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Narratives of Shona divorcees: decolonial challenges to African feminist thought

Abstract

Although historically marriage was highly valued in Shona traditions, missionary Christianity introduced a much more rigid vision of marriage in the form of monogamy, in which women were domesticated as (house)wives and mothers, and economically dependent on the breadwinner-husbands. African feminisms, which emerged in response to Western feminist hegemony, have not always adequately interrogated this norm of marriage and its impact on women. Concerning women who opted out of marriage through divorce, early African women scholars dismissed them as 'feminists' and as women who had abandoned African cultures, particularly the value placed on marriage. This paper asks: What does it mean for African feminist understandings of "African women" when the voices of divorced women are foregrounded? How do these voices complicate and challenge commonly accepted ideas relating to gender, marriage, and family life in contemporary Africa? To answer these critical questions, I discuss the narratives of forty-four divorced Shona women, which were gathered through life story interviews conducted during fieldwork carried out in areas of Zimbabwe predominantly occupied by the Shona people between August 2023 and March 2024. By foregrounding the voices of divorced women, the article expands African feminist discourses and studies of singlehood through a decolonial lens. Sidelining unmarried women, especially divorced ones, in the African feminist agendas in the 1980s meant that many social worlds and realities remained hidden from scrutiny. Centering the narratives of divorced women allows for critical insights that challenge the romanticisation of marriage and its normative hold.

Keywords:

Shona, divorce, African feminisms, marriage, decolonial

Introduction

Since the 1980s, women's movements in Africa have grown immensely, prompting scholars to speak of African *feminisms* in the plural rather than the singular (Dosekun 2021). This discussion of the voices of Shona divorcees arises from the observation that earlier forms of African feminisms created hegemonies and marginalities, and produced silences "around issues of non-conforming sexualities and gender identities" (Tamale 2020, 39). Indeed, they were pro-natal and heterosexual (Dosekun 2021). Popular and often cited thoughts representing that era of the women's movements in Africa include Gwendolyn Mikell's argument that "no self-respecting African woman fails to bear children" (1997, 9). Articulating a similar stance, Mary Kolawole is on record as claiming that to most Africans, lesbian sexuality is actually "a non-existent issue," because it is "completely strange to their worldview" and "not even an option to millions of African women" (1997, 15). Just as non-normative sexualities have been sidelined in this way, so too were women whose lives did not conform to the ideal of heterosexual coupling and marriage – including unmarried and divorced women.

It is against this backdrop that I find Sylivia Tamale's (2020) call to decolonise African feminisms productive. In her thinking, there is "need to move into the next phase of Afro-feminist activism … to reconceptualize the struggle for more meaningful and contextually relevant ways of addressing the marginalization of women" (Tamale 2020, 25). In this article, re-conceptualising African feminisms involves writing previously marginalised divorced women back into the African feminist movement, recentering their lived realities expressed through indigenous languages. Furthermore, it involves tracing colonial legacies in social norms around marriage. Although marriage is highly valued in many African traditional cultures, colonialism and missionary Christianity introduced a much more rigid form of monogamous marriage as a lifelong commitment, in which women were domesticated as (house)wives and mothers and economically dependent on the breadwinner-husbands. Moreover,

colonial religious and legal structures continued to exert normative pressure on women's roles in ways that adversely affected unmarried women. Even though African feminisms have been instrumental in resisting both heteropatriarchy and Western feminist hegemony, they have at times reproduced normative assumptions about marriage, sidelining women who existed outside heterosexual coupling.

Early African women scholars conceptualised the exclusion of such women as a strategy to defend the institution of marriage, motherhood and family – dominantly perceived as core features of African cultures. In this article, where I privilege the subjectivities and stories of divorced women, I pose the following questions: What does it mean for African feminism when the voices of divorcees are foregrounded? How do these voices challenge or disrupt commonly accepted ideas relating to gender, marriage, and family life in contemporary communities? To address these questions, this article proceeds in three further sections, followed by a conclusion.

In this article, I begin by explaining how I collected data for this study. Thereafter, I discuss the intersecting vulnerabilities of divorced women, and more broadly, unmarried women in Zimbabwe, drawing on Tamale's (2020, 39) argument that "any serious analysis of decolonization and decoloniality must go beyond race and pay close attention to the nuanced and complex intersections of oppressive systems based on gender, sexualities, migration, poverty, religion, etc". Within dominant feminist discourses, divorced women are rarely regarded as part of historically marginalised groups. Nonetheless, as I demonstrate in this section, there is historical evidence that they have, indeed, been marginalised.

The subsequent section turns to the historical marginalisation of divorced women within certain strands of African feminism. Here, I focus on how divorced women have sometimes been framed as adopting a Western ontology[1], with their resistance to dysfunctional marriages interpreted as an import of foreign individualism rather than as a pursuit of dignity grounded in local relational ethics such as *Unhu,* the Shona iteration of Ubuntu. *Unhu,* according to Samkange and Samkange, connotes "[t]he attention one human being gives to another: the kindness, courtesy, consideration and friendliness in the relationship between people, a code of behaviour, an attitude to others and to life...." (1980, 39). The framing of divorced women as adopting a Western ontology, albeit emerging from an understandable concern with resisting western feminist impositions, has had the unintended effect of delegitimising the voices of women whose aspirations for peace, dignity and mutual respect are deeply rooted in indigenous African ethical and relational traditions. As the divorcees' narratives in this section illustrate, these desires are not alien to *Unhu* but intrinsic to it.

