



The Price of Womanhood

Girls' and young women's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Zimbabwe

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Please note: This document contains sensitive material that relates to Female Genital Mutilation that some people may find upsetting.

*Front cover: Young woman participating in the Progressio International Citizen Service programme.
Back cover: Young pregnant women playing outside a clinic in Zimbabwe.*

Foreword

**“Getting
enlightenment
can help
change the
lives of
women.”**

- Mandy
(focus group
discussion)

This publication offers insights from a research project in Zimbabwe carried out by Progressio in 2015. It looks at issues around Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and gender roles, in the society in general and in the context of the church specifically. Issues around SRHR are often misunderstood, and in many cases believed not to exist because in many cases, no one talks about them.

Progressio is an international development organisation that has worked tirelessly for 75 years in the advancement of women’s rights around the world. In Zimbabwe, there is a need for a greater exploration of SRHR and other areas of gender equality.

Progressio initiated in this research to gain an insight into SRHR and gender equality within different religious groups in Zimbabwe. Research was conducted in Zimbabwe with a small number of young women and girls, as well as men and boys, who belonged to mainstream churches from the Christian faith, and Apostolic and Zionist churches. The research examined issues of SRHR within the Apostolic as well as Zionist churches, an area that is normally not accessible because the church members preserve confidentiality about their issues.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Fatima Haase, Policy and Advocacy Officer (SRHR) for Progressio, for facilitating this research on power relations, SRHR and young women’s decision-making options in Zimbabwe. I would also like to thank the research participants and Progressio staff involved in this process.

The results of this research will be used to inform project development and to stimulate further research on related topics within the churches in Southern Africa.

Fiona Mwashita

Progressio Southern Africa Sub-Regional Manager

Key Messages

Key messages that emerged from the interviews about young women's and girls' SRHR in Zimbabwe.

- 1. Girls are expected to marry young because they are not seen of much value until they are married. Society attaches a high value to marriage, which means girls and young women lack self-confidence and a feeling of 'power within'. Marrying young means transitioning into a new social status in which young women and girls are treated with respect. Being able to find a husband is also seen as a sign that they have been raised well, which earns their mother more respect. Lastly, early marriage is seen by parents as an opportunity to protect a young woman or girl's purity and avert pre-marital sex.
- 2. Young women and girls are expected to give birth early after marriage because this is an opportunity to prove fertility in a society that values family and children highly. Showing that they are able to bear children enhances their value as a woman and will increase the respect that society has for them. The expectation is also attached to the *lobola* payment that the groom's family has paid to the bride's family. The pressure to give birth has been traditionally exercised by the young woman's aunt, but if the aunt lives far away, powerful women in the community or family put pressure on the young woman instead.
- 3. *Lobola**, as a cultural tradition, manifests social norms that might limit women's free decision-making over their own bodies, such as when and how often they want to get pregnant. In such cases, the husband and his family, who contributed to saving for *lobola*, limit a woman's agency over her sexual and reproductive decisions.
- 4. Bridal showers and kitchen parties are informal sexuality education events, used by respected women to teach younger women conservative social norms about what is expected of them as future wives.
- 5. Religious leaders of mainstream churches and traditional leaders do not play a leading role in influencing young women's attitudes and knowledge on SRHR. Respected women play a key role in ensuring that young women conform to what society expects from them.

***Lobola is a bride price, paid by the groom's family to the bride's family.**

Background

Young women's SRHR and social norms in Zimbabwe

Amongst others, two important policies shaped the definition of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights that most people are using nowadays. Whilst there is no agreed full definition of SRHR, two sections of the policies give an overview on what is meant by SRHR:

1. The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. (*Beijing Platform of Action, c.96, 1995*)
2. Reproductive health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes. It implies that people have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so. Implicit in this is the right of men and women to be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of family planning of their choice, as well as other methods of their choice for regulation of fertility, which are not against the law, and the right of access to health-care services that will enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth. Reproductive health care also includes sexual health, the purpose of which is the enhancement of life and personal relations. These rights rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. They also include the right of all to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence. Full attention should be given to promoting mutually respectful and equitable gender relations and particularly to meeting the educational and service needs of adolescents to enable them to deal in a positive and responsible way with their sexuality. (*International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Chapter 7, reproductive health and reproductive rights.*)

Customary law is influenced by a patriarchal world-view that can clash with contemporary values such as human rights law and its instruments.

