

“I WILL MARRY WHOM I CHOOSE” CHALLENGING FORCED MARRIAGES IN ZIMBABWE

By Miriam Banda

Far from dying, forced marriages are still taking place in rural Zimbabwe. In this modern day and age, this calls for a closer analysis on the aspect of choice. Shouldn't a woman be able to choose whom she wants to marry? Why are cultural practices not cognizant of human rights? Zimbabwe is a signatory to human rights instruments including regional treaties such as the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development which emphasize that cultural practices harmful to women should be eliminated and that a marriage should take place with the full consent of both parties involved. This begs the question why then are we sliding back into the realm of forced marriages? The answer is simply that gender inequality is at the heart of these cultural practices. Women have been stripped of any form of control over their sexuality and fertility even, by what men define as tradition. I say men because it is men who in the Shona culture rule over females by right of birth. The female child is seen as 'disposable', by being married off without her consent to join another family. In essence what we have is the interplay between sexuality and culture.

The Shona family set up as an institution differentiates roles between boys and girls in general. Roles are pre-determined on the basis of biological attributes. The result is that society views women as sexual beings who are defined as dependant and subordinate to men. Women simply fulfill the roles and expectations that society places on them. For women who swim against the tide of societal demands, there is a high price to pay.

Take for example, Chipo* a 20 year old woman who comes from Chesa a rural area in Mt Darwin. Three months prior she was living with her mother and they were receiving financial support from her two older brothers. However, the situation quickly changed with a dramatic twist of events. She learnt then that her brothers had accepted *lobola* (bride wealth) from a well known man in the area of Mt Darwin. The 'bridegroom' is an older man in his late forties who is wealthy by rural standards and already has six wives. The brothers had met up secretly with the man and negotiated her marriage

It is very difficult for a young girl or woman at the centre of this marriage to refuse the match. In communally organized societies such as rural villages in Zimbabwe there is a clear emphasis on group identity. For a young girl or woman to refuse the man thrust upon her is to go against the will of the elders. She would automatically lose the all rights in her lineage. The Shona marriage has the primary purpose of creating bonds between kin groups. The bridegroom by transferring bride wealth, acquires rights over the bride's reproductive capacity. The bride plays no meaningful role in the negotiations for lobola meaning she is merely a conduit in the entire process. It is evident that sexuality and culture are interwoven so intricately that one might fail to see the extent to which this is detrimental to gender equality.

In the scenario given above, Chipo acted quickly in approaching her local police station. The police went on to arrest her two brothers who were later released without charge. However, Chipo stated that her involving the police only made her relationship with her family more acrimonious as the latter felt she wanted them imprisoned. Despite the fact that Zimbabwean law protects female persons from being pledged or forced into a marriage without their consent, most cases of this nature go unreported because this usually occurs in family circles. In the Zimbabwean context it is difficult to ascertain the prevalence of such practices mainly because there have been no cases that have been prosecuted to finality. It is clear that these practices will not fade until we address attitudes in our communities in the quest for gender equality.

Research needs to be undertaken to determine the prevalence of forced marriages. With research undertaken there will be need to target the attitudes of communities who practice arranged marriages. There would be need to highlight the importance of a young woman having the right to choose whom she wants to marry and consent to the marriage in question.

Further, my view is that as a people, we have to realize the dynamism of culture. Those who argue for the preservation of culture paint a romantic picture of African tradition and institutions that remain untouched and unaffected. We cannot ignore that culture interfaced with the colonial process and went through change. In essence, culture is not static but is influenced and influences change in itself. To highlight the plight of the unfortunate young women who find themselves trapped in a union they did not consent to, we need to engage with men in dialogue over the disadvantages of arranged marriages. One is the likelihood of contracting HIV/AIDS especially in a polygamous union.

*not her real name