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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Kubereka: singleness, childlessness and non-biological mothering in Shona culture

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the Shona concept of *kubereka* (procreation or carrying a child on the back) to examine never-married women's experiences of joys and anxieties surrounding (non)biological mothering in a socio-cultural context whose constructions of parenthood and motherhood reveal multiple contradictions. Shona cultural norms suggest that 'everyone has a child' in the sense that kinship systems always position individuals as parents in some relational form. However, women, particularly single ones, without biological children, continue to face stigma and exclusion. Although child rearing in Shona communities is a collective responsibility involving non-biological caregivers, such single women, who like others, perform mothering roles through nurturing, are still stigmatized for being childless and without a family. This tension generates complex emotional and social pressures. By centring the lived realities of single and childless women and advocating for a rethinking of the broader conception of motherhood, this study highlights 'perspectives grounded in single life' to illuminate how the experiences of women are often underexplored in dominant African feminist discourses. In doing so, it provides a culturally grounded analysis of reproductive gendered female identities, contributing to the growing interdisciplinary dialogue on the intersections of African feminisms and decolonial singles studies.

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Introduction

In this article, I centre the experiences of never-married and childless Shona women who nurture non-biological children, exploring how they negotiate social expectations and pressures to bear children in a complex socio-cultural context that valorizes heterosexuality, marriage and motherhood as key features of gendered social identities.

I focus on the lived experiences of never-married and childless Shona women of Zimbabwe, who raise non-biological children against the backdrop of three intersecting silences: the scarcity of research on single women in the Global South (Brosius et al, 2024, p. 4); the relative neglect by early African feminists of women whose sexual and reproductive life fall outside normative expectations (Tamale, 2020); and the unacknowledged

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productive ways in which women who have never married and have no biological children contribute to raising children within many Shona families and communities. Analysing the experiences of these women, I draw on the concept of *kubereka* – which refers to both biological procreation and broader acts of nurturing – to illuminate a culturally specific context that complicates and enriches understandings of female singlehood.

African women's experiences and voices are at the core of African feminisms, and African indigenous concepts – such as *kubereka* – occupy a crucial place in decolonial methodologies. Decolonizing research methods, as Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues, involves 'rethinking and unthinking dominant ways of producing knowledge' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019, p. 481). Centring African epistemologies, such as the critical concept *kubereka*, therefore, fits into what Pasch Mungwini, terms 'critical reappropriation of indigenous knowledges' intended to salvage and revitalize African forms of knowing and traditions, to contribute 'towards changing the global knowledge landscape' (Mungwini, 2013, p. 79).

While, culturally, in Shona communities, every woman is believed to have a child – in the sense that there is always someone within one's family who relates to a woman as mother – *kubereka* is almost always associated with childbearing, which is no surprise, given that this is the first meaning of the word. In this article, however, I highlight another meaning, beyond the childbearing which I derive from *kubereka*, as the act of carrying a baby on one's back. This sense of *kubereka* represents a key childcare practice among the Shona. The item used to carry babies on one's back is derivatively called *mbereko*. When a married woman bears children, people say *ane mbereko*. So *mbereko*, just like *kubereka* has a double meaning – it can both refer to the item used to carry babies on one's back and a woman's ability to bear children. For single childless women who raise non-biological children, therefore, we could still say '*vane mbereko*', meaning that they are procreative through the affective labour they provide to raise non-biological children. In this context, I use the concept of 'affective labour' to mean 'work that generates intense responsibility' and 'as reproductive work' that belongs to 'the archipelagos of unpaid activities carried out in the home' (Federeci, 2012, pp. 70, 71). In this way, we extend reproductive mothering to include mothering roles carried out by raising children.

Drawing on *kubereka* as the act of carrying a baby on one's back, combined with the symbolic reproductive sense of childrearing, I think through not only the social, emotional and financial burdens and responsibilities carried by never-married women without biological children, but also the forms of agency, resilience and care that emerge in their practices of *kubereka*. The main questions that I ask are: how do they perform and experience *kubereka*? How are they perceived by society and their own families? What can this reveal about singlehood among the Shona?

Central to my argument is the seeming paradox of a 'tremendous importance attached to parenthood' and 'a high incidence of children being reared by persons other than their biological parents', which has also been broadly highlighted by Hillary Page in an article on the role of others in social reproduction in Sub-Saharan Africa (Page, 1989, pp. 401–402). Although this is an important work, it risks making generalizations across diverse and complex African cultures and does not examine the position of the 'others' who raise children through the lens of Singles Studies. To the best of my knowledge, there is little to no scholarly work on the intersections of motherhood, parenthood, childlessness and

singlehood, especially privileging the perspective of never-married childless Shona women who raise non-biological children. On the one hand, African feminisms have not engaged with this subject, and on the other, there is a dearth of scholarship in Singles Studies based on the experiences of women within African cultures. The article boldly intervenes by theorizing *kubereka* as a feminist concept of nurturance and expands the scope of African feminist enquiry into women's reproductive and relational lives. In this sense, it contributes to scholarship that has begun to illuminate how 'mothering could look when imagined, practised and lived outside of patriarchy' (Debele, 2023, p. 136). At the same time, it challenges conceptions of singleness – prevalent in literature drawn from neo-liberal western contexts – as being equivalent to individualistic and solitary lives (see Kislev, in this special issue).

