prize to reward male characters who succeed where other men fail. In one such story titled ‘Chinyamapezi’ a king has a daughter who is so beautiful that he becomes jealous and possessive and puts impediments in her way to marriage. He places the girl on the top of a very tall tree and puts bees just below her. Any suitor who wants

to marry this ‘gem’ of a girl must deal with bee stings and bring her down. We are told by the story-teller that “vakatanga kubindana vakomana vachiuya” (Ngano vol.4:80) (Boys came in large numbers to try their luck), suggesting that scores of them came. In the end, it is the boy suffering from leprosy who manages to deal with the bee stings and win the hand of the beautiful girl in marriage.

The king’s daughter in this story is a mature grown up woman of marriageable age but it is the father who decides everything for her. He puts her beauty on display and invites men to come and compete in a dangerous game, and the winner takes her away to be his wife - just like a soccer team that wins the world cup. The winning team takes the world cup and goes away with it. The trophy itself does not decide where it wants to go because it is an object. Neither does it want anyone to compete for it. But it was made, and so is the girl in the folktale. Such stories tended to disempower women. Girls grew up from early years conditioned by them to accept that in matters of marriage and love ‘others’ made decisions on their behalf. In the story of Chinyamapezi given above the girl was expected to take the leper and wash him, smear his body with oil until he looked good. She did that. While the story teaches society not to shun people with disabilities, such stories prepared girls for any eventualities in life, including going into forced marriages. It did not matter what someone looked like or how old someone was, as long as he had what the elders needed, one would have to go with him and make him ‘look good’ enough. And so, like the girl in the folktale given above, many a time a young innocent girl was betrothed to an old man twice the age of her father, thereby entering into polygamous marriage because essentially the element of choice was not there. The overriding but erroneous consideration was that all that a woman needed was a man to give her babies which agrees with Fishman (1992:1) when he says that “women’s subordinate and limited position in society was tied into their sexuality and into what was sometimes perceived as their prevailing sexual nature.” A folktale such as the one referred to above tends to objectify the girl child by presenting her as someone who cannot name and define her world.

Related to the above are narratives that shaped young girls’ perspectives on childbirth and motherhood. One of the major themes found in Shona folktales is that of barrenness or infertility or simply childlessness. In Shona culture, children are more important than love and people do not marry for the sake of love. Love is not an end in itself. Failure to conceive and have children is a ‘curse’. Motherhood and fatherhood are virtues. Any marital union, even one resulting from a love relationship, becomes complete only when it starts to produce children. When a man and a woman cohabit and conception does not take place tongues start wagging. Oliver Nyika and Giles Kuimba capture in

*Ndinodawo Mwana* (I also want a child) (1993) and *Rurimi Inyoka* (The tongue is a snake) (1976) respectively typical tragi-comic events that often happen in Shona society as a result of ‘failure’ to conceive. Most folktales that deal with the theme of infertility tend to place the blame on women. When young women listen to such stories one evening after the other they internalise the belief that it is always the woman who is to blame whenever there is no conception. On the other hand, the boy child ends up thinking that when there is no child born the species represented by the girl members of the audience is the one at fault. Such oral “literature shapes and reflects popular conceptions of the nature and capabilities of women...” (Fishman, 1992:1).

Examples of stories that were told with a hidden agenda of disempowering women can be given here. There is a tendency of always blaming women in folktales that talk about childlessness/infertility in marriage without ever putting blame on their male counterparts. The stories are very simplistic because they do not explore deep into issues of who does what in order for a child to be born, neither do they address the question of who determines the sex of a child. The narratives provide simplistic solution to the problem of barrenness by merely blaming the woman. In one such story titled “Mukadzi ainge asina mwana” (A woman who had no child) (Ngano vol. 4:60) the *sarungano* tells the child audience that there was a man and his wife who had no child. The wife then picked up “*katodo*” and used that as her child. In another story, “Mukadzi akanga asina vana” (A woman who had no children) (Ngano vol. 4:8-9) children are told that there was a woman who had no child and she decided to go up a mountain and found “*tutsindi tushanu*” which she took and made them her children. These became the children who performed various household chores for her, like grinding grain. In yet another folktale “Mukadzi ainge asina mwana” (A woman who had no child) (Ngano vol. 4:52) there was a married woman who lived with her husband but she did not have children (note: **she**, not **they**, did not have a child). Because she feared that her husband would divorce her she moulded a ‘child’ out of ‘*sanhi*’ and that became her baby. In Ngano vol. 2 (p.59) there is a woman who, because she has no children, decides to make a child using “*ivhu remutapo*”. These are a few examples of stories taken from those recorded in books but there are many more that remain in orality.

