

## MARRIAGE AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY: THE CASE OF MASVINGO, ZIMBABWE

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### Abstract

*It is the contention of this article that marital hope and pursuit of the marital strategy functions as a survival option for some female heads of households as shown in this study. This article examines how and in what ways female heads of households benefited or were disadvantaged by the lack of or entry into various forms of marital relationships. The experiences of many of the women interviewed for this study showed that the pursuit of the marital strategy had had different outcomes for different individuals at different times. Sometimes, the outcomes were positive, but at other times, the marital strategy had negative results. Through the use of case studies, this article illustrates the outcomes of both losing and gaining 'official husbands', the exploitation of men by 'some tricky' women, and the implications of this behaviour on the development of the family as an institution of socialisation.*

### INTRODUCTION

This article is premised on the view that urban survival strategies<sup>1</sup> adopted by poor women<sup>2</sup> are complex, dynamic and multiple. As Chant (1996) observes, in addition to income generating strategies, survival strategies also refer to people's daily reproductive activities, which encompass Moser's (1989) triple roles of women, namely, the productive, reproductive, and social reproduction or community roles. Similarly, Mapetla and Machai (1998, 156) argue that survival strategy encompasses "intricate relationships where other possibilities of patronage or support are explored or formulated". The time and energy the women in the sample studied here spent in maintaining and sustaining social relationships or social networks,<sup>3</sup> showed that these relationships were a

<sup>1</sup> Survival strategy refers to the activities people adopt for livelihood. It includes the mobilization of material and non material resources.

<sup>2</sup> Increasing impoverishment meant that the majority of households particularly those headed by women were failing to cope with urban existence. Poor women refer to all those women constituting the majority of women in town who are not in a position to cope with urban existence. Poor women live a deprived lifestyle and lacked most necessities of life.

<sup>3</sup> A social network refers to concrete interpersonal relationships linking three or more individuals.

major resource that ensured women's continued stay in town. Relationships approximate, in many ways, what Mararike (1999) refers to as 'intangible assets' that people need in order to survive in both rural and urban contexts. Contrary to the general thrust of most feminist writers, who stress the negative relationship between marriage and women, it is the contention of this article that marital hope and marital strategy remain survival options for some female family heads in Masvingo. They pursued this strategy through what may be termed, gender coalitions,<sup>4</sup> and social networks.

The findings discussed in this article are based on information collected over a period of 14 months in the provincial town of Masvingo, in southern Zimbabwe from November 1994 to December 1995. The focus of the study is on urban female heads of households.<sup>5</sup> Out of a total of 50 respondents who constituted the research sample, the "never married", with or without children, comprised only 38% of the sample. The rest were in the three categories of widow, divorced, and living with a man in an informal marital union (*mapoto*) where the woman continued to maintain a high degree of independence as far as decisions about her life were concerned. *Mapoto* unions enabled some women to choose to live with men on their own terms.

The research sample was based on snowballing sampling techniques, which depended on women's social networks. The study sought to establish how female heads of households managed to deal with impoverishment, the kinds of options that were open to them, and the various survival strategies they pursued in order to survive in town. It became clear during fieldwork that one of the survival options which some of the women pursued was the development and maintenance of relationships with some men who, in times of need or in their day-to-day lived experiences, could act as patrons and offer donations to the women in cash or in kind.

Social networks/relationships featured prominently as a major survival technique. Generally, social networks, marriage and its variants in particular, enabled them to maximise their chances of urban survival. This article seeks to examine how and in what ways female household

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<sup>4</sup> Gender coalitions are a social construction rooted in the notion of power relations between men and women. Gender power is continuously being recreated in negotiations between men and women. In the process of creating this negotiated social order individual men and women form strategic alliances to enable them to access and to control resources.

<sup>5</sup> Household refers to a set of relationships based on shared or co-operative resource allocation between individuals who may or may not be permanently co-resident. Whilst co-operation and shared goals and resources underlie household membership, members are free to pursue independent interests that may conflict with those of other members of the household.

heads benefited or were disadvantaged by the lack of or entry into various forms of marital relationships. It was the widespread view that marriage had a positive effect on the life chances of a woman that made many Masvingo female family heads to hold on to marital hope, despite their experiences that revealed the many disadvantages of marriage.

