Experiences of women in early marriages in rural Zimbabwe

Abstract

This paper attempts to provide a nuanced analysis of the experiences of women in early marriages in rural Zimbabwe. It was guided by a decolonial social constructionist framework and inspired by a feminist lens that endeavoured to gain insight into the first-hand experiences of early marriage. In-depth narrative interviews were carried out with eleven women who experienced early marriages. The article addresses the marginalised voices of the women by providing space for them to share their stories and lived experiences within the context of their everyday lives. Research findings highlighted that there were diverse reasons for early marriages, mostly cultural and economic. However, such marriages were also characterised by various forms of abuse which resulted in the women having difficulties adjusting back into society after surviving these marriages. Findings also show that societal norms and beliefs continue to influence and shape the behavior and experiences of women in negative and detrimental ways through promoting early marriage practices.

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Introduction

Despite national and international laws barring early marriage, young women globally are still being married at an early stage. For the purpose of this paper, we have defined early marriage as any marriage where a girl is under the age of 18. This definition is based on the legal age of becoming an adult and the fact that early marriage is illegal in Zimbabwe[1]. Early marriage

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[1]   It is important to note that there is no clear and shared understanding of early marriage across the various contexts and literature reviewed. We opted for the term early marriage as preferable to child marriage as the latter is further complicated by different understandings of childhood and adulthood across contexts which is not possible to elaborate on here.

practices for women are most common in Sub-Saharan Africa (18%) and South Asia (44%) (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 2018). Although Asia has the highest number of child brides, the global phenomenon of early marriage is shifting to Sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2018). Much of the literature on early marriages describes young women as survivors who have suffered from social, psychological, educational and physical consequences and in some cases, die early in life (Kanjanda & Chiparange, 2016); and that early marriage contributes to the continued oppression of women, and further legitimises and perpetuates gender-based violence (Rembe et al, 2011). However, a broad overview of the work that is being done around early marriages in Zimbabwe and internationally has generally been informed by reports from non-governmental organisations which present a negative and one-dimensional picture of the practice (Research Advocate Unit, 2014; Hodzi, 2016). Qualitative research which thoroughly examines women's subjective experiences and personal constructions of early marriage is also very limited, with women's experiences being only briefly discussed when outlining the effects of early marriage (Ahmed et al, 2013; Hodzi, 2016). Global discourse on early marriage largely fails to explore the role of agency in young people's decision-making about sexuality, family and marriage, particularly the desire to enter adulthood (Karim et al, 2016). Strategies to eliminate early marriages generally focus on changing individual-level attitudes and knowledge and have been less successful as compared to those that involve the whole community (Cornwall, 2003; Callaghan et al, 2015). Individual-centred approaches locate early marriage as a problem that violates individual human rights and obscures the context that validates early marriage as a comprehensible familial and cultural practice, and conceals the complex historical, structural and socioeconomic factors that perpetuate early marriage practices (Callaghan et al, 2015). The noticeable absence of women's voices in the literature around early marriage further entrenches the construction of women as victims who need to be rescued (Archambault, 2011; Camfield & Tafere, 2011; Callaghan et al, 2015). Therefore, coherent and effective research on early marriage should not only take on a socially oriented perspective but should pay attention to those mostly affected by the practice in order to bring about meaningful social change (Cornwall, 2003).

A decolonial social constructionist approach

This paper takes a decolonial social constructionist approach to research on early marriage by observing the context and broader social environment in which such a practice takes place. Social constructionist approaches in psychology (Gergen, 1985) are a response to the assumptions of positivist orientations that conceptualise the individual as the central unit of analysis. Instead, social constructionists view the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of individuals and communities as influenced by their historical, political, economic, and institutional context. Such an approach contributes to emerging

perspectives in psychology from a decolonial feminist lens. As argued elsewhere (see Macleod, 2003), categories of adult and child follow a western binary logic. This logic promotes ideas about acceptable forms of marriage according to predefined notions of who is considered to be an adult (and thus able to marry according to the law), which is largely determined and regulated by age (Bunting, 2005; Camfield & Tafere, 2011; Boyden et al, 2012). Much of this literature reflects a gendered perspective with an overemphasis on the regulation of the female body and restrictions on sexuality.

