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IS DOCILITY POWERLESS POWER?

SHONA WOMEN'S SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Revai E. Mudzimu

Introduction

I often hear people say, “When life gives me lemons, I make lemonade and find someone with vodka and have a party,” but the question to ask is: “is lemonade the drink one likes and is it the best drink for a party? These are statements normally used by people who are presented with challenging situations and they try to make them appear better. I liken this saying to how many women try to make docility agentic and transformative. When women in Zimbabwe face challenges to their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), they deploy several strategies of navigation. These strategies range from resistance, resilience, reworking, and docility, among others.

Using the data from my fieldwork with the Korekore women of Mt Darwin in Zimbabwe that I undertook from April to September 2018, I will demonstrate how docility as a strategy can be agentic. SRHR is an aspect of human rights which is related to sexuality and reproduction. Docility has been for the most part taken to mean subordination and yet there is an element of malleability that results in a person becoming agentic. I analyse docility as a strategy through the panopticism theory. Panopticism is a theory that was invented by Michel Foucault (1975) from the architecture that was developed by Jeremy Bentham; panopticon literally means “all-seeing”. I use panopticism to analyse how the Korekore culture creates women as docile bodies. On their part, the women are forced to respond using docility as a strategy to navigate their SRHR. Several epistemologies on African women’s ontologies have rendered them powerless. As a result, African women are expressing the voice of their silence, the sexuality of their eroticised desexualisation, the fullness of their ‘lack’ and the centrality of their marginality and exclusion (Mackinnon 1983: 639).

Given such a background, using docility is counter intuitive as it perpetuates their own violence. However, I argue that women's experiences are not homogenous, hence, the need to tap into the lived experiences of the Korekore women. The names that I use in this study are all pseudonyms.

Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights

Discussing Shona women's SRHR may be futile without tracing it back to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR 1948) and the International Conference on Population Development (ICPD, 1994). Although SRHR were not explicitly spelt out in the UDHR, they were indirectly referred to in article 2 which states that "*Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status ...*". It was only in 1994 that the ICPD clearly stated that SRHR are human rights that are applied to sexuality and reproduction. However, history shows that SRHR should not be taken as timeless givens but rather as part of the wider, political and social ideologies (Finkle & Mcltosh 2002; Oford 2012). SRHR were introduced as a concern to population growth, not to human rights (Pizzarossa 2018: 2). In 1954 in Rome and in 1965 in Belgrade, the UN argued that population was increasing at any alarming rate hence there was need to find family planning services to reduce birth rate and slow population growth (Ashford 2001; Kellog 1970). In line with the UN call, some governments started deploying coercive practices to force women to control birth rates. Some were even forced to undergo abortions (Zeidenstein 2009; Garcia-Moreno 1994). Although it cannot be denied that rapid population growth can pose a threat to economic development, there are also several factors that cannot be taken for granted in wanting to promote SRHR. For example, when the agenda for SRHR instrumentalises women's bodies for political reasons, this makes them factors not actors, objects not subjects of their lives. It is in this manner that I argue that SRHR might be playing a panoptical role in African women's sexuality. However, for the purposes of this discussion, I will use the view of SRHR that has been agreed on from the ICPD (1994). This view is horizontal and puts human rights at the centre. They state that SRHR are everybody's rights to a state of physical, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; rights to decide freely about sexuality, to be sexually active or asexual, who to have sex

with, how and when, physical, mental and social well-being in relation to reproduction and the rights of all people to decide freely whether to have children or not, the number of children and methods of birth control they like. Put together, these four aspects translate to women's rights to their sexuality. A lot of campaigns on SRHR have been undertaken by the government and different non-governmental organisations on social media and in some cases by visiting the people in their different locations. The women have taken this new socialisation about their sexuality in the same manner they have done with their culture.