Divorced women's life stories and decolonial methodology

I centre the life stories of forty-four Shona divorcees gathered through life story interviews conducted during fieldwork carried out between August 2023, and March 2024 in various regions of Zimbabwe, primarily in areas occupied by the Shona[2]. In each of the nine field sites, I worked with a local research guide – typically a single woman – who was connected to my social network. These guides were not only participants themselves, but also played an important role in identifying women from their own networks who were interested in taking part in the study.

[1] One finds echoes of this in the contemporary Catholic Church, where, as Susan Rakoczy (2016, 17) notes, before and during the 2015 synod sessions, various African bishops such as Cardinal Robert Sarah of Guinea, insisted that the admission of divorced and remarried persons to the Eucharist, was not an African concern, but that of the west.

[2] The Shona are the majority ethnic group in Zimbabwe. It is made up of Karanga, Zezuru, Manyika, Ndau and Korekore sub-ethnic groups.

The divorcees' stories documented here constitute "non-academic and non-scholarly material" intended to fit into the framework of an African feminist decolonial project that goes beyond "elitist intellectualism" (Tamale 2020, 38). The interviews were conducted in the Shona language, and the translations are my own. It is worth noting that Shona language speech acts become a tool of decoloniality through which distinct forms of Shona cultural knowledge are transmitted (Turin, 2012, xviii). The women's life stories in their own language represent their ways of knowing and being in the world as Shona divorced women, which may differ significantly from those of divorcees in other cultural contexts.

The lived realities of the women that I interviewed are not homogeneous. Factors such as age, economic status, level of education, personality etc., shaped these women's experiences of divorce. The women's ages ranged from 29 to 71 years, and they came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. All but one were literate and formally educated, with qualifications ranging from Grade 3 primary education to a PhD. Majority completed secondary school. The sample included women from both the formal and informal sector, including professionals and small-scale entrepreneurs. Although most of the women spoke of divorce as liberating, some viewed it as having triggered loss of respect and stability in their lives. However, what brings them together is that they have all been married and are largely stigmatised in a social, cultural and religious context that valorises marriage. The women can rightly claim "*takabva noko kumhunga hakuna ipwa*" (we have been to the millet fields; there are no sweet sorghum cane), taken to imply marriage is not as rosy. Their stories illustrate how unmarried women – through knowledge based on experience – contribute to knowledge-making and produce alternative African feminist knowledges (Lewis and Baderoon 2021) about marriage and family.

Stories and storytelling are central to the methods that I use in this study. The women told me their life stories in a typical way of *kutaura nyaya* (sharing stories) – unstructured everyday conversations. Storytelling "is closely associated with indigenous ways of knowing and fits in perfectly with decolonial discourses" (Tamale 2020, 44). In particular, the narratives represent 're-stories' that afford the women a space to challenge stereotypes about their identities.

Through re-stories and re-storying, they strive, in the Achebean sense, to restore their dignity, personhood and humanity. Achebe (2001), in his book *Home and Exile*, writes about re-storying not only as an arduous task carried out by previously colonised peoples, but one that involves re-telling the stories about the glorious achievements of such communities, which have been misrepresented in colonial narratives (2001, 605). In some cases, the women are direct in their reclamation of dignity and humanity. By way of example, in speaking about sex and sexuality, one participant said "*semunhu, ndine wandiri kuonana naye*", which means "since I am only human, I am romantically involved with someone". As I argue elsewhere, the pursuit of sexual pleasure by unmarried women emerges as "a subtle assertion of social legitimacy by living as fully human subjects beyond the bounds of conventional marital norms" (Mangena 2025, 12).

However, unlike typical Achebean re-stories, some of these participants did not necessarily re-tell glorious achievements. Rather than glorifying or romanticising divorce some expressed regret or longing for married life. One participant, a 45-year-old woman who divorced at 31 with three children, lamented: "*Pandakasiiwa zvinhu zvakatanga kuoma. Ndine murume zvaive nani. Ndaipiwa mari, anga asingandishungurudzi*" (When my husband left me, things became difficult. Life was better when I was married. He used to give me money and did not abuse me).

These varied and complex views of divorcees about marriage – including the perspective of a typical never married woman who still desires marriage – reflect a popular sentiment among Shona women: "*Varimo mudzimba vanoda kubuda nepamawindow, vari panze vanoda kupinda*" (those in houses [i.e. marriages] want to escape through the window [such is their desperation to get out of them], and those who have never married want to get in [to marriage]. Beyond these extremes – of yearning to enter or escape marriage – many women occupy positions along a broader, more nuanced spectrum.

Cultural, historical and gendered stigmatisation of unmarried women

This section examines the layered marginalisation of unmarried Shona women by unpacking how cultural scripts, colonial legal frameworks, and religious institutions have historically intersected to shape negative perceptions of female singleness. Although my primary focus in this article is on divorced women, in this section, I extend the discussion to other categories of unmarried women – never-married or widows – given the overlapping, but distinct stigmas they face.

Female singleness in Shona traditions

Being unmarried at a particular age is deemed unacceptable among the Shona, as is the case in other African contexts. As Grace Musila (2021) notes in the context of Kenya, for example, it triggers loss of respectability. Across categories of unmarried Shona women, many are adversely affected by public perceptions and stereotypes that single women are *mahure* (whores). As aptly articulated by one divorcee, singleness is often equated with whoredom: "*Kundonga wega unonzi hure*" (If you are single, you are labelled a whore). As I have noted elsewhere, "*the* stigma *of mahure* is steeped more in anxieties about female autonomy than in what the women do" (Mangena 2025, 8).