Stories such as these demonstrated to the little boys and girls that children are important in Shona society. However, they also imbued the young ones with the perception that whenever a marriage failed to produce children it is the woman who is at fault. That is why we find that in each and every one of these stories it is the woman who goes to look for a child in order for there to be restoration of grace or social order. Otherwise

“things fall apart.” It is not surprising therefore that even in real Shona life, as Matetakufa (1988) correctly notes:

The pressure exerted on infertile women can be so great that even in the face of such deadly infections as HIV and Aids some will take the risk and attempt to fall pregnant by multiple partners... In desperation other women will go to the limits of faking pregnancy and even steal newly born babies from unsuspecting mothers. They usually get caught and end up in jail. Meanwhile infertile women are subjected to verbal and physical abuse from their spouses. In extreme cases some women are unable to endure the alienation and pressure. They feel so worthless that they commit suicide.

What this shows is that women have tried all sorts of things in order to hold a child they can call their own and avoid alienation because early generational socialisation through story-telling taught them that they must produce children and if they fail they must accept the consequences.

There is no other way of disempowering the girl child than to tell her stories that teach her that she is the guilty part in any childless marriage and there is no greater way of empowering an infertile man than to tell him stories that exonerate him from guilt by shifting the blame to the female counterpart. Stancia Moyo's view cited by Farawo (2014) rings true of the plight of the African woman who finds that “infertility is often viewed from a female perspective in African society, but this is primarily because in these societies, women carry the burden of infertility as they are ‘blamed’, often solely, for childlessness”.

An interesting aspect of these folktales is that all of them, and without any exception, use titles that exonerate men from blame in situations of childlessness. The titles of folktales tell the story better. Some of the titles that talk about infertility/childlessness are: ‘Mukadzi akanga asina vana’ (A woman who had no children) (Ngano vol.4:8); ‘Mukadzi akanga asina mwana’ (A woman who had no child) (Ngano vol.4:52), ‘Mukadzi ainge asina mwana’ (A woman who had no child) (Ngano vol.4:60). Although the story in Ngano vol.11 (p.59) is titled “Musikana wevhu” (A girl made of mud), it nevertheless starts as follows: “Kwakange kuine mumwe mudzimai. Mudzimai uyu akange asina mwana.” (There was a certain woman. This woman had no child.) There is not even one story that carries the title “Murume akanga asina mwana/vana” (A man who had no child/children). These stories were told in a society schooled in strong patriarchal traditions. There were no stories that placed failure to conceive on men

because that would be contradictory to popular cultural talk about men's virility and the popular saying that 'murume ibhuru' (man is a bull). This agrees with Moyo (Farawo, 2014:8) who says that:

In Zimbabwe, silence surrounds the subject of men's role in infertility and this is partly because of the patriarchal nature of society and partly because men's infertility runs contrary to dominant definitions of masculinity, which defines manhood in terms of virility and fecundity.

Matetakufa (1988) and Moyo (2014) agree that whenever conception fails the man is never mentioned as part of the problem. Man's infertility is concealed because that subject is taboo. Even if both man and woman are mentioned as principal characters in a folktale in what Vladimir Propp calls the 'initial' situation' it is the wife, and not the husband, who is said to have had no child or children. The title is always phrased thus "Murume nemukadzi **akanga asina** mwana" (Man, and a woman who [singular subject concord /a-/] had no child) not "Murume nemukadzi **vakanga vasina** mwana" (Man and woman who [Plural subject concord /va-/] had no child). One subject, the woman, and not both, had no child. The status of the man is not specified. While the English translation ('who') seems to make no difference the Shona version does ('a' in 'akanga asina' is singular). It is a husband [and a wife who had no child]. It is like the husband had a child, yet he too did not have. The man is exculpated and this is confirmed by the fact that he does not accompany his wife to go and look for a child. The wife goes alone and she has to in order for her not to be divorced as punishment for gross failure.

