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‘It [vagina] does not survive on porridge’: The sexual lives of Shona single women in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Historically, the lived experiences, particularly the sexual lives, of single women have been overlooked and marginalised within African feminist discourse. Early African feminist movements prioritised pro-heterosexual marriage and natalism, often sidelining women who did not conform to these norms. This article examines the sexual lives of single Shona women in order to complicate the understanding of female sexualities, desires, and pleasure, particularly how women challenge and dismantle the intertwined systems of heterosexuality and patriarchy that shape heteropatriarchal Shona cultures. This study is grounded in ethnography, using methods of life story interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. Ultimately, this paper argues that single women’s narratives especially disrupt dominant epistemologies, contest disparaging perceptions of unmarried women, and challenge stereotypes and patriarchal and religious norms by asserting sexual autonomy, redefining personhood beyond marriage, and resisting societal control over their bodies and desires.

Keywords single women, Shona, African feminism(s), female sexuality, desire, pleasure

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Introduction

During a testimony at a church conference[1] for single women in Zimbabwe, a Shona divorcee testified that:

> *Mharidzo yainyanya kundibata yaipiwa kupentecostal kwandaienda yaiva yekuti masingles tiri vakadzi vaJesu. Asi ndaiti ndadzoka mumba kubva kuchurch, nhengo yangu yaishuvira murume, ndoshaya kuti ndochimuka here ndoti baba vepanext door huyayi. ‘Haipiwi poriji’*
>
> (The teaching that did not sit right with me in one Pentecostal church I attended, was that single women are Jesus’ wives. When I got home from church, my vagina would crave sex, and I would be at a loss as to whether I should get up and ask the man next door to have sex with me. It [pointing to her groin] does not survive on porridge!).

[1] In compliance with research ethics, I am not disclosing details of this conference. I attended as an ordinary person rather than a researcher. One of my participants invited me to attend so that I could see for myself how single women were accommodated within her church.

This divorcee expresses her dissatisfaction with an unnamed Pentecostal church's teaching that single women are Jesus' wives. Traditionally, Christian thought envisions Jesus metaphorically as the bridegroom of the entire church, but this denomination—as in many Pentecostal contexts in Zimbabwe (Biri 2021)—he is positioned, exclusively, as the spiritual husband of single women. However, as the anonymous woman suggests, this framework disregards the realities of single women's lived experiences, including their desires for companionship and intimacy that a spiritual relationship with Jesus cannot satisfy. Not all single women reject this interpretation of Jesus as a spiritual husband, however. In a study conducted in Kenya, for instance, one participant embraced the notion of being 'married to Jesus', framing it as a source of emotional and spiritual security. She explained that, unlike earthly husbands, Jesus does not abandon or forsake (Parsitau 2020: 338). These divergent perspectives illustrate the ambivalence with which the metaphor of Jesus' wife is received and reinterpreted by women navigating singleness in African Christian contexts. The above-mentioned Shona woman's critique implies broader tensions regarding how religious and cultural narratives regulate single women's sexuality in contexts that valorise [heterosexual] marriage. The statement 'it [vagina] does not feed on porridge', is markedly and unapologetically vocal about the sexual needs of single women. The candour of the statement, delivered in church, a very dominant space where sex outside of marriage is viewed as fornication, necessarily triggers conversation around societal norms and sexual autonomy. Building on this reclaiming of the sexual needs of single women, this article examines how single Shona women assert sexual agency in defiance of social and religious discourses that police, stigmatise, and misrepresent their sexuality. To do so, my analysis adopts a broad understanding of 'sexual lives', one that encompasses the erotically significant aspects of social being—desires, practices, relationships, and identities (Jackson 2006: 106).

The paper itself is based on a larger ongoing project on Shona single women. The Shona constitute the principal ethnic group in Zimbabwe, representing over 80 per cent of the country's population. My ethnic background and social position as a Shona single woman born and raised in Zimbabwe gave me unique insight and access as I carried out this project. From that vantage point, I could relate to the broader issues on the complexity surrounding single women's sexuality among the Shona.

I also focus specifically on the Shona to avoid what has been termed the 'Africa syndrome' (Dube 2009: 184) and the 'homogenizing trap' (Tamale 2011: 1). The Africa syndrome is 'a paradigm that assumes or gives the impression that, if it happens in one African ethnic group, place, or even nation, then it happens in all African cultures, places, and nations' (Dube 2009: 184). This is not to suggest, however, that there are no commonalities across African cultures (Tamale 2011). The Shona culture is not homogeneous, since what is known as Shona today is a colonial construct that brought together diverse groups of people whose cultures—and perhaps more significantly, languages—are not always alike.

While acknowledging the cultural and religious importance of marriage in Shona contexts, my analysis offers a more nuanced understanding of marriage

by focusing on a group often overlooked in existing scholarship, particularly within African feminism(s): women who, for diverse reasons, are unmarried. Terms such as 'unmarried' define women by lack—by what they are presumed *not* to have. As Bella DePaulo and Wendy Morris (2005: 58) argue, that is one way in which single women are stigmatised, since they are 'defined in terms of who they are not'. In the specific context of my study, I contend that singleness is a marital status, and in discussing the lives of women who identify as single, evoking issues of marriage is unavoidable. I recognise that this framing may reinforce societal expectations that prioritise and normalise marriage as the ideal. This is particularly pronounced in Shona culture, where some forms of singleness—especially the never-married—often not by choice are socially stigmatised notwithstanding.

Furthermore, I adopt a contextual definition of Shona female singleness, which may differ significantly from interpretations in other cultural and academic contexts. In this context, singleness refers to women who are not married, even if they are dating. Marriage, in Shona culture, typically involves a woman moving in with a man who has paid *roora* (bride wealth) and formally introduced her to his family. While cohabitation—known as *kubika mapoto* ('cooking pots')—was traditionally stigmatised and frowned upon, it is increasingly common in contemporary Zimbabwe. This shift not only reflects economic pressures that hinder many men from formalising marriages through *roora*, but also broader transforming family structures. Within Shona society, single women generally fall into three categories: those (usually late thirties and above) who have never married and are beyond the conventional marriageable age, widows, and divorcees. Widowhood, however, presents a unique complexity, as marriage often continues symbolically after a husband's death, since widows often retain their husband's surname and remain in their matrimonial homes. Nonetheless, I include them in my definition of singleness, as their lived experiences offer critical insights into Shona understandings of death, gender, and sexuality. Singleness is shaped by intersecting factors such as age, education, location, economic status, religion, and personality. These elements influence how single women experience *singlism*—a term DePaulo & Morris (2005: 60) define as 'anti-singles sentiments'.

