Research article

Breaking the silence: Zimbabwean women's musical narratives of resistance

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Breaking the silence: Zimbabwean women's musical narratives of resistance

In this article, I examine how contemporary Zimbabwean women musicians Hope Masike and Feli Nandi use music as a site of storytelling and resistance within an industry dominated by men. This dominance, which perpetuates the silencing of women, is rooted in their historical exclusion from the music scene, shaped by restrictive patriarchal gender norms that have either limited their participation or relegated them to peripheral roles such as backing vocalists. In addition, certain musical instruments, such as the *mbira*, have traditionally been reserved for men. Drawing on bell hooks' concept of "talking back", I analyse how Masike and Nandi's work challenges restrictive gender norms by articulating women's lived experiences of struggle, resilience, and defiance. Masike has sustained a decade-long career in the *mbira* genre traditionally dominated by men, while Nandi's transition from backing vocalist to solo artist exemplifies the reclamation of artistic autonomy and the shaping of her own identity as a musician. Both artists blend traditional instruments with contemporary genres, creating hybrid musical forms that assert women's agency. Using textual analysis of selected songs and music videos—paying particular attention to lyrical meaning as well as visual and aesthetic elements—supplemented by audience reception on YouTube, I demonstrate how Masike and Nandi transform personal and often-silenced experiences into public acts of empowerment, amplifying women's visibility and contributing to social commentary and cultural change. **Keywords:** women, silence, speaking out, resistance, Hope Masike, Feli Nandi.

Introduction

The Zimbabwean music scene has long been man-dominated, shaped by gendered norms and cultural conventions that restrict women's participation and deny them a voice within the nation's musical and cultural discourse. Scholars on Zimbabwean music (for example, Lovemore Togarasei, Urther Rwafa and Maurice Vambe, and Ezra Chitando and Pauline Mateveke) stress that the industry has historically been a gendered space. Its roots trace back to the precolonial era, when women's involvement in music was limited. As Togarasei (234) notes, although women were involved in traditional musical practices—singing and dancing during rituals—their roles were often subordinate, and their performances conducted under men's authority during ceremonies. Rwafa and Vambe, and Chitando and Mateveke, further observe that spaces associated with musical performance, such as beer halls and nightclubs, have historically been perceived in masculine terms. Women who entered these places were often stigmatised and labelled as morally deviant. Despite a notable increase in the number of women musicians in contemporary Zimbabwe, the industry remains man-dominated (Tivenga, "Zimbabwe Urban Grooves Music and the Interconnections between Youth Identities and Celebrity Culture" 134). Women continue to grapple with "a significant social stigma that may discourage entry or growth in the music sector" (Kamara and Mupfunya 9). Those who pursue musical careers are often relegated to subordinate roles such as backing vocalists and dancers, while women solo artists and all-women bands are rarely afforded the same recognition as their men counterparts (Chari; Kamara and Mupfunya; Tivenga, "Zimbabwe Urban"; *Music and Urban Youth Identities: A Study of Ghetto Youth in Contemporary Culture and Politics in Zimbabwe*).

This historical exclusion extends to the playing of musical instruments. As Yarri Kamara and Farai Mupfunya observe, and as Ellen Koskoff argues, musical instruments have been deeply entangled with masculine power

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and gender ideologies that "underlie and prescribe who can and cannot play and under what circumstances performances will occur" (Koskoff 129). This is particularly evident in traditional music, where women have been restrained from playing instruments such as the *mbira* due to customary prohibitions (Kamara and Mpfunya 9). The *mbira* is a traditional Zimbabwean lamellophone consisting of metal keys mounted on a wooden soundboard, which are played with the thumbs and forefingers and amplified by a resonator. It is deeply rooted in Shona culture and spirituality and is associated with both musical performance and ritual practice (Jones). The *mbira*'s restrictions are well documented by Paul Berliner, Susan Makore, Claire Jones, and Jennifer Kyker. Early women *mbira* musicians, including the late Ambuya Stella Chiweshe and Beuler Dyoko, encountered significant obstacles, and some resorted to learning the instrument in secrecy due to these prohibitions. Since women were expected to fulfil domestic responsibilities, *mbira* playing was historically regarded as a man's domain (Jones; Kyker), and, as Jones (129) observes, "most *mbira* players are men, whether the instrument is performed in private or at public venues".

