A LOOK AT THE STRUGGLE OF ZIMBABWEAN MARRIED WOMEN REGARDING SAFE SEX

FRANCIS MACHINGURA

KEY TERMS:

ABSTRACT:
The debate on HIV and AIDS has attracted necessary attention in all facets of Zimbabwean life. Today, the assumption is that all people, men and women, understand the urgent need to openly discuss and negotiate the need for safe sex, whichever way necessary, for the preservation of life and the integrity of families. Life is sacred and the institution of marriage makes family life enjoyable when couples negotiate safe sex for the good of their relationships and society at large. Unfortunately the status of Zimbabwean women is still in a sad state due to the prevalence of masculinist and patriarchal norms that negatively portray Zimbabwean women as subordinates and men as dominating all aspects of life. This portrayal of men and women does not end in the public sphere but is also found in the private sphere where men decide what is good for their partners in relation to safe sex. Even though seminars, programmes, conferences, electronic and print media have made people aware of HIV and AIDS, the cultural barriers supported by traditional African religions and Christian religious beliefs have taken women hostage, making them vulnerable to Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), HIV and AIDS. This article looks at Shona cultural and spiritual beliefs that promote masculinity and considers the negative impacts on the sexuality of women and, in turn, the ongoing HIV and AIDS pandemic. With the popularity of Christianity throughout Zimbabwe in mind, the article uses 1 Corinthians 7:4 (“The wife’s body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband”) as the text that can be used for the liberation and empowerment of all women in the face of HIV and AIDS.
Introduction

The prevalence of HIV and AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa calls for an urgent resolve to equip every member of society, especially the weaker members of society: women, the disabled, and children. Women constitute the biggest percentage in terms of population in the world, let alone in Zimbabwe. Even though women are the majority in every nation, their ineffectiveness at negotiating for safe sex is a cause for concern. In some cases, African cultures have not been supportive of women especially with regard to safe sex and the challenges of HIV and AIDS. Truth be told, men and women of the cloth have also been found wanting in their interpretation of the Bible. Often they use the cultural lenses of their own African societies to interpret the Bible, which can lead to a perpetuation of the exploitation of women that serves little more than masculine egos and selfishness. In Zimbabwe, the Bible is a popular document on all matters of faith, morality and socialization. Yet, unfortunately, the Bible has been used to justify the oppression of women in relation to sexuality. Women have been made to believe that it is improper for them to talk or negotiate for safe sex. Sometimes claims are made about the Bible ‘saying this and that,’ yet it is really the power of masculinist perspectives that are at play. According to these interpretations of the Bible, women are made to facilitate the enjoyment of the lives of men and little more. In order to get the ball rolling, let us first look at Shona culture and the status of married women with regard to sexual matters.

The Zimbabwean Women’s Failure to Negotiate for Safe Sex: a Dialogue with the Shona Culture

Culture represents the accumulated symbolic social information necessary for the structuring and directing of the social system (K C
Hanson and Douglas E Oakman 1998, 16). Culture influences people’s behaviour in terms of thinking and acting (M F C Bourdillon 1976, 23). Culture has had an influence on Christians’ attitudes towards sexuality particularly the sexual status of women. When Christians use the Bible, they use the same cultural lenses to define and characterise the sexual status and roles of women. Christianity has greatly grown in Zimbabwe but this has not changed the perception of the Shona people on marriage, status and the roles of women in marriage. Even though churches advocate for couples to get tested before they get married, the attitude of the church towards the use of condoms in marriage is very unfortunate. Interestingly, many couples are tested before entering into marriage but that does not mean that, testing negative when entering marriage, one has escaped the virus altogether.

Many couples have lost their lives because of the church’s attitude towards the use of condoms and their patronising interpretation of the Bible in relation to sexual issues. The attitude in most cases is that ‘HIV and AIDS may be wicked but not as wicked as condoms.’ The reluctance of the church to tackle the growing problem of promiscuity amongst men in Zimbabwe is a great betrayal by the church. That said, it is our contention that the Shona culture is the major force behind the challenges faced by women in general, and married women in particular, on sexual issues. Even though women had certain privileges and powers in the Shona culture, it is unanimously agreed that the Shona culture furthers masculinist behaviours.

It is sad to note that gender is culturally constructed from birth to death and those constructions create fertile fields for the spread of HIV and AIDS (Musa Wenkosi Dube 2008, 100). The Minister of Women’s Affairs, Gender and Community Development, Olivia Muchena, also blamed cultural and religious practices for
limiting the access of women and girls in Zimbabwe to HIV counselling and testing, as well as Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission (PMTCT) services. She states that cultural beliefs and practices place the women and girls at a disproportionate risk of contracting HIV. Olivia Muchena (Robert Tapfumaneyi, 22 November 2011) argues that,

Some of these practices include polygamy, spousal inheritance, *ngozi* (i.e., the traditional belief and practice of appeasing avenging spirits), *chiramu* or *sibale* (a mock marriage cultural practice where a young sister-in-law can be fondled in a practice that can lead to sexual intercourse), sex as a cure for HIV, and property inheritance. An effective response for women and girls must improve their access to quality HIV prevention, treatment, care and support, addressing the structural drivers of vulnerability and risk for women and girls and mitigating the impact of the epidemic. Some negative religious practices also contribute to exposing women to HIV as some apostolic sects promote early marriage of girls and young women to older men who are already in polygamous unions.