Despite the diversity and fluidity of singleness, the experiences of women who belong to this social category remain under-researched, especially within African feminist discourses. In particular, little is known about how Shona single women articulate and negotiate their sexuality. While some of the single women interviewed in this study internalise and adhere to religious moral expectations—especially discourses that sex outside marriage is sinful—many of their personal accounts complicate and challenge these discourses. Public narratives tend to be dominated by harmful stereotypes, such as the notion that they are *mahure* (whores). However, the women's own accounts of their sexuality challenge these misconceptions. By examining the sexual lives of Shona single women, I engage with the broader societal prejudices surrounding their identities. Beyond this, I seek to reintegrate their voices into African feminist discourse in ways that reshape the movement's priorities. Drawing on

life story interviews, I illustrate the lived sexual experiences of single women and their potential to inform alternative African feminist knowledges (Lewis & Baderoon 2021) on sexuality, gender, and family. I use the phrase 'alternative African knowledges' to refer to the growing body of literature that advances bold and radical agendas, especially in the contested spaces of sexuality, culture, religion, and gender (Ahikire 2014: 8).

African feminisms, singleness, and female sexuality

In her book *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*, Tamale (2020: 39) observes that, in challenging the dominance of Western feminism, 'Afro-Feminisms have also produced their own silences around issues of non-conforming sexualities and gender identities.' These subtle silences are particularly evident in the agendas of various African feminist movements and the strategies employed by some African feminists to combat the hegemony of Western feminism. A key criticism by African feminists of Western feminism has been its perceived stance as 'anti-men, anti-child, and disruptive of the "natural" state of the family (and its hierarchy)', with some even equating it with lesbianism (Atanga 2013: 302). As a result, Afro-Feminisms have often positioned themselves as pro-heterosexual, which has led to accusations of homophobia (Atanga 2013).

The marginalisation of non-hegemonic and non-normative women's social and sexual identities within early African feminist discourse was not only a matter of silence but also involved active strategies of demonisation, with non-conforming sexualities being labelled as 'un-African'. In her discussion of natalism, Gwendolyn Mikell (1997: 9), for instance, asserted that 'no self-respecting African woman fails to bear children'. Mikell's argument exemplifies how early African feminists, in their attempt to reject Western feminism, framed their position in a way that excluded women not conforming to the heterosexual marriage model in which procreation was central.

The early critiques of Western feminism by African feminist scholars often framed it as a movement led by women who, they argued, struggled to relate to men—specifically, those unable to sustain marriages 'through thick and thin' (Oduyoye 1994: 169). As scholars have noted (see Tamale 2020; Nkealah 2016), this characterisation implicitly marginalised lesbian identities. It also casts suspicion on non-conforming heterosexual women, such as single women and divorcees, as implied in the opinion cited by Oduyoye. This framing reflects broader tendencies to valorise marital endurance within many African cultures. In the specific Shona context, for example, women are often advised to 'persevere, that is how marriages are' (*shinga, ndizvo zvinoita dzimba*) when facing marital strife. This cultural script stigmatises those who do not persevere, particularly divorced women. Although scholarly work that laments the exclusion of single women from African feminist work exists (see Tamale 2020), to my knowledge none deals comprehensively with the sexual lives of single women.

In this article, I draw on the experiences of single Shona women to explore the complex, frequently overlooked, dimensions of female sexuality and desire

in African contexts. As Signe Arnfred (2015: 150) notes, leading African gender theorists such as Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónké Oyewùmí have, historically, paid limited attention to this topic. She attributes this silence to the 'historical legacy of racist fascination with Africans' allegedly profligate sexuality', which has discouraged scholars from engaging with the subject in meaningful ways (Arnfred 2015: 150). However, there has been a recent shift in African feminist discourse, with works such as Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah's *The Sexual Lives of African Women* (2021) foregrounding female sexual agency. To my knowledge, however, no scholarly study has examined the sexuality of single women in Africa from their own perspectives, and my study of Shona single women aims to address this gap. Such work is important as it helps debunk monolithic and homogenising narratives of 'African women', and interrogates the common perception that African (hetero)sexuality is linked to marriage.

My contribution to the growing literature on African women's sexuality aligns with South African rapper Dope Saint Jude's critique of the outdated nature of mainstream African feminism in her song *Realtalk*.[2] Beyond critique, she calls for inclusivity, particularly for women with non-conforming sexualities, including 'the girls who like to fuck; girls who are also boys; and mothers with baby daddy and baby mama'. She emphasises inclusivity across gender identities, sexual freedoms, and non-traditional family structures. The plea to 'update it' signals an urgent demand for African feminisms to become more adaptive, intersectional, and responsive to contemporary social realities. This is of crucial importance in order to understand the diverse ways these new realities engage with heteropatriarchy which, in some ways, keeps updating itself in the face of challenges posed by women's movements (Enloe 2017). Building on Saint Jude's thinking, this paper focuses specifically on Shona single women's sexual agency, telling stories of their pleasure, desires, freedom, and power as a way of '*updating* African feminism'.

Methods: speaking about sex

The study is grounded in ethnography, using life story interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. Narratives were gathered though life story interviews with purposefully selected participants from rural, peri-rural, and urban areas across Zimbabwe.[3] While this paper draws on a smaller set of narratives, the broader study drew on interviews held with 44 divorcees, 40 widows and 22 women who had never married. The women's age ranged from 33 to 79 and they came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. All but one were literate and formally educated, with qualifications ranging from Grade 3 to a PhD, and most had completed secondary school. In the sample, there were women from both the formal and the informal sectors, including professionals

[2] Realtalk Lyrics | Genius Lyrics.