Given the current reports of trends in early marriages as being increasingly a sub-Saharan African phenomenon, these practices cannot be divorced from global social, economic, and political arrangements that have led to one-sided and culturally biased understandings of early marriage, and that have perpetuated racialized and gendered ideas about Africa and Africans. However, we are cognizant of the impact that colonization (and its associated capitalist patriarchal practices) has had on family structures in local communities and how these transpire through gendered violence in everyday life (Boonzaier, 2005). The focus on women's experiences of early marriage in this paper thus seeks to contribute to the dearth of literature on the topic from the perspectives of the women themselves with the aim of providing a more nuanced analysis of early marriage and how it may also exacerbate existing forms of gendered violence.

The social-cultural context of early marriage

In many communities the practices of early marriage have strong cultural roots and a clear cultural sense (Karim et al, 2016; Buchanan, 2019). In Zimbabwe, early marriage is still being practiced under customary marriage and in most cases through the payment of *lobola.* Lobola is the payment of bride wealth among the Shona and Ndebele societies respectively (Riphenburg, 1997). Contemporary practices of lobola are embedded in heterosexual and patriarchal family structures, which assign binary cis-heteronormative gender roles- the woman/bride becoming the homemaker and children bearer, whilst the man/groom becomes the provider, protector and head of the family (Shefer et al, 2010). Mutanana and Mutara (2015) examined the views of Zimbabwean men who married girls before they reached 18 years. Men disclosed that when they saw girls carrying out traditional roles such as washing, cleaning and cooking they regarded them as grownups and available for marriage despite their age. This transition from girlhood to womanhood is often marked by societal practices, such as *ukuthwala* (Monyane, 2013) in South Africa and *mat kwam* (Achebe. 2018) in Nigeria, practices by which a man abducts a young woman or girl and seeks marriage from the girl's family. Women who reject this are often looked down upon by the society. In Tanzania, a girl is generally considered ready for marriage once she reaches puberty and undergoes initiation rites (Mtengeti et al, 2008).

Religion is an important cultural resource for understanding early marriage. Hodzi (2016) carried out a study in Zimbabwe with apostolic church leaders and women in the sect. She noted that issues of sexuality, power and patriarchy were at the heart of early marriage practices as the parents benefitted from power and influence in the church by marrying off their virgin daughters (Hodzi, 2016). Kanjanda and Chiparange (2016) also found that early marriage practices in Manicaland province were a deliberate effort by people within church structures to guard and serve their personal interest in the church.

What is common across these examples is that early marriage is not necessarily seen as a phenomenon in itself but one that is embedded in the common cultural understandings and practices of marriage. Customs surrounding marriage, including the required age and ways of selecting a spouse depend on a society's understandings of the family, its role, structure, pattern of life, and the individual and collective responsibility of its members (Mfono, 2000: 5). Nevertheless, these examples suggest that early marriage is perpetuated by gender ideologies which discriminate against girls (Ghosh, 2011; Kyari & Ayodele, 2014; Delprato et al, 2015). Some work has recognised the importance of women's voices in understanding the practice of early marriage (Camfield & Tafere, 2011; Narang & Vaishnav, 2012; Ahmed et al, 2013; Callaghan et al, 2015; Hodzi, 2016; Karim et al, 2016) and on women's ways of resisting early marriages. A study by Ababa (2006) in Ethiopia indicated that most early marriages ended in divorce/separation with 56% of participants reportedly ending their first marriage because of lack of interest and some felt they were too young to be in a marriage. Early marriage debates are often limited by the binary opposition of women's agency and victimhood that derive from individualistic and Eurocentric cultural understandings of women and families (Mfono, 2000), rather than African conceptualizations that marriage is between families not individuals (Kwaramba, 2004).

This emerging body of work indicates the need for a decolonial social constructionist perspective that not only interrogates the phenomenon of early marriage but also its historical location in cultural institutions such as the church and family and the power dynamics therein (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). Colonisation of Africa by the Western states transformed gender and power relations in complex, diverse and contradictory ways by changing societal structures and systems (Duran & Duran, 1995). Men were given more power and women were confined to domestication or dependent roles which later on were fixed in the social creation of space and of gender (Mama, 1997; Kesby, 1999).

Method

Because this study sought to understand the lived experiences of women, it adopted a qualitative research design. The experiences and meanings generated by people are

crucial for researchers to understand their viewpoint which improves the qualitative conception of the phenomena studied (Daher et al, 2017).