### NETWORKING AS SURVIVAL STRATEGY

Maguire (1983) observed that networking involved the purposeful establishment of connections linking individuals. Galvin (1991, 104), following Barnes (1969), considered social networks as situations in which "an individual may know and interact with a number of people, some of whom may know and interact with each other and some of whom may not". This is what Barnes called "concrete interpersonal relationships". The sample of women discussed in this study included the kinds of relationships some of the women were forging with men or could establish with them. Rogers and Vertovec (1995) have argued that network analysis is possibly the most appropriate study of social relations such as those that will be discussed in this study.

Barnes (1969) distinguished between total and partial networks; a total network being "an interconnected chain" of individuals and immaterial things (Barnes, 1969, 56). On the other hand, Barnes (1969, 57) regarded a partial network as "any extract of the total network based on some criterion applicable throughout the whole network". Some of the networks considered by Barnes as "partial" are kinship, marriage, friendship, and political and religious networks. Total networks incorporated all types of relations, unlike partial networks that focused on one type of relationship. It becomes clear for some of this study's respondents that marriage and gendered friendship relations were being exploited as a survival strategy. The fact that such gendered relationships could result in material benefits flowing to the women was evident among women living with men in *mapoto* relationships or in the case of widows who managed to inherit property. Not surprisingly, therefore, some women strove to establish relationships with men in order to gain access to various material benefits. In general, most women, possibly because of past problems in their marriages, had negative views about married life, although they still strove to establish some kind of intimate relationship with a man.

The alliances or relationships the women sought to establish with men were those that would enable them to interact with men on their own terms. They were, thus, determined to forge new types of partnerships with men, in which the man moved in with the woman on condition that he would contribute towards rent, food, and domestic labour. It was not

sex that featured uppermost in their relationship with men. All the respondents who cohabited with men indicated that they preferred that these relationships should remain informal. They did not want to tie themselves down or, in their words, to "hang themselves" by entering a formalised relationship. Their decision to cohabit was a conscious one as it freed them from what they perceived as the limiting and constraining effects of marriage. As noted by Mapetla and Machai (1998, 176), the advantages of informal relationships to the women are that "men who become bossy or are stingy with money are not tolerated . . . When they become unemployed and are a liability, they . . . expel them". Such options would not be possible in a formalised relationship. Yet, at the same time, the women continued to regard the marital option as the desired goal but remained cautious not to hastily formalise relationships that might result in a foreclosure of other survival options.

Bridge (1995), Mitchell (1969) and other writers on social networks have considered social networks as resources that people turn to in their daily lives, especially in times of need. Sharma (1986) regarded networks as useful household survival resources, repaired and maintained even for married couples, primarily by women. Bridge (1995), Werbner (1995), and Grieco (1995) emphasised that networks have economic and social benefits, functioning both as cultural capital and as an effective exchange system. In the case of the women of Masvingo, such networks brought them various benefits such as financial and other forms of aid, gifts, swapping favours, and emotional support. What has, however, been lacking in scholarship on social networks so far is an analysis of informal marital unions and relationships of women and men who enter some form of partnership. Usually, the direction of flow of resources is greater in *mapoto* unions than in formal marriage relationships. According to Masvingo female household heads, *mapoto* relationships offered a safer home environment because women were less abused than in a formal marriage and they remained independent to make their own decisions. Moreover, they had the power to end a relationship should the man fail to 'deliver'.

While the impression given above is that a *mapoto* relationship has several positive attributes, it would be misleading to argue that such relationships have no negative aspects. In the light of the AIDS pandemic, *mapoto* relationships have the potential of becoming death traps. When questioned on this issue, the women of Masvingo said that they were fully aware of the ravages of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. They argued, however, that they had no choice as they were driven to enter *mapoto* unions by poverty and not, primarily, by the need for sexual gratification. They felt, however, that they were in a better situation than women in formal marriages who were "sitting ducks" in the face of HIV/AIDS and

who could not insist on safe sexual practices as they themselves could. If the *mapoto* women engaged in unprotected sex, it was not because they had no choice but because other considerations outweighed perceived dangers. Discussions with the Masvingo women in *mapoto* relationships revealed that they had more opportunities for practising safe sex than might appear at first sight.