[3] Fieldwork was carried out in predominantly Shona-speaking regions, specifically in Mwenezi, Beitbridge, Masvingo, Gutu, Mutare, Chipinge, Chimanimani, Chivhu, Zvishavane, Kariba, Kwekwe, Domboshava, Harare, Chiweshe, Murehwa, and Chegutu. The sample also included married men and women, and church and traditional leaders.

and small-scale entrepreneurs. Some of the women relied on casual work or 'piece jobs' such as part-time domestic work. Others were supported by donor organisations, their parents, siblings, or adult children. A few reported a degree of financial stability. One 71-year-old and never-married single mother, who ran a family business, put it simply: *handina nhamo* ('I am not living in poverty'). Others, however, reported living in extreme poverty.

Invoking 'Shona single women's sexual lives', as I do in the title of the article, is not meant to suggest that the women's sexual lives are homogeneous. While common themes emerge from the women's accounts of their sexual lives, these must be understood in the context of the women's diverse and often divergent life trajectories, which I will identify and analyse below.

In each area where I carried out fieldwork, I collaborated with a local research guide—typically a single woman—with ties to my personal social network. In addition to being participants, the guides played an important role in identifying women from their social networks, neighbourhood, churches, or workplaces—who were interested in taking part in the study.

In addition to life story interviews, I draw on data gathered through focus group discussions and participant observations conducted during two church conferences organised for single women. In the entire project, I facilitated five focus group discussions—held in Chivi, Masvingo, Kwekwe, Kariba, and Harare—with married men (aged 28 to 77). Each comprised four to nine participants.

The focus group discussions—conducted toward the end of my fieldwork carried out between August and October 2023, and January to March 2024—were designed to gather and explore the men's thoughts on various issues raised by single women during the life story interviews, issues including men's attitudes towards and relationships with single women to whom they were not related. The two national conferences for single women that I attended were organised by the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) in Zimbabwe[4] and the United Baptist Church[5] and held in February 2024 in Chatsworth and Mutare, respectively. Though not initially part of my research design, these events provided valuable opportunities for participant observation. Two of the women that I had interviewed, who belonged to these denominations, invited me there so I could witness what happens during such events.

Although I posed a specific question, during interviews, that asked women to walk me through their sex lives, many spoke about their sexuality even when responding to questions that were not explicitly about it. Such narrative strategies are unsurprising, since sexuality intersects with various dimensions of everyday life (Tamale 2011). That said, not all participants were eager to discuss their sexual or intimate experiences. Some indicated that they found it difficult to talk about sex and related topics, owing to their socialisation and religious beliefs, as reflected in responses such as 'with my Christian background, I have

[4]The AFM is said to be one of the largest Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe and the mother church of Pentecostal movements in Zimbabwe.

[5]Historically, the United Baptist Church in Zimbabwe, a missionary-initiated church, was founded by South Africa General Mission (SAGM) missionaries in Chimanimani.

always not been able to openly talk about my sexuality'. Indeed, religion, and in this case, Christianity in particular, instituted an elaborate system of control that 'tabooed speaking about sex' (Tamale 2006: 12).

Within Shona culture, discussions about sex and related matters are context dependent, often permitted only within specific social relationships, which typically do not extend to interactions with strangers. Nonetheless, many women chose to open up, sharing details about their sexual desires, dating histories, partner preferences, and romantic experiences. Where necessary, we employed euphemisms to navigate the sensitivity of the topic. As Tamale (2006: 20) notes, metaphors offer an acceptable medium for discussing sexuality, helping to 'shift it from the private to the public sphere'. By way of example, although the title of the article reads 'it [vagina] does not survive on porridge', in the actual testimony, the woman simply pointed to her vaginal area and uttered 'it'.

Single women's sexuality

Analysing the sexual lives of single women participating in my study, in this section, I identify common themes that emerged from my analysis. These include how the women engaged with, and sometimes disrupt, stereotypes about single women's sexualities, and how they navigate the religious and cultural moral expectations, demonstrating sexual autonomy and the fact that they are desiring subjects.

'*Kundonga woga unonzi hure'*/If you are single, people call you a whore: Stereotypes about single women's sexuality

Single women face deep stigma, and negative stereotypes about their sexuality abound. They are often labelled *whores* or *mahure* in Shona. While *mahure* literally refers to commercial sex workers, this term is used broadly and loosely to stigmatise women perceived as deviating from moral sexual or social norms, including single women, many of whom may not lead necessarily promiscuous lives. As a 43-year-old divorcee concluded, singleness is often equated with whoredom: '*Kundonga wega unonzi hure*' (If you are single, you are called a whore). Some of the women I interviewed explained how the term 'whore' had been used in different contexts to describe them. One widow narrated that, as soon as she was widowed, her sister's husband '*akamurambidza kutaura neni, because aiti ndave hure risina murume*' (forbid her from talking to me because he said I had become 'a whore without husband') (48 years old, widowed at 35). Another widow, meanwhile, described how some of her neighbours policed her and implicitly treated her like a whore. She recounted that they would speculate that:

> *Unazvo zvikomba zvake, hatingozvioni chete. Ukangofamba, ukaita nguva usina kudzoka pamba zvonzi wanga uri kuzvikomba. Imwe nguva kutonzi mahure ekuBaptist akavandira, ukaita zvevarume vacho pachena yave mhosva, zvonzi vanoita chihure mwana achiona*
>
> (She definitely has boyfriends; it is just that we haven't seen them. 'If I went away somewhere and took a long time to return home,

> they would say 'you had gone to your boyfriends'. Once they even said, 'these Baptist women are devious'. However, if you date openly, it is considered wrong and they claim, 'she behaves like a whore in the presence of her child)—47 years old, widowed at 31.

What stands out in these accounts is how the label *hure* (whore) is used, regardless of a woman's actual sexual behaviour. The promiscuous stereotype therefore works independently of reality and fact, and across all the sub-groups of singleness identified earlier, suggesting that stigma is steeped more in anxieties about female autonomy than in what the women do. The stigmatisation of widows dating openly in front of their children is especially telling, as it is framed as transgressing moral expectations tied to motherhood and womanhood. This also probably linked to the point, made earlier, that marriage for widows is seen as continuing symbolically after a husband's death. The same expectations of moral uprightness, however, influence how some single women negotiate their sexuality. One 45-year-old divorcee, whose eldest child was married and had a child, reflected on the idea of remarrying: '*Ndave nemuzukuru. Zvichabuda here kuti zvigonzi mbuya vakaenda kunoroorwa?*' (I am now a grandmother. Would it be appropriate for it to be said that grandma has gone to get married?). In Shona culture, the role of a grandmother carries with it a moral authority and the dignity associated with age and aging. This cultural belief that associates respect with age and ageing, making the very notion of remarriage inappropriate for this 45-year-old participant, even though she is not the age that would typically be defined as old.