Name	Age	Age of 1st marriage	Number of children	Education level
Gertrude	23	15	2	Form 3
Juliet	24	14	0	Form 2
Chantel	18	13	1	Form 1
Miriam	24	15	3	Form 3
Muchaneta	27	16	1	Form 3
Noleen	25	16	3	Form 2
Mary	24	17	2	Grade 7
Precious	19	16	2	Form 3
Shawn	21	15	1	Grade 6
Sibongile	18	16	1	Form 1
Tatenda	23	17	2	Form 3

Table 1. Demographic Information of participants.

Table 1 highlights the demographic profile of the eleven women between the ages of 18 and 30 years chosen for this study. This sample was chosen to avoid ethical implications of choosing minors and the risk of interviewing children who may be experiencing and recounting traumatic experiences. The age range was also important because the women were still able to recount their experiences of being recently married. Pseudonyms were used to safeguard the identities of participants.

Two participants (Miriam and Muchaneta) remarried after their first marriages and were currently in their second marriages. Noleen and Precious remarried after their first marriage but later divorced. The rest of the participants did not remarry after their first marriage and were no longer married when the study was carried out. Only one participant did not have children at the time of the study.

Participants were chosen through purposive and snowballing sampling procedures. Considering the sensitive nature of the research, the women in the study were difficult

to reach therefore participants were selected based on accessibility. Participants were drawn from three provinces with highest rates of early marriages which are Mashonaland West, Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland East. Six participants were recruited through a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) already working on early marriages in Zimbabwe which had offices across all the three provinces. The first author conducted all the interviews with the participants and temporarily engaged with the NGO for two months to familiarize himself with the participants and also grasp broader issues around early marriage in Zimbabwe. Five participants were sourced through two Village Counsellors who were elderly women in rural villages and who introduced the researcher to the women who resided in their villages.

The aim was to adopt an open-ended or unstructured approach and depart from the typical question and answer set-up. Therefore, narrative interviews following Wengraf (2001) Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) were conducted. This approach is concerned with both the inner and the outer worlds of historical person-in-historical circumstances with the primary focus on individual experience in unique historical and societal locations and processes (Wengraf, 2004). As we were interested in researching the contexts under which early marriages occur, experiences of the women and the meanings elicited out of these experiences, it was important to understand the role of socio-cultural contexts in shaping these experiences. In each BNIM interview, there are three sub sessions with the third session being optional. Only the first and second sessions were adopted for this research due to the unavailability of most participants for the third session and to minimise costs for the researcher. Interviews were conducted at the participants' homes and some at the Village Counsellors' residences. Two sessions were held: SQUIN (single question inductive narrative) and TQUIN (topic question inducing narrative) and were recorded and transcribed for each interview run. The interview began with a carefully constructed single question which asked women about their experiences of being married at an early stage, from what led to the marriage and how they coped/adjusted after the marriage. Participants talked about experiences and events which they considered to have been personally important to them. The first session usually lasted between 15 min and 45 min. After each first session, there was a small break of about 10 min to organise notes and identify follow up questions.

In the second session (TQUIN) which was carried on the same day, the interviewer asked for more narratives in the sequence of topics which were raised from the first session. One female official from the NGO and one female village counsellor were there to assist with the follow up questions in case the participants felt uncomfortable with the questions. The two sessions lasted approximately between 1 to 3 hours. At the end of each interview run, participants were allowed to reflect on the interview

sessions and to ask any questions regarding the interview. Since it was voluntary participation, participants were not given any reward for their involvement. Verbal consent from participants was recorded in each session and the recorded interviews were then transcribed verbatim for analysis. All interviews were conducted in Shona and transcribed then translated into English by the first author who repeatedly listened to the original tape of the recorded information to cross check the translations. The transcribed data was shared with participants, to enable them to check if what was written was a correct representation of what they had said.

The analysis that follows is a thematic analysis guided by postcolonial feminist theory. Tamale (2004) has located feminism in Africa in the continent's historical realities of marginalisation, oppression and domination brought about by slavery, colonialism, racism, neo-colonialism and globalisation. A postcolonial feminist analysis is thus adequate for this study given the importance on the inter-connectedness of gender, women's oppression, race, ethnicity, poverty and class in African feminisms (McFadden,2002) and the resultant postcolonial nature of African feminisms (Njambi, 2004; Tamale, 2004; Mama, 2005).