It is sad that it is sometimes culture, as shown by Olivia Muchena, which exposes a female child to patriarchal violence. But the fact is that both the patriarchal Church and the underlying masculinist cultures play a role. A case in mind is the state of women in apostolic sects where polygamy is celebrated even though it badly impacts on womanhood. As I have noted elsewhere, the Johane Marange and Johane Masowe sects are known for marrying off ‘young girls’ under the guise of religion. What complicates the status of women in such sects is that, they are barred from using any form of family planning methods (Francis Machingura 2011, 185-210). The Bible is invoked to support and qualify the position of men as decision-makers in the institution of marriage and women as just followers in that marital partnership. The claim being that ‘it is the voice and mind of God’ that must be respected when in actual fact it is
'the voice and mind of men supported by the masculine culture’ that sometimes spoke through the Bible. And in most cases, this has had a negative impact on the powers that married women have in negotiating for safe sex. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1983, 7) observes that, the Bible is not a ‘neutral’ book but a political weapon against women’s struggle for liberation. She observes that the Bible bears the imprint of men who never saw or talked with God. The Bible has been used to supplement or support what the broader Shona culture says about women particularly as it emphasizes women’s submission to men. It does not matter the challenges that arise against the freedom and rights of women. In most cases where couples accuse each other of promiscuity, it is always the man who culturally and religiously takes the lead in negotiating for safe sex and not vice versa. This does not matter whether the man is known for going out with other women and in return infects his wife with sexually transmitted diseases (STI). What is painful is that, HIV and AIDS greatly exposes some of the social, cultural injustices of the African culture as observed by Olivia Muchena. The Shona culture in most cases conditions married women to become subservient to men even in cases where their existence, role and status are felt.

In the present era of HIV and AIDS, it is married women who suffer more than the unmarried women or single mothers. HIV and AIDS show how cultures play double-standards by tolerating unfaithfulness amongst males and at the same time expecting married women to be slavishly faithful to their husbands. Most married women realise that, after faithfully committing themselves to their husbands, they found that they were HIV positive when they fell pregnant after being tested for HIV. It is unfortunate that the majority of women learn the hard-way that marriage is sometimes not a safe place from HIV without proper empowerment. Ezra Chitando (2011) sadly notes that, the HIV epidemic has highlighted the fault-lines that are caused by gender inequality whereby women’s powerlessness and
men’s abuse of power are significant factors in understanding the epidemic in the sub-Saharan Africa. This was confirmed by Thandiwe that, were it not for the patriarchal society she could not be in the situation of a full-blown AIDS that she is in now. Despite the fact that she knew that her husband was promiscuous she did not have the courage to negotiate for safe sex as it is much worse for married women to request their husbands to use condoms. Thandiwe (Raymond Mhaka, 20 November 2011) regrettably noted that:

My husband was promiscuous, and the community even identified him as one of the bulls. I knew my husband was promiscuous but I could not move out of the marriage because of stigma attached to divorced women. I was also afraid to ask my husband to put on a condom every time we had sex because culturally it is taboo to do that. I knew about the female condom but I had little information about it. I thought the female condom was for prostitutes. Even when I became visibly sick I still did not have the courage to go to the local clinic until when it was almost too late.

Thandiwe in this case shows us that, the Shona culture does not fully empower women in relation to sexual issues especially women married to promiscuous men. The sorry state of women is so dire in Zimbabwean rural areas where there is little or no information about how married women can protect themselves in promiscuous marital unions. Even when empowered with the information, it is still a daunting task to put their safe sex knowledge into practice or engage in any sexual discussions with their husbands for fear of being labeled ‘prostitutes’. Women have been rendered powerless and have become minors to push on safe sex matters when they are suspicious that their lives are being endangered (Musa Wenkosi Dube 2008, 104). Culture has set a wedge against women in such a manner that, it is men who are expected to take the lead on sexual issues. As a result, women still lack the information as well as proper empowerment.
This was confirmed by the Deputy Minister of Health and Child Welfare, Douglas Mombeshora, who speaking at the launch of the Zimbabwe Accelerated Agenda Country Plan and Work Plan on Women and Girls, Gender Equality and HIV in Harare, said that (Robert Tapfumaneyi, 22 November 2011):

Through concerted efforts from all fronts, Zimbabwe has made great strides towards achievement of universal access targets but still remains below the targets particularly in the area of treatment and care. Although we have quite a wide array of HIV prevention services, sadly very few of these are women-oriented, and as a matter of necessity and empowerment of women, we still need to expand HIV prevention services that target women, and the recently concluded National AIDS Conference has reiterated our commitment to reduce new HIV infections through virtual elimination of Mother-to-Child Transmission.