In the next section, I conceptualize the African feminist lens on singlehood, motherhood and parenthood in order to, on the one hand, introduce singlehood studies into African feminisms, and on the other, theorize singlehood using an African socio-cultural context. This theoretical framework section is followed by a short note on methods. A detailed discussion of contradictions in social perceptions of motherhood within Shona communities is then provided. In the penultimate section, I examine the narratives of childless single women about their experiences of raising children who are not biologically theirs, before making concluding remarks.

African feminist lens on female singlehood and non-biological motherhood

Although there is a wealth of scholarship on women, gender and sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa, it tends to centre on married women, and less so on single women without children. The sparse literature on single women in Africa includes work on their financial position (Mandeville, 1979); sexuality (Frahm-Arp, 2012; Mangena, 2025); representation in literature (Kwatsha, 2015); and their place in religion (Biri, 2021). Early African women scholars, some of whom refused to be identified as feminists, produced 'silences around issues of non-conforming sexualities and gender identities' (Tamale, 2020, p. 39). Commenting explicitly on African women theologians, Mercy Oduyoye remarked that few of them 'talk about women outside of marriage or family life' (Oduyoye, 1995, p. 199). These silences included condemnation of women who did not bear children. About childlessness specifically, it was asserted that 'no self-respecting African woman fails to bear children' (Mikell, 1997, p. 9).

Within the limited scholarship on single women in Zimbabwe, the experiences of never-married women without children are marginalized. In her book on single women in Pentecostalism, Kudzai Biri, for instance, centres single motherhood, effectively marginalizing never-married women without children. Even in associations for single women, which are predominant in churches in Zimbabwe, never-married women without children remain largely unaccounted for. By way of example, the single ladies' association in the Pentecostal Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (AFM) brings together Widows and Single Mothers (WISMO) and clearly excludes never-married women without children.

When female childlessness is discussed, the dominant perspectives are, and remain, those of married women (Akujobi, 2011; Oduyoye, 1999). Remi Akujobi's article suggests that childlessness only matters and happens within a marriage (Akujobi, 2011, p. 4). Oduyoye spoke, in a similar manner, and recounted a personal conversation with her

father, in which she pointed out that had she not been married, no one would have expected her to have children. As I illustrate in this discussion, however, childlessness plagues single women just as much.

To address this theoretical gap, and enrich and expand debates on childlessness, singlehood and African feminisms, I propose an African feminist lens on female singleness and motherhood, which is located at the intersections of African feminisms and Singles Studies. An African feminist lens is 'responsive to the conditions of African women's lives' (Dosekun, 2021, p. 1). Even as African feminisms depart from Western feminism, especially in terms of contextual grounding, they still affirm core feminist tenets such as the need for 'new ways of thinking about culture, language, morality or knowledge itself' (De Lauretis, 1986, p. 2). I deploy an African feminist lens on singlehood to examine how never-married Shona women navigate and contest cultural scripts around singleness, gender, personhood, childlessness and motherhood. This approach generates new knowledge into the ways in which these women's lives are simultaneously shaped by and resistant to dominant norms.

Singles studies in Africa is underdeveloped, yet it holds significant potential to expand critical debates in African and gender studies – particularly around sexuality, culture, family and modernity. Concepts such as *procremania* – coined by Craig Wynne to refer to 'the societal obsession with having children' (2020, p. 20) – offer productive analytical tools to these conversations. However, where African contexts are concerned, there is still a need to use specific African cultural frameworks. This article centres on the lived experiences of Shona single women without biological children – who nurture children notwithstanding – as a way of grounding this enquiry in Shona epistemology. Through the culturally embedded concept of *kubereka*, the analysis seeks to highlight the diverse (re)productive roles performed by single women without biological children while simultaneously showing how single women's lives matter, in and of themselves, beyond normative family structures. Whereas childlessness is conceptualized as a lack that forecloses productivity, *kubereka* enables that productivity.

A note on methods

This article is based on life story interviews with purposefully selected participants from rural, peri-rural and urban areas across Zimbabwe in fieldwork carried out between August 2023, and March 2024. The interviews were conducted in Shona language, and the translations provided in this paper are my own. Where I retain the original text, as such terms are not easily translatable, they become part of a 'creative repository of concepts' (Mbembe, 2016, p. 35) that could potentially shape discourses on singlehood.