Apart from the fact that formal marriages have the potential of exposing wives to HIV/AIDS infection because of the fact that the rights and obligations of married persons make it hard for parties to insist on safe sexual practices, formal marriage networks can also be disruptive, burdensome, and a strain on meagre resources such as money, time and space. This was clearly evident in the case of married women in Masvingo who were the family breadwinners and who, sometimes, had to bear the double burden of looking after retrenched husbands and trying to maintain domestic peace by constantly reassuring the non-working husband that, despite being unemployed, he was still the legitimate head of the household. Sometimes, this situation took a heavy toll on the married woman's mental and physical health. Moreover, married women were sometimes abused by their husbands who sought to mask their sense of inferiority arising from the fact that they were no longer the breadwinners in the family by resorting to violence against their wives. In such situations, formal marriages proved to be problematic to the wives and their children. This is not to say that women in *mapoto* relationships can not also be abused. Indeed, some of the women interviewed for this study were in abusive *mapoto* relationships, but *mapoto* offered women easier opportunities to opt out of the relationship than those in formal marriages did.

The above observations notwithstanding, marital hope and marriage remained an attractive survival option for most of the women. The women's perceptions of issues were not motivated by any gender awareness but resulted from their day-to-day lived experiences and the need to cope with the concrete problems they faced on a continuous basis in town. Though they appreciated the benefits of married life, such as the fact that widows sometimes inherited houses and other property when their husbands died, they also knew the disadvantages. Given this situation, it is useful to analyse the degree to which gendered networks provided survival options for poor women in Masvingo.

#### GENDERED NETWORKS

The majority of women in the sample under study indicated that they would prefer to enter a more stable social relationship with a man if that chance came their way. In other words, despite their negative perceptions

of marriage, marital hope remained a desired goal. That they were cohabiting with men and maintaining various gendered networks was the result of their need to adapt to changing and harsh economic conditions. Social relationships with men could, therefore, be seen as a form of social capital that made it possible for the women to continue to stay in town.

The research suggested that social networks based on marital relationships were in a state of flux, as 62% of the women interviewed had been married at some point in their lives. They were now widows, divorcees or in a *mapoto* relationship. The temporary nature of the marital status of many female household heads became clear in the year it took to carry out the research for this study, as shifts and changes in marital status were already taking place in the studied sample. In other words, gendered networks were not characterised by permanence. Those whose marriages broke down for one reason or another often found themselves in strained circumstances as they lost all claim to houses and other properties and did not have jobs from which they could derive income with which to sustain themselves. They, thus, experienced rapid downward social mobility. Indeed, one recently divorced woman food vendor confessed that she had never experienced what it was to be in abject poverty until after her divorce. Despite the temporary and, at times, problematic nature of marital unions, the perceived potential benefits possibly explain why many of the women interviewed still saw marriage as desirable and a strategy that would enable them to cope with poverty.

#### THE ROLE OF MARRIAGE AMONGST THE SHONA PEOPLE

While not every one of the respondents was Shona by ethnicity, 82% were Shona, 8% Ndebele, 6% Malawian and 4% Shangaan. It is reasonable, therefore, to base the following discussion on the Shona perception of marriage as that group comprised the overwhelming majority of those interviewed, particularly since Shona marriage values seemed to influence the values, attitudes and perceptions of the respondents.

Chavunduka (1979) and Gelfand (1984) observed that, despite the changes brought about by colonialism and capitalist development, among the Shona, marriage is a social commitment that establishes a social relationship not just between two people, but also among families and friends. Thus, among the Shona, one marries not just one's partner, but also the relatives of one's partner, be they blood relatives, friends, colleagues, or acquaintances at church or clubs. The Shona people see marriage as a group affair, for through marriage, a person reaffirms his/her commitment to the well being of the group. To a certain extent, this explains the dominance of marital hope and pursuit of strategies to

realise some form of marital hope by some women. While traditional Shona marriage has undergone many changes over the last one hundred years, an important principle that has survived the test of time is payment of bride-wealth. Chavunduka (1979) noted that bride-wealth legalises the marriage union, and it acts as an insurance against marital dissolution. The Shona did not recognise unions where bride-wealth negotiations were not entered into and saw such couples as living in a *mapoto* union. In the event of death of one of the spouses in such a relationship, the surviving spouse was not treated as a widow or widower, but as an outsider without any rights including mourning rights over the dead spouse.