Women's marginalisation in *mbira* performance has been further compounded by the instrument's contradictory and complex historical positioning, which has been shaped by intersecting discourses of gender, tradition, nationalism, and colonial-era Christian demonisation. Jones (130) notes that the association of the *mbira* with ancestors and the past theoretically makes the instrument suitable for women to play, as they are often perceived as custodians of culture and tradition. However, in reality, society still refers to "tradition" to exclude women from playing the *mbira*, arguing that it is not part of their cultural role. Under colonial rule, Christian missionaries condemned *mbira* playing as a pagan practice, relegating it to Shona religious rituals and spirit possession. By contrast, nationalist representations framed the *mbira* as traditional or as "voices from the past" (Jones 139), evoking a sense of cultural heritage and tradition. This not only contributed to the exclusion of women but also undermined the commercialisation of *mbira* music, positioning it in opposition to so-called "modern" musical instruments. Jones also notes that, in light of these contradictions, it has been difficult to determine the statistical distribution of men versus women musicians, as the information on women playing *mbira* in spiritual ceremonies is sparse.

Against this backdrop of exclusion, in this article, I examine how Zimbabwean women musicians have utilised music to disrupt gendered boundaries and norms through musical narratives of resistance that articulate both their personal experiences and the broader lived realities of women. I approach music as a site of storytelling and expression for women whose voices have been silenced by dominant and oppressive patriarchal structures. I focus on two contemporary Zimbabwean artists—Hope Masike and Feli Nandi (real name Felistus Chipendo)—and explore their musical journeys, careers, and stories—both personal and those drawn from representative women's experiences—that they articulate in their music. Drawing on available biographies and online interviews, I analyse how their personal experiences intersect with their musical expression and with broader women's realities. I examine the themes embedded in their music through textual analysis of both music and video texts, paying particular attention to the meanings communicated through song lyrics and visual and/or aesthetic elements. I selected the songs using purposive sampling, prioritising those that resonate with issues related to gender and women's experiences. In addition, where applicable, I drew on audience responses from YouTube, particularly fan comments that speak to how the songs resonate with listeners, reflect women's lived experiences, and contribute to the songs' impact and reception.

Central to this discussion is an exploration of women's survival and resilience through the act of speaking out. My analysis is informed by feminist theory, particularly bell hooks's concept of "talking back", which she presents as a critical act of women's resistance against patriarchal structures and patriarchal thinking. For hooks (*Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, thinking Black* 2), speaking out is critical, including speaking about the private, or that which is not meant to be public, as it is in private spaces that women "are most wounded, hurt, dehumanised, there that ourselves are most taken away, terrorised and broken". This perspective is particularly instrumental in analysing song lyrics that reflect Masike and Nandi's personal experiences. Adding to the above, hooks (*Talking Back* 5) emphasises that authentic speaking is not solely an expression of creative power but an act of defiance that challenges the politics of domination that render women nameless and voiceless. This assertion is particularly relevant in understanding Masike and Nandi's entry and survival within Zimbabwe's man-dominated music industry, where their voices serve as powerful instruments of resistance and empowerment.

Incorporating hooks' insights allows for a nuanced understanding of how Masike and Nandi's musical expressions facilitate both personal and collective catharsis and resistance, especially considering hooks's (*Talking*

Back 12) argument that, when women end their silence and speak with liberated voices, their words resonate with others who live in silence. I therefore argue that Masike and Nandi's music resonates with the experiences of many women living in patriarchal societies; and given that music has the ability to reach "wider audiences than other forms of art, like literature" their songs "infiltrate the threatening space" (Ngongkum 62) of the man-dominated music industry and culture, functioning as a medium of resistance and women empowerment.

Introducing Hope Masike and Feli Nandi

Masike is an award-winning musician, poet, songwriter, visual artist, dancer, and advocate for education and women. Dubbed the "princess of *mbira*", she has been recognised by Forbes as one of the most influential women on the African continent. Masike has sustained a career spanning over a decade in the traditionally man-dominated *mbira* genre, and her music actively challenges entrenched gendered norms that have historically constrained women's participation in Zimbabwean music. In a conversation with Zimbabwean newspaper publisher Trevor Ncube, Masike noted that the commercial aspect of *mbira* has been a key motivation behind her musical career, explaining that she plays the *mbira* "to make money". In doing so, she and other contemporary women *mbira* players defy restrictive gender roles and societal pressures that have historically marginalised women in Zimbabwean music (Jones 130). Moreover, *mbira* has evolved to be as contemporary as any other musical instrument, with artists like Masike resisting rigid categorisations and blending *mbira* "with the elements of jazz, gospel, and rock" (McClune 1350). Thus, as aptly observed by Jones (143), most contemporary and commercial *mbira* players have resisted "being pigeon-holed into oppositional 'traditional' and 'modern' categories, instead forging new identities from elements of both".