While the term whore (*hure*) is used loosely to refer to single women, as shown in the examples above, several of the single women I interviewed offered a more nuanced sense of whoredom, associating it more directly and broadly with sex work and promiscuous behaviour, as the following examples suggest:

> I am sexually active: I date, but *handisi munhu anomhanya*
>
> (I am not promiscuous)—Never-married woman born in 1966;
>
> *Handiiti maboyfriend akawanda. Handipindi mubhawa*
>
> (I do not have many boyfriends. I do not go to the bar)—36-year-old divorcee.

The women cited here navigate stigma by strategically distancing themselves from the social and sexual identities often associated with the whore label, such as frequenting bars (which, in Shona, implies sex work or dating many partners). The bar (*kubhawa*) is a space culturally and religiously coded as morally corrupt.

In addition to the whore stereotype, the dominant narrative also frames single women as 'small houses', a slang term for women who date married men. Liv Haram (2004: 223) explores a comparable dynamic in Tanzania, where for some single mothers, the role of a *nyumba ndogo* (literally, 'small house')—a woman with a visiting partner—is a relatively empowering arrangement. Haram suggests that the role of *nyumba ndogo* enables a degree of social independence while preserving a form of communal respectability. However, in the Shona context,

women labelled as 'small houses' are often vilified, for their perceived role in breaking up marriages. This label carries strong moral condemnation, with such women frequently cast as 'husband snatchers' or 'homewreckers'.

A 40-year-old divorcee shared her discomfort with dating married men, noting that single women are often labelled as 'whores' or 'husband snatchers'. In her words: '*But* this is all because *vamwe vedu vane zvavanoitawo zvinoita kuti masingles afungirwe*' (some of us behave in ways that make people suspicious of singles). While this reflects a commonly held belief that stereotypes carry a kernel of truth, it is crucial to unpack the gendered dynamics that sustain and reinforce these stereotypes. These labels—often projected by married women—frame single women as threats, diverting attention from the behaviour of unfaithful men. As one 61-year-old married man remarked, '*madzimai ndivo vanoita dambudziko nevanhu vasina kuroorwa*' (married women are the ones who have problems with single women). Echoing this sentiment, a 38-year-old divorcee stated '*Vari married havadi kutiona. Vanotyira varume vavo*' (Married women feel uneasy around us. They are afraid for their husbands [read: they are afraid we might snatch their husbands]. These perspectives reveal how societal expectations and fears around women's sexuality are unevenly distributed, often placing blame on single women, while excusing or overlooking male responsibility.

Although other women contribute to perpetuating negative perceptions about single women in Shona communities, men—particularly those who regard unmarried women as sexually available, reducing them to objects of desire—also play a significant role. This perception is clearly reflected in anecdotes shared by single women during my study. A 42-year-old never-married woman, for instance, remarked: 'Men, especially married men, think that every single woman is desperate for sex.' She went on to describe how some taxi drivers near her vending stall regularly proposition her for casual sex. Similarly, a 43-year-old divorcee shared that 'there are loose men at my workplace *vanongofunga kuti vanogona kutorara mubedroom nasingle mother*' (who think that they can sleep [have sex] with a single mother). Echoing this, another divorced single mother noted: '*Kana usina murume kudai, munhu wose ari muraini anenge achida kurara newe* (if you are unmarried like me, every man in the village wants to sleep with you). A never-married 42-year-old added: 'Men—married men, to be precise—often suggest I become a second wife or a so-called 'small house.'

These narratives highlight broader gendered concerns on how singleness and sexuality intersect, accounting for the narrow and demeaning identities attributed to single women. As I discuss in the sections that follow, however, these dominant narratives—co-produced by both men and married women and possibly carrying a kernel of truth—are not passively accepted by single women themselves, who actively challenge and subvert them through their daily sexual practices and choices.

Single women as desiring subjects

In contemporary Shona communities, religious doctrine and cultural tradition intersect to regulate female sexuality. This section explores how single women

negotiate these moral landscapes. The narratives that I explore suggest the ways in which some women internalise dominant norms of chastity and self-restraint, while others resist them in pursuit of sexual autonomy and pleasure. Through their voices, we can discern how desire, discipline, and dissent co-exist in complex ways.

In some Christian denominations and in Shona culture, girls and unmarried women are taught about *kudzikama* (to be self-controlled). One 75-year-old widow powerfully illustrated the internalisation of the *kudzikama* doctrine within the religious context, explaining that:

> *Tinodzidziswa kuti panorairwa apa, nezita rajesu kuti dzikama. Panotukwa apa kuti usafunga zvevarume*
>
> (We are taught that *this* [pointing to her vaginal area] is to be scolded [and told] 'in Jesus' name, behave yourself'. It must be *scolded* so that it does not think about men)

The act of scolding the vagina—invoking the authority of Jesus—offers a striking example of how religious teachings become deeply embedded in the body. The act especially evokes Michel Foucault's (1988: 18) concept of 'technologies of the self' which, in this case, take the form of religious practices deployed in the participant's discipling of her body. Here moral regulation shapes not only behaviour but the very language and logic through which self-control is conceptualised and expressed. The body itself is made a site of self-discipline.

Kudzikama (being self-controlled), is also a central message in the socialisation of girls within Shona culture. This moral ideal is primarily instilled through *kuraira*, an intergenerational practice where older women counsel younger girls on matters of sexuality and appropriate social behaviour. Within both cultural and church contexts, girls and unmarried women are taught to embody a passionless ideal, one that reflects a broader model of self-restraint. As Signe Arnfred (2004: 62) observes, this ideal is rooted in notions of discipline and self-control. Arnfred (2015: 152) further argues that 'such restraint—particularly the suppression and concealment of female desire—ultimately serves to reinforce patriarchal power structures'. Echoing this, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2003: 35) notes that acknowledging female sexual pleasure and desire challenges male dominance by undermining the presumed supremacy of male desire, authority, and control.