This paper draws on narratives from twenty-two women who have never married, have been widowed or divorced and who are childless. The women's ages ranged from 29 to 65, and they came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. I focus on the Shona and do not intend to generalize about the African experience, as it is important to attend to the particular socio-cultural dynamics that shape singlehood differently across diverse ethnic groups within the continent. Although the women faced stigma in diverse ways due to their childlessness, even those who have raised children, their accounts must be

understood in the context of their diverse socio-economic situations, and often divergent life trajectories.

Many of the women were childless due to either social or biological circumstances. Some had been married and could not bear children, and by the time I interviewed them, their marriages had collapsed. Others had failed to get married, and had attempted, without success, to have children out of wedlock. Some, who had either never dated or were currently dating, had been waiting for the right partners up until their biological clocks ran out. All of the women were childless, but some had raised or were raising children belonging to their relatives.

I complement my participants' narratives with my own story as a single Shona woman without biological children. Documenting selected details of my life experiences relating to singleness, childlessness and experiences of caring for children who are not biologically mine, is, to quote Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 737) 'an important manner of knowing'. My standpoint is that of a single woman, who, according to Kristin Aune (in this special issue), uses singleness as 'a resource for understanding the social world'. I co-share the spaces of vulnerability and possibility that these women inhabit, as well as write myself into their stories as someone who partakes of their social worlds.

As a point of departure, childlessness is a sensitive and deeply intimate subject. For women who never married despite their efforts to do so, and who experience singleness as 'something they did not like', childlessness can carry an additional layer of emotional weight. I recall speaking to a woman, for instance, who cried during the interview when she recounted how her marriage of eight years had ended because she could not bear children. Although I recorded this incident in my fieldnotes, this scene remains vivid in my mind even today. And what do these tears signify? Even though all tears look alike, their meanings are shaped by the complex and often unspoken emotional landscapes that produce them. As Jerome Neu suggests, their differences 'lie in the thoughts that provoke them or that, however inadequately, they express' (Neu, 1987, p. 35). The tears of my participants made visible the often-silenced hurts and traumas experienced by childless women.

Contradictions and tensions around (non-biological) motherhood in Shona

Shona traditional cultures, besides being heteronormative, also adhere to marriage normativity and hetero-parentality, which I take to mean a privileging of biological and heterosexual parenthood. Two contemporary, social practices in Zimbabwe reinforce this societal expectation to marry and procreate. The first relates to the way in which, during public gatherings, and in other social contexts adults (male or female), regardless of their actual parental status, are often addressed as '*vabereki*' (parents), suggesting that adulthood is often conflated with parenthood. The second is where women are often addressed as 'mother', reinforcing the normative link between womanhood and motherhood.

The implicit and explicit ways in which biological motherhood and fatherhood are valorized within Shona communities is even evident in certain traditional rituals. In the past, when an adult died childless, for example, specific Shona burial rituals were performed. As one elderly participant explained:

When a mature childless individual [male or female] was close to death, the elders would say to him/her: Look, you are leaving this world without a family or children, so we give you this

child (a doll made out of a maize cob, even), to play with. If you have any grievances, you must direct them towards this doll. This ritual was intended to prevent the deceased from returning to haunt/take the children of others.¹

Although the physical setting has changed, nowadays, the ritual's core purpose remains, reinforcing the notion that dying without biological children disrupts norms in a social and cultural context where the dead and the living are spiritually connected. Relatedly, those who die without having offsprings are viewed as spiritually impure and even the 'purification ceremony which ensures admission into the spirit world is not carried out for them' (Mutambirwa, 1985, p. 277).

Over and above this unique way of burying individuals without children, there are certain places where married and unmarried women without children are discouraged from going. In Chiweshe area, for example, women without children are often discouraged from attending a *rushanga* which is dedicated to the protection of children. *Rushanga* is a traditional sacred place and shrine where people gather(ed) to petition for rain. Today, people can go to *rushanga* to make other requests, including seeking protection for their children. It can be conducted in a traditional manner or as an adapted Christian event, especially among African Initiated Churches, which typically value traditional cultures. One participant's explanation illuminates the logic of excluding the single and childless women from a *rushanga* dedicated for the protection of children:

Individuals without families do not go to a *rushanga* dedicated for the welfare of children, where parents 'pray/cry out [read make petitions]' for the well-being of their children. So, if a person does not have children, he/she does not go as he/she does not have any offspring to 'pray' for. If anything, such a person is prayed for by *his/her* parents since he/she is their child. At *rushanga*, the things spoken of relate to children, those who have children. 'I talk about my children, the next person talks about his/her children, this one does not have children or is not married. So, he/she should stand aside so that he/she does not get upset'.

Although this exclusion has been framed as a gesture of emotional care intended to protect the feelings of childless individuals (men or women), it also functions as a powerful mechanism of reaffirming normative expectations about womanhood and manhood. It is also possible, and indeed very likely, that some of the childless individuals pre-emptively avoid such spaces to shield themselves from potential emotional harm.