Nandi is also an award-winning musician, songwriter, and fashion designer. She plays instruments such as the congas, *hosho* (shakers), tambourine, and chimes. Her music, which she classifies as Afro-fusion, blends these instruments with traditional elements and instruments such as the *mbira* alongside "modern" instruments like guitars. She began her musical career in 2018 as a backing vocalist for Mbeu and the Mhodzi Tribe before embarking on a solo career in 2020.

While there is substantial scholarship on women in Zimbabwean music, including analyses of misogyny, sexual objectification, and the structural barriers women face, Masike and Nandi's music has received limited scholarly attention. Scholars such as myself, Kamara and Mupfunya, and Edith Katiji and Richard Muranda examine the challenges women encounter when entering the music industry. In my PhD thesis and monograph, I further demonstrate how young women Zimdancehall artists who successfully established careers in the genre were subsequently vilified for transgressing gendered norms and disrupting men's social order. Studies by Manase Chiweshe and Sandra Bhatasara, as well as Munyaradzi Nyakudya, Kufakurinani Ushehwedu, and Bridget Chinouriri, highlight how contemporary Zimbabwean music often perpetuates misogynistic stereotypes, commodifies women, and even incites violence against them. Despite this extensive critique of gendered dynamics in Zimbabwean music, the contributions of musicians such as Masike and Nandi, whose work foregrounds women's agency and reconfigures musical traditions, remain underexplored. In this article, I thus address this gap through a critical engagement with Masike and Nandi's music, examining how their lyrical narratives contribute to broader discourses on gender, resistance, and empowerment.

Claiming the music, the stage, and the instrument: A woman's journey to artistic autonomy

In this section, I examine the independence, power, and autonomy that come with women's ownership of their music, the stage, and musical instruments. I emphasise how Masike and Nandi have successfully pursued independent musical careers without reliance on man-led bands or mentorship structures. Their achievements are particularly significant given the man-dominated nature of the Zimbabwean music industry. As shown above, Masike has excelled in playing the *mbira*—an instrument historically reserved for men. Similarly, Nandi's transition from backing vocalist to solo artist who leads her own ensemble of backing vocalists is highly symbolic, as it enables her to define her artistic identity, develop her music to its full potential, and assert her autonomy. When asked by Ncube why she left Mbeu, she responded: "I found myself. We are different artists" (In Conversation with Trevor, "Feli Nandi, Afrofusion Musician & Fashion Designer In Conversation With Trevor"). Her response speaks to a broader struggle faced by women in the Zimbabwe music industry—a struggle for self-definition, creative autonomy, and visibility. As backing vocalists often have little authority over the creative process,

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transitioning from a backing vocalist to a solo career can be interpreted as a rite of passage and transformation of self, marking a shift from objectification to subjecthood (hooks, *Talking Back* 12).

Also significant in this analysis of women's ownership of their creative art is the way both Masike and Nandi, in their respective conversations with Ncube, acknowledged the influence of preceding generations of women—the "mothers" and "grandmothers", to borrow from Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*—who have shaped and inspired their musical journeys. They refer to "mothers" and "grandmothers" who have been professional musicians; those who possessed musical talent but never pursued it, or never had an opportunity to pursue professional careers; and the maternal figures who have played significant roles in their lives. Masike explicitly credits pioneering women *mbira* musicians, such as the late Ambuya (note that *ambuya* means grandmother) Stella Chiweshe and Chiwoniso Maraire, declaring that these women "made it possible for us to see that 'I can be a musician too'" (In Conversation with Trevor, "Hope Masike in Conversation with Trevor"). Nandi similarly acknowledges Chiwoniso Maraire as a key influence, although she also recognises the inspiration from renowned man *mbira* musician Thomas Mapfumo and what she learnt as a member of Mbeu's Mhodzi Tribe. In addition, both artists highlight musical legacies within their own families. Masike acknowledges her mother's vocal talent, while Nandi discloses that some of her songs were written by her grandmother. She also describes her mother as her hero, celebrating her resilience in raising her children single-handedly following their father's passing.