Stories about man-eating monsters lurking in the dark will make children afraid of going out into the dark at night alone. Stories are powerful. Equally, stories given above are powerful and will make children think that women are responsible for childlessness. It is therefore not uncommon in Shona society to find that a woman is blamed when a marriage produces no children. Because of this attitude relatives often advise their kinsman to find another woman.

## Poetry

One other oral art form that has been used to disempower women is oral poetry in the form of *Nhango dzomudumba*, a type of poetry used by aunts in counselling young women on marriage issues. While folktales were told mostly to young boys and girls *nhango dzomudumba* were told to women and older girls of marriageable age. This kind

of poetry gave direct instruction to women to submit themselves completely to patriarchal power and domination. It is a matter of obeying biblical verses that “Vakadzi zviisei pasi pavarume venyu” (Women obey your husbands) and “Varume ivai misoro yevakadzi venyu” (Men be the heads of your families) giving men total control since the head has the noses, the ears, the eyes, the mouth and the brain. It is the ‘head’ that does the seeing, the hearing, the breathing, the talking and the thinking! The woman is thus subalternised and relegated to a subordinate position to men. Disempowerment of women manifests itself in some Shona poems.

The kind of education that was imparted by these poems was crucial and important because it guaranteed that there was harmony and peace in marriages; that families and societies remained intact and orderly. It also played a role in conflict resolution by minimising areas of conflict in advance. This was achieved by ensuring that at least one part, and in this case the woman, was disarmed. The Shona have a proverb which says “Machongwe maviri haakukuridzi pamutanda mumwe chete. Rimwe rinorumwa muchochororo” (Two cocks do not crow from the same log. One will be bitten). Some poems were therefore used to socialise girls so that they would grow up into submissive, docile and unassertive members of the society. In the poem “Zvirango zvokwavamwene” (curtsies expected by the mother-in-law) (Hodza, 1988:18-20) a woman about to get married is told by an aunt/grandmother that she should not get involved in disputes between in-laws because she is a foreigner in her adopted family. In other words, she should remain mute even in matters involving her husband and relatives. A few lines will be quoted here to illustrate how the process of disempowering is made complete. The aunt/grandmother says, among other things:

*Tevedzera zvinodiwa nemurume wako  
Uchengete mitemo yaanokusimira mumba*

*Dzimba idzi uchidziona dzakadai,  
Munotukanwa uye muchirwiwa,  
Asi chinorwiwamo hakusi kuti mumwe akashata pausu,  
Chinorwiwamo mirawo nemitemo inosimwamo,  
Inenge ichinzi mukadzi takura tiwirirane,  
Zvino iwe mukadzi woramba kuitevedzera,  
Murume wotiwo, “Chirega ndikuzvindikite zvawaramba kuzviita.”*

(Do what your husband wants  
Obey his laws and interdicts



Inside these huts you see  
There are quarrels and fights,  
People do not fight because one of them is ugly,  
They fight because of the laws that are enforced in there,  
Which the wife is ordered to obey to the letter,  
And now when the wife refuses to obey them,  
The husband says, "Let me beat you up thoroughly because you have  
disobeyed.")