Some of my participants—particularly widows, irrespective of their ages—narrated how they strove to heed both the traditional and Christian calls to discipline their desires. A significant number described their commitment to *kudzikama* (being self-controlled). The following two examples illustrate this.

A 74-year-old widow whose husband died when she was 34, recalled:

> *Ndakanamata kuna Mwari kuti wakatora mudikani wangu. Chindibvisa chinoda varume. Ndakabva ndagara hangu*
>
> (I prayed, God, you have taken the one I loved. Remove my desire for men. I then lived a celibate life)

A 65-year-old participant, widowed at nearly 50, said:

> *handina kuzombofunga murume. Ndaiti ndikaona murume ndoita sendaona mumwe mukadzi*
>
> (I never thought about [read: having sex with] a man. Each time I saw a man, it was like seeing another woman)

Both women's narratives reflect varying degrees of internalised religio-socio-heteropatriarchy. The first frames celibacy in spiritual terms and as a personal vow, where divine assistance is sought to suppress desire. The second articulates celibacy through a heteronormative lens, where the erasure of sexual difference—seeing men as indistinct from women—serves as evidence of the woman's lack of sexual desire.

By contrast, most single women in my study tended to disregard societal and religious expectations that they supress their sexual desires. They spoke about their inability—or refusal—to deny what their bodies yearned for. Some divorcees and widows who chose not to remarry, for instance, still engaged in sexual relationships. This was implied in statements such as '*handifungi zvekuroorwa asi shamwari ndinayo*' (I am not thinking of getting married, but I do have a 'friend') and '*zvekuti ndigadzikwe mukitchen hayi. Ndine shamwari yekufambidzana nayo'* (I have no desire at all to be placed in a kitchen [that is, be married]. I have a friend for companionship). Such narratives illustrate a refusal to comply with heteropatriarchal marriage normativity and the broader societal expectation that women rein in their sexual desires. This resistance—consciously feminist or not—asserts the women's right to sexual freedom and pleasure, challenging the structures that seek to control their desires.

Not all romantic relationships involving single women are transactional ones, where women are paid for sex, which Beverly Haddad (2025: 354) describes as 'survival sex for basic necessities' or 'commodified sex for the instant gratification of the desire for luxury goods and opulent lifestyles'. Some relationships are pursued purely for sexual pleasure. Some of the women I interviewed indicated that they engaged in sex because they derived enjoyment from it. They described being in a romantic relationship and having sex for reasons they characterise as *kungofara* (mere enjoyment), *kufadza nyama* (carnal or bodily pleasure), or *kutamba* (for play or fun). This is aptly illustrated in the statement of a 55-year-old divorcee, who emphasised that the role of her boyfriend was to satisfy her sexual needs: '*Kungoita chibabamukuru* [6] *chekuti nyama dzifare chete*' (I have a boyfriend to give me sexual pleasure). The meanings of these Shona terms—*kungofara, kufadza nyama, kutamba*—resonate with what Arnfred (2004: 59) describes as 'pleasure and enjoyment, or desire—*which in this case*, is female desire'. The women actively seek pleasure in a social context where both Christian doctrine and Shona traditional cultural expectations dictate that women outside of marriage should control their sexual desires—or, if unable to do so—seek legitimisation through marriage.

[6]This participant was my aunt (sister to my brother), so this term, which I translate into 'boyfriend', refers to husband or boyfriend of my older sister or paternal aunt.

Many of the single women I interviewed indicated that they were sexually active and found sex pleasurable, framing this not as deviance, but a natural expression of their humanity. One interviewee, a 38-year-old divorcee, explained, '*Munhu haangagoni kurarama ari oga*' (A human being cannot live 'alone' [read: without a sexual partner]). Similarly, another 44-year-old widow, whose husband had died when she was 29, shared that, although she had no intention of remarrying, she was in a romantic relationship, stating, '*semunhu, ndine wandiri kuonana naye*', which means 'since I am only human, I am romantically involved with someone'. These statements reflect not only a recognition of sexual desire as natural, but also speak to the broader context in which womanhood and personhood are tied to relational identity. This framing of sexual desire as natural ties in neatly with the phrase 'it [vagina] does not feed on porridge' discussed earlier. Within such a framework, the pursuit of sexual pleasure emerges as both a personal choice and a subtle assertion of social legitimacy by living as fully human subjects beyond the bounds of conventional marital norms.

Many of the single women I interviewed engaged in sex outside of marriage, an act traditionally viewed as sinful within Christian doctrine. However, some of these women were unapologetic in their decisions, asserting that they would rather sin and ask for forgiveness than forgo sex altogether. As one Catholic divorcee put it:

> *Ukarara nemurume upombwe, unonoreurura, but since Mwari tsitsi dzake dzisingaperi, unongonoreurura*
>
> (If you have sex with a man outside marriage, that is fornication, but since God's mercy is endless, you can always seek His forgiveness)

The invocation of divine mercy suggests a reinterpretation of moral authority: if God's compassion is boundless, then rigid sexual norms may lose their absolute authority, making space for alternative sexual choices without the fear of eternal condemnation. Although the women maintain the norm of sex outside marriage as sin, they profit from the traditional Christian notion of divine forgiveness.

Still on the contentious issue of intimacy, some participants who were divorcees spoke candidly about how their (ex)husbands starved them of not just sex, but also pleasurable, fulfilling sexual experiences, thereby asserting their own (sexual) desires and implicitly calling into question the supremacy of male desire and power. By way of example, a 34-year-old woman divorced twice described her second ex-husband in the following stark terms:

> *Munhu aingovhura makumbo ako oita zvake. Ukamuudza kuti hapana chandiri kunzwa haateereri. Ukamuudza zvinokuitira wonzwa zvonzi wakazviwanepi*
>
> (He would just open my legs and do what he wanted. If *I* told him that *I did not feel anything [I was* not satisfied], he would not listen. If *I* told him what satisfied *me*, he would ask *me* where *I* learned that from)

This woman knew what gave her pleasure and expressed her sexual needs, exercising agency that challenged gendered sexual norms. Her husband's response—questioning the source of her knowledge—reveals how patriarchal norms condition women to remain silent and sexually ignorant. Women who demonstrate sexual awareness often risk being labelled promiscuous. This is a clear example of how, as Patricia McFadden (2021: 289) writes, patriarchy seeks to supress women's 'creativity, imaginations, and sensibilities of freedom and pleasure'.