Sexuality encompasses sex, gender roles and identities, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction (Reynolds 2006; Shaw 2006; Pascale et al, 2006; Chitando & Njoroge, 2016). Tamale (2011) argues that sexuality, like gender, race and class is a system of power which defines what is acceptable and what is unacceptable for both women and men. It is important however, to first of all understand how the issue of sexuality is understood in the African context so that we get a better understanding of the women under study's use of docility in their SRHR. The first problem we are faced with in trying to come up with the meaning of sexuality is that the term sexuality does not have a direct translation in the Shona language (Zimbabwean local language). Hence, when talking about sexuality we mainly end up talking of femininity and culture (Kambarami 2006). The three variables are inextricably interwoven to the extent that any efforts to separate them are fruitless. To this end, I discuss sexuality as interwoven with femininity and culture. The Oxford English dictionary defines femininity as qualities or attributes which are regarded as characteristics of women. However, it must not be overlooked that femininity is rooted in an intricate system of socio-cultural contexts rather than psychobiological factors. Thus, it is dependent on time, place and cultural norms (Borgota & Montgomery, 2000). Culture may be defined as the abstract values, beliefs, and perceptions of the world that shape and are reflected in a people's behaviour. Culture encompasses all that is human-made, learned and transmitted, especially through language, rather than what is inherited biologically.

Conceptualising Navigation

Navigation can mean different things in different milieus. In this context, it will refer to how women resist, are resilient or rework their oppression

in respect to SRHR (Scott 1985:57). For Scott, these are “everyday forms of resistance”, whereby those with little power come up with strategies for their survival where they do not have agency. He declares the process as “weapons of the weak”. This resistance may happen in several ways, for example, foot dragging, mimicry, slander, sabotage, false compliance, inter alia. Thus, this chapter seeks to understand the women’s experiences as they evolve and respond to violence and marginalisation through docility. Due to the patriarchal nature of the Korekore culture, it dictates how women should behave with their sexuality and in this manner, I argue that it is violent towards women’s SRHR. Because of this violence, the women deploy docility as a way of navigating the violence that is directed towards them.

While many scholars have focused more on conflict and violence in relation to wars between nations, they have overlooked the somatic (bodily) violence, as well as mental inhibitions regarding women’s lives (see Galtung 1990; Tarusarira 2017). This chapter takes a nuanced trajectory and deploys a hermeneutical discursive approach to investigate how Korekore culture in Zimbabwe negatively influences women’s agency and prevents them from realising their mental and physical potential. Violent acts can be manifested as direct and structural. This chapter will dwell on cultural violence which Galtung identifies in religion, ideology, language, art, empirical science, formal science and cosmology. He refers to it as those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence . . . that can be used to justify or legitimise direct or structural violence (Galtung 1990: 292-301). Put simply, the chapter discusses cultural violence as expressed in ideologies and religion, where sometimes there is no immediate human being directly harming anyone, but the violence is built up into the structure and shows up as “unequal power” and “unequal life chances.” In the face of violence, women’s navigation may involve engagement with the perpetrators of violence, in whatever form it may rear its ugly head. This is a way of transforming the conflict situation expressed in suppression and oppression, in this case, the denial of SRHR.

Instead of only being docile, the women can also make the effort to transform their situation thus, land themselves in the process of conflict transformation. Lederach (2003) asserts that conflict transformation entails “envisioning and responding to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships (Lederach

2003:14). The conflict transformation approach takes the process of handling violence and conflict beyond management and resolution. In so doing, there is acknowledgement that the situation in which the women find themselves is not one that can be managed or solved with some mathematical puzzles as is implied by conflict management and resolution. The tools of humility, prudence and knowledge which the women use help them to transform their violence.

Etymologically, the word docile comes from the Latin word *docilis* which means, “easily taught”. According to Foucault (1979: 136), the notion of docility entails that a person may be subjected, used, transformed and improved. I have invented the phrase “powerless power” to mean trivial survival mechanisms that a group with less power use, but which is not transformative. Docility, for the most part, has been taken to mean subordination and abandonment of agency. It has also been taken to suggest a lethargic and submissive person who blindly submits to power structures (Bezuidenhout et al, 2018). While it looks like docility is powerless power, I would like to take a nuanced approach to interpret the strategy of docility as I am informed by the data from my fieldwork. This does not mean that I am baptising docility as a strategy. Neither am I saying that it is the best way that weaker groups should use to respond to their violence. That is not the task of this write up: I just seek to demonstrate how the women in my study make it agentic. If docility has qualities of teachableness and readiness, then it is inextricably linked to prudence. Docility and prudence are closely linked because of their situational aspect which gives allowance to know when to follow the rules and procedures and when to deviate from them (Bezuidenhout 2018:74). Simply put, docility is an integral part of prudence. When you are taught, you learn how to interpret and how you should act.