Reflexivity

As scholars conducting research with rural women in Zimbabwe, we acknowledge the power dynamics influenced by our life background, gender, age and level of education and how these influenced the research process. However, the first author, being a Zimbabwean man, he was an outsider in relation to his gender; but being a Shona speaker, he was an insider as most of the participants spoke Shona, the main local language. This is likely to have made the women feel at ease and perhaps allow them to provide detailed experiences without the difficulty of using a different language. We acknowledge that our association with the non-governmental organisations which helped us access participants also mediated the interviewer/participant relationship. The organisations are well known in Zimbabwe for empowering local communities through providing social and economic support. We noticed that in some narratives, women selected narratives which stressed their need for assistance as a result. Since most of the women had experienced some form of abuse in their marriages, we anticipated some reluctance on their part of being interviewed by a male researcher. However, the first author being supervised by an African woman (co-researcher) on this project, the discussions we had helped the research process by mitigating some of the potential problems associated with men conducting research on women.

Results and discussion

This section outlines key findings from interviews with women in early marriages. The section reveals different themes including the socio-economic context of early

marriages, the experiences of women in early marriages and the role of society in shaping these experiences.

The socio-economic contexts of early marriage
Many of the women described contexts of poverty as being important issues that contributed to their being propelled into early marriages.

Sibongile: "*My parents passed away when I was young. My aunt ill-treated me and my sister, she stopped paying my school fees and I ended up staying at home. She told me to look for work to sustain myself and so I got a job as a domestic worker when I was 12 years. I then thought it was better to get married because I wanted my husband to take care of me and my little sister.*"

Poverty in this case means not having enough food or not being able to go to school due to a lack of money and resources. Most of the women interviewed came from families already living in poverty, which motivated their decision to get married and be looked after. This was also often supported by a desire to get away from home where they were being abused by stepparents or guardians. Many of the young women were orphans or had parents who were divorced. Although poverty played a vital role in prompting the woman to marry early, the young women showed agency as central in their decision to marry.

Mary: "*I was never brilliant in school such that I repeated each grade that I went through. I began to dislike school when I discovered that I was not academically gifted. I started dating an older man who was twice my age. The man promised to marry me so I decided to quit school and marry him because I wanted to be his wife rather than live my horrible life alone.*"

In constructing her reasons for marrying at a young age, Mary constantly referred to herself ('I') indicating a sense of responsibility for her own actions. She decided to marry at a young age because she did not have any prospects of staying in school. She opted for marriage because she thought her husband would save her from the embarrassment and give her a better life. Therefore, in a poverty situation it can be argued that the financial, social, and gendered motivations of young women to marry strengthen the idea that they were not passive victims of their life circumstances. Rather, they were actively trying to solve problems in the context of their lives. Even if the parties agreed to the union, none of the women defined love as their primary motivation. These women used marriage to fulfil their need for freedom, social acceptance, independence, care, and basic safety.

Traditional practices such as arranged marriages and the attitude of the family towards teenage pregnancy which are all societal practices based on patriarchal ideas of controlling the sexuality of young women, were some of the main reasons why young women married early. Through this system of surveillance, the women were punished for placing themselves in 'compromising positions' such as staying out late with a boyfriend.

Gertrude: *"I was forced to marry early because one day I got home late after spending time with my boyfriend. My parents immediately told me to go back where I was coming from. My boyfriend's family accepted me and we started staying together as husband and wife."*

Gertrude's narrative notes one such case where young women are forced into marriages by fathers who fear that their conduct may bring shame on the family and make them 'unmarriageable'. Feminist readings have described women's sexuality as a central concern to maintaining national values because women are conveyors of masculine honour given the biological and cultural roles in reproducing the next generation (Yuval-Davis, 2003; Mayer, 2012). It is in this discourse that women are expected to enact "proper" behaviour which upholds the interest of the community. *Improper* behaviors such as sex before marriage and flight from home which brings dishonor and shame to the family are seen as weakening the social order (Yuval-Davis, 2003).

Another tradition which promotes early marriage is an arranged marriage between two families:

Noleen: "*My aunt arranged that I marry this man who was her church mate's son. This guy however had a mental condition and he was on medication. The reason for marrying him was that I could take care of him because he needed lots of attention.*"

A strand that could be drawn from Noleen's narrative is the regulation of women's gendered identities and behaviors, particularly in care-giving roles. Furthemore, arranged marriage as a tradition is governed by cultural standards which serve to ensure social cohesion, order, morality and propagation of the society (Grover, 2009). Certain beliefs about parental matches give family-arranged marriages enormous credibility compared to marriages initiated by the couple (Grover, 2009) and arranged marriages are perceived as robust and lifelong, while the latter are regarded as fragile and ephemeral.