Masike's song "Mbira yangu", from her 2019 album *The Exorcism of a Spinster*, explicitly addresses the issue of women's musical autonomy. The title, which translates to "my *mbira*", symbolises not only her ownership of the instrument but also her assertion of authority within the traditionally man-dominated *mbira* genre. Reflecting on this, Masike asserts, "as a woman, the fact that I play the historically male-dominated *mbira* genre is very unusual, and I celebrate this on 'Mbira yangu'" (Masike). The song's repetitive refrain, "*ndoiridza mbira, manje ndoiridza mbira*" (I play the mbira, certainly I play the mbira), serves as an act of defiance against historical prohibitions that sought to exclude women from playing the instrument. This assertion of music ownership aligns with Veronica Doubleday's (3) argument that "to possess or play a musical instrument is to wield power". Furthermore, Masike demonstrates her knowledge of the instrument through her lyrics, which describe the constituent parts of the *mbira*: "*Gwariva racho, nderemubvamaropa, rine majeke* [...] *ine nhetete nemazembera*" (The wooden plank is made from the *mubvamaropa* tree, it has rattles [...] high keys and bottom keys).

Although it is highly probable that Masike learnt more about the *mbira* as a student of music at the Zimbabwe College of Music, articulating these details is a symbolic act of asserting both her technical expertise and her rightful place in the *mbira* tradition. Also significant in this reference to the *mubvamaropa* tree is the meaning of the term itself.[1] *Mubvamaropa* translates to "bloodletting tree" or "a tree that oozes blood", evoking images of a menstrual flow. Notably, the tree, known for its medicinal properties, is used to treat menorrhagia (heavy menstrual bleeding) and infertility in women (Maroyi 3). Masike's bold declaration that the wooden plank of her *mbira* is made from the *mubvamaropa* tree can therefore be read as a celebration of womanhood and a reclamation of space for women musicians within the *mbira* tradition. In doing so, she associates the *mbira* with feminine symbolism, establishes a connection between women and the instrument, and subverts its historical association with men's musicianship and exclusion of women from this cultural space.

The song "Mbira yangu" also addresses the stigmatisation of the *mbira*, and Masike challenges this by asserting her pride in her ability to play the instrument. She references societal prejudices against the *mbira* in lines such as:

> *Vamwe vaindiseka, zvanzi ndezvemarombe, vamwe vaindisema, hanzi karombe, vamwe vaindifara, zvanzi ndezvechibhambi,* [...] *hanzi madhimoni.*
>
> Some people laughed at me, saying *mbira* is for idlers; some despised me, saying I am a good-for-nothing; some mocked me, calling me backward [...] some said I was possessed by demons.

These lines also echo the long-standing demonisation of the *mbira*, which began with the arrival of Christian missionaries who associated it with pagan practices and evil spirits (Jones). This demonisation has persisted to the present day, with public discourse and media outlets such as *Newsday* noting that some still view the *mbira* as demonic or linked to evil spirits (Chiedza). Through her defiant celebration of, and proud identification with the *mbira*, Masike challenges these perceptions and positions herself as a custodian of the music and cultural tradition. Ultimately, the musical journeys of Masike and Nandi illustrate how women in the Zimbabwean music

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industry are actively reclaiming artistic autonomy. Whereas Masike's "Mbira yangu" offers a lyrical and symbolic declaration of ownership over both instrument and tradition, Nandi's artistic independence is embodied in her performance practice and career trajectory, particularly her refusal to remain confined to supportive roles traditionally assigned to women vocalists. In asserting control over their music, the stage, and their creative identities, these artists challenge systemic gendered exclusions and contribute to a powerful reconfiguration of women's presence and authority within Zimbabwe's music industry and creative process.

The personal as narrative in music

Both Masike and Nandi draw on their personal experiences in their music, using the music as a means of personal expression. Songs such as "The exorcism of a spinster—Muregere" (leave her) by Masike and "Ndibateiwo" (guide me) and "Unotyei?" (Why are you scared?) by Nandi reflect their lived realities. However, their experiences are not unique to them alone, as they resonate with the experiences of many other women in similar circumstances.

Masike's "The exorcism of a spinster—Muregere" —the title track from her 2019 album—critiques societal expectations related to marriage, especially the pressure placed on women to conform. In many cultures, including the Shona culture that informs Masike's music, girls are socialised to view marriage as the ultimate achievement (Chitando and Mateveke). Reflecting on this—as she comments on the song and album via *World Music Network*—Masike reveals: "When I was young, my plan was to get married at age 26 and, like my parents, have nine children. When I reached 26, I didn't even have a boyfriend!" Masike employs the concept of exorcism as a metaphor for the struggles of single women who fail to meet societal expectations on marriage and the pressure to conform. The song is framed as an exorcism ritual, intended to rid the spinster of the "demon" that has supposedly prevented her from marrying (*kutadzisa mwana kuroorwa*). This reflects not only Shona traditional beliefs but also Christian perspectives on marriage, illustrating how Zimbabwean society is shaped by both cultural and religious ideals.