The stigmatisation of never-married and childless women is evident in derogatory names such as *tsikombi* – that are given to women who take longer than (socially) expected to get married. Derived from the Shona verb *kukomba* – meaning "to become overripe," and often used to describe pumpkins left to grow beyond the point of consumption – *tsikombi* metaphorically frames women who are perceived to have passed their culturally designated prime for marriage[3].

In addition to being derogatorily labelled as *tsikombi,* never-married women – just like never-married men, or married men and women – without children are traditionally buried with a maize stake (*guri*), rat (*gonzo*), tree bark (*gav*i), or white cloth (*jira jena*) tied to their bodies. These items represent the children they never had[4]. Traditionally, this is done so that the deceased does not haunt or trouble the living, since it is believed that a childless person who die is full of bitterness. The fact is that, ultimately, dying without a family and biological children is associated with shame. In certain communities, such as the Bukusu of Kenya, the coffin of a woman who dies childless is not carried through the main door when taken to her grave. Instead, a special opening is made at the back of the house, through which her body is passed – an act imbued with symbolic meaning[5] – "intended to prevent the 'childless spirit' from lingering or affecting the living" (Asatsa et al., 2025, 20).

Although biological parenthood is respected, as is evident in the burial rite discussed in the previous paragraph, contradictions emerge in the treatment of women who have

[3] A man in a similar position is known as *tsvimborume*. Marc Eprecht mistook *tsvimborume* for a respectable term (1998, 637), which however, as one participant explained, derogatorily implies that a man who does not marry has '*tsvimbo isingashandi*' (a knobkerrie [used here as a metonymy for a penis] that does not work). *Isingashandi* could also imply that the penis is of no use [since it is not used for sex or childbearing, as expected].

[4] Specifically, among the Ndau, as one participant said "*Murume anorodzerwa gwiringwi, mukadzi wawakaramba uri mupenyu tokupa wafa*" (A man who dies without ever having married is buried with a carved wooden doll that resembles a wife whom the man failed to have in real life). The participant further explained that boys who do not seem to do well in preparing towards becoming fathers and husbands are often teased "*iwe ukafa tichakurodzera gwiringwi*" (when you die, we will carve a 'doll wife' for you). So, male singleness is equally stigmatised among the Shona.

[5]This is drawn from a discussion with a friend from Kenya.

had children outside wedlock with men they did not marry. Such women are derogatorily known as *mvana*. As Serena Dankwa opines, "motherhood is an important avenue to become a woman and accumulate power" (2021, 175). Yet, for Shona women who bear children outside wedlock, this power is not guaranteed, as they often face social stigma.

Beyond the experiences of unmarried mothers, other forms of singlehood, such as widowhood and divorce revealed further complexities in Shona customs. Widows, in particular, represent a distinct category of singlehood, as they are considered to remain married beyond death of their spouse (see Oduyoye 1995, 136). If a widow refused to take part in levirate marriage (*kugarwa nhaka*), which was permissible because she could choose one of her sons to step into the fatherly role – she was, nevertheless expected to live without a romantic partner. In that case, any sex that she might engage in while in her matrimonial home was and is still equated to "*kusvibisa musha wevanhu*" (desecrating people's home [by implication, the home of her husband and his family].

Interestingly, there seems to be no Shona term for divorcees. Even the concept of divorce itself does not have a direct translation but phrases like *kuparara kwemhuri* (the destruction of family) are used. That phrase as well refers to *family* and not to marriage ending. While this lack of a term to describe a divorcee could suggest that divorce was rare, it was not always stigmatised. As one participant explained:

> *pachiManyika, kare vaiti mukwasha haaroori achipedza, saka vaiti chimbomirai kubvisa pfuma yasara, then kana vazoona kuti vagarisana ndipo pavaizopiwa zvakasara* (In Manyika culture, it was believed that a son-in-law should not pay the entirety of the *roora*. So he would be told to [pay part] and hold off paying the remainder, then, after ascertaining that the marriage was working, they [the bride's family] would accept what was left).

This suggests an understanding that marriage could fail, echoing Oduyoye's (1994, 168) observation that Akan parents reserved the right to dissolve their daughters' marriages if they proved unhappy or unfruitful. Similarly, according to Tamale (2020, 195) among the Baganda, Basoga, and Bagwere of Uganda married women (except wives of *kabakas* and chiefs) could leave abusive husbands and return to their natal homes, a practice known as *okunoba*.

Although, nowadays Shona women are expected to persevere within marriages, evidence from the Manyika example and examples in other African contexts suggests that there could be colonial origins in this expectation. As Tamale (2020, 95) notes, within the specific context of Uganda,

> when [colonial] native commissioners began to prescribe divorce and the return of bride wealth as a remedy for women's desertion or adultery, families began pressuring their daughters to remain in potentially life-threatening situations.

Tamale's analysis suggests that the pressure on women to remain in troubled marriages might have originated from colonial laws that made divorce financially burdensome for families. Even though similar arguments cannot be made with certainty in the Shona context, what we know is that the derogatory term used for divorcees, *madzoka*, is a recent development and is largely used in common parlance.

Madzoka is derived from *kudzoka* (to return). Once married, a Shona woman leaves her family to join her husband's family and build a new home, as is typical in patrilocal societies. Upon divorce or separation, the woman is sent back or returns to her family. *Madzoka* (a returnee) is drawn from this idea of a woman 'going' to a husband's home in marriage and returning to her natal home in divorce. The term is widely considered derogatory. As one participant noted, *"madzoka kutuka"* (*madzoka* is a form of insult*).*

Even though the dominant perception is that *madzoka* is an insult, its English slang version 'returning soldier' may carry some positive connotations. The image of a 'returning soldier' evokes survival and resilience – having endured battle and returned alive though sometimes carrying post-traumatic stress disorder. This alternative reading resonates with the narratives of divorced women explored in this article.