From the interviews with the women, it became clear that the way Shona people perceive illness, death, and marriage had considerable influence on the way the women tended to cling on to marital hope. Remaining single or being divorced was seen as resulting from bad luck due to evil spirits or failure to appease one's ancestral spirits. Indeed, some of the respondents rationalised their situations in these terms. It was therefore important for a person to continue to hold on to marital hope as a sign that one had not accepted the dominance of bad spirits and bad luck as determinants of one's life, for it was like a curse to die as a spinster. Traditionally, a bachelor or spinster was buried together with a rat or maize cob and one's spirit was condemned to wander forever in the woods. In other words, for the Shona people, marriage entitled one, even if childless, to a permanent place as one of the ancestors. In the light of Shona perceptions of and the status accorded to marriage, the behaviour of this study's respondents who placed a premium on marital hope and pursuit of marriage as a survival strategy was very rational.

#### MARRIAGE AS SURVIVAL STRATEGY

Obbo (1986, 193) linked urban women's twofold goals to their ability "to establish their own economic and social credibility . . . and to protect themselves against what they perceive as material and status vulnerability that results from divorce, widowhood, or remaining single". Women try, often successfully, to improve their social and economic status through establishing various types of relationships with men. While conceding that the strategy of manipulating womanhood and motherhood as a transactional tool did not always work for all women, Obbo argued that it enabled some women to access financial and material resources (sometimes including housing) from their lovers, even though this might not result in marriage. This strategy worked for some of this study's respondents. Indeed, one respondent lived mostly on maintenance money, while those in *mapoto* relationships and some prostitutes equally pursued this strategy.

Obbo noted that there were instances when some of the traditional marital links in heterosexual relationships lent themselves to feminist strategies. Women's autonomy and empowerment could still be pursued, as was the case for widows who inherited urban houses that had been registered in the names of their deceased spouses. This was possible where a supportive legal framework existed, such as the Matrimonial Causes Act in Zimbabwe. On their part, Oppong and Abu (1987, 77) observed that "most women perceived marriage as very important for a woman's economic status and quite important for her personal happiness and companionship". However, they emphasised that the reality, based on their study in Ghana, was that only a minority derived economic or social status from marriage, and marital happiness remained more a desired than achieved goal. They also observed that women who brought resourcefulness and good incomes as well as material resources into marital relationships were able to achieve some degree of autonomy. All Masvingo respondents living with men in *mapoto* relationships had a reasonably positive view of the *mapoto* arrangement irrespective of their poverty category. In all *mapoto* cases, the men contributed to the household budget and the women retained their autonomy and control over the use of their incomes. This suggested the possibility that the high level of marital hope amongst the Masvingo women was being maintained in the context of a "radical traditionalist" feminist perspective in which "wifehood", motherhood, and radicalising "traditions" were options that were useful in the pursuit of independence and autonomy.

Thus, marital strategy was not something necessarily tied to heterosexual reproductive relationships but, as noted by Amadiume (1987) and Lee-Smith (1996), same sex marriages (woman to woman) could be used in new contexts as useful strategies for accessing resources. Amadiume (1987) emphasised that, in pre-colonial and contemporary Africa, the Nnobi of Eastern Nigeria and many other ethnic groups, such as the Babamba Mindossi, and Mboshi of the Congo region, the Mende of Sierra Leone, Venda of Southern Africa and the Luba of Katanga, had flexible gender systems<sup>6</sup> that allowed women access to economic resources and positions of power through institutions such as 'male-daughters' and 'female-husbands' which allowed them to pursue heterosexual relations within the context of same-sex relationships. Favourable matriarchal ideologies guaranteed some women important positions of power. For instance, among the traditional Lovedu in

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<sup>6</sup> Gender system refers to a process of reconstruction of relationships between men and women on the basis of negotiations over a gender contract. Gender systems through socialization perpetuate hierarchical relations in society.



northeastern Transvaal, the queen acted as "female husband" who did not officially marry although she could have children. Through her "wives", she had affinal links with her subjects (Amadiume, 1987).

Powerful women could enhance their status by forging "woman to woman" marriages that allowed the circulation of gifts and wealth, access to power, and the establishment of affinal relationships through particular types of relationships with other women. "Woman-to-woman" marriages had developed as a response to the constraints of patrilineal inheritance; a strategy that enabled some women to control land and property.

When daughters performed roles usually monopolised by their male kin, they were classified as men for the purposes of power, and this enabled the "male daughters" to establish an independent economic base and to gain a monopoly in terms of ritual access to the gods and political matters. Amadiume argued that sex did not correspond to gender roles. Female roles did not always give rise to female subordination, for there were instances in which the pursuit of such roles gave rise to powerful positions for some women, which has important implications in terms of how women negotiate their feminine roles in urban Africa today. The actual techniques or strategies and the kind of trade-offs that women have made in such societies as the Nnobi could have positive implications when viewing female heads of households in African societies today.