For many childless single women, these hurtful moments of exclusion are not isolated, but form a broader pattern observed across a range of social settings in modern Shona communities. Each of these events – baby showers, bridal showers, couples' meetings, family-centred church activities, Mother's Day or weddings – serves as a subtle and yet potent reminder to these women of their deviation from expected life trajectories, intensifying their experiences of marginalization.

Because of the place of children and motherhood within Shona cultures, the single women without children that I interviewed reported facing stigma in their everyday lives. They were especially upset by the question, often posed by their friends or distant relatives: 'You are Mrs who or Mother of who, now?' Through this question, people want to know whether a woman has a child or a husband, or both. A woman who has a child in Shona is often called by the name of her first child – Mai Anna (mother of Anna), for instance. The same term *mai* can be prefixed to a husband's surname to indicate one's married status, as in the example Mai Moyo, which means

'Mrs Moyo'. *Mai*, then, means 'mother of' or Mrs. It is worth noting, then, that the practice of naming women after their children or their husbands further reinforces the idea that a woman's status and respectability are derived from her relational roles rather than her individuality.

Given the cultural intertwining of womanhood, motherhood and marriage, therefore, women who are unmarried and do not have children may face social pressure, and marginalization within Shona communities. By way of illustration, I recall an uncomfortable family gathering where my childlessness attracted what I experienced as symbolic violence – a subtle form of emotional harm enacted through omission and silence. I had visited a relative with two of my cousins, both of whom are married with children. When we arrived, our host introduced my cousins to his other guest (who was not known to us), not by their first names but by the number of children they had, naming each child. When it came to introducing me, the host just looked in my direction and said nothing. The resultant silence hung awkwardly until one of my cousins intervened and said, 'This is Tendai; she is our eldest daughter'. While I am indeed family in that sense, the decision to skip over introducing me in the initial introductions felt deliberate.

I can only speculate about my relative's reasons. Arguably, he is probably more a victim of social conventions, and not malice on his part. In my early forties, I found myself rendered invisible, not because of what I was, but because of what I was not: a mother. Although this is a deeply personal experience, it exemplifies how women without children can have their social worth undermined in mundane places and in ways that reinforce patriarchal and heteronormative norms, which conflate women's identities with motherhood and wifehood. In both scenarios, women are not respected and valued for who they are. As Oduyoye explains (1999, p. 113), the pervading belief is, in most African cultures, 'human beings have to be linked to other people, and it is best if that link is to one's child'.

Be that as it may, this cultural landscape on women and motherhood is fraught with contradictions. Within this same Shona community – despite its emphasis on biological motherhood – some cultural beliefs and practices recognize and value other forms of motherhood. It is believed, among the Shona, that everyone has a child. Where women are concerned, this is because every woman is a mother to some children within her extended family. She is *maiguru* (big mother) or *mainini* (small mother) to the children of her sisters and paternal aunts, for example. Notwithstanding, the social terms *mainini* (younger mother) and *maiguru* (older mother) reveal that these *other* mothers are distinct from the biological mother. A woman is also a *tete* (aunt) to her brother's children. A paternal aunt (*tete*) is also known as *babakadzi* (female father). So, in these other roles, such as the one played by *babakadzi*, women can even perform parenting roles in ways that disrupt gender binaries.

Kinship ties such as those discussed above have been used in cases of childlessness within marriage in traditional Shona families. Wives who could not bear children were or are, for example, often assisted by a younger sister or brother's daughter (*mainini*). The *mainini* 'came/comes legitimately as a second wife' (Tatira, 2016, p. 125). Culturally, the children borne by the second wife belonged to the sister or aunt who could not bear children. Kinship roles also extend beyond procreation to shape social legitimacy in key rituals. For example, a *mainini* or *maiguru* can stand in for the biological mother in various social and cultural contexts. In some cases, the 'big' and 'small' mothers are considered more ritually legitimate than a woman who raised the child through daily care.

This preference for blood kinships becomes especially salient in instances where the biological mother is deceased. By way of example, one widow, who had raised the daughter of her late husband's brother after the death of both of the child's parents, recounted how, despite her years of caregiving, she was excluded from playing a maternal role at the child's *roora* (marriage ritual). The biological sisters of the deceased mother assumed those roles instead. Because the widow was a *mutorwa* (outsider/not a blood relative), her nurturing relationship could not confer legitimacy on her as mother. The participant described this cultural arrangement as *chivanhu chakabhenda* (warped tradition), implying that such customs distort and undervalue the moral weight of caregiving provided by non-biological mothers. The maternal items received by the 'mothers' included *mapfukudzadumbu* (baby kicks) – money given to the mother-in-law in appreciation for the time she carried her daughter in the womb – further reinforcing the privileging of biological mothering.