Given potential colonial entanglements in perceptions of divorce, Tamale's proposed strategies of African feminist reconstruction become pertinent. They include embracing *Ubuntu*. In her own words, *Ubuntu*

> [c]arries additional potential and promise to address African women's subordination and oppression. In other words, the core values of communitarianism, humanness and egalitarianism enshrined in Ubuntu can be strategically deployed to operationalize gender justice, albeit after a careful interrogation and historicization of the concept itself. (Tamale 2020, 143).

While Tamale here speaks about the utility of *Ubuntu* in addressing women's subordination in broad terms, one could use the same strategy to recover the narratives of divorce, singleness and marriage from ideologies that demonise female singleness in particular – ideologies that are not only cultural, but also represent attitudes rooted in colonial legacies.

A critical appraisal of the concept of *Unhu* reveals that divorce was not always stigmatised in Shona traditions. However, leaning on *Unhu* philosophy to retrieve respectability for single women does not necessarily mean that we become blind to their stigmatisation in Shona cultures. We must still acknowledge that *dying without a family* and especially without a child is associated with shame. We can also not ignore the verbal violence and stigma in terms such *mvana* and *tsikombi* noted earlier, and the reality that there is no equivalent term for their male counterparts who have children outside wedlock.

Stigmatisation of single women in (post)colonial religious, social and political contexts

Beyond their ambivalent treatment in traditional contexts, unmarried women have historically been marginalised in colonial settings and continue to do so in postcolonial Zimbabwe. For a long time, they struggled to secure a "legitimate space in urban public spaces" (Jeater 2000, 41). Under colonial rule, section 51 of the Native Affairs Act, Chapter 72, "forbade single women to live in the urban areas without the consent of their male guardians" (Scarnecchia 1997, 107). Legalised housing was for men, single and married, but as time went on, some of these regulations were relaxed to accommodate single women, though available options were not always the best. Hostels were constructed to accommodate single women, but restrictions such as curfews were put in place to control women's movement, and those with children could not bring them to the hostels. These controls were rooted in colonial anxieties about sexually transmitted diseases, which led European administrators to police women's movement to curb the incidence of syphilis (Scarnecchia 1997, 67). Single women's 'uncontrolled' sexuality in this incident was conceptualised as a 'danger … and root of disease' (Arnfred 2004, 67).

This marginalisation of single women in urban areas during colonialism persisted in the early years after independence. As Jeater (2000, 41) notes,

> by the 1980s, the belief that women, especially single women, could not have a legitimate place in urban public spaces, had become deeply rooted in Zimbabwean gender constructions, as evidenced by the notorious 'round-ups' of single women from the streets in 1984 and 1986.

Beyond the 1980s, and on multiple occasions, the Zimbabwean police mounted 'Operations', during which unaccompanied women were arrested arbitrarily in raids

conducted at night. Subsequent operations such as Operation *Chipo Chiroorwa* [6] (Chipo [a woman's name], it is time to get married) in 2007, reinforced patriarchal and cultural assumptions that every woman should get married (Chitando and Mateveke 2012, 44), even as they targeted sex workers.

When missionary Christianity introduced a new form of monogamous marriage, they made a point of demonising divorce. What is known today as *muchato* (wedding), often used to describe church or court weddings is, linguistically and conceptually, deeply rooted in colonialism. Oral history has it that the Shona verb *kuchata* /to wed/get married – literally *ku* (to/at) charter [7] – was derived from the journey to register marriages with the colonial administrators. The noun *muchato* (wedding) was drawn from *kuchata*.

The various ways in which *muchato* was used within missionary churches further marginalised unmarried women. In mission churches such as the colonial Anglican church, for example, women's movements excluded unmarried women, privileging those with solemnised marriages (or those with *muchato*). Women's fellowships within the colonial church were women-only spaces that inherently marginalised those who were neither wives nor mothers (Haddad 2016).

Widows were accommodated in this framework, particularly if their marriages were solemnised. Compared to divorcees, they tend to be more accepted across most denominations. As one divorcee stated *"zvinotambirika kunzi wakafirwa kupinda kurambwa" (*it's more acceptable to be a widow than a divorcee). This perception is largely rooted in Christian teachings that discourage divorce. For instance, one Jehovah's Witness participant cited Malachi 2: 16: "'For I hate divorce!' says the LORD,

[6] The name of the operation was drawn from one of the most remembered celebratory songs of pre-independence Zimbabwe, "*Chipo chiroorwa tipemberere*" (Chipo get married so that we can celebrate) by Zexie Manatsa and the Green Arrows.

[7] I heard this story from a friend, Pedzisai Maedza, who heard the story from her paternal aunt Tete Tariro Maedza.

the God of Israel". This stigma is further reinforced by expressions like "*ndosaka wakasiiwa nemurume*" (that is why you were left by your husband) which implies blame and shame toward divorcees.

Although changes have been made to the composition of women's movements – including the creation of single women's associations, the incorporation into some of youth groups of women in prolonged singlehood – much remains unchanged. Even with reforms that allow some unmarried women to join, because marital issues remain the core principle in running such groups, many single women, even after becoming members, do not attend meetings regularly. This is manifest(ed) in one divorcee's statement "I avoid *Ruwadzano* because *ndingori ini*" (I am alone [taken to mean: I am the only one, without a husband]). The verb *kuwadzana*, from which the word *Ruwadzano* is drawn, means coming together in friendship and harmony. The single women's decision to absent themselves from *Ruwadzano* meetings, represents their agency as much as it disrupts the spirit of *Kuwadzana*. It paradoxically highlights division rather than the sense of community implied by the name *ruwadzano*. The tension in *Ruwadzano* captured here challenges ideal notions of community represented in women's movements, which, as I demonstrate later, also highlights the exclusionary tendencies of African feminisms.