Commenting further on the song and album, Masike reflects on the idea of exorcism, drawing attention to the different societal and religious perspectives that attempt to make sense of prolonged singlehood as she remarks (at the age of 35):

> Many years later, there is an entire community worried for and about me. Some, from the cultural side, are sure there is a curse, a goblin perhaps, visited upon me by some evil deity. Others, from my Christian world, have said I surely must have a "spiritual husband," blocking me from marriage to anyone. At my age, what other explanation could there be? An aunt says I am too independent […] and too vocal. A friend says I am too picky […]. So, remedies range from traditional skin tattoos into which medicine is rubbed, to consulting traditional healers or church prophets to find out who is blocking marriage. In really "bad" cases, exorcisms may be performed, and this can happen both in the Christian and the traditional rites.

The comment also underscores the intersection between Christian and African traditional religious beliefs regarding exorcism. Edwin Ahirika (149) notes that biblical demonology and African traditional conceptions of exorcism share similarities: both traditions view exorcism as a means of restoring a person's physical, mental, and spiritual well-being, ultimately reintegrating them into the community. In the case of "The exorcism of a spinster—Muregere", the supposed "demon" is blamed not only for preventing marriage but also for depriving the woman of happiness (*kutadzisa mwana kufara*) and a meaningful life (*kushaisa mwana hupenyu*). Thus, exorcism is perceived as a means to restore both marriageability and full membership in society.

Through "The exorcism of a spinster—Muregere", Masike critiques the stigma associated with unmarried women and the immense pressure placed on them, despite shifting gender roles and societal changes. Women now have greater access to education and career opportunities, often delaying marriage in pursuit of economic independence. Yet, as Celik argues, "gender roles are still rigid", and marriage remains "the mainstream form of life" (49). Masike incisively and sarcastically exposes the absurdity of such expectations in her closing remarks on the song: "as we—today's young African women—get more educated, as more attention is paid to human rights (women's rights), and as roles inevitably change with patriarchal stereotypes challenged, there just might be more exorcisms required than ever in human history!" Masike's statement underscores the irony involving these changing dynamics—as women gain greater autonomy, the societal pressure to conform is even intensified. The earlier quote in which Masike refers to "an aunt" who claims that she is failing to get married because she is "too independent" further illustrates the persistent pressure on women who pursue careers and economic independence to adhere to traditional gender roles. Through her music, Masike not only personalises these

struggles but also challenges the deep-seated cultural and religious discourses that continue to define women's worth in terms of marriage.

Nandi revealed in an interview with Miss V Candy of Star FM (real name Nonhlanhla Tutani) that her musical journey was marked by deep personal and internal struggles, especially how she has grappled with forces that stifled her, and to give voice to what she carried within. Reflecting on this struggle, she reveals:

> I knew there was something in me that desperately wanted to come out, but I was not in a free state to do that. […] I said, "Oh, you are a wife, a daughter-in-law […] you can't just wake up and say, I want to sing […]. *Kuimbei*? (What is there to sing about?) Moreover, *hausi kuda kuimba* gospel (you do not even intend to sing gospel)," so I started getting depressed a lot. (Feli Nandi, "Full interview on Star FM")

What Nandi relates in this instance is representative of the challenges faced by many women musicians, particularly married women, who must navigate moral and societal expectations and restrictions placed on married women. As she hints, women musicians—especially those who perform secular music—are often subjected to moral scrutiny, while gospel musicians enjoy "a good image" (Makore 53) and greater social acceptance. Makore (53) further observes that gospel artists tend to be "portrayed favourably" because they sing about "the goodness of God", reinforcing a cultural bias that frames secular women musicians as transgressive. This observation is corroborated by Togarasei (238), who echoes Makore's arguments and notes that women's "sharp voices" have been viewed as suitable for gospel music, which is why they dominate the gospel music genre. The tension between remaining silent and the urge to speak out is explored in Nandi's song "Ndibateiwo", which, as she reveals in her conversation with Ncube, was written "from a painful part". The song captures the turmoil of bottling up emotions and struggling to articulate her pain (*kufufutirwa neangu mashoko*), as well as the conflicting responses she received when attempting to express herself. She sings:

> *Ndikati nditaure, zvanzi atanga, ndikati ndinyarare, ane chakamugara, ndipakure zviri mumoyo, anozviitisa.*
>
> If I speak, they say I am at it again; if I remain silent, they say she is possessed; if I express the burdens of my heart, they say I am seeking attention.