The empowerment of women can go a long way to curb the spread of HIV and AIDS. What is so painful is that, the Shona culture values the sacredness of the marriage institution at the expense of women. It is always women who suffer and get infected with the HIV virus because of cultural beliefs. It is culturally a taboo for Shona women to openly talk about sex and discuss safe sex methods without inviting cultural stigmatisation. Women who dare openly talk about sexual issues are labeled ‘immoral, un-African, uncultured, loose and ominous’ to the societal order. Further to that, it is again a taboo for the married woman to turn down the sexual advances of her husband even if she knows that the husband is promiscuous. A good woman submits to the husband on everything and does not nag her husband about his worrisome sexual behavior. The Shona women behave as expected by the broader society, that is, reprehensibly and amorally (Isabel Mukonyora 2007, 63), even if their rights are suspended or violated against. What is shocking is that, in cases of rape, the Shona women are usually considered at fault, even in cases where they are
victims of sexual abuse (C W Pape 1992). It is even much worse for the married woman to think of moving out of the marriage. Even if the marriage has proved to be an albatross to the neck of women; respected elderly men and women take the leading role in persuading the woman to persevere as well as preserve the marriage. It is such sad cases where elderly women, aunts persuade the abused married women to stay and endure. It is also said that, women though innocent victims are sometimes collaborators in perpetuating mind-sets and exploitative social structures that demean women (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1994, 12). The Zimbabwean H Metro (22 September 2011) reported an emotional article about Stembiso Maunde’s predicament to her bed-hopping husband, Goodwill Muzanenhamo, who pesters her to have unprotected sex. Stembiso expressed her fear of contracting HIV at the Harare civil court where she was applying for maintenance and was quoted saying ‘My husband is dating a number of girlfriends and at times he doesn’t come back home but he still insists that we have unprotected sex’. The sexual violence by men against married women is still going on despite World Conferences of Human Rights that seek the total elimination of violence against women. The World Development Report (2003) rightly noted that violence against women was a serious cause of death and a global cause of ill-health (Nelson Okorie 2011, 171-184). With so many stumbling blocks, can married women stand up and challenge their husbands on safe sex?

It is important to note that, most women are economically dependent on their spouses such that, they cannot negotiate for safe sex, neither can they refuse on the grounds that they find themselves on. Most women in Africa are culturally dependent on their opposite sex as brothers, husbands, fathers and grandfathers. As the world celebrates thirty years of AIDS activism, it will be difficult to champion the Zero new HIV infections, Zero discrimination and Zero AIDS related deaths if the empowerment of married women in Africa
is not urgently and seriously taken into consideration (2011 World AIDS Day Campaign). Women particularly the married ones are still discriminated against when it comes to safe sex empowerment. They still have no control over their bodies and cannot insist on safe sex. In the end, forced sex in marriages relegates women for pleasure catalysts’ where it reduces their ability to negotiate for safe sex as they are threatened with expulsion from the home if they refuse to oblige (Clifford Chiduku, 20 October 2011). As a result, for fear of the economical backlash, they choose to keep quiet. In most cases they are afraid that, the end of their marriage is an invitation to poverty and hunger. Most of the economically dependent women are not prepared to single-handedly raise their children. As a result, most women suspend their rights in exchange for their supper to survive. Gender activists cite gender-based violence as the major contributor to increased infections in marriages. Musa Dube (2008, 103) noted that, domestic violence is fuelled by accepted gender inequalities that often leave many women afraid to call for abstinence in relationships. Married women in some cases endure being raped and violated against, being coerced through fear of the consequences that would follow if they demand their rights. There are also many women losing their lives in childbirth today. In most cases, family planning is in the hands of man as the head of the family. Sadly as a result, babies end up being born HIV positive and many others die in their first years of life.

The society at large has not helped much on the plight of married women in the light of HIV and AIDS. Popular Shona sayings like ‘Musha Mukadzi-A home exists because of the woman’ are invoked to convince married women to endure sexually abusive marriages despite the consequences that arise from such unions. There are popular cultural beliefs that celebrate masculinity, for example, the common Shona saying that ‘Murume ibhuru rinovonekwa nemavanga-a man is a bull when it is seen with battle
scars’. It is the ‘scar’ cultural and masculine philosophy that some critics believe as one of the major factors contributing to the abuse of women and rise of HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe. The philosophy of the scar manifests itself when men engage in extra-marital affairs and unprotected sex that often expose women to sexually transmitted diseases (STIs). Yet even though the husband is known to be promiscuous, the wife still cannot initiate or discuss with her partner about HIV testing let alone to ever mention something about the safe methods of preventing infection. The entire hullabaloo about the ABC prevention strategy—‘abstain, be faithful, or wear condoms’ will come to note as long as women play the second fiddle in marriage. Recent research has shown that marriage increases the frequency of sex but at the same time surprisingly exposes married women to HIV and AIDS. It impedes women’s ability to negotiate condom use or abstain from sex if not interested (The Sunday Mail, 05 November 2011). Tsungai Nhorito of the Hopeful Life for Widows and Orphans in Africa (which mainly assists orphans and widowed women because of the HIV and AIDS scourge) argues that (Raymond Mhaka, 2011):

Rates of HIV and AIDS infections continue to rise in Zimbabwe despite increased efforts to fight the problem. This was being caused by social and cultural beliefs within the African society which do not allow women to ask their husbands or partners to use condoms or to get tested. During their outreach programmes, most women, especially in rural areas and farms, admitted that they were afraid to ask their partners to go for HIV testing as the men would accuse them of infidelity.