Some denominations have progressed and formed singles' associations. However, even these singles-only spaces embody contradictions – they offer care and community while reinforcing norms of controlled sexuality and moral respectability. One participant revealed that in the Catholic guild for single ladies – the Saint Monica Guild – in some parishes, a married woman is appointed to act as the group's *vatete* (aunt), "*vekushanda navo vachivaraira" (*who works with the *single women*, counselling them). This arrangement infantilises single women, because *kuraira,* the role that is

played by the aunt is traditionally an intergenerational practice, in which older women counsel younger girls on appropriate social and sexual behaviour.

In many of these efforts to accommodate single women, one notices the persistent hegemony of marriage and married women, ambivalences, contradictions and displays of exclusion, even within structures that are supposed to address exclusionary tendencies. In addition to such hegemony within post-colonial churches in Zimbabwe, the narratives of single women reveal deep-seated animosity between them and married women. This is further complicated by what I term a complex gendered subalternisation of single women, that is evident in perceptions of their sexuality and sexual lives (Mangena 2025).

I note that in Shona contemporary communities, single women are stereotyped as husband snatchers or home wreckers or ‘small houses’ (label for women who date married men). I trace these stereotypes to at least three sources: for one thing, that they are based on the reality that some single women do indeed date married men and that may have strained some marriages (Mangena 2025). Furthermore, these stereotypes are co-created by both married women and men. As one divorcee stated “*vari married havadi kutiona*. *Vanotyira varume vavo*” (married women do not want to see us. They are afraid for their husbands [read: they are afraid we might snatch their husbands]). Yet, men – particularly those who regard unmarried women as sexually available – reduce them to objects of desire (Mangena 2025). Collectively, these ideas highlight broader gendered concerns accounting for the demeaning identities attributed to unmarried women.

These varied contexts, in which unmarried women are stigmatised, underscore the value of intersectionality in decolonising African feminisms. To borrow Tamale’s words, such contextual knowledge “activates awareness of the fluidity and dynamism”

of unmarried women's vulnerabilities (2020, 45). In the case of unmarried Shona women, an intersectional lens demands attention not only to tradition, but also to the (post)colonial religious, legal and social orders that have reinforced the hegemony of marriage. A decolonial African feminist lens resists both the romanticisation of the past and the normalisation of contemporary stigma of female singleness. It also requires an appraisal of intragender dynamics, especially where married women participate in marginalising their unmarried counterparts. The marginalisation of single women also finds troubling echoes in spaces that purport to be liberatory – such as African feminisms – an issue I also highlight in the next section.

African feminisms and narratives of divorcees: rethinking marriage and divorce

Proponents of indigenous forms of African feminisms (Nkealah 2016) often held ambiguous, if not exclusionary, attitudes toward unmarried women, including divorced women. That ambiguous relationship in many ways challenged the idea of community within African feminisms, a sense of community encapsulated in its apt description as a movement concerned with the plight of the womenfolk in Africa, from the African viewpoint, to mirror their realities (Ahikire 2014).

Some early African women scholars rejected the concept and label feminism as western. Instead, they created other labels such as Motherism, Stiwanism, Femalism, Nego-feminism, etc., all of which are connected in many ways, including in the way that these proponents "take a look into *African* histories and cultures to draw from them appropriate tools for empowering women and enlightening men" (Nkealah 2016, 63). Moreover, early African women scholars also dismissed 'feminists' as women who had abandoned African cultures, and especially the value accorded to marriage and motherhood (Arndt 2002, 21). Ama Ata Aidoo is on record, for example, as having declared, "feminism. You know how we feel about that embarrassing western philosophy? The destroyer of homes. Imported mainly from America to ruin nice

African homes" (1989, 34). Connected to its rejection was the way in which feminism became associated "negatively with women who have 'difficulty' relating to men - that is, difficulty in keeping their marriages intact, through thin and thick" (Oduyoye 1994, 169).

In forming an Africa-based movement that challenged the hegemony of Western feminism, it was crucial and understandable to deploy cultural relativism (Eze 2015, 310). Unfortunately, that also contributed to negative attitudes towards women who choose to live outside of marriage, fail to get married, or have failed marriages.

While literary writers have especially managed to "complicate the notion of African cultures" (Eze 2015, 311), negative perceptions about the intersections of feminism, and especially divorce, remain alive in some quarters. A very good illustration is the following citation from a scholar writing about Nigerian literature:

> The ascription of bravery to women who trumpet divorce and absconding (sic) from home for every challenge in marriage or perceived injustice against them, can increase the cases of divorce witnessed in Nigeria today. It is a recipe for amplifying the number of broken homes and single mothers in the country, many of whom echo divisive chants and deride men in public, as part of the praxis of African feminisms. (Amaefula 2021, 303).

This echoes the argument that keeping a marriage intact through thick and thin is a positive thing and failing to persevere is negative, as it destroys families. In the specific context of my study, male participants during group discussion concurred that "*Maequal rights auraya dzimba. Submission yanga iriko even mubhaibheri. The husband is the head. Hamugoni kuenzana mumba. Mukaita masimuka tienzane musha unoparara*" (equal rights have destroyed homes. The submission of wives existed even in the Bible. The husband is the head. You cannot be equal in the home. If you claim equality, the home will be destroyed)" (Focus group 2, 10 March 2024). However, these

narratives that ‘nice African homes’ were or are disturbed by feminism and feminists are contested in the divorcees’ narratives that I evoke in this section.