Reflecting on her personal experience, Nandi further discloses to Ncube:

> Sometimes, you want to talk to people, you want to tell them what's happening, but the story gets changed. And when you choose to stay silent, they start saying, "Ah, she has resorted to staying alone, she has things, she has spirits". […] I was just tired of that, especially within the family. I was tired of people creating different versions of me. (In Conversation with Trevor, "Feli Nandi")

As in Masike's "The exorcism of a spinster—Muregere", we see here how the trope of demon possession is invoked to control women's narratives and silence their voices. Rather than allowing women to articulate their own experiences, society imposes its own distorted interpretations, reinforcing patriarchal structures. Yet self-expression is vital to women's liberation. As hooks (*Talking Back* 2) argues, true healing can only occur when women are allowed to voice their own realities and openly speak about the private if they are to heal their wounds, recover, and realise themselves.

Similarly, Nandi's song "Unotyei?" (Why are you scared?) emerges from a place of personal grief, as it was inspired by the passing of her mother. The music video confirms this as it ends with the dedication: "based on my true-life story. Rest in power, *amai* (mother) (Margaret Gwatidzo)" (Feli Nandi, "Unotyei—Feli Nandi"). Through this song, Nandi channels her sorrow into artistic expression as a means of healing, exemplified by the following lyrics of comfort: "*Nyarara, shingirira, chema netariro, hanzi inguva*" (Do not cry, be strong, mourn with hope, for everything happens in its time).

The personal narratives and testimonies explored in Masike and Nandi's music extend beyond individual experience; they resonate with the struggles of many other women confronting similar challenges. This is evident in the comments on the YouTube video for Nandi's "Ndibateiwo" (guide me), where listeners articulate how deeply the song speaks to their own realities (Studio Art Pictures TV). One user writes: "I can't express how this song speaks to me. I literally cry", while another references the lyrics directly to highlight their relevance to women's lived experiences: "You speak to every woman in this […] *ukataura hanzi anotaurisa, ukanyarara hanzi akagarwa* (if you speak they say you talk too much; if you remain silent they say you are possessed), so we practice *kudzora mashoko* (we limit what we say)". These responses demonstrate how the personal narrative in the song

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underscores the transformative power of self-expression—not only as a means of self-liberation but also as a way to challenge and reshape broader societal discourses. As hooks (*Talking Back* 12) asserts, the act of self-expression is inherently transformative, capable of altering not only the self but also the world outside the self. In consideration of this, the personal has been aptly defined as "the political", underlining that "personal experiences—especially those of women—are deeply connected to larger social and political structures. What might seem like private or individual issues (such as domestic labour, reproductive rights, or emotional labour) are actually shaped by, and reinforce, broader systems of power, patriarchy, and inequality" (Roberts 149). Thus, the personal is central to women's narratives as it "produces a feminist tale" (Roberts 142).

Challenging taboos on women's desire and gender-based violence

Having examined the ways in which women have been silenced through their exclusion from the music scene and the stigmas attached to women musicians and unmarried women, in this section, I explore how women challenge their silencing by speaking out about sensitive topics—what I regard as "the unspeakable"—defying social taboos. Masike and Nandi express shared sensibilities around love and women's desire, women's rights, and domestic violence in songs such as "Ndoitasei" (What shall I do?), "Shuwa" (Indeed), and "Ndimutsewo zvakanaka" (Wake me up properly) by Masike, as well as "Murume mutema" (A dark man), "Ndakareva wani" (But I told you), and "Kukurumidza" (To hurry) by Nandi. In this section, I specifically focus on two key and interrelated issues: the societal perception that it is inappropriate for a woman to initiate a romantic relationship with a man, as depicted in Masike's song "Ndoitasei" from her album *The Exorcism of a Spinster*, and the silencing of victims of gender-based violence, as articulated in Nandi's "Ndakareva wani".

"Ndoitasei" expresses the internal conflict of a woman who desires a man but is constrained by societal norms that dictate that she must not be the initiator of romantic engagement or a romantic relationship. The lyrics reveal her struggle as follows:

Pane mukomana wandinofarira,
Asi iye haandifarire.