The words in these lines are coming from an aunt /grandmother to a young woman about to get married or someone who is already married but is possibly facing challenges in the marriage. The elderly woman is inculcating into the younger one values of servitude, docility and ability to suffer in silence. The young woman is reminded that only the man makes the rules and hers is just to obey them without question. This made Shona women to grow up conditioned to accept that other people made rules for them and theirs is to obey them. These 'other' people are the same boys they grew up with. These are poems that shaped the way women perceived reality and saw their roles in marriage and family - to grow up to accept that someone she grew up together with and playing together with had a right to make rules for her to obey and to punish her if she broke them. The poem given above, most of whose stanzas have not been quoted, effectively takes away the power to shape one's destiny and influence circumstances of one's life. The girl effectively becomes an object who is acted upon by the husband. She is rendered a consumer of the male counterpart's ideas and agenda. In fact, the woman becomes ineffective and marginal. There is an African proverb which says "the hen knows that dawn has come, but it watches the mouth of the roaster". As Schipper, quoted in Kaschula (2001:33) says, this African proverb implies that the male is the natural speaker for the species regardless of how much the female may know. She is expected to depend on the male for the orating of experience. In Shona experiences it is not uncommon to hear men saying "vakadzi nyararai uko!" (Women be silent!) as if they would be uttering unintelligible things. It takes away the fighting spirit from the woman and puts there docility and total acceptance of what would otherwise be an unacceptable situation. This is total disempowerment. The woman must suffer in silence. Kaplan (1976:28) quoted in Spender (1980:41) shows that "...even Sophocles writes in *Ajax* that 'Silence gives the proper grace to women.' Spender (1980:41) further notes that "many contemporary books on etiquette which hand out advice to young women on how to be popular propagate the belief that the best and most attractive woman is a quiet one and quotes young men who say "I like girls who listen to me without

interrupting and who pay attention.” All this points to patriarchal ideology and in the case of Shona culture it is the major force behind the thinking in the oral art forms, despite the fact that most of the stories are recited by women themselves.

### **The proverb: Manifestations of Disempowerment of Women**

The other oral art form that can be said to be an efficient tool in disempowering women is the proverb. Proverbs serve many useful functions but there are those that make comments on the character, behaviour and appearance of women in a manner that makes those who look at her doubt her sanity and view her with suspicion. A lot of Shona proverbs have been crafted in a manner that constructs a woman who is disempowered.

The famous Shona proverb “Musha mukadzi” (A home is home because there is a wife) gives, at face value, the impression of a woman with power. A home cannot be a home unless there is a woman. It sounds like she is the one who fires the shots, the boss. When people say ‘musha mukadzi’ (A woman makes a home homely) they mean that she must sacrifice herself so that that home survives: in other words, she must bear children, cook, sweep, wash for everyone, go to the fields, bring firewood, fetch water, entertain visitors and husband’s relatives, etc. In short, she must sacrifice herself in the interest of others without complaining. But this woman has no ‘power’; she has been reduced to a beast of labour, a slave. If this proverb is uttered to a man it educates him to remember that he must keep or have this human being called a woman who is a doer of all things around him. If it is uttered to a woman herself it is a reminder that her selfless sacrifices are needed to keep the family going.

A number of Shona proverbs had the effect of diverting attention from the epi-centre of women’s power - their mind and body. Many proverbs were crafted that were designed to devalue a woman’s powerful asset - her body, her looks. Shona society uses proverbs that determine the way a woman views herself and also the way she is viewed by others. Such proverbs also influence the way others view a woman, particularly a beautiful and light skinned one. Most of these proverbs were meant to educate young men to consider inner qualities rather than outside looks and superficial appearances when choosing a woman to marry. While this was a noble thing to do it nevertheless had a hidden agenda of disempowering a woman by diverting attention from her most empowering asset - her body. There is a strong relationship between a woman’s body and power over men. As a girl grows up and her body continues to develop and take on a woman’s shape so does her power over men. As Rossi (1985:258) says:

Thus a woman gains power over her husband if he clearly places a high value on her company or if he expresses a high demand or need for what she supplies (Blan, 1964; Homans, 1967). If his need for her and evaluation of her remains covert and unexpressed, her power will be low.

Allowing the Shona girl to use the power of her body over men could be dangerous for society. That power must be kept low and there are proverbs that serve that purpose. For instance, there are a number of proverbs that present a beautiful and light-skinned woman as dangerous and undesirable. While these proverbs teach young people that they should not be attracted by outward appearances they also have the effect of making people to drift away from the epicentre of women's power - their bodies. There is no better way to illustrate this point than to quote from Vitalis Nyawaranda's poem in which a number of such proverbs are used. Advising a grandson about choosing the right woman to marry the old uncle says:

*Ongorora pokuteya mariva ako,  
Dutu guru rizere masvosve  
Mwena wakapfumbira une nyoka nemadzvinyu,  
Onde rakatsvukira kunze mukati muzere honye.  
Matende mashava ndiwo anovavisa doro  
Unyirinyiri hwengwe hwakapedza mbudzi kuti tsvai.  
(Gwenyambira, pp.157-158)*

(Make your choice very carefully,  
A strong wind carries a lot of ants  
A frequently used hole has snakes and lizards,  
The fruit of a fig tree looks good on the outside but inside there are worms.  
Red calabashes make beer to go sour  
The colours of a leopard lured many goats to their death.)