I find a connection between what is described as the women’s failure to “keep marriages intact through thin and thick” and the expectation, within contemporary Shona communities, that women in bad marriages should simply learn to endure. This is reflected in the common advice given to married women experiencing marital problems: “*ndizvo zvinoita dzimba”* (that is how marriages are). This narrative that “that’s how marriages are” normalises violence and other harmful behaviours within marriages. I highlight narratives of divorcees as examples of stories that explicitly challenge such conservative and problematic views about marriage and divorce that were deeply rooted in earlier forms of African feminisms. Here, I focus specifically on some of the women’s responses to my questions about their reasons for divorce, the differences between their marital experiences and how these compare to their lives post-divorce, as well as the women’s thoughts about remarriage.

Figure 1: Summary of key themes emerging from participants' responses

Why divorce?	Lfe post-divorce	About remarriage
- Husbands had (multiple), (prolonged), (open) extramarital affairs, often moving in with other women or marrying second wives. - Domestic violence or abuse which included physical, verbal and emotional abuse. Embodiment of physical and emotional abuse included scars such as broken teeth or signs of minor stroke - Lack of support or neglect: included emotional neglect, abandonment (especially where wife and children stayed in rural home while husband worked in town or elsewhere). - Problems with in-laws especially mothers-in-law who, in some cases disapproved of the wife or interfered in the marriage. - Financial issues: included poverty, mismanagement of family funds. - Educational or social incompatibility, especially where the wife was more educated than the husband. This triggered other issues such as physical and verbal abuse. - Serious offense like rape committed by the husband. - Spiritual (Chivanhu) causes for divorce including avenging spirits (*ngozi*) or curses linked to crimes committed by fathers and grandfathers. In this belief system, unfulfilled marriage promises are thought to be repaid in kind—through (spiritual) marriage itself which disturbed physical marriages.	- Many women described gaining financial independence, personal freedom and a sense of self-worth after divorce: improved appearance and selfcare; peace of mind and better health - Several narratives highlighted how divorce was a means of escaping abusive or oppressive relationships. - Others faced financial challenges after divorce, despite independence, hostility and lack of support from natal family, social stigma and loss of status in community and church. - Some women experienced ambivalence: missing aspects of marriage like co-parenting or social status; acknowledging kindness in ex-husbands	- Many expressed no desire to remarry. *Reason* 1. Remarriage complicates raising of childre from previous marriages. 2. Chronic illnesse such as cancer and HIV and AIDS; 3. Pa trauma. Negative experiences in previou marriages. - Some expressed a desire to remarry, believing the value of companionship, e.g., *Kungovaw vaviri kwakanaka* (being in a couple is good), b faced obstacles such as limited dating poo Few available never married man (*majaya*) widowers or divorces. Most available men we already married and uninterested in polygam Some were cheated by potential suitors. - Some expressed desire for remarriage only cases where they would occupy positions power within those marriages - Some divorcees who chose not to or failed remarry, still engaged in sexual relationships assert their right to sexual autonomy ar freedom. Their motivations included: 1. Havir sex for mere enjoyment, carnal or bod pleasure, or for play or fun. 2. Viewing sex as natural expression of one's humanity, as frame in the following 'A human being cannot liv 'alone' [read: without a sexual partner]); 'since am only human, I am romantically involved wi someone' (Mangena 2025).

Why divorce?

I retell the story of Chiedza's divorce, which offers a compelling lens through which to explore some of the reasons women choose not to persevere in difficult marriages. Chiedza, not her real name, was a 48-year-old divorcee. She told her story during a testimony at a church event organised by and for single women by a particular denomination in Zimbabwe:

> *Imba yangu ndaiida, uye haisi mhosva yangu mama kuti ndakazosiya. Ndakaita mureturn, situation yakanga yasvika pasingaiti. Ndaifundawo mvura, sekudzidziswa kwatinoitwa kuchurch, asi pamwe pacho yanga isingafundiki mvura yacho. 15 years in marriage, mama handina kuroorwa. Handina kugamuchirwa, vamwene navatezvara vakaramba kundishonongora. Asi ndakashingirira. Pamwe pacho waiti wakafunda mvura kudaro, murume ouya mumba okutokonya, aona wakanyarara, oita weti mugaba okudira.* (I genuinely wanted my marriage to work mother, and it' s not my fault that it ended in divorce. I became a "returned soldier" because my marriage had become unbearable. I kept my mouth filled with water [read to mean: practiced silence], as we are taught in church, but there were times when it was incredibly difficult to stay silent. Although I was in that marriage for 15 years, I never truly felt married. My in-laws *never accepted me,* but I persevered. Even when I was practising silence, my ex-husband would provoke me. At times, realising I wouldn't respond, he would urinate in a container and throw it in my face).

This story challenges the negative perceptions of "*women who have difficulties in keeping their marriage intact*." It represents a powerful image of a dysfunctional marriage and a divorcee's agency in leaving the marriage. Chiedza illustrates that the marriage was problematic from the beginning as her mother- and father-in-law did not accept her – symbolised by their refusal to perform the ritual of *kushonongora*. This ritual involves members of the bride's new family giving her gifts to welcome her into

her matrimonial home. When performed by the mother-in-law and father-in-law, *kushonongora* carries even greater symbolic weight. Without this gesture, Chiedza argues that the marriage people say she has 'returned from,' never truly existed in principle.