Transition into marriage
Describing their experiences of being married at an early age, the women interviewed described their marriages as a harsh transition into a different lifestyle:

Tatenda: "*All of a sudden, my life changed in a space of days. I stopped going to school, I lost friends. It was really difficult becoming a wife in such a short time.*"

Noleen*: "At first, I did not what was expected of me as a new bride, I was never taught anything about married life at home. I learnt most of the things when I was in my marriage*"

Noleen describes herself as someone who did not know about marriage and entered very inactively into marriage. She describes marriage as the context within which a young women 'grows up', and transition from 'not knowing' to 'knowing' and is part of growing up; there is no preparation for marriage, but rather you come to know and understand married life by experiencing it. Upon marriage, the women were expected to bear children, carry household duties and provide for the family. A further example of the control of men within marriages. Patriarchal societies tend to propagate ideas surrounding motherhood which restrict women's mobility whilst at the same time burdening them with the responsibility of nurturing and rearing children and providing for the family. The African woman is then socialised into sustaining the very power relations which will continue to oppress her throughout her lifecycle (Tamale, 2004). Considering that all the participants were from rural areas, the economic challenges were almost similar in every marriage.

Noleen: "*The workload was just too much because I took care of the household duties when my mother in-law was not around. Some of the duties included house chores, garden watering, herding cattle and looking after my husband. In terms of food, we were ok though.*"

Tatenda: "*After my husband fled to South Africa, I survived on working for other people's crop fields because I had no other means to feed my child. I was overburdened by my responsibilities because I had to maintain our home.*"

Noleen utilises the discourse of responsible womanhood to show how she perceives what womanhood entails. When her mother in-law was absent, she had to step up and be the woman of the house by maintaining the household. The same is shown in Tatenda's narrative where she had to balance between maintaining the household and fending for her family. Tatenda illustrates how she was already suffering and failing to provide for her child which inclined her to work on other people's crop fields. In this case, having a child for whom one is unable to take care is seen as irresponsible motherhood/womanhood.

Although Noleen did not have problems related to subsistence, she was overwhelmed with responsibilities of maintaining the homestead. The same cannot be said about

Tatenda who lived in poverty and at the same time had to work hard for her family. The concept of domesticity covers the debates about what has been termed the public/private sphere challenge in African societies (McFadden, 2000a). Tamale (2003) has theorised that capitalist patriarchal societies are characterised by a separation of the 'public' from the 'private' sphere as a way of oppressing women. She states that these two spheres are highly gendered, with the former inhabited by men; the locus of socially valued activities, such as politics and waged labour (Tamale, 2003: 11). The latter constitutes the mainly unremunerated and undervalued domestic activities performed by women (Tamale, 2003: 11). Tamale (2003) has argued that this division has necessitated the domestication of women's bodies and their relegation to the 'private' sphere, where women provide gratuitously the necessities of productive and reproductive social life while remaining economically dependent on their male partners. Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi (2003) postulate that young brides are not able to overcome poverty for themselves and their families due to lack of education and adequate support from their partners. Therefore, it can be argued that these women heavily relied on their husband to sustain the family which consequently left them in dire situations when the marriages broke off.

Experiences of abuse and violation
There was however some consistency regarding the abuse and violations that the participants went through. In most cases, the kind of abuse ranged from physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Most participants highlighted that their husbands were physically abusive because they wanted to exert some power over them through physical and emotional harm. Gertrude attributed the less physical abusive nature of her husband to the age difference between them. In the following extract, Gertrude implies that she sometimes deserved the abuse when she offended her husband.

Gertrude: "*We were in a good relationship though because the age difference was not too big, my husband would only beat me when I did something seriously bad.*"

Miriam: "*Even when I put a lot of salt when cooking, I would receive a beating for that. He would say I was stubborn, disobedient and not taught good manners when growing up.*"

The victim-blaming explanation above highlights the internalization and normalization of violence against women. Most of the respondents in this study reported having been physically and emotionally abused by various means. Some of the emotional abuse included isolation, lack of companionship and harassment.

Tatenda:" *It was difficult living without him most of the time. I was all alone and scared at our home.*"

Miriam: *"My husband was abusive, and I feared him a lot such that with time, I lost my freedom, became sad, stressed and socially isolated. To make matters worse, he did not allow me to socialise with other people nor visit my friends."*

Tatenda experienced emotional abuse by not having companionship from her husband. She was left pregnant before her husband went to South Africa in search of a job. Tatenda narrated that she felt alone and wished that she had never married him. Miriam's husband did not allow her to have any independence or contact with other people. He would harass her whenever she wanted to express her opinions. She became sad, stressed and emotionally trapped. This kind of control can be classified as the structural denial of a person's autonomy which is a form of psychological violence. Hof and Richers (1999) argue that these oppressive and dominant structures imposed by the abuser dictate the way women are supposed to behave around people.