The Shona culture and most religions in Zimbabwe like African Traditional Religion and Christianity are the major stumbling blocks in the empowerment of married women on safe sex. Some women though having enough knowledge about living a healthy life and safe sex cannot practice it because of culture. The other
contributing factors are: the highest level of illiteracy on healthy issues, marginalization of women and poverty which force women to depend on men. They attend HIV and AIDS seminars and New Start Centres sessions but are not given the space to live safely. Married women have little or no choice when it comes to what is good for their bodies. Condom usage invites controversy and misunderstandings in marriage. Yet as observed by Olivia Muchena, the consequences of living with HIV and the burden of care are severe for women and girls, as they have both social and economic implications (The Herald, 16 September 2011).

Single Women Better Placed than Married Women on Safe Sex
What is sad is that, the recent Zimbabwe National HIV/AIDS Conference unveiled that the majority of new HIV infections occur in stable relationships and particularly in marriages where it is more difficult to adopt preventative behaviour with a regular partner than an occasional partner. Mrs Margaret Butau, the acting director for technical services in the Zimbabwe National Family Planning Council, rightly observed that (The Sunday Mail, 05 November 2011):

Low condom usage in marriages can be attributed to a number of factors. There is the issue of low risk perception when people think they are not at risk because they are in a stable relationship, diverse cultural beliefs, norms and values and lack of knowledge coupled with limited access to services. However, there are a number of myths and misconceptions that condoms are used by prostitutes, condoms can slip off and remain in the uterus among other things. Male involvement and participation in sexual reproductive health issues which include family planning is critical in bringing about change in the use of condoms in marriages.
Musoni Ndaizivei, Free Health Aid Director, observed that, women were more exposed to HIV when they are in the home as wives such that the institution of marriage can’t be certified as a safe haven from HIV infection (Clifford Chiduku, 2011). Cultural beliefs and myths are to blame for the sexual reproductive status of married women. Some traditional beliefs put married women at more risk than their unmarried counterparts. It seems as if, the common traditional belief still works amongst men that the use of condoms is not for married people under whatever circumstances. It is common to hear men saying ‘Hazvina musoro kudya chihwitsi nebhepa racho kunyanya uchidya naMai Mwana-it is a sign of madness for a man to eat a sweet with its paper (condom)’ particularly when sharing with your wife. Vurayai Chivenge, a father of six, laughed it off and quickly dismissed the use of condoms in his matrimonial home as culturally laughable, immoral and unacceptable. During the interview, he argued that (Interview, 16 September 2011):

I do not see any reason why I should use condoms with my wife. If we are both faithful why should we use a condom? Even if when I am unfaithful to my wife, there is no way I can use a condom with my wife. To me the use of a condom is totally unacceptable. Better still, the ultimate decision lies with the head of the family.

Vurayai Chivenge represents the traditional perception of the society particularly men that, condoms for most people are meant to be used with immoral women or the so-called ‘ladies of the night’. Condoms usage in marriage is unlikely to succeed if its usage only borders on mistrust or the assumption that it is for immoral people or those with the HIV virus. Therefore, for most married women, suggesting condom use to a husband is as good as accusing him of infidelity which is a punishable offence. To this end women have become silent victims of their husband’s sexual networks. Had it been
that, people are made aware that, condoms are part of contraceptives against pregnancy, it would have gone a long way. Noble women ‘Vakadzi chaivo-real women’ are typified as not to be associated with the use of condoms, even in the face of promiscuity. The perception also shows that, single or unmarried women are better empowered than married women because they have some choice to use protection or engage in safe sex. The majority of married women do not have any choice as the choice is mostly left to the husband. According to Moreblessings Zulu (The Sunday Mail, 05 November 2011),

In most African settings, it is difficult for a married woman to take up the initiative to use condoms as a contraceptive in her matrimonial home because it is regarded as taboo. Besides being regarded as taboo, most husbands will not agree to use a condom. As a woman I would not mind using one because I know I will be protected from a lot of things. It is very worrying when we get to hear about such developments on issues that matter most to women. I don’t get to understand why women are always at the receiving end in everything that happens in the world?