It is significant that she addresses her mother directly in the narrative, particularly when she says, "*imba yangu ndaiida, uye haisi mhosva yangu mama kuti ndakazosiya"* (I genuinely wanted my marriage to work and it's not my fault mother that it ended in divorce). Mothers often encourage their daughters to persevere (*kushingirira)* in marriages, even in difficult circumstances. In this context, maternal figures – mothers, grandmothers and aunts – embody what Portia Phalafala (2020) describes as matriarchives (matrilineal repositories of indigenous knowledges). However, divorcees such as Chiedza have learned that these ideas sometimes contradict their understanding of an acceptable married life.

Kushingirira, combined with *kufunda mvura* (keeping silent) as Chiedza explained, could not even save her marriage. The teaching about *kushingirira* is done in the everyday practice of *kuraira*, which is an oral Shona practice even in mundane contexts. The church teaches women to be silent (Hinga 2017, 145), and that a good woman is one who remains silent (Moyo 2005, 131). However, *kufunda mvura* and *kushingirira* both perpetuate domestic violence and husbands' domination and abuse in marriages. It is possible to argue that left unchallenged, men are free to be and do what they want, while their wives suffer in silence.

Paradoxically, there is a way in which a woman who keeps silent when her husband expects her to speak, uses her silence to trouble him. As one divorcee recounted, her husband would not spend his nights at home, and she would not ask him where he had been. For that reason, he would beat her. In her words, "*ndaive ndisingamubvunzi*

kuti airarepi paanga asingauyi kumba. Saka ndiyo mhosva yandairoverwa. 'Sei usingandibvunzi kuti ndanga ndiripi?'" (I would not ask him where he had slept when he did not come home. So that is the crime that I was beaten for. 'Why are you not asking me where I was?'). This woman would keep quiet not because she believed that the man was right in his actions, but very likely to spite him. This story illustrates the ambivalence of silence: it can be both a tool of suppression and a means of subversion. After all, 'not having a mouth' "is not always merely a helpless gesture or a capitulation, but can also be a resource" (Weiss 2004, 14–15).

In Shona communities, there is a cultural norm that promotes silence by discouraging women and family members from speaking about issues that occur within the privacy of their homes, which is referred to as *kusafukura hapwa* (not exposing one's armpits). As Oduyoye (1995, 131) notes in a different but related context, the home becomes "a world of secrets, *which* often hides a multitude of wrongs". Although this is done to protect the integrity of the family, it allows bad things, including different forms of violence, to continue unabated. This taboo is broken by women who leave dysfunctional marriages and verbalise the difficult times they have experienced within such marriages. Arguably, then, Chiedza's narrative shows that divorce could be an initial step for women to assert their agency, find their voice, and openly share their experiences in marriage. It also highlights the need to view speaking up as a means of social transformation. To cite Oduyoye (1995, 131), if people were to know that "the rags of domestic affairs" can be hung in public, that would constitute motivation to "not getting them so tattered in the first place". From this perspective, *kufukura hapwa*, traditionally believed to be shameful, from Chiedza's story and Oduyoye's perspectives, could serve as a necessary form of accountability and may be a means to reforming personal relations.

Life post-divorce

When I interviewed some divorcees and asked them to compare their married lives to their lives after divorce, they gave interesting narratives. One, a 29-year-old single mother, explained that *"Iyezvino ndiri kurarama zvakanaka ndisina murume. Ndine murume ndanga ndakasakara. Kupinda mumarriage yaitove nhamo, but nhamo iyoyo yakatowedzera mumarriage*" (I now have a better life without a husband. When I was with my husband, I looked worn-out. Initially, I got married because of poverty or troubles, but my poverty or troubles only worsened in the marriage). Another 62-year-old single mother and grandmother recounted her personal experiences with divorce and marriage as follows: *"Ndiri kumurume ndaive nenhamo yaionekwa nemunhu wose. Ndairarama nemashamba. Murume anga asingashandi, ini ndini ndaitoshandira mhuri*" (When I was married, it was evident to everyone that we were living in poverty. I had to rely on pumpkins to sustain myself. My husband did not work, so I was the one who worked to provide for our family*)*.

Significantly, both above-cited women frame their understanding of marriage in patriarchal terms: that, it is the prerogative of the man, as the head of the family, to provide for his children and wife, who are dependent on him. Yet, outside of marriage, their lives improve because they have ceased to be economic dependents and have started to work to sustain themselves. In contemporary cultures, marriage is often framed as a marker of success for women. For instance, a TikTok video by @chiemasiziba humorously depicts marriage as an escape from poverty; symbolised by the smoothing away of cracks in feet (*man'a*), access to a bed, migration from the village to the city, and homeownership through marriage. This aligns with how girls are socialised to aspire towards marriage for material benefit: *"Kutsvaga kuroorwawo kumisha iri nani pane yavo" (*to look out for marriage in households that are better-off than theirs*)*. However, the narratives of divorced women cited above disrupt this framing. Their experiences suggest that marriage is not a guaranteed path to greater material well-being. These narratives also underscore the intersection between gender

and class, revealing how economic precarity both motivates marriage and complicates its dissolution.

These few cases in which women demonstrate that their lives improved after divorce are not, however, intended to generalise women's experiences of divorce. Indeed, some divorcees, while noting that their post-divorce lives were better materially, regretted the loss of a husband through divorce, as is exemplified by a woman who lamented that:

> *Murume wangu anga ari munhu ari right, problem yake kwaiva kusada kushanda. Anga ane tsitsi. Ndakarwarirwa nemwana akashaika, iniwo ndikarwara, asi aindichengeta achitondigezesa. Ndakatarisa upenyu hwangu ndine murume ndinoona sekuti pandakaroorwa ndipo pandakatanga kutambura. Iyezvino upenyu hwangu hutori right* (my ex-husband was a good person, but his problem was that he did not want to work. He was empathetic and when my child became sick and died, and when I also fell ill, he took care of me, and even bathed me. Reflecting on my married life, I realise that my poverty/troubles began when I got married. Now [after the divorce], my life is actually alright).