Although, traditionally speaking, no wife was divorced for not bearing children (Tatira, 2016) and a relative could be brought into her marriage to bear children for her, this did not mean childless wives were accorded respect. There is ample evidence that childless women still suffered in numerous ways, a reality vividly encapsulated in the Shona proverb '*kushaya mbereko ishamhu inorova asingadonhedzi misodzi*' (childlessness is like a whip which hits one who sheds no tears), which speaks to the silent and often invisible pain borne by such women. In a similar vein, as Oduyoye (1999, p. 116) argues in the context of West Africa, 'there is no empowering word and ceremony to strengthen what may, for many reasons, turn out to be a childless marriage'. This further demonstrates the subtle ways in which biological motherhood is always highly valued and implicitly determines women's value.

The kinship ties between the children of one's sisters and aunts, described earlier, were in the Shona past used to benefit women who, for reasons beyond their control – could not marry and bear children. A woman chosen to appease an avenging spirit (*kuripa ngozi*) would never be married. Instead, she would be given a child born to her younger sister to raise as her own. In return, the child would be expected to do everything for the woman. Some of the single women I interviewed also used this kinship custom to answer the uncomfortable question about motherhood. One participant noted that each time she visits her father, who still lives in the area where she grew up, people ask whose mother or wife she is. In response, she simply tells them she is *Mai* so and so, inserting the name of any of her nieces.

Even within a social structure that recognizes motherhood beyond biological reproduction – in the diverse ways described above – the stigma surrounding childlessness remains deeply entrenched. In the past, this was clearly underscored in the burial ritual for individuals without biological children highlighted earlier. While it is said that 'everyone has a child' – suggesting that parenthood extends beyond biology, the reluctance to allow childless individuals seek spiritual connections with the *children of others* in death reveals a deep-seated emphasis on biological lineage. Even when children of their siblings regard them as parental figures, such individuals are, in death, still viewed as childless.

This tension between normative ideals and lived realities is also visible in social and religious settings. For example, in some Catholic parishes in Zimbabwe, members of small Christian communities (known as sections) and guilds unite to celebrate family achievements and happy moments as well as offer each other support during

bereavement. Where children are concerned, different forms of support are only offered to biological children, often unintentionally marginalizing both women who raise non-biological children as well as the children themselves. This fits into the framework of what Kislev, in this special issue, termed ‘structural penalties’ – where the children raised by single women without biological children are not recognized, and the women’s care work in raising the children is disregarded each time biological motherhood is prioritized.

The strong emphasis on biological lineage drives many never-married women to have children, even outside marriage. Generally, in Shona, women who have children out of wedlock and remain unmarried do not enjoy the full power and privilege acquired through motherhood (Dankwa, 2021). Such women are stigmatized as *mvana*. Although the label *mvana* carries deep social stigma, particularly because such women are seen as defying the norms of marriage and respectability, it paradoxically coexists with a pragmatic tolerance – especially as prolonged singleness becomes increasingly common. For some unmarried Shona women, the idea of having a child or children outside of marriage is often framed – both by the women themselves and their families – as a socially acceptable trade-off in the absence of marriage.

The desire for motherhood among single women reflects a recalibration of priorities: it is not merely a substitution for marriage, but a reassertion of personal agency and access to social status in a culture that closely links identity to childbearing. In that regard, one participant narrated her struggle to have a child after getting married proved difficult. Although she managed to get pregnant multiple times, she unfortunately miscarried each time. In her determination to have a child, she underwent surgery twice to remove fibroids. She also shared the story of her cousin ‘who ended up just having a child’, after failing to get married. Yet another participant recounted how a friend encouraged her to ‘find someone to have a child with because *she* shall end up lonely, but if *she* has a child at least *she* will have someone *she* calls her own and *she* would not be this 40-year-old *barren* woman’. In some cases, even parents of single childless women put pressure on them by encouraging, ‘please try to have at least one child, so that we can have a grandchild’. This pressure to have children when marriage has failed is not just exerted by relatives and family of the single and childless women, but the women themselves often seem to embrace the idea.

While the Shona culture recognizes mothering beyond biological reproduction, the extent to which these other forms of mothering offer social validation remains ambiguous. Although care and nurturing are lauded, and mothering through kinship exists, true social legitimacy still seems tethered to biological reproduction. This represents a cultural and social set up that single women grapple with in complex ways, as I illustrate in the next section.

Testimonies of non-biological mothers

In this section, I discuss stories of single women who, despite having no biological children, are nonetheless raising and caring for children. I am especially interested in how they navigate the contradictions around non-biological mothering, especially as regards the lack, and recognition of the (emotional and financial) care they provide.