While some participants endured bad sex, others were denied it entirely. One divorcee recalled how her husband disappeared from their home for over six years, prompting her to seek a relationship elsewhere. By the time we spoke, she had left her matrimonial home and was living with a new partner. Married women who seek relationships in the absence of their husbands challenge the Shona traditional expectations that women should wait patiently for their return. For several women, particularly divorcees, their journey into singlehood can be traced to a pattern of being denied sexual fulfilment and the space to express freely their sexual desires.

To conclude this section, I draw on a revealing statement from one of the men in my focus group discussions. This participant's comment highlights how some men deploy entrenched beliefs that women exist principally to satisfy male desire. Reflecting on why some husbands engage in extramarital affairs, the participant in question blamed women, suggesting it was their responsibility to be sexually available in order to preserve their marriages:

> *Chinopa kuti murume aite magirlfriends dzimwe nguva mabatirwo aanoitwa mumba nemudzimai. … vakadzi vanowanza maexcuses … yet mugodhi, …* just serve him
>
> (What pushes a married man to have extramarital affairs sometimes is the way he is treated at home by his wife. … wives make so many excuses … Yet it [a woman's vagina] is a mine shaft … [the woman should] just serve him) – Focus group 4, 22 March 2024.

The image of a woman's vagina/body as 'just a mine shaft' to be accessed on demand exemplifies a deeply misogynistic view that reduces women to sexual vessels, denying them agency or subjectivity. This narrative is challenged by the voices of women in my study—especially those who have left unsatisfying marriages or chosen to remain unmarried—who speak candidly about their sexual desires, needs, and pursuit of pleasure. In doing so, they disrupt the passive and objectified image of women as mere providers of sexual service. Instead, they assert themselves as active, desiring subjects even in the face of religious and cultural taboos. This shift not only contests the dominant gendered script but also reclaims women's sexual agency within and beyond the bounds of marriage.

Single women's dates and dating patterns

At one of the national conferences for single ladies that I attended during my fieldwork, time was allocated for group discussions. I joined a group of

never-married women. In that instance, I found myself not only observing as a researcher but also participating as a fellow single woman. There were five of us in that group—I was the youngest, while the others were all over 50. When the conversation turned to dating issues, the focus shifted to me. The women offered a wealth of advice on the ideal dates, speaking as though they themselves were no longer actively dating. They warned me against being indiscriminate in my choices, emphasising that, at that stage in my life—where I was financially stable and professionally secure—I might attract men more interested in my wealth rather than in genuine love. They also stressed the moral implications of dating married men, warning that such relationships would not be godly, as they could destroy existing families. From this exchange, two issues emerged that I wish to explore further: the power and agency of single women in choosing their partners, and the moral discourse surrounding relationships with married men. Each is a critical element in conversations about Shona single women's sexuality.

In contemporary Shona society, it is often believed that unmarried women are desperate for love and will date anyone—'*chero zvake ane* trousers' (anyone who wears trousers),[7] as one TikToker, @chiemasiziba[8] put it. This perception reinforces the idea that women in prolonged singlehood, including younger divorcees and widows, have limited options when it comes to romantic partners. Such views reflect a strictly conservative patriarchal script, which dictates that an ideal partner should conform to specific norms—for example, a man should be older than his wife, as an older wife is thought to pose a threat to male authority. Similarly, a never-married younger man (*jaya*) is generally discouraged from marrying a woman—whether divorced or a widowed—who has children (*mvana*). Men are not generally expected to date/marry women of a higher social class.

In one focus group, male participants elaborated on the types of men they thought were available to single women, particularly single mothers:

> *ane mwana mukadzi has few choices, saka vakadai ndivo vaizogona kupedzisira vave nevarume vaya vanonzi havaiti, chidhakwa, chirema, or rombe like, because anenge ari desperate to get married*
>
> (When she has a child [outside of marriage], a woman has limited choices, so such women ended up with the so called undesirable men—drunkards, crippled or loafers—because they will be desperate to get married) – Focus Group 2, 10 March 2024.

This narrative, which portrays single mothers as desperate to settle for *any partner*, including those with often stigmatised characteristics suggests that their sexual and relational agency is limited. Some women I interviewed affirmed this perception, noting that their dating pool is indeed narrow. As one never-married 42-year-old woman explained: '*ukasatowana akaramba or akafirwa hakuna*

[7]The Shona phrase *vemabhurugwa* (those who wear trousers) is a euphemism for men.
[8]@chiemasiziba.

kwaunowana murume' (if you cannot get a divorcee or widower, then you will never get a husband).

However, some of the women I interviewed demonstrated that, even within a limited dating pool, they remained selective and exercised agency in choosing their partners. One never-married participant, aged 56, emphasised this autonomy: '*Handingatsvagirwi, ndinoona ndega*' (No one finds a boyfriend for me, I find one for myself). Another participant, born in 1966 and never married, recounted rejecting a much older man she was introduced to with a dismissive quip: '*uyo imbopaiwo hama dzenyu uyo*' (you can give this one to your relatives). These accounts highlight that, contrary to societal assumptions, many single women assert control over their romantic choices and reject what they perceive as unsuitable partners.

In addition to the perception that single women, particularly single mothers, are willing to accept any man, they are also commonly stereotyped as small houses—women who date married men. The women I spoke to responded to this accusation in diverse and often deeply personal ways. Some flatly declared that they would not date married men on moral or emotional grounds. A 38-year-old woman, divorced twice, explained that her Christian faith and her family's religious standing would never allow her to date a married man. Another participant, a 54-year-old never-married mother, refused such relationships because she did not want to feel like anyone's 'second best' and she resented the secrecy that dating a married man would require and the fact that she would not be able to tell the world that she is in love.