This narrative offers a complex portrayal of both marriage and divorce. It illustrates the co-existence of hardship and care within marriage, as well as material improvement alongside emotional ambivalence after divorce. Thus, it complicates one-dimensional interpretation of either institution.

About remarriage

Some of the divorcees that I interviewed expressed a willingness to remarry if they could be in control within the new marriage. I interpret these desires for gendered power as a defining feature of the subversion of marriage undertaken by women who have experienced divorce. One such example is a divorcee, over 50 years of age, who articulated her stance as follows:

Handidi kuroorwa, ndoda kuroora. *Ndichitozodzinga murume wacho ndichimuudza kuti patakatamba pakakwana (*I do not want to *be* married but to marry. I will actually end up sending the man away, telling him that we have played together long enough).

Another participant, insisted:

Ndave ne23 years tasiyana. *Ndave nemidzi yeusingle, handichatongeki*. *Uye handichadi zvemurume wekuti ndigoteerera*. *Ini ndingatoda murume wekuuya achisuka iye* (I have been divorced for twenty-three years. I am deeply rooted in singleness; I cannot be easily controlled [dominated] anymore. I no longer want a husband that I must just obey – I would prefer one who does the dishes).

These two anecdotes highlight how some divorced Shona women articulate radical visions of female agency in marriage, reflecting a broader contestation of traditional gender norms. These narratives do not merely subvert marriage norms but rather signal an evolving negotiation of gender roles, one that challenges cultural constraints while opening new possibilities of 'doing family'. For instance, when the first participant says "*handidi kuroorwa; ndoda kuroora*" (I do not want to be married; I want to marry), she is purposefully asserting her agency in a social context where men possess the agency to marry as emphasised by the verb *kuwana* (to marry), which only men can perform. Even as they emphasise female desire for power and control, they also reveal the ways in which personal experiences of divorce reshape women's perspectives on intimacy and partnership.

Rather than viewing divorce as evidence of failure or man-hating, the narratives of Shona divorcees compel us to rethink how marriage, as currently structured, often reproduces harm for many women, and to interrogate it within African feminist discourse. As mentioned earlier, feminism has come to be associated with many bad outcomes in Africa, such as divorce. However, the narratives of Shona divorcees that I invoked here challenge the stigmatisation of divorce. Arguing with Oduyoye, these

women “ask simply to be human” (1994, 169). When a woman leaves a marriage because, as one of my participants put it, ‘things had gotten out of control’ and goes on to lead a fulfilling life, in which she is sexually active and economically stable, she is asserting her full humanity. So how can African feminisms be reimagined to include such women in its agendas? In reimagining African feminisms, “the integrality of humanity” (Marah, as cited in Tamale 2020, 25) among all women must be centered, recognising that all women, including those previously marginalised ones such as those considered non-normative, deserve dignity and respect. Valorising their experiences and struggles should be central to any inclusive vision of African feminisms.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the experiences of divorced women, particularly those of the Shona women, expose a significant critical blind spot in African feminist discourses: the limited theorisation of African womanhood outside the bounds of heteronormative marriage. I proposed that a decolonial African feminist lens offers tools to expand African feminisms to be more inclusive of women whose lives unfold outside the institution of marriage, an institution that early African feminists upheld as a core pillar of social cohesion.

The strategies that I employed in this article included re-centering the lived experiences of divorced women, particularly through the Shona language, which shapes how these women articulate their realities and ways of knowing and being known. I also highlighted how colonial and missionary legacies introduced rigid social norms around marriage, norms that persist, despite some efforts within the Zimbabwean Christian denominations to effect reforms.

This article's key intervention lies in elevating the epistemic and political significance of divorced women's perspectives within African feminisms. These perspectives, grounded in lived experience, challenge dominant narratives that figure singlehood – especially that acquired through divorce – as inherently problematic. Such narratives often imply that marriage, by virtue of its ubiquity should not be interrogated or challenged. Yet, as Kislev notes, such stereotypes "hurt both singles and couples" (2023, 3). Stigmatising divorce may pressure women to persevere in dysfunctional marriages. The narratives of divorced women enabled critical insights that resist the romanticisation of marriage and its normative authority. Without idealising divorce or vilifying marriage, these narratives represent a complex picture: divorce is not beneficial for all women, because, while some informants experience financial and personal growth, others struggle post-divorce.

In exploring the struggles of divorced Shona women, it became evident that, although these women do not form a homogeneous group or identify as feminists, and such a concept has no equivalent term in their language – through which they make sense of life, and the world – their aspirations for justice, dignity and a good life resonate deeply with the values at the core of African feminist thought, and feminism more broadly. Interestingly, women who walk out of marriage have been negatively associated with Western feminism, or framed as individualistic even though, as I have illustrated, the values they pursue through divorce – such as dignity, respect, and peace – are at the core of *Unhu*, an indigenous relational ethics.

The direction that African feminisms need to take, therefore, involves rethinking their priorities and embracing the "inert complexities of African women's lived experiences" (Mangena 2025, 20) as central to their discourses. These complexities often shaped by (colonial) history, and sociocultural realities call for a more nuanced engagement. This may require a willingness to confront the movement's ghosts: to trace its silences

and reckon with what has been left unsaid, unspoken, and unknown. Such a reckoning could open pathways for more inclusive and context-sensitive feminist praxis.

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