There is a man I admire,
But he does not show interest in me.

She grapples with uncertainty—as expressed when she cries out:

ndoitaseiko kuti ndiwane rudo?
ndoitaseiko kuti ndimuzivise?

what shall I do to find love?
what shall I do to make him aware?

Masike's song critiques the entrenched gender norms that regulate women's sexuality and desire. As Natalie Schneider (12) notes, "traditionally, and perhaps stereotypically, men have been the pursuers of women and women the receivers of their attention". This notion is rooted in long-standing socio-cultural beliefs that prescribe sexual restraint for women, shaping their behaviour and self-expression. Patricia McFadden (3) similarly highlights that these restrictive gendered expectations are deeply embedded in cultural and sanctified beliefs and practices that discourage women from openly acknowledging or acting upon their desires. Chimamanda Adichie (33) observes that women are socialised from an early age to be ashamed of their sexuality and saying that they have desire. Those who dare to defy this are labelled as loose or "sluts" (Walter-Bailey and Goodman). Wendy Walter-Bailey and Jesse Goodman argue that such constraints serve as mechanisms of patriarchal control, marginalisation of women, and policing of their bodies.

A feminist perspective on women's sexual restraint, therefore, contends that women who subvert constraints on sexuality and desire significantly challenge oppressive gender norms. In music especially, such forms of resistance have been interpreted as protest against sexist and misogynistic narratives, including those found in men's musical lyrics and performances. Women rappers, for example, have used rap music to assert their right to bodily autonomy and to openly express sexual desire (Roberts 149). In the Zimbabwean context, music by young women Zimdancehall musicians like Lady Squanda (Sandra Gazi) and Lady Bee (Brenda Bechani) has

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similarly been analysed as contesting traditional femininity. Their music challenges social conventions through the performance of erotic dance moves and sexually explicit lyrics (Tivenga, "Zimbabwe Urban"; *Music and Urban*). Similarly, Masike's assertion of agency extends beyond lyrical content to the performance of bodily autonomy. In "Ndimutsewo Zvakanaka", she articulates sexual desire, affection, and intimacy from a woman's perspective, both through the song's lyrics and a music video characterised by sensuous bodily movement and intimate performance. This sexual expressiveness can be read as a deliberate challenge to cultural norms that discipline and police women's bodies and desires. Scholars such as Elizabeth Perez (21) associate such expression of sexuality and erotic performances with the right to experience and express bodily pleasure. McFadden goes further, linking sexual pleasure and eroticism to political empowerment, arguing that between this power and pleasure lies female power and freedom.

Masike's "Ndoitasei" can be read in a similar light—as a song of resistance. She introduces a counter-narrative that challenges women's prohibitions and limitations on romantic relationships and expression. The music persona encourages the woman "who is in love" and is battling with desire to defy societal expectations and express her feelings—"*ukanyara unoruza*" (if you are shy, you will lose out). This represents shifting attitudes toward women's agency in romantic relationships, aligning with Rodwell Makombe's argument that Zimbabwean women are beginning to assert themselves and challenge restrictive gender norms on women's sexuality (88). However, while there is evidence of changing gender roles, as I pointed out earlier in this article, traditional expectations and the pressure to conform remain powerful. As Schneider observes, despite broader shifts in gender dynamics, the expectation that men should be the first to say "I love you" continues to endure, illustrating the persistence of patriarchal structures in regulating romantic desire and expression.

Nandi's "Ndakareva wani" addresses the pervasive issue of gender-based violence (GBV), particularly that experienced by married women, and the culture of silence that sustains such abuse. Given the global prevalence of GBV, there has been extensive research on the subject and the societal mechanisms that facilitate its persistence. Scholars have identified several contributing factors, including "patriarchy, unequal gender roles, culture and [religion, especially] biased biblical interpretations [concerning the unacceptability of divorce,] [which] expose women to domestic violence in their marriages" (Chisale 1) and ultimately compel them into silence.

Silence emerges as the central theme in "Ndakareva wani", which foregrounds the experiences of a woman whose abuse is dismissed and normalised by her family. The music video of the song depicts a victim of GBV with a visibly bruised and swollen face addressing a family member, likely her mother, lamenting that she had previously disclosed her abuse only to be silenced and compelled to endure it. The mother is portrayed as reinforcing the expectation that women must persevere through suffering as expressed in the following lyrics: "*mukati munhukadzi chako kushinga*" (as a woman, you should be strong). This reflects what Bijaya Pokharel, Kathy Hegadoren, and Elizabeth Papathanassoglou (1) identify as microsystemic factors that influence women's silence. In this case, that factor is concern for family, especially the preservation of the family image, as the mother is more concerned about the shame that their family will suffer (*makati tonyarira pai, mukati tofambira kupi*) in the event of a divorce than the personal well-being of her daughter. Thus, the fact that the victim speaks out at this point is a significant and bold first step towards her self-emancipation.