Ragies Gunda and Ezra Chitando (2007, 184-197) rightly observed that, “much more still needs to be done as long as HIV and AIDS continue to affect individuals, families, communities and nations. Sub-Saharan Africa countries have been greatly affected by the pandemic, and the number of orphaned children is rising. It is our understanding that, with these sad dynamics, if married women are given the right empowerment to initiate safe sex; condom use is the only tool for women in matrimonial homes where the husband has proven to be promiscuous. Men can also use protection if they suspect their wives to be promiscuous. It is sad that conservative Christians take such safe sex calls in marriage as an invitation of the devil into many homes let alone the sacral marriage institution. Yet it is not far
from the truth that condom use in a promiscuous marriage protects women against the transmission of HIV and unwanted pregnancies. But why do marriage women feel so disempowered to stand up and defend their rights on safe sex in life threatening marriage.

The Shona culture, traditional beliefs, the Bible and Christianity in the case of Zimbabwe are the major albatross on the necks of women particularly those in marriage. Certain Shona cultural practices like Lobola have led gender activists to argue that, it’s a practice that enslaves and takes away the rights of women. Stella Mapingure (not her real name), a mother of three, further adds that (Interview, 24 September 2011),

It is considered improper for a married woman to ask from her husband who paid lobola for her, to say I will not have sex with you if you do not have a condom or even to suggest that the man wears one.

Lobola or payment of dowry (could be in form of cattle, sheep and now money) is a cultural practice amongst the Shona people. It is a practice that is symbolically done to show value to the women as well as the parents or guardians who raised her. What is interesting is that, the bride-price is negotiated by the male-heads of the two families without the input of the woman who is married off. Unfortunately the practice has in some cases disempowered women in marriage as they are always reminded about the lobola which was paid whenever they fight for their right to life and protection in marriage. The husband has total control over his wife because of the lobola. In most cases because of the Lobola, the married woman can lose her status especially if she fails to have children. The major purpose of marriage amongst the Shona is the continuation and expansion of the man’s lineage by giving birth to sons. As a result of
cultural influences, the problem arises when the married woman gives birth to girls only. It is common to hear about stories of men who go out of their marriages to try their luck for a son with other women. In most cases such extra-marital endeavors result in infections and clashes in marriage. Married women in most cases cannot do anything to stop such kind of behaviour from their men lest their husbands will regard them as disrespectful. For some critics, lobola takes away everything from the woman in marriage particularly on sexual issues. The married woman is expected to respect and serve all relatives of her husband. In some cases she has to do unpleasant chores around the homestead (J F Holleman 1952, 39). The married woman’s right to sex is also infringed against, as it is the man who decides when, where and how to have sex. The choice to have or not have children is the prerogative duty of the husband. Most married women have become slaves to their own marriages where as slaves; they are not supposed to speak at all about their untenable condition. In other hands, they are considered as ‘property’ and deficient in human nature (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 3). Sexual enjoyment in most African marriages is gendered to an extent that, power defines and outlines who must have bigger share of sexual pleasure between the husband and wife. Therefore, if the woman is sick, it is mostly at the generosity of the man to decide to have or not have sex with his sick wife. Yet for marriage and sexual union to be a lifetime occupation and experience, it must have mutual meaning, respect and significance to both partners. According to J S Mbiti (1973, 41), it must fulfill the ‘whole self’, both physical and psychological, both organic and spiritual. Sadly the Shona marriage in most cases confers on the husband exclusive sexual rights on his wife. M F C Bourdillon is right to argue that:

Marital fidelity on the part of the husband is not essential to Shona marriage, but the husband is supposed to keep his wife informed of his extra-marital relations, and a failure to do this may be regarded as endangering his children.
The concern over the husband’s actions about his decision to take another wife is not much on seek the woman’s thought about it but to avoid endangering children. Yet it factually true that, is it the woman who suffers more than children, it the actions of the man are detrimental. The Shona culture allows the man to have as many wives as he can afford to take care. The married woman though a partner in marriage cannot stop her husband from taking over another woman. Worse still she cannot insist or ask her husband whether he is using protection or not with other women.

The monthly researches on the percentage consumption ratio of male condoms against female condoms confirm the masculine power in Zimbabwe. It is men who still take a leading role in the use of condoms. We want a situation where women also take a leading role in the protection of their lives. According to Zimbabwe National Family Planning Council statistics (Zimbabwe Aids Network), the current average monthly consumption for the male condom in the public sector is 4,741,061 while that for female condoms is 352,124. The total number of condoms used between October 2010 and September 2011 is 56,637,425 and 3,983,141 for male and female condoms respectively. Unfortunately in a survey conducted by the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, Gender and Community Development, the National Aids Council and other partners, it confirmed that, men who have multiple concurrent partners seem more prepared to use condoms in their sexual relationships outside of marriage, and yet would be unwilling to do so with their wives at home (Zimbabwe Aids Network). The same outcry was made in the neighbouring South Africa by the Health Minister, Aaron Motsoaledi, who said ‘in the married couples it is men who are causing these problems. Condoms are working. The question is faithfulness. We need to target the elder age groups, the married couples. The married couples are a big problem. We know that they’ve been very stubborn about using condoms’ (The Times, 30 November 2011). What is interesting is that,
greater effort has been put on the use of condoms outside than inside marriage. If the reduction in HIV and AIDS prevalence rate is to be taken then it implies some awareness successes have been achieved. Unfortunately the recent researches on the rate of HIV infection in stable relations like marriages are not motivating. One of the big stumbling blocks created is the traditional assumption that, condoms are not for marriage and even in circumstances that expose married women to HIV and AIDS. Many discordant couples, where one is HIV positive and the other is not, normally fail to reach an agreement on safe sexual practices and risk having the other party infected. Mr Sinokuthemba Xaba, the national condom programme co-ordinator in the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare, encourages condom use in marriages that (The Sunday Mail, 05 November 2011),