Others—despite moral reservations—found themselves in relationships with married men. Even women who identified as devout Christians acknowledged the practical realities of their dating landscape. A 38-year-old Pentecostal divorcee with two children candidly shared that:

> *Mharidzo indondibata ndeyeupombwe nekudanana nevarume vevanhu. Ini handichagoni kuwana jaya. Vakafirwa or divorces vashoma. Ndotodanana nemurume wemunhu. Nekuti munhu haangagoni kugara oga*
>
> (The church teaching that I have issue with is the one on adultery and dating married men. I can no longer find a boyfriend who is single. Widowers and divorces are few. So, I am dating someone's husband. Because no one can possibly live alone)

So, while some single women express their discomfort with dating married men, a significant number of the women that I interviewed dated married men, interpreting their decision to do so in diverse ways. One Catholic divorcée, aged 56 years, explained how this issue is discussed in her church's single women's group:

> *Tinodzidzisana kuti musanyengwa nevarume vevanhu pamunogara, nemuchurch. Zvikazonzwikwa kuti mumwe wedu akarohwa nemukadzi wemunhu hazvizopi chimiro chakanaka*

> (We teach each other that we should not date married men in the neighbourhood and from our parish. If it came out that a member of our group was involved in a fight with a married woman [over the latter's man], that would not present a good image [of the group])

Here, discretion is central. The participant invoked the Shona proverb '*muroyi royera kure*' (a witch should bewitch those from afar)—suggesting that while dating married men is morally questionable, as implied in the metaphor of the witch in the proverb—it is condoned if done privately and does not cause a scandal.

The accounts that I cite below explicitly challenge the stereotype of single women who date married men as home wreckers. Many women I interviewed framed their relationships with married men as emotionally or sexually fulfilling, but not intentionally harmful to the men's families. As one 49-year-old divorcee explained: 'My boyfriend is a married man, but I respect his family. We have been together for eight years now, but *hatiiti zveshow off*—we do not show off [our relationship]'. Similarly, a 43-year-old widow said: '*Ndinaye wekufambidzana naye, murume wemunhu, asi pfungwa yangu haisi yekuda kuita disturb marriage yevanhu. Kungoti ndiwanewo shamwar*i' (I have a boyfriend, 'someone's husband', but my intention is not to disturb anyone's marriage. I am just looking for a 'friend').

For these women, 'respecting a family' does not entail avoiding extramarital relationships, but rather preserving the social and emotional boundaries that maintain the illusion of marital stability. This logic was echoed by some male participants. In one focus group, for example, a married man explained: '*Varume vanonyenga asi vanoita respect mhuri dzavo. Ndotoudza girlfriend kuti handidi kufonegwa kana ndave kumba ndine mhuri yangu*' (married men have girlfriends but they respect their marriages. I tell my girlfriend that I do not want her to call me when I am at home with my family) (Focus group 1, 5 March 2024). This framing reveals a mutual moral negotiation: both men and women justify extramarital relationships through a discourse of discretion and containment. The women assert that they do not intend to destroy marriages, and men claim to 'respect' their families. Such relationships, while framed as non-disruptive, implicitly contest dominant norms surrounding marital in/fidelity.

A few participants recounted instances where secrecy was broken, leading to direct confrontation with spouses of the men they were involved with. One participant, a 50-year-old single mother of two with a married boyfriend, recounted that his wife once came to her workplace to confront her and even sent some women to her home to beat her up. Ultimately, while some individuals in these relationships frame their actions as harmless, the reality is more complex, with secrecy, emotional detachment, and confrontation shaping different outcomes for different people.

Ironically, some of the divorcees who dated married men believed *their* marriages had ended because their ex-husbands had had extramarital affairs. They found this deeply painful and unacceptable. One 38-year-old divorcee,

for instance, recounted: 'I divorced after staying nine years in my marriage because my husband had several extramarital affairs. *I* struggled with this issue for many years. I realised that if I continued with the marriage, I would die from diseases, and I told him I was fed up. This conflict persisted between us for many years.' Yet, post-divorce, the same woman dated a married man herself, becoming, the 'other woman' in someone else's marriage—the very role that once threatened and destroyed her marital stability. This scenario disrupts normative moral ideals of female victimhood and virtue, since this particular woman does not fit into the typical categories of victim or virtuous woman in dominant African feminist narratives.

While some of the extra-marital affairs cited above carried emotional investment or moral complexity, others took on a more transactional character, blurring the lines between intimacy and economic survival. Some relationships resembled sex work, as some women listed sex with men as a source of livelihood. One divorcee responded to my question on her sources of income as follows '*ndinotengesa chero chandinenge ndawana. Nekurara nevarume vevanhu*' (I sell many things. I also sleep with other people's husbands). Another participant, also a divorcee, noted that '*uri musingle unorara nababa vepanext kuti mwana awane kudya*' (when you are single, you sleep with the married man next door in order to feed your child).

The narratives analysed in this section complicate monolithic portrayals of single Shona women as either passive victims of patriarchy or morally deviant 'small houses'. Instead, they reveal a spectrum of strategies, justifications, and moral negotiations through which women navigate sexual pleasure, desire, and survival in a constrained and constraining socio-economic, religious, and cultural context.

Non-normative sexual practices

Many never-married women that I interviewed stated that they were not single by choice; they had waited in vain to get married. Some even narrated incidents of what I would term 'near marriages' and others remained hopeful that they would get married at some point, even if they were in their late forties and beyond. The majority identified as heterosexual. However, one participant's sexual life story stood out. This participant, whom I refer to by the pseudonym Natasha, was over 40 when I interviewed her, had always been single, and had no child.

Explaining her singleness, Natasha said that she was single, but not by design. She had experienced heartbreaks and none of her relationships (with men) had progressed to marriage. The men that she dated had broken up with her because she refused to have penetrative sex with them. She further revealed, however, that she 'felt more at peace when *she was* alone than within a relationship'. She believed that she would not be bothered about her singleness if she lived in a society that did not stigmatise it:

> Yes, I crave companionship but at same time, I do not feel completely lost without a partner. … For me, the 'yearning' to be

> married that most people feel is not so strong. Yes, I would naturally have chosen singlehood if I was in a society that would allow me to be what I want to be.

Her view about her singlehood reflects a complex interplay of personal choice and societal pressure. Natasha's experience highlights a nuanced perspective on singlehood—one that balances the desire for partnership with a strong sense of independence and contentment in solitude. Related to her finding comfort in being without companion, Natasha revealed that she could enjoy sex alone and without penetration, stating that:

> within the relationship, kissing, touching, being naked with someone, oral sex, sharing nudes, virtual/phone sex [sic] is part and parcel of the relationship. … When I am not within a relationship, I masturbate when I am feeling horny or for the sexual release or I engage in phone sex with a buddy (like a guy who likes me).