Never-married women without biological children who are mothers

During a church conference for single women organized by one denomination, a 65-year-old never-married woman testified: '*Handina kumboita mwana, asi ndine vana vakawanda*' (I have never had a child of my own, but I have many children). During group discussions held among delegates at the same conference, she elaborated that she had raised over fifteen children. Some participants in the discussion group – themselves never-married women without biological children – recognized some of the children she spoke of and expressed surprise, admitting that they had not realized that these children were not her biological offspring. The women in this group collectively concluded that they were all mothers, even if they had not given birth to them, affirming a broader and more inclusive definition of motherhood grounded in childrearing rather than biological reproduction alone. This thinking, albeit fraught with contradictions in Shona culture, as argued in the previous section, is strong in other African cultural contexts, where childrearing is even more highly esteemed than childbirth itself. In some Kenyan indigenous traditions, for instance, proverbs emphasize the primacy of nurturing. For example, the Swahili saying: '*Kuzaa si kazi, kazi ni kumlea mtoto*' (Giving birth to a child is not much work; the real work is nurturing the child) highlights this concept. Nurturing is a role that even non-biological women can fulfil (see Debele, 2023).

This inclusive understanding of motherhood is echoed in the narratives of other never-married childless women, such as a 40-year-old who revealed that 'people say I am single and childless, but if you were to visit my home right now, you would find four children staying there'. Her words challenge the ambivalence within which single women without children are perceived within Shona communities. Their singleness is equated with, and devalued as, solitary. As this participant's statement and the story of the 65-year-old woman mentioned earlier suggest, some single and childless women shoulder significant childcare and financial responsibilities. Theoretically, these stories provide opportunities to reflect on the lived realities of single women that destabilize rigid binaries of marital status and family. They reveal the layered and context-specific ways that care, kinship, and responsibility are enacted beyond formal marriage or biological reproduction. These social practices of raising children, even if one is single, reflect not only a coping strategy, but a deliberate life design aimed at cultivating social relationships and fulfilment. When all is said and done, the roles that single women play are ingrained within Shona culture.

Some of the women I interviewed played the role of nurturing children – who are not biologically theirs, but are otherwise related to them – so thoroughly that people assume the children were their own. I previously touched on this point with reference to one participant's testimony, but I push this further by closely examining the stories of two women – one told by the participant, and the other narrated by her sister.

The first participant was born in 1969. Since 1998, she has been living with her sister's four children. Her sister had gone to live in the United Kingdom in 1999, when her youngest child was five. When I interviewed this participant in 2024, that same child had turned thirty. According to the participant, these children, now adults, call her mother as per Shona tradition, and some of their neighbours are unaware that she is not their biological mother. Even two of her former boyfriends assumed that the children were hers.

The second participant, born in 1981, had been looking after the two children of her late sister. The children became her responsibility because her other two sisters were married and had their own children and, from her perspective, would not have been able to give adequate attention to the orphans. According to the participant's sister, this woman's future had been shaped by her caregiving responsibilities. The sister further revealed that the woman was planning to build her own house, where these children could live and feel completely at home.

Both women stepped in to care for and raise their sisters' children, a role provided for within Shona kinship structures, since they are *maininis* – literally 'small mothers' – to these children. The narratives further illustrate that motherhood is also performative and relational, often demanding significant sacrifice.

The social recognition that these women receive – whether by being called mother or standing in at significant life events – echoes broader patterns in which caregiving women are honoured as maternal figures, even in the absence of biological ties. One 52-year-old never-married woman, for example, recounted how she had looked after her brother's two children after both parents had passed away. When one of the children got married, she was asked to stand in as a parental figure at the wedding – an act that symbolically affirmed her role as a parent. However, as I illustrate in the next section, even though single women who raise children receive real and symbolic recognition, they also shoulder the emotional burdens of caregiving, which are not always acknowledged.

Complex emotions: of joy, strain and anxiety

For some women, caring for children is a complex emotional experience, which combines joy, emotional strain and persistent anxiety. These feelings are often intensified by concerns over not having biological children and uncertainty about how the children they care for will relate to them in the future. Asked about her joys and sorrows, for example, one 33-year-old participant described supporting her family as both deeply fulfilling and equally stressful. In her words:

I sometimes feel a sense of achievement or pride that I am contributing to their life [sic], but I also have times where I am very resentful and overburdened by the responsibilities. . . . The harsh reality is that society sees me as childless and these children might one day wake up and be told I am the 'unmarried and childless aunt' who wishes them ill, whereas they don't realise I have put my life on hold, in a way, to help them grow.

Her words reveal the emotional ambiguity of non-biological caregiving: it is as satisfying as it is risky, often going unrecognized.