In view of the recent study that shows a significant association of hormonal contraceptives and HIV transmission implies that there is need for condom use among couples. In a patriarchal society like Zimbabwe, men generally decide on how sexual relationships are held and negotiated, hence women are socially handicapped to negotiate for safer sex. According to the Demographic and Health Survey 2005/6, condom use among married and those in long-term relationships is low. Some people do not have the adequate skills to negotiate for condom use within their relationships, be they male or female.

Even though men are religiously, culturally, politically and socially regarded as heads of their families let alone the society at large; it seems women are on the receiving end when it comes healthy and safety of their wives. President Mugabe once castigated some senior Government male officials for contributing to the spread of HIV and Aids through promiscuicy. He was quoted saying (The Herald, 06 September 2011; H Metro, 06 September 2011):

*AFRICANA*
The role of men in society is unquestionable. It is for this reason that men should take their place in the HIV response, both for their own health as well as in support of women and children and it is not just treatment, but also a fact of discipline. It is discipline in a custom that recognises that men are free to have as many wives as possible........maybe this is the custom that lies behind the fact that our men are not satisfied with one woman even if they know that they are HIV-positive. I know of cases of men, who even though they are taking ARVs are running from one woman to the other. These are not men I know because of my extended family, but because of my being Head of Government.

The lack of responsibility by male government officials shows the bigger challenges that society and particularly women face against HIV and AIDS. Better and urgent safe methods that empower women in the area of sexuality are needed. Therefore it would be much better and easier if health personnel come up with something that married women can silently use before sex so as protect them. The safety methods would go a long way in liberating and empowering married women. The safety methods must enable married women not to be detected by their promiscuous husbands, for example, the use of undetectable smearing liquids.

Our concern with married women is informed by the number of HIV and AIDS widows and orphans in Zimbabwe. The growing number of orphans and street children is cause for concern which needs a concerted effort from all stakeholders. We have observed from our experiences with friends, relatives, colleagues and brethren that if married women are not fully empowered in relation to safe sex, the number of HIV and AIDS related orphans will continue to grow. The life of married women is a life of struggle, first as a small girl and later a grown up woman against a pre-conditioned gendered society.
It is really important to realize that, if many women are empowered, many lives will be saved. Our concern is also guided by the multiple crises (1998-2008) that forced many Zimbabweans to emigrate and this had a greater impact on the stability of many marriages. Circumstances exposed both men and women to HIV and AIDS. When these couples met after several months if not years, they usually don’t get tested for HIV even if one of them especially men knows they had been engaging in unprotected sex. The sad thing is that, most husbands flatly refuse using any protection as argued by Mary Mwadu (not her real name) that (The Herald, 08 July 2011):

I got the female condom from the clinic in anticipation of my husband’s home coming. To my surprise, he asked me if I was now into sex work. He would not use any protection. I contracted a sexually transmitted infection immediately and felt very embarrassed to go to the clinic where I was well acquainted with the staff. I thus went to see a private doctor and got treated. I fear that recurrent STIs are not good for my health. My husband wilfully infected me and still insists that we use no protection.

The STIs infection is clear that the partners do not use protection and most of them are not aware of their HIV status. It is clear that, women particularly the married ones experience gender-based violence on a daily basis where in most cases they endure painful or thorny marriages instead of enjoying them. This article did not seek to just analyze and explain the socio-economic, religious, cultural and political dynamics as well as structures that marginalize and exploit women; but it sought to push for the change of exploitative and exclusive structures. Women must be empowered and the broader society must be made aware of the painful realities that married women face in marriages. Therefore in order to offer a liberating call for the empowerment of married women on safe sex,
we find the mind of Paul on sexual issues so encouraging. So let’s turn to Paul.

The Mind of Paul on the Marriage Institution: The Status of the Married Women

In order to have a dialogue with the Bible, there is need to admit that the biblical texts convey meanings derived through a specific culture and particular social constructs. Bruce J Malina and Richard L Rohrbaugh (1992, 11) noted that:

For the most part, ancient documents refer to their contemporary social systems only indirectly. They assume that their readers share their world and know what they mean. Yet we do not share important social understandings with the writers of these texts. Because our social and cultural experiences do not match those of biblical authors, we can be seriously misled about what they mean.