Six out of the eleven participants also reported being sexually abused in their marriages. Most participants regarded their first sexual experience as rape. In many contexts in Zimbabwe, forced sex within marriage is generally viewed as normal and even tolerable (Feldman & Maposhere, 2003). The following narrative illustrates an incidence of sexual abuse:

Miriam: *"In terms of our sex life, he would just sleep with me whether I liked it or not. Sometimes he would use force especially when I was on my menstrual periods or tired. His argument was that "a woman never falls sick or gets tired from work."*

Many women described the entitlement their husbands' s showed to their bodies-through non-consensual sex. Miriam's narrative further describes how masculinity and femininity are created within her narrative. Miriam's husband demanded sex from her arguing that "a woman never gets sick or tired" to serve her husband's needs. According to Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi (2003), this kind of action is the result of unequal power relations that exist between a young bride and her older husband who has total control over how, when, and where sexual intercourse takes place. Women have to act as per their socialisation whereby they are required to satisfy the needs and demands of their husbands. Postcolonial African feminists have argued that womanhood in Africa continues to be framed by narratives of domesticity (McFadden, 2000a; Tamale, 2002, 2008, 2011) which entails that women should stay in the private sector. Horn (2006: 11) reinforces this when he states that contemporary cultural norms and laws in most African societies reinforce the idea that a 'proper or real' African woman is a woman, "who is heterosexual, married, bears children, and more often than not, pleases her husband sexually."

The women were often in a difficult position of making decisions about whether to report the abuse, precisely because they depended on their abuser for material security (as mentioned by Precious) and some emotional security (fatherly affection).

Precious: *"I did not want him to go to jail, I just wanted him to receive a beating from the police so that he feels the same pain he put me through. I did not want my child to grow up without his father present. I also did not want to lose the breadwinner of the house."*

Miriam: *"Even though he was abusive, I could not live without him. My children and I needed him to be around to provide that fatherly affection."*

The women were found to maintain ambivalent feelings towards their abusers, some even describing the relationship in positive terms, such as "want", and "needed". Ambivalent femininities acknowledge the existence and mixture of obedience and resistant actions in women's practices. Even though women do not want to remain in unequal marriage, in which men are adulterous or abusive, they are fearful of tarnishing social relationships with the broader family, and do not challenge the financial implications of a divorce (Moore, 2015).

Coping with Abuse
Participants in the study had different means of coping with the abuse. Tatenda and Precious would flee to their neighbours for safety every time they were abused only to return home when the situation was calm. The women negotiated their space by physically walking away from conflict and abuse as a means of coping, thus permitting distance from the abuse and the search of means to deal with the situation. The ways in which the women psychologically assessed and processed the abuse impacted adjustment and coping. Gertrude blamed herself for the abuse, citing immaturity.

Gertrude: *"As I grew older, I matured a lot and I realised that most of our fights were a result of immaturity. So, with time the fights and abuse became less."*

Self-blame as an inner characteristic can serve as a way of coping since it produces a sense of control, which may deliver the courage for averting more victimisation (Mendes et al, 2008). At the same time, self-blame lets men off the hook because as they are then not blamed for their actions. It may be a coping mechanism but not a form of resistance (Sigad et al, 2015).

Sibongile: *"I did not want to think about the abuse anymore. I realised the only way to cope was to avoid going back to those memories again."*

Chantel: *"I constantly communicated with my friend and her encouragement was so helpful because she was always there for me. Whenever I would think of killing myself, she would counsel and help me go back to my senses again."*

Gertrude: *"I had a group of friends and sometimes we would meet when my husband was not around. Their words were encouraging and somehow helped me to cope with the abuse."*

Sibongile found ways to cope with the abuse by separating herself from the abusive experiences. This way of coping can be defined as an effort to forget, cover up, or intentionally reject the abusive experience. Communication helped Chantel and Gertrude to cope with the abuse and this was achieved through keeping social bonds with the community during the time of abusive. This facilitated their healing. Sigad et al (2015) indicate that communication gives women opportunities to share and hear other people's stories of abuse and this raises friendship, familiarity and provides them with a platform to reflect upon experiences other than their own, discovering the similarities and differences. This enables a healing process through self-reflection and solidarity pathways. While some women left the family home for a period, which may be seen as a form of resistance, they often returned after some time. Other women turned to friends and elders as a way of showing their grievance and gesturing their discontent within the marriages.