All these proverbs, used one after another in quick succession in a stanza in one counselling session, describe a beautiful and light skinned woman in a series of negative images: she is a strong wind full of ants, a hole with snakes and lizards, a fruit full of worms, red calabash that turns good beer sour, bright colours of a leopard that attract goats to their deaths. To this can be added another proverb commonly used in such counselling sessions which says 'Mukadzi munaku akarega kuba anoroya' (A beautiful woman if she does not steal she bewitches people). In other words, a woman cannot

have both good looks and a good heart. If she has good looks then she has a heart of a devil. These are images that are meant to contain her. All these images invade the space a woman should occupy and control. She loses control of that space as all the assets in it are verbally attacked and destroyed. An ugly woman with a good heart is preferred. Speaking on behalf of women the world over, Magezis (1996:104) notes that ‘society’s expectations of feminine emotions affected the way we saw our bodies and how our sexual desires developed as we grew up.’ Feminine beauty and light skin were not qualities to be taken advantage of, but were supposed to be played down as if they did not count in courtship. Attention was being diverted away from the epicentre of a woman’s power to other things, such as childbearing and motherhood. There are proverbs that seem to suggest that the only things that count are childbearing and motherhood. That is what the proverb “Mukadzi akanaka ndeane mukutu kumusana” or “Unaku hwemukadzi huri pamwana” (The only beautiful woman is one who has a child on her back; one who has given birth). That is a way of diverting attention from a woman’s body to childbearing and mothering, things that subsequently take away the glamour of her youth. This tends to be confirmed by the celebration of loss of a woman’s power epitomised by the proverb “Usikana idambakamwe. Chikuru umvana.” (Girlhood is a one day wonder. It is a one off thing. Once virginity is gone it is gone forever.) This proverb celebrates the fact that the purity that was the woman’s pride is no more, as if it was ever meant to last forever! No wonder Magezis (1996:104) complains that “Too often we have been made to feel that we’re the last person who should have a say over our bodies.” We remember too the old days when children generally dressed scantily and would sit with their genitals exposed. Among the Ndau tribe of Zimbabwe if a little girl sat with her genitals exposed the mothers and grandmothers would euphemistically say, “Fukidzai n’ombe dzababa” (cover/hide daddy’s cattle) and the girl would drop her legs and pull over her loin cloth. It is that part of her body that will bring her father some cattle as lobola/bride wealth when she grows up and gets married. The genitals are a symbol of cattle (wealth for the father). They will translate into something for the benefit of the patriarchs. This conditioned girls to grow up feeling that the part of their body “that possessed the power to reproduce our species” (Magezis, 1996:105) belongs to man, first to her father as his ‘bank’ for now and later to another man as her husband. She herself owns nothing. This is hardly what Magezis (1996:91) means when she says that, “Our body is our home... where we want to feel safe, and relaxed. A place we can call our own. A home we can enjoy.”

It has often been said that ‘knowledge is power’. This is true because a well informed and knowledgeable person is a powerful person. S/he speaks with confidence because s/he knows what he is talking about. He can engage in debate because he is well informed

about the issues at stake. Yet “there are a number of devices which help to block the meanings of women, to inhibit them, to coerce silence, to make them muted” (Spender, 1980:83). A number of Shona proverbs have been crafted that are meant to deny women access to information thereby rendering them powerless in a way.

From the time of courtship Shona proverbs make it clear that a woman should never be told the truth. If she is deprived of correct and accurate information then she is rendered powerless to defend her wishes, position and interests. The Shona say, ‘Rume risinganyepi hariroori’ (A man that does not tell a lie will not marry) or put differently, ‘Rinonyenga rinohwarara. Rinosimudza musoro rawana.’ (A man who is courting a woman hides his true colours. He will only show them when he has won).