The Panopticon metaphor

Panopticism as a social theory was developed by Foucault (1975) in his book *Discipline and Punish: The birth of prisons*. The Panopticon building was designed in the form of a ring with a tower at the centre. Each cell had two windows, one opening on to the inside of the central tower and the other one allowing light to pass through the whole cell. The idea was to allow the inspector to see all the inmates from the tower without them

seeing the inspector. The inmates could not also see other inmates. However, the inmates would know that they were being watched at any moment and hence, behave as if they were being watched. In this case, the idea of being watched is internalised by the inmates. When the inmates internalise the idea that they are being watched, they become docile bodies which are very easy to control as they discipline themselves. Foucault used this to explain a new kind of subjectivity in the modern period which emphasised self-discipline. Although this concept was used for prisons, Foucault argues that it can be used in several institutions such as schools, churches, hospitals and so on, but it does not mean that we overlook institutions which are differently organized, such as African culture and religion. African culture and religion use many rituals and according to Tuner (2017), rituals use structure and in Foucauldian perspective, structure is a characteristic of panopticism (Foucault, 1977). I argue that through panopticism, the women become prisoners of their culture. They become docile bodies. Therefore, the task of this argument is to determine whether the women lose their power when they are thus turned into docile bodies.

There are several assumptions of panopticon, but two are of interest in my argument. First, the total invisibility of the inspector and second, the “universal visibility of the inmates”. These assumptions involve two sides of power, that is, the “power over the inmates” and the “power over oneself”. The historical background of the discourse of SRHR has informed us that it is a product of modernity where the population growth rate is seen as a threat to economic development, hence, it must be controlled, regulated and governed. For the UN to achieve the goal of SRHR in Zimbabwe, they use a lot of funds to spearhead programmes that help to control the population. They go around the country advertising their programmes and offering family planning services free of charge. Like the inspector in the central tower of the panopticon, invisibility is also ensured in these programmes where the real motives of these programmes lie hidden to the clients, but they achieve their desired goals of making the people, especially the women, internalise the importance of family planning services so that nearly everyone grabs one type or the other, of family planning services. The women I interviewed confirmed that nowadays nearly everyone uses modern family planning services. They spoke with a lot of conviction that reflected how they have internalised the importance of using family planning services. The “inspector” (UN) uses several strategies such as research to assess the universal visibility of the

women. Let me put it very clearly here, I do not mean to go against the women attaining their SRHR, but what I am simply doing is to demonstrate how the panopticon concept can be translated to reflect how the women's sexuality can be pressured so that the women end up being docile.

Shona culture also uses the concept of the panopticon in surveilling women's sexuality. From childhood, women are taught how they should behave in relation to their sexuality, for example, on characteristics of femininity. The women grow up with the belief that a real woman should get married as a virgin and this helps them to abstain from sexual relations. Another example is the stretching of labia minora. The women in my study told me that every girl is supposed to undergo the elongation of the labia minora because failure to do so will lead one to being divorced when one gets married. What is central to these teachings is that they instill in the women that their sexuality is in the hands of men. This happens in multiple ways, for example, through proverbs, games, songs and so on. Both SRHR and Shona culture use the panopticon concept to instill discipline and to engender docility. SRHR expects the women to be free and express their sexuality as they wish (ICPD, 1994), whereas Shona culture expects that women should not be self-expressive when it comes to their sexuality. Culturally, their male counterparts should determine when to have sex and how, when to have children, how many and whether to use contraceptives, which type, or not to use at all. My research participants indicated that when they are under such pressure, they use docility as a way of negotiating the complications that are caused by these conflicting value systems.