Natasha redefines sex as anything that gives her sexual pleasure. She finds satisfaction through masturbation and phone sex. In doing so, she challenges dominant definitions of 'real sex' as necessarily involving penetration. Masturbation, in particular, becomes a form of agency, allowing her to enjoy sexual pleasure on her own terms.

The only other instance in which masturbation was mentioned during my fieldwork came from a participant who had always been single and was not dating at the time of our interviews. She recalled how her sisters would remark, '*Munhu haangatombogari asingarari nemurume; akange asina, then anenge achiita masturbation*' (A person cannot go without a man [read: sex]; if she doesn't have one, then she must be masturbating). Despite this candid mention of masturbation, it largely remains a taboo subject, especially among my female participants and, within Shona communities more broadly. This silence persists even though masturbation is, for some single women, a source of pleasure—as illustrated in Natasha's account.

Natasha's sexual choices contrast starkly with broader cultural expectations around chastity in Shona tradition. Chastity or virginity is valued in Shona traditional cultures, just as it is in Christianity. Indeed, in the past, when a Shona girl was married after losing her virginity, some rituals such as *kuboora machira* (making a hole on a white cloth and taking that to her parents) were done to announce that one had married a non-virgin. The general belief in Shona culture is that men tend to want to marry a woman who has not engaged in premarital sex. One never-married woman born in 1966 recounted how one of her aunts said to her: '*uri kungoti mukomana wose wawadanana naye worara naye. Ndosaka pasina anoda kukuroora*' (you are sleeping [having sex with] with every boy that you date. That is why no one wants to marry you). In the case of Natasha, however, some of her previous boyfriends ended their relationships with her because she refused to have penetrative sex with them. Natasha's narrative, hence, challenges the belief that preserving one's virginity is a guarantee that a woman will secure a husband.

Following her revelation that she was also attracted to women, I asked Natasha the question: 'Have you met women who are also attracted to you?' She responded:

> Online, yes, on a social media platform but we never got to meet up, we were in different countries, and she later got a girlfriend then she cut all contact. … This year, I have been on dating applications and have swiped right for a girl, and we spoke for a bit in the last month and exchanged other social media platform usernames so we can stay in contact, but I have not followed up on that.

Natasha's narrative provides an example of a woman who is drawn to men, but also attracted to women and has dated them online. However, Natasha has not explored her alternative sexuality in real life, but online, enjoying the freedom that the online space allows her *to be*, something that is not safe to do in real life in Zimbabwe (see Sibanda & Ncube 2024: 268). Interestingly, some of her close friends dismissed Natasha's views on singleness and sex. They labelled her as '*munhu ane chakamugara*', which literally means 'a person who is [demonically] possessed'. This labelling echoes the 'Christian church's position in Africa that same-sex relationships are demonic and anybody who practices that ought to undergo exorcism' (Ojo & Adelakun 2016: 480).

It is worth underscoring that the women I interviewed diverge significantly from the representations found in some scholarly accounts of female sexuality in Africa. Their appearance, dress, and comportment, for instance, contrasted sharply with the figures described in Francis Nyamnjoh's (2005) study of sex and consumerism in Senegal. The older women in my study, for instance, bore little resemblance to the Senegalese *Diriyankes*—the 'bulkier, heavily perfumed and jewelled, richly traditionally dressed women, sometimes divorced' (Nyamnjoh 2005: 300). Even those who declared sexual autonomy or sought sexual pleasure did not conform to the image of Harare's so-called 'small houses', high-maintenance mistresses adorned with luxury goods and urban privileges in Nyamnjoh's work (2005: 318). My research underscores, therefore, how it is possible to speak of female sexual pleasure through the lives of ordinary women, challenging dominant narratives that primarily link sexual agency and female desire to exceptional or hyper-visible figures such as sex workers or high-class mistresses. It is worth noting that I did not focus on how the women looked—not to overlook embodiment entirely, but to resist the temptation to invest bodily appearance with the totality of their sexual subjectivity.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have examined the lived sexual realities of Shona single women through life story interviews conducted across various regions of Zimbabwe. I have argued that many of the women actively challenge negative stereotypes about their sexuality, often reinforced by married women who view them as threats and by men who see them as sexual objects. These women assert their

right to sexual pleasure, framing it as a natural human need rather than a moral failing, despite religious and cultural teachings that seek to demonise sex outside marriage and suppress single women's desires. While some participants conformed to dominant expectations by practising celibacy, many resisted, engaging in romantic relationships on their own terms. In doing so, they disrupt patriarchal cultural and religious norms, redefining personhood beyond marriage, and resisting societal control over their bodies and desires. I have demonstrated that the lived stories of the interviewed women reveal the limitations of discourses that foreground and prioritise marriage and procreation as the main, and even sole, markers of female legitimacy.

The significance of this study lies in the manner in which it disrupts the monolithic portrayals and understandings of women's sexuality. By centring the diverse ways in which single women assert sexual autonomy, whether through celibacy, relationships outside of marriage, or taboo practices like masturbation, I have attempted to complicate dominant narratives that equate female sexuality with marital or reproductive roles.

Significantly, this study highlights tensions within African feminisms, especially the need to move beyond exclusionary paradigms that place more value on marriage and motherhood. The experiences of the single women I spoke to demonstrate the contradictions in feminist discourses that claim solidarity whilst perpetuating, through marginalisation, biases against unmarried women. For example, I contend that the strained dynamics between married and single women reveal how patriarchal norms are internalised and reproduced, even within feminist spaces. What I have done in this study, therefore, is to call into question the idealised notion of 'feminist sisterhood'.

As a parting shot, I state that this study is important because it expands and pushes the boundaries of African feminist thoughts and calls for more inclusive and capacious approaches that acknowledge the full range of women's sexual and social realities. By foregrounding the voices and lived realties of single Shona women, I have not only challenged misrepresentations but also invite a reimagining of feminist priorities. I believe that these priorities lie in embracing sexual autonomy, desires, and diverse forms of personhood beyond the framework of marriage. This, of course, is not merely a purely academic exercise. Rather, it is a necessary step towards a feminism and feminist praxis that truly reflects the inert complexities of African women's lived experiences.

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