Many a time a young woman has entered into a serious relationship and become pregnant only to discover that she is already in a mess, perhaps impregnated by a man who already has other wives. In some cases she marries someone believing that he has a stable income, a business, cars and even good education. She discovers when it is too late that she has been lied to all along.

When a proverb instructs people to deny someone information it encourages them to disempower someone because s/he cannot make an informed decision. An uncle giving advice to grandsons says:

*Chawanzwa usaudze mukadzi*  
*Mukadzi idare rinoti ngwengwengwe*  
*Chaanzwa achiridza kwese*

(What you have heard do not tell a woman  
A woman is like a bell  
What she has heard she rings out everywhere  
(Joseph Kumbirai, unpublished)

Although this is not quite a proverb the saying is proverbial in style and it teaches young men not to trust women. They should not tell women secrets because they will not keep them. These proverbial statements encourage people to deny women access to information, thus rendering them powerless. Yet on the other hand the uncle advises his nephews that:

*Chawanzwa usavanze murume*  
*Murume idare risingamborira ...*  
*(Joseph Kumbirai, unpublished)*

(What you have heard do not hide from a man  
A man is a bell that never rings...)

A man is empowered, while a woman is disempowered. Not only do proverbial sayings tell the world that women should be blocked from getting access to information. There are also proverbs that tell us that women themselves should not be allowed to express themselves. Irons (1992:145) posits that “tough talk is obviously a linguistic assertion of power over experience, or at least an attempt to assert such power...” There are proverbs that deny women the opportunity to get power through their language. For example, the proverb ‘Nhumbu mukadzi mukuru. Hairevi chayadya’ (A pregnant womb is a mature woman. It does not reveal what it has eaten). The underlying idea here is that women are a muted lot; they should not just say things, like a womb that does not tell the world what made it to bulge like that. A woman should behave like a pregnancy which does not disclose contents in the womb. Similarly, “Mukadzi ngaaredzwe nguodzokusimira, arege kuredzwa muromo” (Only a woman’s clothes should be lengthened, not her mouth) is a proverbial saying that expects women to remain mute thereby denying them the “linguistic assertion of power over experience.” There were women, who, if a pregnant woman gave birth to twins they would kill one and present one to the patriarchs; or if the twins were a boy and a girl they would kill the girl and present only the boy to the patriarchs. The ‘woman’ was effectively silenced. The world would never know these things because the deeds were done by members of what Spender (1980:81) calls ‘the muted group’. They did not have the power to save one of their own or save their children which they carried through nine difficult months and delivered in painful labour.

It is such socio-cultural practices, beliefs, norms and values that have retarded women’s progress and limited their ability to contribute more meaningfully to their own development and to the development of their country.

One clear development that shows that there was imperative need to rid society of the cultural sanctions that ‘unoracised’ women’s experience was the role played by the Zimbabwe government to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment. Since independence in 1980, Zimbabwe has witnessed the passing of several Acts of Parliament that are meant to protect women from all sorts of abuse. Among these acts are the Legal

Age of the Majority Act, the Matrimonial Causes Act, The Sexual Discrimination Removal Act, The Sexual Offences Act, the Domestic Violence Act and the Maintenance Act. The promulgation of the National Gender Policy (2002) provides guidelines and the institutional framework to engender all sectoral policies, programmes, projects and activities at all levels of the society and economy. The government formed the Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development to monitor and coordinate gender programmes. In addition civic organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations such as Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association, PADARE/Men as Partners and Musasa Project, work in the areas of improving the status of women and protect them against all forms of abuse that may endanger their bodies and health. The greatest beneficiaries of these acts are women.

It is our conviction that government and non-governmental organisations were galvanised into action in response to cultural constraints placed on women by tradition and aspects of oral literature are some of the tools used to create those constraints. These Acts and projects gave women voices, choices, freedoms at least in the public domain. Though not everyone may be fully committed to the uplifting of women at least these legal frameworks provide an opportunity and platform for female voices to be heard all the time. Some may not be committed to the policy of uplifting of women because they themselves are products of a culture whose oral art taught them that the story of women can only be read from a male script. So they pass the laws but they do not take them seriously. Women too may not take advantage of the legislation that is meant to serve their interests because of the limitations imposed on them by traditional education received through African oral art. Hence you find women who choose to live with an unbearable situation because of the cultural utterance ‘ndinofira vana vangu’ (I will die here for the sake of my children). Others do not report abusive husbands because that is not in tandem with the behaviour of a well-cultured woman; mothers will not report to the police cases of their daughters who will have been raped by an uncle because that upsets kinship relations if the uncle goes to jail, and many such excuses; or a wife will risk getting infected with HIV by having sex with a promiscuous husband because oral art tells her that he is entitled to enjoy his conjugal rights. Such is the power of the ‘word’.