In telling their stories of abuse, the women displayed their resilience in coping with the abusive environment, with little or no help. Their stories painted a complex picture of resistance, resilience and compliance, highlighting how the African female body is a site of resistance, negotiation, identity, self-desire, pleasure and silence (McFadden, 2002; Tamale, 2003; Mama, 2005). According to Tamale (2004), silence can also be a tool of resistance and struggle, especially for the marginalised.

Abandonment and divorce
All of the eleven participants in the study were divorced from their first marriages and only two were in their second marriage. After divorce, the women often found the adjustment process very difficult after months and years in marriages considering that they lost development opportunities and had limited life opportunities.

Chantel: "*I was sent away with no property or valuable I had worked for. I only managed to take some clothes with me. Since I did not finish my education, I had to do temporary jobs such as ploughing in people's fields and domestic work.*"

Noleen: "*After divorce, I stayed home for a while, but life was tough because my child and I did not have support. So, when I turned 17 years, I decided to marry again.*

However, after a few months, I left my second husband because he was so abusive and at one point, he almost killed me. I am currently staying with my uncle doing part time jobs."

Poverty demanded that these two women find alternative ways of sustaining themselves and their children after the divorce. Chantel spoke of how the failure to complete her education meant that she was not competent for formal jobs and could only qualify for temporary jobs. Noleen drew on a discourse of responsible motherhood to explain her decision to marry again for financial security and accommodation which ultimately failed. In some cases, families were supportive of the women. For example, in the case of Muchaneta:

Muchaneta: "*My husband's family did not want me to go to work or school, they wanted me to be a house wife and that is what triggered our marriage breakdown. I told my parents about this and they decided to take me back home so that I could go to school.*"

However, in other cases, women were left to fend for themselves. After the divorce, Chantel did not get any share of the property she owned together with her husband, which follows common cultural practices in Zimbabwe (Kawewe, 2001). It was also found that some women were not accepted back by their families when their marriages ended in divorce or abandonment. As a result, the women ended up living alone or cohabiting with friends. Faced with the sole responsibility of taking care of their children, Mary, Precious and Shawn ended up engaging in sex work.

Mary: "*I left my husband after I found out that he was cheating on me. My mother did not want to take me back, so I stayed with my friend who introduced me to sex work which I am still doing at present.*"

Shawn: "*After realising that my husband had another wife, I decided to go back home but my mom was not willing to take me back. I started living alone and I am currently working as a sex worker.*"

As shown in the literature, divorce brings social and economic difficulties for young mothers as they take full responsibility for their children (Erulkar, 2013). Divorced and abandoned young women end up carrying out commercialized forms of domestic work such as cleaning, cooking, child-minding and even commercial sex trade (Kawewe, 2001). Similarly, studies in the Amhara Region concluded that this area was a major place of origin for commercial sex workers. This is because of the high prevalence of early marriages in the area, which often lead to divorce (Erulkar & Muthengi, 2009).

Studies have pointed out that early marriages do not usually last and frequently lead to early divorce (Erulkar & Muthengi, 2009). Men are usually the ones to divorce or abandon their wives (Otoo-Oyortey & Pobi, 2003). However, over half of the participants in this study were the ones who left their marriages. In line with Muchaneta's narrative, Mathur et al (2001) add that when married women are employed, it is often viewed as a danger to culturally accepted gender roles and many families fear for the safety of these women if they engage in other activities outside the family's home. Muchaneta, Noleen and Chantel's accounts show different circumstances that led to divorce, but they all had a choice of returning home and were accepted by their parents. This facilitated their adjustment process.

Society shaping the experiences of early marriage survivors
Neighbors, the police, and the family shaped the experiences of girls married early either positively or negatively. The absence of support is sometimes evident in the ineffectiveness of the police to deal with women who have experienced violence (Boonzaier, 2005). Since early marriages are illegal in Zimbabwe, police has failed to carry out its duties of protecting early brides in the community. In some incidences, underage brides went to report cases of abuse, but the police failed to act adequately. In most cases, underage brides were only provided with counselling and told to go back home.