This fear of not being appreciated for performing non-biological motherhood shapes the lives of many single women, including my own. For instance, it has compelled me to think deeply about my future. I recall a conversation with my father who, in his nineties, is being cared for by his children. I pointed out how, unlike him, I have no biological children and will therefore not have the same kind of support in my old age as he does. This, despite the fact that I am a *maiguru* (big mother) to my sisters' children and *tete* (*babakadzi*, female father) to my brother's children, and I have also played a crucial role in raising children within my nuclear family. According to the ethos *chirere mangwana chigokurerawo* (raise it, [and] tomorrow, it will raise you), one might say that single women

who raise children who are not biologically theirs have invested in their future through nurturing. Significantly, this saying does not limit child rearing to biological parents. In that sense, they too have ‘procreated’ – not by birth, but through child rearing – and, like all other *parents*, could expect to be taken care of in their old age. Notwithstanding, the women are cautious not to assume that these children will prioritize them in the way biological offspring might.

As in my case, although they respect me – as their *maiguru* or *tete*, and as an individual who contributed towards their welfare – the emotional closeness they share with their parents is distinct. I remain aware, then, that, despite my role in their upbringing, they might never prioritize caring for me. In any case, even when biological parents raise their children, there is no guarantee that these children will support and care for them in their old age. While biological children may suffer considerably for mistreating their mothers – through *kutanda botso* (a traditional form of appeasement of a biological mother for offending her), for instance – this expectation does not extend to non-biological mothers. As Muwati, Gambahaya and Gwekwerere (2011, p. 4) observe, ‘the individual who offends his or her mother can only expect clemency through *kutanda botso*’, and no individuals can do that for non-biological mothers. This suggests that non-biological mothers remain fundamentally distinct from biological ones in ways that may inadvertently diminish their value.

Mentioning the anxieties about the future of single, childless women is not meant to reduce the discussion to ‘children as an investment for the future’, nor is it intended to ignore the joys of raising non-biological children that these women experience. Rather, the question of the future is important within a social context such as that of the Shona, and in Zimbabwe more broadly, where there is no state social policy that caters to the aged. The discussion thus aims to reflect the realities on the ground and is not intended to idealize non-biological mothering. I find resonances between the anxieties faced by single Shona women that I have raised and Serena Dankwa’s argument regarding contemporary Ghana that ‘overcoming the stigma of childlessness and wishing to claim motherhood can lead women into precarious circumstances’ (Dankwa, 2021, p. 168).

Negotiating needed, yet invisibilised, care labour

The fear of not being appreciated for or being forgotten after raising non-biological children is experienced as a lived reality by some women whom I interviewed. As one childless 52-year-old widow recounted:

I looked after my siblings’ children and those of my husband, but I was left traumatised from the experiences. I looked after a stepchild, and the child packed his bags and left for his grandmother’s home without informing me. I also cared for my brother’s child, and when he came to take away his child, he asked why I was not considering adopting a child.

From this account, it is clear that taking on the role of a ‘nurturing parent’ is fraught with emotional risks and social ambiguities. Such work may not be acknowledged by the children that a childless woman looked after, or even the biological parents of these children. It could be argued that the experiences recorded here are typical for any adults raising non-biological children, because such children often bookmark bad experiences at the hands of non-biological parents. Child adoption, also mentioned in

this account, is less common among the Shona, because there is 'strong cultural resistance' (Muchinako et al., 2018, p. 43) to it. It is against this background that we should understand how this participant was emotionally affected by her brother's suggestion that she should consider adopting a child. On the one hand, then, the suggestion could be taken to mean that only *formal parenthood* could legitimize her caregiving and nurturing roles. On the other hand, the suggestion seems to downplay how the participant was already connected to the children that she raised – she was, after all, *mainini* (small mother) to her stepson, and the *tete* or *babakadzi* (female father) of her brother's child.

Many single and childless women experience both the fear and reality of being forgotten or undervalued by the children they help(ed) to raise. These experiences are compounded by broader social constructions of singleness and childlessness as lacking or being incomplete, despite the complex and relational lives of many. Without a husband, without children and without her own family – in a sociocultural context that privileges heterosexual marriage – the unmarried woman is seen as less important. This contradiction – of being simultaneously needed yet invisibilised – creates an emotional dissonance that single and childless women always have to negotiate.

Personally, I have experienced firsthand what it means to perform care roles, and yet feel undervalued for having no family of my own. I have been frequently asked, for example, where I 'put my money': 'with whom do you spend your money when you have neither a child nor husband?' And such questions are asked by very close relatives who know that I help raise the children of my siblings. What that does is, on the one hand, disregard the nurturing labour that I provide to non-biological children, and at the same time subtly suggest that without children, without a husband, my life is meaningless and worthless/worth less. It is implied, for instance, that I cannot work and spend my earnings on my personal needs, or that as a single and childless woman, *my* personal needs are less important. This last point is influenced by the selflessness that women, and African women in particular, are expected to embody in order to validate their womanhood. If the intimate and intentional ways that single women care for themselves were recognized as valid and valuable, that would be one way of affirming that their lives matter in and of themselves – not in relation to who they marry or mother.