In the Shona culture, when a woman gets married, she is treated as a novice in sexuality, hence the need to be docile so that she can be taught (Chitakure 2016, Kambarami 2006). For the most part her matrilineal aunties and her husband's sisters teach her and control her sexuality. The women indicated that they have nothing to do other than being docile and be open to learning. However, that does not mean that they do not have rights to their sexuality. They are prudent and know what to do with the information that they get from the power structures around them. Some have argued that docility has some elements of the eagerness to learn, and this eagerness has been referred to as "epistemic conscientiousness" (Montmarquet 1992; Zagzebski 1996). In the Shona culture, men are treated as more knowledgeable than their female counterparts and the men themselves have taken it as the reality. To this end, the men find themselves

giving instructions to the women always, even in line with their sexuality, which I assume they do not know very well.

The Zimbabwean society is highly patriarchal and to this end, it is clear that the meaning of female sexuality is a patriarchal product (Khumalo & Garbus 2002). Women learn and internalise the meaning of sexuality from tender ages and there are several institutions that socialise these women, namely, the family, religion, education and the society at large. As if that is not enough, the Shona society is highly controlled by western values, thus putting the women in a quagmire regarding their sexuality. This can be explained well in the Kenyan Gikuyu proverb which says “*Njogu igiri ikihurana, nyeki niyo yumagira*” translated to mean that “when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers”. The encounter of SRHR and Shona culture makes the women the zone of contestation. From very tender ages, the girls are socialised to view themselves more as subordinate housekeepers, with their male counterparts as physically strong protectors and breadwinners. This is done, for example, through a game known as *mahumbwe* (mock marriage). In this game, girls are given dolls and kitchen utensils while the boys have cars, axes and cows among other things.

Moreover, these young girls are taught the so-called feminine qualities such as gentleness, passivity and submission so that they will please their male providers. This socialisation is carried throughout puberty, adolescence, up until adulthood. Besides games such as *mahumbwe*, there are several rituals that are performed such as labia minora elongation and virginity testing in a bid to define female sexuality. It seems to suggest that what is central to Shona female sexuality is marriage. Hence, the desired destiny for most women is marriage (Kambarami, 2006). Within the marriage constellation, female sexuality is defined as being in the hands of men. Once *roora* (bride price) has been paid for the woman, it results in her losing her SRHR, in a real sense. A case in point is the payment of *rusambo* (the central portion of bride price paid in cash or cattle). Once this has been paid, the woman is expected to be sexually passive and satisfy their husband’s sexual desires because that is enshrined in the marriage contract (Messer, 2004). Women are not allowed to insist on safe sex measures as the men control the sexual encounter (Leclerc-Madlala, 2000). In this regard, the social meaning of the payment of bride price may be regarded as violence on women.

The socialisation of women on their sexuality does not end with the family, but also infiltrates into the education system. Some of the textbooks that are used in Zimbabwe portray women as a weaker sex compared to their male counterparts, who are portrayed as strong. A textbook that was used in elementary school by the first class is one good example to demonstrate how the education system in Zimbabwe defined sexuality. It had pictures with the father driving a car and the mother breastfeeding and it said, “*Ona baba vanotyaira mota kuenda kubasa*” (look at father driving his car to work), “*ona mai vanoyamwisa Tarisai ari kuchema*” (look at the mother breastfeeding Tarisai who is crying). This socialises girls into believing that their sexuality is supposed to mean getting married and having children, while the men should go to work and provide for them. Marriage is a sacred institution among the Shona that every woman is supposed to undergo. Those who choose not to get married are given names, for example, they are called *vane chitsinha* (a boy or girl without interest in heterosexual relationships or marriage). On another note, women who decide to prolong getting married because they want to further their education are stigmatised. They are called the “unmarriageable” (Chirimuuta, 2006; Kambarami, 2006). This kind of socialisation is internalised by the women so that when they grow up and there would no longer be anybody to tell them what they should do, they discipline themselves and behave according to the dictates of their culture. There are statements that are constantly repeated in Korekore society, such as “*hazvibvumidzvi*” (it is not allowed), “*zvinoyera*” (it is sacred), “*unoita munyama*” (misfortune will befall you) and others. Statements such as these act as the watchtower at the centre of the panopticon prison and continue to surveil women’s sexuality.