Miriam: *"At one point, he assaulted me badly such that I went to the police and we did undergo some counselling by police officers and then we were told to go back home. Yes, they did notice that I was underage, but they did not do anything about it."*

The family context was highlighted by most participants as a key site of influence in their marriages and a central basis of support which was important for participants to reintegrate into social life. This kind of support was vital for the brides who were mostly abused by and isolated from their husbands. Participants also drew upon beliefs within the broader community and wider societal context as factors shaping their experiences. Many of the participants emphasised how the community stigmatised and labelled them as outcasts after their marriages broke down. The women explained that the community environment lacked positive role and supportive figures available to them.

Miriam*: "People from my community said a lot about me, some were looking down upon me. Men wanted to take advantage of me because they thought I was now a free woman. Some think you are now a junkie and they can just use you for sex. So, it was also difficult settling back because people view you differently."*

Gertrude: "You know, people always talk but at the end that talk fades away. I am not what they think I am, all I want is to rebuild my life again"

Perceptions held by the community towards the women can leave them with feelings of embarrassment and shame. The shame that arises is not simply personal but also extends to the family since there are certain obligations that are assumed. These women are expected to be representatives and models for the family and any act they perform in opposition to this is seen as threatening the family's name. Watts et al (2015), found that African societies generally frown upon unmarried teenage mothers, leaving the teenagers with feelings of shame and embarrassment. Underage mothers are perceived to set bad examples to other teenagers and give a bad reputation to the community and their families. While community members labelled and positioned them as dangerous and outcasts, the women in this study resisted these labels and did not position themselves as victims, rather they constructed a positive identity around their experiences.

Conclusion

Through the narratives described in this paper, women in early marriages constructed identities that reflected the social, historical and economic context of Zimbabwe. Their experiences of early marriage were largely confined to normative ideas of what it means to be a woman and wife in rural Zimbabwe. However, this paper demonstrated that women were not always "forced or coerced" to marry as indicated in most of the literature, but also practiced their agency by entering early marriages. They saw marriage as a necessary transition from childhood into womanhood which is required in their societies through various cultural practices. Although most of the women in this study were poor, uneducated housewives, who had never gone beyond secondary school nor been formally employed, they challenged the identity of being passive survivors.

On the other hand, most marriages were characterized by violence and abuse, and the women described marriage as a process which required constant resilience and obedience. The narratives of early marriage in this project represented women's experiences as subordinated and whose roles were to maintain the honour of the family, the community and of the nation. It is therefore important to acknowledge how nationalism shapes the experiences and representations of women in Zimbabwe. Feminist scholarship on nationalism describes the political status of women through normative discourses of gender and sexuality which emphasise the functionality of patriarchy for the maintenance of nationalism (Nagel; 1998; Waetjen, 2001). There is an acknowledgement that power, control and domination are not only embedded in the nation but also in relations of gender and sexuality.

Psychological perspectives on sexuality have historically been framed from positivist and realist perspectives which provide little attention to how people construct and give meaning to their sexuality in their different socio-cultural contexts (Ussher, 1999b). Recent literature on sexuality in African studies ascribes to the idea that the experience of sexuality is a complex one that is produced in historical contexts (Madzivire, 2015). The colonial discourse on African sexuality affirms that women's sexuality was to be restricted by means of social control and order signified by African men in the designation of tradition (Vaughan, 1991). This social and cultural construction of sexuality determines when and whom girls marry and defines the conditions of how the girls and women live in their married life.

This national patriarchal framework thus legitimises the decisions of fathers or male guardians to marry off their daughters as well as the general abuse inflicted onto young women, because they hold power and authority over them. Considering the above, this paper suggests that examining the lived experiences and representations of women in Zimbabwe through a decolonial social-constructionist lens allowed us to scrutinise the role of the modern nation-state in shaping gender relations in current Zimbabwe. We were able to examine the socio-cultural context and the importance of women's voices in understanding women's subjective experiences of early marriage. The approach adopted in this study moved away from universalising or static ideas of lived experience and allowed for multiple constructions and influenced our understanding of gender and power intersection between men and women in rural Zimbabwe. In particular it looked into how the institutions of marriage, gender and sexuality are socially constructed. Through this lens we were able to challenge Eurocentric assumptions and constructions of African women's passivity and victimhood and the more general gendered and racialized constructions of Africa. Instead the research contributes to a decolonial lens that caters for a more nuanced understanding of early marriage and the roots of gendered violence.

Acknowledgements

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