The mother's insistence that "*ndozvinoita dzimba*" (this is how marriage works) illustrates how GBV is normalised and legitimised within patriarchal social structures. The woman (a victim of GBV) is further pressured to maintain a facade of happiness by posting seemingly joyful images on social media—*ingori mifananidzo chete pamhepo* (just pictures online), while internally enduring suffering—*kusekerera sezviri kuendeka* (smiling as if everything is fine). This performance of happiness resonates with hooks' analysis of honesty and deception in *All About Love*, where she argues that lying in heterosexual relationships is deeply entwined with patriarchy, "sexist socialisation" and the maintenance of men's power. For women, therefore, lying often reflects a lack of agency and a socialised powerlessness—"a way to please" (hooks 33) and a mode of survival within structures that deny them authenticity and power. Most significantly, this enforced dishonesty produces a deep disconnect from the self, as women learn to project a constructed version of themselves that conceals their fears and insecurities. Over time, this façade becomes so familiar that they risk losing sight of their true feelings and identities. Confronting this denial, as hooks asserts, is the necessary first step towards reclaiming honesty and clarity (*All About Love* 48). Thus, when the victim of GBV in "Ndakareva wani" breaks her silence, declaring to her mother that she has had enough—*ndaneta* (I am tired), she ultimately enacts the resistance that hooks (*Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* ix) describes as rejecting "patriarchal thinking" and challenging men's domination—beginning with

defying the strongest patriarchal voice in her life: her mother's. This rejection of GBV is echoed in the audience reception of the song on *YouTube* (Feli Nandi, "Feli Nandi Ndakareva Wani Official Video"), where many women articulate how the message resonates with their own experiences of abuse and their desire to resist it. One fan writes: "a daughter back from a failed marriage is better than a dead one. Sending love to all my Sisters", while another addresses her daughters directly: "To my daughters Gabrielle, Tanatswa and Zion. Whenever it gets to any form of violence. *Dzoka mwanangu* (Come back my child). It's not worth it. *Chero ndiri pasi pebridge huya uchifema mwanangu* (Even if I'm under a bridge, come while you still can breathe)". Others share their own histories of survival: "Story of my life. Glad some of us got the strength to stand up and walk away. My heart breaks. So many women are suffering because no one wants to say it! Stop Abusing US!" These responses demonstrate how the song reverberates through women's lived realities, heightening awareness of the urgency of resisting GBV and affirming the socially transformative power of Nandi's narrative.

Taken together, Masike and Nandi's music demonstrates how contemporary Zimbabwean women musicians confront silence as both a cultural expectation and a mechanism of patriarchal control. While Masike's music challenges the regulation of women's desire and bodily autonomy, Nandi's "Ndakareva wani" exposes the violent consequences of silence enforced on women within marriage and family structures. By giving voice to desire, pain, and resistance, they transform music into a site of feminist intervention, social critique, and self-emancipation. In doing so, Masike and Nandi not only articulate women's private struggles but also disrupt the cultural norms that render those struggles unspeakable.

Conclusion: From silence to speech

In this article, I have shown how Masike and Nandi use music to navigate and resist Zimbabwe's man-dominated cultural and musical space. Their work demonstrates how women musicians transform personal experiences into collective narratives that challenge gendered silencing and assert agency. Drawing on hooks' concept of "talking back", I have illustrated how their music turns the private into public acts of resistance, exposing and contesting patriarchal control, including the normalisation of the marginalisation of women.

Through "musical storytelling", both artists expand the space for women in Zimbabwean music, asserting autonomy over their artistic identities while articulating the lived realities of many women. Audience responses on platforms such as *YouTube* further confirm the resonance of their music, providing affirmation and solidarity for listeners facing similar struggles. Masike and Nandi's musical narratives thus contribute to ongoing struggles for gender justice, using music to reclaim voice, redefine representation, and disrupt patriarchal ideologies that continue to constrain women's autonomy in Zimbabwean music and society at large.

Notes

1. The botanical name is Pterocarpus angolensis, also commonly known as kiaat or African teak.

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