In Africa generally and in Zimbabwe in particular, religion permeates all aspects of human life, hence, religion is not spared in defining women’s sexuality among the Shona. If we take, for example, what is portrayed in Christianity: the story of Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:4-3:24) portrays Eve as having been taken from Adam’s rib. This has been taken to mean women’s subordination to men in all areas of life. Such a background text polices and guides relations between women and men in society. This is responsible for many of the “gender troubles” in African societies (Chitando 2019).

According to Foucault (1997: 24), people can perform a number of operations in their thoughts, body and conduct in order to attain happiness and wisdom. In the context of the Korekore women’s use of docility, there is

need to think in line with Judith Butler (1997). She calls for a revisiting of the “paradox of subjectivation”, which can be explained to mean that the process and conditions that secure a subject’s subordination are also the means that lead to self-consciousness. They may further be understood if we take an example of the virtuoso pianist who submits to a painful regime of disciplinary practice in order to acquire the ability of playing her instrument with mastery (Mahmood 2001). Docility becomes, therefore, an act of agency. Agency is defined as the capacity of individuals to act independently and freely to influence a change (Giddens 1968). However, agency is not limited to those actions that result in progressive change, but also those that aim towards continuity, stability and stasis (Mahmood 2001: 212). The women that I engaged with during my fieldwork indicated that, to a large extent, sexuality is in the hands of men who have been socialised to believe that the payment of bride price grants them exclusive rights over women’s sexuality. Within such a context, the women said that they navigate their SRHR through docility and how they do it makes me argue that docility is agency. This docility is shown in both language and action, for example, they refer to their husbands as *Shewe* (My Chief) (Mukova & Mangena 2016: 120). Among the Shona, chiefs are traditionally revered, and their word goes without being questioned. When the husband is referred to as a chief, this is a reconfirmation of their power over the women and they are happy to engage into this “zero-sum” constellation, where they feel that the women’s loss is their gain (Mukova & Mangena 2016: 120). Furthermore, most women were very clear that to be submissive, docile and available to one’s husband all the time is the best strategy for staying happy in a marriage. They showed that those who would want to go against this so-called norm would be stigmatised and sometimes end up losing their marriages. This is in line with what has been argued by some scholars that African marriage entails that the women should be sexually passive and submissive, men are the initiators of sex and set the conditions for the sexual encounter (Kambarami, 2006; Messer, 2004). While docility can be interpreted as a way in which women perpetuate their oppression, the women I interviewed showed that they try to make it yield agentic results although it is a painful process. They try to make lemonade out of lemon.

Transformative docility

The Korekore women engage in several actions that resemble being docile and the question to ask is: are these actions transformative? Put simply, do they give them agency or do they facilitate any change? As I have said before, conflict transformation entails envisioning and responding to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships (Lederach 2003:14). The patriarchal nature of the Korekore culture holds that sexuality is in the hands of men, thus, women are supposed to be passive and submissive. Taking a closer look at humility and self-knowledge as the roots of docility, the women said that they influence their sexuality for a change. The women said that when they are humble, that makes the men treat them as harmless people and hence, relax and leave them to do what they like.

Ukazvidukupisa anongorivara nekuti anoona kuti hapana wekurwisana naye, Ipapo unenge wahwina (If you humble yourself, your husband will realise that he has nobody to argue with, then you win it) (Grace 42).

While SRHR offer everyone the rights to do what they like with their sexuality, the women are not passive recipients in this whole situation. With the strategy of docility, they are able to distinguish and choose what they want from what they do not want. Docility is related to prudence, which is the virtue of realism and the willingness to know the truth. Several women in my study indicated that they use their prudence in accessing their SRHR. Some said,

Haungoiti mukumbazvose tsapo yebenzi, unosarudza zvinoenderana newe uye zvisingakukuvadzisi (you do not just take everything. You choose what fits you and what is harmless) (Fungai 39).