Since the Bible is arising from certain cultures, it will only make sense to us if comparisons are not made in relation to our cultural world-views. 1 Corinthians 7:4 is one of the biblical texts that are usually quoted in relation to married women. It is common to hear men saying to their spouses ‘See your body is mine to do with it what I want. So you have to do what I say’ (Aimee K Cassiday-Shaw 2002, 65). The text has been used to support cultural beliefs and practices that tend to put women as subservient to men. 1 Corinthians 7:4 and other biblical texts are usually quoted to support men’s erroneous views that in no way can a wife tell her husband what to and not to do in relation to sexual matters. The husband has the God-given right to just “take what is on his wife” in spite of her feelings or disagreements. Neil T Anderson (2008, 41) asks an interesting
question that ‘Should a wife submit to anything her husband wants her to do sexually? No. Neither spouse has the right to violate the conscience of the other. If a sexual act is morally wrong for one, it is morally wrong for both’. There is need to realize and establish Paul’s mind in relation to the natural sexual role of spouses in healthy and mutually supportive relationships (Barrington H Brennen 2011). The reference to the Bible by both men and women on marital issues on most occasions is not meant to serve women but to make them subservient to men. The Bible is then invoked to make women particularly the married ones realize that ‘even God expect them at all cost to submit to men’. When Paul wrote that ‘the wife’s body does not belong to her alone but also to her context, that is, a husband’ (1 Cor. 7:4), this was nothing new at all to the people of Paul’s day. It was part of their belief and practice that women were the sexual property of their husbands (Tom Hale and Steve Thorson 2007, 86). The important role of women in the family unit was to bear children for their husbands. The Pauline texts share in the hegemonic ethos of antiquity and mediated theologically the image of the ideal woman through cultural codes that required ‘a closed mouth (silence), a closed mind, a closed body (chastity) and an enclosed life of domestic confinement (Cheryl Glenn 1997, 1). Yet Paul thinks that, in the new salvific narrative brought by Jesus, every human body and soul was equal in the eyes of God. In a marriage, both the man and the woman have equal sexual rights and responsibilities to each other.

It is important to also note that, 1 Corinthians 7:1-7 has been associated with the controversy on celibacy that Paul was addressing and its impact on married couples who were shunning having sex. The institution of marriage during the time of Paul is believed to have faced some influences and problems from certain cults. According to Paul J Achitemier (2001, 341),
It has already become clear that the loose sexual practices of their seaport city have influenced how the Corinthian Christians have lived and have raised questions about how they must live. Perhaps some felt that absolute sexual abstinence was the only way to react to the kind of immorality they abandoned when they became Christians, just as others seem to have felt that since they were now spiritual; sexual immorality no longer mattered. Paul’s basic advice is that if celibacy is not possible for an individual, marriage is perfectly acceptable.

The Corinthian Christians wrote to Paul seeking clarifications on marital issues. Certain pagan cults at Corinth and other locations taught about abstinence from sex for long periods of time, even within marriage. The idea behind this was that, denying the natural desires of the body purified the soul. Some in the puritan age embraced the idea that sex within marriage was sinful. They thought sexual expression was an unfortunate necessary evil. Richard Oster (1995, 153) argues that, in the Latin Satirist Juvenal, it was wives who needed to seek for forgiveness of sins from sexual intercourse from the goddess Isis by devoting to celibacy. Even if the text is regarded as addressing the challenges of celibacy or purity, the way Paul addresses the issue is interesting. Paul upholds the equal status of both the husband and wife in making sexual decisions on whether to do it or not. Paul’s perspective on sexual intimacy is that, there is no platform for either spouse to claim the prerogative super preference over the other. Paul’s perception empowers women in the marriage institution. Partners were expected to agree to abstain from sex only for communion with God for a short time so as not to be tempted. Mutuality and understanding is the way to go for married couples as in the case of Adam and Eve.

However, Larry Richards and O Richards (2004, 356) thinks that, the text does not suggest anything to do with a puritan attitude
toward sex considering that the Bible affirms the mystery of and special nature of the sexual relationship. Biblical texts in fact forbid sex out of wedlock. Sex is biblically regarded as sacramentally pure and must be kept like that in marriage (Lev.18). Sexual enjoyment within marriage is upheld and celebrated. Even though Paul is believed to have been unmarried, he was not anti-sex or anti-marriage (1 Cor.7) as some would like us to believe. This text is not simply just talking about physical and emotionless sex, but rather a holistic connection between the two persons. What Paul brings is something totally new to his community when he turned over the tables and argued that, ‘in the same way the husband’s body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife’ (1 Cor.7:4). In the eyes of Paul, married persons no longer controlled their own bodies but must surrender authority over to their spouses. It does not matter the woman is part of the marriage equation. Paul is not saying here that the physical bodies of the husband and wife belong to each other, but rather he is talking about the whole person with its physical and sexual characteristics (Richard Collins 1999, 259). Despite the male dominant culture of the period, Paul advocates a much more egalitarian conduct when it comes to marriage. The Jewish culture just like most traditional cultures like that of the Shona people in most cases assigned women a secondary role in society and the family because of women’s derivative creation (Gen.2:18-25) and the portrayal of women as weak (Gen.3:1-7) (Richard N Longenecker 1984, 78). Paul overturns that and brings in the ‘redemption’ model where both men and women are equal in the salvific power of God (Gal.3:24). Richard N Longenecker (1984, 78) notes that, Paul broadens the discussion to deal with the spectrum of male-female relationships within the family. The emphasis is on equality and mutual obligations that exist between the sexes. We find the same house rules to do with relations between slaves and their masters in Colossians 3:18-4:1 and Ephesians 5:21-6:9. Paul’s broader perception of relations set him apart from broader understanding of ‘house rules’ in antiquity (Richard N
Longenecker (1984, 78). Paul took women as partners not pieces of the man’s property as emphasized in most white weddings in Zimbabwe, as couples put on their rings to seal the union of partnership as shown below.