In Masvingo, respondents' personal social networks had become an important resource to which the women turned as an aid in their strategies to stay in town, especially when they had failed to pursue the marital strategy successfully. However, unlike the situation depicted in Amadiume's study, same-sex marital relationships were not observed, although there were respondents who acted like "male-daughters" in that they contributed to the socio-economic survival of their fathers and/or brothers' households. Some respondents pursued this strategy as part of their double-rooted option to ease their re-entry into the village should that be necessary. This undermines the view that only sons are critical to the survival of the household.

This study found out that Masvingo female household heads adopted multiple survival strategies in order to continue staying in town. Marital hope and marriage remained useful survival options. Among the respondents, 52% thought that single-mother households acted in the best interest of the children's welfare and that single mothers had the freedom and independence to maximise their chances of making a living. However, despite these positive ratings of single motherhood, 66% of Masvingo respondents also had a strong desire to marry or remarry. They noted that the pressure to sustain one's household under difficult circumstances was high for female heads, for there was generally only one breadwinner in such households.

However, 42% of the respondents noted that marriage did not create a partnership that pooled incomes vital for household maintenance. Only 22% of the respondents believed that marriage could raise the status of a woman, and only 14% saw economic advantages in marriage for women. Masvingo respondents unanimously agreed about the stressful nature of marriage for women. In their view, marriage denied women autonomy and independence because a woman's opinions and suggestions were often ridiculed or ignored by men, while the woman was reduced to a state of dependence. 72% per cent thought that most women had frustrating marriage experiences. Only 12% of Masvingo female household heads felt that marriage had no disadvantages; yet, the desire for marriage remained strong for two-thirds of the respondents. This apparently contradictory stance can be accounted for by the fact that, despite its shortcomings, marriage remained a desirable strategy to cope with and manage poverty in the long term.

#### MAPOTO AS SURVIVAL STRATEGY

This section discusses cohabitation or *mapoto* as a form of marriage. Amongst the issues raised in the discussion are the perceived role of socialisation and *mupfuhwira* in such unions, *mapoto* as a survival strategy, HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the question of 'exploited' men in *mapoto* unions.

##### Socialisation

Mararike (1994) noted that every society has cultural rallying points in the form of symbols, rituals, norms, and various forms of religious worship, which motivate people to commit themselves to the ideals of their society. Amongst the Shona, a very high value was placed on marriage to the extent that its variants in the form of *mapoto* were seen as a better option in the face of a formal marriage not materialising. While *mapoto*, especially in the urban context, had become widespread through socialisation, respondents had internalised a value system that placed a premium on formalised marriages. The idiom of the language used in formal marital unions dominated *mapoto* relationships. The *mapoto* couples were referred to as husband and wife and, to a large extent, they perceived themselves as such. In the absence of a formalised marital union, *mapoto* became the acceptable substitute.

#### SURVIVAL STRATEGY

As noted above, through socialisation, Masvingo respondents considered marital unions as proper for the enjoyment of conjugal relationships. As Chavunduka (1979) argues, sometimes, in the urban context, even where

bride-wealth had not been paid, parents and traditional courts treated *mapoto* relationships as if they were recognised unions and demanded payment of maintenance and bride-wealth in cases where a couple had stayed together for some time. To the *mapoto* couple, it was clear that this type of union was becoming the norm amongst both women of independent means and the poor. *Mapoto* relationships were considered ideal in that they offered a much safer home environment.

In the case of marital abuse, a woman could easily opt out. Men in *mapoto* had to deliver, both in material and emotional terms, lest they found themselves kicked out or abandoned by the women. Because *mapoto* men do not pay bride-wealth, they lack the traditional recognised claims over the women and, hence, can only maintain the relationship on the basis of mutual respect and understanding of their partners.

*Mapoto* was a survival option for a minority of the Masvingo respondents. It guaranteed the flow of material resources in addition to offering emotional support. In *mapoto*, while the man was not considered the head of household, he was still expected to act as a provider or to contribute to household maintenance. *Mapoto* enabled people to pool resources and enjoy conjugal rights at the same time. For some women, therefore, *mapoto* created space that enabled them to cope with urban existence. The way *mapoto* unions operated demonstrated that these forms of marital union played an important role and had become one of the strategies for urban survival amongst some of the women. More importantly, *mapoto* relationships were characterised by a notable degree of equality between the partners, making it possible for couples in these unions to negotiate their way.