### **The flight from ‘themselves to the other selves’ returns**

Earlier on in this paper we raised the point that a woman’s body is the epicentre of her power over men. It has also been mentioned that elders used oral art such as proverbs to

divert people's attention from the beauty of the body to the beauty of the soul, the heart, the inside we do not see. By diverting attention from body assets women were being disempowered. However, going by developments that have taken place over the years as the world becomes increasingly more globalised this attempt to disempower women by diverting attention from the body appears to have failed. It has failed because women have been turning towards the use of chemicals and drugs to enlarge particular members of their bodies and enhance their beauty. This is not a new phenomenon in Zimbabwe. In the 1960s and 70s women in colonial Zimbabwe used skin lightening creams such as ambi and bu-tone in attempts to change the colour of their skins from black to something near white. The use of these skin-lightening creams was, to use Ngugi waThiongo's (1981:12) words, taking these women "further and further from [themselves] to other selves, from [their] world to other worlds". They were diverting attention from the inner soul, the heart, to the body. The concern here is not 'the flight' from themselves to the other selves. The concern in this article is the failure of the process of socialisation to inculcate into the minds of the young the fact that 'outward beauty' is good but is of no permanent value and therefore should not be focussed on. The elders were saying in their proverbs, a light skinned and beautiful woman would not necessarily become a good wife, a good cook or a good that and that (whatever assessment criteria they used). In fact, they were warning young men that one needed to be sure of a woman's inner character, otherwise such women would be a source of problems when they turned out to be unreliable, unstable, unfaithful or even witches. Around the time of Zimbabwe's independence this skin-bleaching craze disappeared as a result of a brief cultural regeneration, but "fast-forward 30 years and the skin-bleaching craze has returned with a vicious streak..." "So big has the problem become that the BBC carried a documentary of the ever-increasing craze of skin-bleaching among black people. It appears everyone is ignoring the consequences" (Catherine Murombedzi, Sunday Mail Leisure, 16-22 February 2014). Most commonly used drugs and chemicals now include diprosone, cyproheptadine, apectine, supa apeti and mega apeti carolite, movate, lemonvate, corticosteroid, erpiderme and others.

Some of these drugs and chemicals make one's skin look lighter and more attractive, the very qualities that elders warned against and suggested caution about when they said, "Mukadzi munaku/mutsvuku kurega kuba anoroya" (A beautiful woman if she does not steal she is a witch). Some of the drugs enlarge a woman's body parts thereby drawing the attention of the world to those parts, contrary to what Shona proverbs advised. Some of the drugs like apectine, supa and mega apeti carolite are said to boost the size of breasts and buttocks. The idea is for these women to attract people to themselves, thus empowering themselves. Remarks made by two ladies interviewed by



the Sunday Mail Reporters (Sunday Mail Extra 3, 8 June 2014) reveal this increasing craze to focus on the body. One interviewee named as Chipo said:

These drugs have done wonders for me. My self-esteem used to be so low because I did not see myself as beautiful or attractive. I did not get as much attention as other girls...Africans generally respect a well-built woman. I am now getting all the respect and attention I deserve.