Unfortunately Christian women, especially from apostolic churches, are the most affected as they are encouraged to live within the confines of the Bible which demands ‘women to remain silent and be blessed in child bearing.’ It is our view that the church must not just rush to wed people and give them useless rings and marriage certificates without fighting for the proper empowerment of all partners including women in the institution of marriage, particularly on safe sex in cases of a promiscuous husband. The radical mind of Paul to stand and fight for the weak must be a wake-up call for the church to stand with the weak, in this case, married women in their fight for a healthy life free from STDs, HIV and AIDS. Paul’s statement still reminds modern men about the meaning and purpose
of the institution of marriage, that their wives are equal partners in marriage. This includes partnership on sexual matters where sex is a special menu that must be enjoyed by all partners in marriage.

Paul brings out the original plan of God when He equally created humanity as ‘male and female’ (Genesis 1:27). In marriage, Paul teaches that one’s ‘other’, be that husband or wife, and holds the authority over the mate’s body. Paul in not concerned with ownership or property rights but with relationships and relatedness (Marion L Soards 1999, 139). This passage does not teach that a wife (or husband, for that matter) should submit to sex whenever and wherever the partner demands it, no matter how she feels. Rather, it is about mutual responsibility and not selfishness. In fact Paul emphasizes on dialogue between the married partners and this can only be realised when both partners value each other as important. Equality in 1 Corinthians 7:4 results from the limitation of freedom given in the presence of the partner (H Conzelmann 1975, 117). The freedom that Paul expects in marriage is that which benefits partners in marriage and not that one that enslave the other as in the case of some married women. Paul’s concept of marriage will go a long way in empowering women, even those in marriage to have a say on how their union should be run. Even if Paul is against divorce and remarriage in 1 Corinthians 7:10-17, he gives flexibility to both partners to separate. Divorce from a dysfunctional marriage is an aspect that is absent in the Shona culture. Yet married women must have the freedom to move out of a marriage that is detrimental to their lives. Paul’s understanding of the woman’s sexuality or body helps us in our argument against people who arbitrarily use the Bible in disempowering women and making them suffer sexual abuse from their husbands. The mind of Paul in relation to the position of women in marriage was not to make them sexual slaves to irresponsible and promiscuous husbands. Paul’s ruling permits separation when one of the partners is not a Christian and will not live in peace with the
believer (1 Cor.7:12-16) (Raymond E Brown 1997, 519). Paul shows the extent to which a workable marriage can be sustained or not sustained as long mutual respect and peace is there or not. Anthony C Thiselton (2000, 505) adds that:

To Paul, in Christian marriage, husband and wife ‘belong’ to each other. This belonging is grounded in avga,ph, which entails respect for each other, even placing the other first, far from being incompatible with union with Christ, it instantiates the priority of concern for the other which finds paradigmatic expression in Christ’s love........The precedence of others over self.

Sex between husband and wife expresses the bond of friendship and respect that exists. At first reading, this passage may also seem to teach that sex is a duty, a required act. But duty is better translated as sacred responsibility between the married couples. The intent of this duty isn’t that a wife complies with a husband’s selfish appetite for sex on demand but to fulfil her sacred obligation to meet her husband’s sexual needs or vice versa. In that marital arrangement, mutual support and companionship cannot be excluded (Raymond F Collins 1999, 255). In fact, the husband cannot abuse the wife because of the mutual giving of the self (everything) in the marriage contract. Therefore, Paul’s language was an emphasis on mutual agreement as opposed to unilateral decisions that put women in marriage at risk. An injury or risk to the wife by the husband is a breach of contract and trust hence the paradox of not doing to the other what one cannot do to oneself. Paul’s understanding of marriage can help heal the wounds that many women at large and the married in particular in the light of safe sex.
Conclusion
The government with the help of civic organisations, HIV/AIDS researchers, and Churches should pull their ideas together in creating effective prevention programmes in Zimbabwe. Better methods and ways to empower women must be devised like tackling the religio-cultural issues that help spread the HIV virus. The sorry state of married women in cases of a promiscuous husband can be reversed if Paul’s view of marriage can be applied against the cultural, religious and political stumbling blocks that have become an albatross on the necks of many married women in marriage.

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