#### HIV/AIDS AND MAPOTO UNIONS

Regarding concerns about the dangers posed by *mapoto* in the light of the HIV/AIDS pandemic raised earlier, the point to emphasise is that the women of Masvingo believed that they had better control of their bodies in *mapoto* relationships than women in formalised marital unions did. They argued that, in a *mapoto* relationship, a woman was in a better position to insist on safe sexual practices. Thus, contrary to the widespread belief that *mapoto* unions are a death trap, they maintained that, in fact, such relationships are not only a source of economic and emotional support for the women involved with them, but also offered a relatively viable and safe survival option for women facing difficult conditions in the urban environment, characterised by increasing poverty.

#### "EXPLOITED MEN"

In the light of the above discussion regarding the role of *mapoto*, the question that arises is what makes men enter these unions which appear

heavily loaded in favour of women and which undermine their traditional role as heads of households and the dominant marriage partners? Part of the answer to this question can be found in Shona society's perception of behaviour and human relationships. Chavunduka (1979), Gelfand (1984), and Mararike (1998) noted that Shona people attributed the bizarre behaviour of men in marriage or marital relationships to bewitchment by "tricky" women. *Mapoto* women are often seen as money sharks that lure men to their side through charms and use of herbs; otherwise known as *kupfuhwira* (administering love portions). The effects of *mupfuhwira* on a *mapoto* man are believed to be similar to married men under the spell of their wives. Mararike (1998, 90) noted that, under such situations "the women create, out of their husbands, clients who are subservient and serviceable to their interests and agendas". It then follows that, in order to free *mapoto* men from the disorienting effects of *mupfuhwira*, the intervention of medicine men is needed. While *mupfuhwira* might be seen as disadvantageous to men, it clearly serves a useful purpose for the *mapoto* women and ensures that they cope with the demands of town life.

#### MARITAL STRATEGY: EXPERIENCES OF MASVINGO FEMALE HEADS OF HOUSEHOLD RESPONDENTS

The experience of the women of Masvingo who were interviewed for this study showed that the pursuit of the marital strategy had had different outcomes for different individuals at different times. The five case studies discussed below reveal the varied experiences of the women, with some losing and others gaining "husbands" over time.

**Respondent X** was a never-married 24-year-old mother of a two-year-old daughter. She lived under conditions of extreme overcrowding in her parents' four-roomed Mucheke house. Her household had 16 persons (her paternal grandmother, father and mother, six sisters, a brother aged ten, herself, her daughter, and four of her sisters' children). This 16-person household used two rooms: a bedroom and a dining/sitting room. Two lodger families consisting of eight people occupied the other two rooms (a kitchen and a spare bedroom).

X was financially independent, but contributed to the joint budget of the composite household. She was born and grew up in Masvingo. She earned an income of Z\$400 per month from peddling shopping (carrier) bags, which she had begun selling in 1993. In 1994, X spent nine months in Mberengwa communal area in the Midlands Province, at the rural homestead of her boyfriend who was in the Army and who had promised to marry her, following her pregnancy with him. The promised marriage did not materialise as the soldier boyfriend reneged on his promise. Meanwhile, during her stay with her would-be parents-in-law, she received

little material and financial support from him. She had, therefore, decided to return to Masvingo.

At the time of the interview, she was receiving a monthly child maintenance allowance of between Z\$100 and Z\$150 from the soldier. She had obtained a passport in April 1995 with the intention of engaging in cross-border trading in South Africa. Although her marriage plans failed to materialise, X had done everything she could to show her serious intention to marry. Her situation illustrated the predicament of many Zimbabwean women who have tried their best to get married but have been unsuccessful.

**Respondent W** was a 34-year-old widow and a mother of four sons who depended on rentals for her income. By the end of 1995, she was "climbing out" of poverty. Her eldest boy, a 14-year-old, was in the first year of Secondary school (Form One) and the youngest eight-year-old was in grade three. All her children stayed with her. She had become the owner of a four-roomed house after the death of her husband in 1994. Before the husband's death, the family had used the entire house, but now she had to rent out some of the rooms.