Another, who doubles up as a beauty therapist and drug (ab)user, concurred and said that "...the substances were necessary in enhancing women's bodies as they desire..." What this shows is that these women are now diverting all attention to their bodies, the epicentre of female power over the patriarchs. The patriarchs will now go for them and one is not sure whether these women will be able to have full control of their sexual and reproductive health. They become the attraction of men who will probably infect them with HIV and AIDS and impregnate them without taking responsibility. Some are young women. By using these drugs and chemicals that enlighten the skin and boost the size of body parts they run the risk of developing terrible diseases like cancer and others that affect vital organs such as the liver, heart, and skin and cause brain damage. Alarm is already being raised as evidenced by media coverage of this problem in Zimbabwe. Some of the newspapers carry screaming headlines such as the following: *Skin bleaching: Reflection of a deeper problem* (The Sunday Mail Leisure, 16-22 February 2014, p.L9); *Beauty, hip enlargement drug users defiant; Women abusing beauty enhancers risk brain damage: Experts* (The Sunday Mail Extra, 8 June 2014, p.3); *Alarm as women hunt beauty drugs* (Sunday Mail Extra, 8 June 2014, p.5). Society is alarmed as it contemplates the consequences of following these choices but perhaps the ladies are more than prepared to suffer for beauty. Magezis (1996:105) aptly sums it up in the description of her own experiences when she tells us that:

As a girl I was told that I had to suffer for beauty. When I was growing up, curly hair was in fashion. My mother bought a home perm to 'beautify' my straight hair. I remember sitting there squirming as she dabbed this awful, smelly liquid onto the curlers she'd patiently rolled in my hair. It was when I complained that she told me about suffering for beauty...But that was the fate of women - to sacrifice, make themselves beautiful to get a man and then try to manipulate him subtly.

When a black woman remains her natural self, she is herself. But when she takes drugs to increase her body size and weight and use chemicals to bleach her skin so that she

looks more like a white person then she is deliberately, knowingly, and willingly turning herself into a genetically modified sexual object. The proverbs that elders crafted were meant to protect women from getting excessively obsessed with issues of their looks.

## **Conclusion**

Shona oral literature such as folktales, poems and proverbs were very useful tools used in the socialisation of citizens right from early childhood. From them people acquired good moral values and learnt useful lessons about life. That is where they learnt about the pitfalls to avoid in life and about what made one a good citizen and about ways of conforming to societal expectations. However, some of these oral art forms tended to impose cultural sanctions on women in a manner that makes critics to conclude that this was a way of disempowering women and keep the female spirit under control for all time. It also guaranteed that for all time women would be to blame in the event of a married couple failing to have children. As Matetakufa (1988) and Moyo (2014) show, up to this very day the belief among Zimbabweans that when a couple fails to conceive it is the woman who is to blame is still very strong. In doing this domestic violence was reduced by socialising the woman into a muted creature. For this reason we tend to concur with Kaschula's (2001:32) assertion that:

The African woman is a conspicuously 'silenced person' in a conspicuously 'silenced continent'. I totally agree that this silencing or 'de-oracisation' contributes significantly to the woman's disadvantaged position in society.

We also agree that if the woman is given a voice and sufficient space to prove herself she can contribute meaningfully to her own development and to the development of society as a whole.

The oral story told around the heath is dying because of a number of reasons that are beyond the scope of this paper. For that reason, we cannot suggest that the script must be changed and one that is gender sensitive and give scientific explanation to such problems be told. We now call upon writers of fiction, makers of cartoons and television dramas to tell the story that corrects the distortions of the past. Oliver Nyika and Giles Kuimba have done their part in Ndinodawo Mwana (I also want a child) (1993) and Rurimi Inyoka (The tongue is a snake) (1976), respectively. The modern story-teller should read from the gender sensitive script that shows that "...the main medical cause

in both man and woman is tubal blockages -the result of delayed or inadequate treatment of reproductive tract infections” (Matetakufa, 1988).

Finally, Shona elders valued the inner character of a person more than outer appearances. For this reason they crafted proverbial sayings that were meant to encourage people to peep into the soul of a person before making an ill-informed decision based on judging the outside shell. To this end, they used proverbs that diverted people’s attention from outward beauty to inner beauty that resides in the heart. This socialisation does not seem to have had a permanent influence as Zimbabwean women, under the pressure of colonialism and ultimately globalisation, have at various phases in the history of the country took to the use of hazardous chemicals and drugs that bleach the skin and increase size of their body parts in order to draw the attention of the world to their bodies rather than to their inner souls. In this paper we acknowledge that elders used proverbs that diverted attention from the body, the epicentre of a woman’s power, hence disempowering her. However, the same woman is now empowering herself by using chemicals and drugs to lighten her skin and enlarge her body parts with consequences too ghastly to contemplate.

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