Related to this question about how I use my money, is another that friends, people that I know who are not close to me and even relatives often ask: '*saka unofrei nekuvaka*' (why are you killing yourself [read: even bothering yourself] building houses [when you don't have children]?) Beneath this question lies an implicit assumption – that a single, childless woman's life lacks meaning or purpose. Such a woman is not expected to invest in a future for herself, because she is not imagined as having one that matters. Ironically, some of the very people that ask me this question have had six or more children and are married, and yet they have not built houses for *their* families – but no one has ever questioned *their* choices or implied that *they* are failures!

This lack of appreciation or disregarding of non-biological mothering, and the realization by childless women themselves that social and cultural motherhood is not as valued as biological motherhood leaves single women feeling compelled to pursue biological motherhood in the hope of securing recognition and legitimacy. That is why, for instance, after caring for a sister's children with the same intensity and devotion expected of biological mothers, one participant tried several times to have children. Meanwhile, another

participant who raised her dead sister's children recounted that she is uncomfortable with these children calling her mother, as this would imply that they have forgotten their biological mother. This further illustrates the complex politics of recognition and emotional attachment in caregiving by single women without biological children.

These narratives of caregiving by single and childless women are an important reminder that there are other ways of parenting and mothering and (re)producing [*kubereka*] beyond biological parenthood or motherhood. However, Shona sociocultural practices remain ambivalent in acknowledging this. This persistent tension between performing parental roles and lacking recognition renders single women's roles in raising children socially undervalued, highlighting the urgent need to rethink the place of non-biological motherhood or parenthood, in contemporary Shona society.

Conclusion

The study of singleness in African contexts is an emerging, necessary and under-researched sub-discipline within gender studies. This article contributes to scholarly work that has begun to address this gap by reflecting on the experiences of never-married Shona women who, despite not having biological children, raise children within their extended families. Female singleness falls within the broader category of identities and experiences that were largely excluded from early African feminist frameworks. By centring these women's experiences, I contribute to the expansion of African feminist agendas. I engage with the African feminist argument that motherhood needs to be rethought (Debele, 2023, p. 135), applying it to women whose maternal roles have previously been overlooked within this discourse.

I have argued that single Shona women who are unable to have biological children – despite their desire to do so – often still engage in parenting and mothering through nurturing. This is a practice I termed *kubereka* – carrying the emotional and practical burdens of raising children. However, in a socio-cultural context that valorizes marriage and biological motherhood, this form of reproductive labour risks remaining hidden, unknown and unknowable. The narratives that I highlighted make visible the affective labour and emotional terrain navigated by women who do not have biological children. These narratives challenge the stigma around female singleness and childlessness in Shona communities, advocating for a transformed understanding of motherhood and simultaneously disrupting what Karmakar (2022, p. 170) termed the 'polarities of mother and non-mother'.

Scholars such as Oduyoye, speaking from a theological perspective, have called for an embrace of 'forms of fruitfulness, biological and beyond' (1999, p. 119). However, her reflections emerge from the positionality of a married woman, which might limit her engagement with the insights arising from the lived realities of never-married women. These women often challenge conventional and gendered notions of fruitfulness. In raising non-biological children as single women, for example, they offer 'care' beyond what is stereotypically expected of them within patriarchal communities. Their responsibilities extend beyond the cooking, cleaning and ironing that is traditionally associated with women's roles. These women, therefore, often carry the burdens that are typically shared by couples. This evokes the phrase '*ndini baba ndini mai* (I am mother and father), often associated with the roles single mothers play in raising their children. Through this

phrase, the women challenge the gendered boundaries of labour that exist in many Shona families.

In Shona, the affective labour of carrying children on one's back is typically and traditionally performed by women, which is why I conceptualized *kubereka* as a feminist concept of nurturance. This practice is rooted in Shona cultural norms, where men are neither expected nor encouraged to carry babies on their backs literally. Literally and symbolically men also do not possess *chibereko* (the womb), reinforcing the association of nurturance and caregiving with women. Since domestic responsibilities are culturally assigned to women, unmarried men are often encouraged to marry, based on the belief that without a wife, they will not have anyone to care for them. It is for this and other reasons, that it is unimaginable to have a never-married, childless Shona man raising non-biological children, and if such men exist, they are very few and far between.

The lived experiences of the single women without biological children illustrate, moreover, that singleness in Shona communities does not preclude relational commitments. This insight challenges frameworks that view singleness as categorically distinct from marriage and parenthood. Some never-married women may still orient their lives around caregiving and familial ties, even without conventional families of their own. The singles-centred perspective developed in this article ultimately returns us to questions of kinship and care, revealing the multi-faceted identities of never-married women within the specific cultural context of the Shona of Zimbabwe.

Note

1. This practice is echoed in other African communities. Among the Bukusu of Kenya, 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 [drawn from a discussion with a friend from Kenya] (see also Asatsa et al., 2025, p. 20).

Author contributions

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