Among the Shona, for example, the Zimbabwean constitution does not accept same-sex relationships, neither does it allow abortion. In this manner, they use their prudence to choose what befits them and what is beneficial to them. This also includes using family planning services of their choices, even if in some case their husbands might not be forthcoming. They also choose family planning methods that have less side effects. In line with this, I argue that docility is a conscious transformation and a two-way process that is premised on how one stage influences future events. In simple terms, it is an active process. Where it seems to our naked eyes that by being docile the women have given up, we are actually

being too simplistic. Most women I spoke to indicated that docility can be way of empowering oneself if one knows how to manipulate the power structures around oneself. One said:

Ahhh, kunyarara kunokunda zvose... wongoita fungira mumwoyo rwendo rwembwa, asi zivai kuti kunyarara hakusi kupusa (Silence surpasses everything, you just plan in your heart but you need to know that silence does not mean foolishness (Maria, 54).

They referred to several examples to show that docility can be powerful, for example, having more children might mean that the women's reproductive rights are being violated, yet for them it is a game changer. Once you have children, you earn the title "mother" and motherhood is a highly esteemed category within the community under study and elsewhere in Africa. While women have been generalised as oppressed (de Beavour, 1949; Daly 1975), in Africa, woman as a category is not always powerless, disadvantaged, controlled and defined by men (Oyewumi, 1997). More so, having more children is also a great investment as it is envisaged that these children will look after them when they grow up. Thus, it can be explained in the proverb "*chirere mangwana chigokurerawo*" meaning when you bring up your children, they will look after you in the future. Shona sexuality includes the women undergoing certain practices such as labia minora elongation and virginity testing, among others. These practices have been interpreted by several scholars as violating women's SRHR. My research participants told me that womanhood is embedded in having undergone these practices and some say this also enhances their sexual lives. Finally, docility places cognition, knowledge and decision making at the forefront of how individuals adapt, learn, discover and achieve their desired goals.

While the payment of bride price has been taken as violating the dignity of the women and engendering their docility, the women I interviewed said, to be paid for means one is valuable and one is worthy being paid for. This is further confirmed by Bourdillon (1976). He argues that the payment of bride price is to tantamount to saying, "here is a woman who is worthy being paid for". When you have been paid for, the in-laws give you respect unlike when nothing has been paid for you. It seems like you are imposing yourself on their son and they do not give you respect. Coupled with the humility from the women's side, the respect that the in-laws give the sister-in-law helps her to act in a way that she sees fit to empower her. In this manner, docility becomes empowering. When men control the sexual encounter, some treat that as violating women's SRHR as they

contend that women should not be docile. The women indicated that when it comes to sexual encounters, it is feminine to be docile and let the men dictate the pace. The women indicated that motherhood is also embedded in being able to satisfy the husband sexually. When they are docile in relation to sexual activities, they do not feel oppressed. They are rather responding to what motherhood means. This becomes transformative as that helps the couple to live in happiness. In this manner docility results in what Mahmood (2001) refers to as continuity and stability. Moreover, when the men are sexually satisfied, they do not go to look for extra-marital affairs, thus, reducing the rate of contracting sexually transmitted diseases. In this manner, docility becomes a way in which sexual health is enhanced.

Conclusion

Through the process of panopticism, the women are created as docile bodies by African culture and SRHR. However, they use the characteristics of docility namely humility, prudence and knowledge to transform their violent situations. Prudence, humility and knowledge as characteristics of docility are the tools that the women use to actively participate in their SRHR. Although this has been taken by several scholars as dangerous coping strategies through which the women perpetuate their oppression, I have argued that womanhood does not have precedence among the Shona. The more important category is motherhood, and that motherhood is an empowered category. Although several institutions socialise women in their sexuality and by so doing create them as docile bodies, this docility does not translate to unrefined coping mechanisms. The women under study creatively appropriate and deploy docility to negotiate numerous SRHR roadblocks. Hence, docility can be agentic and transformative, and it is powerful power. It is a resource in the lives of Korekore women and should not be underestimated.

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