At the beginning of 1995, W's household was in dire financial need. She depended on a rental income of Z\$240 per month for the two rooms she was letting out to a five-person household and two-person household, respectively and from income derived from the sale of vegetables from her house garden, mostly to neighbours. Her husband had not allowed her to obtain a passport, since he thought cross-border women traders engaged in immoral sexual activities. W was thus denied the chance to develop her business skills during her husband's lifetime. Her first ever passport was issued at the end of February 1995 and she started cross-border trading at the end of April 1995. Her first trip to Pretoria, undertaken with a neighbour, was a fiasco. However, all her subsequent monthly cross-border trips to South Africa had been fruitful.

W's case illustrates how, in some cases, potential entrepreneurial women may be thwarted and never allowed to develop their skills because of their husbands' negative attitudes towards cross-border trading. However, W's marriage had given her access into the housing rental market when she lost her husband, illustrating that the marital strategy has both benefits and disadvantages.

**Respondent V** was a 29-year-old divorcee and a mother of eight-year-old twins. She depended on income from food vending. She operated from two sites in the town centre, one an illegal pavement site just outside a major Department Store (Balmain) and, the other, at the legally designated site opposite Aroma Bakery. Each day, she left the bulk of her day's orders at the legally designated site and only carried a small quantity to the other site so that she would not lose much should the police

impound the goods for unlicensed vending. In addition, she employed two salespersons who moved around town with small amounts of wares. Although she was a legally registered vendor, she was not immune to arrests since anybody who operated outside the designated zone was deemed an illegal operator. She had registered on the Council's housing waiting list and was quite optimistic that she would soon be allocated a stand on which to build a house.

V hoped to re-marry if a suitable partner came along. From September 1995, she lived in a *mapoto* relationship. She had entered this relationship with her eyes "wide open", and appeared to be maintaining her autonomy and independence. Her business operations were apparently unaffected by the *mapoto* relationship. She acknowledged that her partner contributed to the household budget and that this had enabled her to save what she earned from her vending business. V's case demonstrates that *mapoto* unions were likely to be beneficial for women who were financially secure as they could supplement their incomes and even save their earnings because of the financial contributions from their *mapoto* partners.

**Respondent GD** was a 45-year old mother of six, who also depended on income from her food vending business. She was a recent entrant into food vending, having started vending food in 1992. She also crocheted items for the cross-border trade on a part-time basis. **GD** lived with a man in a *mapoto* union. She had had four children from her previous marriage and two from the *mapoto* relationship. **GD** lived as a lodger in one room. She shared the premises with her *mapoto* partner and four children, two of whom were her deceased sister's daughters. **GD's** three school going children from the earlier marriage lived with their maternal uncle in the rural areas, while her oldest child had married and moved out.

**GD** maintained contact with her village, which she visited at least three times a year and to which she sent money every two months. After the death of her husband, she had returned to her village of origin where she had built herself a two-roomed homestead as she intended to retire to the village in her old age. While her *mapoto* partner contributed to the household budget, she was responsible for meeting most of the household's expenses. The relationship allowed her to retain her autonomy and, therefore, she did not intend to formalise the relationship despite the birth of two children and the cordial relationship she had with her partner, as that would undermine her independence. She, however, cherished the emotional support she enjoyed from the relationship.

**GD** did not want to face the same experience that she had gone through following her husband's death. Her affines had taken all the property she and her husband had accumulated over a period of twelve

years. Among the items taken were her marital home, six cattle, several goats, and the family fields. She had returned to her parental village empty handed and had had to start all over again.

GD's case showed that, in some cases, the marital strategy had negative consequences, particularly in case of widowhood. While she had had a reasonably good life while her husband was alive, she lost everything at his death. In contrast, in *mapoto* relationships, there was no danger of a woman losing property to her partner's affines in case of his death. It seems, therefore, that *mapoto* unions enabled women to enjoy emotional and economic benefits from their partners without the risk of loss of independence and control of their resources.

**Respondent Z** was a 27-year-old, never-married, childless bar prostitute and a one-room lodger. She also did part-time knitting and crocheting for a cross-border trader she had been introduced to by a client. She remitted money and material goods to her kin in her home village and contributed to the education of her brother's children. She visited her village at least three times a year. She was double-rooted in the sense that she maintained links with her village of origin.

As a bar prostitute, Z serviced mostly two kinds of male clients, the "one-off", and the 'urban-regular' clients. With two of her 'urban-regulars', she was offering a more personalised service that included provision of food and laundry services. She sometimes gave her "urban-regulars" a discount and preferential treatment compared to her "one-off" clients. Marital hopes appeared to influence her relationships with her regular clients. A proto-*mapoto* relationship seemed to emerge in her dealings with the two regular clients. Members of her prostitute networks referred to some of her "urban-regulars" as "murume wasisi Z" (Sister Z's 'husband'). Although a fulltime prostitute, Z still hoped to marry and seemed to have been guided by this hope in her dealing with her "urban-regulars", demonstrating that, even for her, marriage was highly regarded as a survival option in the urban context.

#### LESSONS FROM THE CASE STUDIES

What emerges from the above case studies is that marital hope and marital strategy remained central concerns in the Masvingo women's lives. This has implications in terms of how the marriage institution and the issue of women's empowerment are understood. While it has been the tradition of the Shona people to frown upon women involved in non-formal marital unions such as *mapoto*, there seems to be a need for society to learn to accept such unions. Given the various experiences of the women of Masvingo who were interviewed for this study, there is need for society to develop strategies that incorporate both formal

marriage and informal marriage arrangements as acceptable options for women. As the above case studies reveal, female headship of households does not necessarily imply a rejection of marriage. In fact, as shown, in all cases discussed above, women preferred to be married and remained hopeful that they would attain this goal someday.

The central concern for the women discussed in this study was that of accessing resources that would ensure that their households survived in town. The women were not motivated by a high degree of gender consciousness; they had practical needs that had to be met and they did whatever was necessary to survive. The above five cases suggest that an indigenous feminism embracing the marital strategy needs to be adopted, for, as long as the central concern of any strategy is to improve the lives of women, such a strategy could still be deemed to be feminist in orientation.

Foucault's (1972; 1978; 1979) notions of power, discipline, sexuality, and surveillance are useful in understanding the situation of the five cases described above. In Foucault's concept, discipline is part of the process of socialisation that women go through in society. Through surveillance, discipline oriented women to develop self-control and live an ordered way of life based on female subordination. Women who did not conform to the image of a good woman were severely punished and shunned. By pursuing the marital strategy, the female heads of households were, thus, acting according to societal expectations. In a society like Zimbabwe where identity is tied to marital status, it made sense for many women to hold on to marital hope as a means of trying to resolve an apparent contradiction arising out of their status as heads of households. In some cases, such as those of widows, marital hope and pursuit of the marital strategy produced tangible benefits such as access to a house following the death of their husbands. This produced contradictory responses amongst the women as shown by the fact that, even in cases of apparent spousal abuse, the women tended to cling on to the relationship.

Foucault's notion of surveillance is useful in understanding the lived experiences of female heads of households in Masvingo. The women were under the constant watchful eye of officials and society at large. Foucault's main argument is that there exists a strong relationship between power and sexuality. Generally, women are seen as subordinate to the men. Institutions contribute to women's oppression and subordination by failing to question the system of gender inequality in society. The choice of urban permanency by widows could, thus, be explained in terms of their desire to free themselves from the constraining effects of tradition and patriarchy.



## CONCLUSION

The article has sought to contribute to an understanding of male/female relations, in the context of changing rural-urban environments by investigating how some women survive outside formal marriage. However, in the light of changing disease patterns such as HIV/AIDS, further questions must be addressed in relation to the implications of "loose" sexual relationships to health issues, especially in the light of the fact that many people regard such sexual relationships as a death trap. As shown, for some Masvingo women, these sexual relationships are essential for their survival in the face of increasing poverty.

The study has also suggested that there is no direct relationship between marital status and women's levels of income. Five of the Masvingo women interviewed who were gradually improving their economic status were divorcees. This suggests that a woman's socio-economic status is not necessarily linked to her marital status. Yet, the perception of the single female household heads was that marriage would improve their economic status. Indeed, even amongst the Masvingo prostitutes, marital hope remained a strong survival strategy. In addition to sexual favours, prostitutes provided regular customers with other services such as laundry services and food provision in relationships very similar to *mapoto*. It was clear that, at times, prostitute-client relationships were transformed into *mapoto* unions. *Mapoto* and prostitution thus both fell within the ambit of the marital strategies that female-heads of households adopted in order to survive in town.

What might appear as a contradictory response amongst the Masvingo women is, in fact, a rational response to their lived experiences. Most of the women had seen and could weigh the benefits as opposed to disadvantages of marriage and they were convinced that marriage remained a viable option. They did not glorify marriage as such, but it remained a major survival strategy, which some women hoped to access in times of need.

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