Data from the most recent Demographic Health Survey for Zimbabwe from 2010-11 gives a useful overview of young women's sexual and reproductive behaviour in the country. It shows that women and girls are sexually active from a young age. Only 6% of adolescent girls have sex before they are 15, but the number rises sharply to 38% before they are 18. The median age for first intercourse in Zimbabwe is 18.9 years.¹ The survey also reveals that 24% of women aged 15-19 have begun child-bearing already.² The median age for the first birth for women aged 25-49 was 21.1 in urban areas, and 19.7 in rural areas.

While this data is important, it only gives limited answers about the reasons why girls begin to be sexually active or start child-bearing at a young age. It only touches on religious beliefs and violence-related social norms, and does not explain, for example, why young girls have early sexual relations.

In most developing countries, especially in post-conflict states or those with weak governance structures, cultural traditions and social norms together form customary law, which plays a major role in people's lives and in defining social and cultural values. This publication shows how in Zimbabwe, as in other African states, customary law has a great influence in matters of public and private law, including marriage, spousal rights and property. Customary law is influenced by a patriarchal world-view that can clash with contemporary values such as human rights law and its instruments. The legitimacy of customary law is rooted in the idea that it is ancient and unchanging, having its sources in deep-rooted practices and culture.³

While many traditions and norms (including religious beliefs) can give women strength, some are restricting women's access to their SRHR and to the decision making power over their own bodies. For example, to access SRHR means to know and act upon the right to decide when and who to marry, the right to say no to sex, and the right to decide whether and when to have children. But the agency of girls and young women in negotiating protection from pregnancies is often limited. Young women and adolescent girls, in particular, may feel unable to assert power in sexual relationships or to negotiate safe sex for avoiding pregnancy.⁴ This has a major impact on their own and their families' lives.

Introduction

Progressio has worked in Zimbabwe for over 30 years. The communities in which Progressio works, alongside local organisations and people, struggle with the impacts of gender inequality.

Often women and girls are expected to be submissive to male decision-makers, including their husbands. Girls grow up knowing that, as a female, their value is closely linked to the status of being married. This means girls strive towards getting married early and start child-bearing soon afterwards.

Early marriage and child marriage is a significant problem in Zimbabwe. According to research by Human Rights Watch, one in three women surveyed, aged 20 to 49 years, married before they were 18 years old, and an estimated 4% married before 15 years.⁵ Customs and practices like child marriage, and social expectations such as early child-bearing and submissiveness towards their husbands, limit women's and girls' access to their SRHR.

Women and girls are expected to be submissive to male decision-makers, including their husbands. Young girls often lack the chance to make informed decisions about their own bodies.

Young girls, especially, often lack the chance to make informed decisions about their own bodies. Strong taboos exist against premarital sexual activity, and there are widespread misconceptions about legal restrictions on adolescents' access to contraceptives. This makes it difficult for sexually active, unmarried 15-19 year olds to obtain effective contraceptive methods and they therefore struggle to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy.⁶ This unmet need for contraception has increased steadily amongst this group from 44% in 1999 to 62% in 2011.⁷ Furthermore, early child-bearing can have multiple detrimental effects on a girl's life and health. For example, girls aged 10-14 years are five times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than those aged between 20-24 years.

These problems, which are at the heart of gender inequality and lack of SRHR, have been increasingly recognised at the international policy level. In recent years, there has been an increased focus on the relevance of SRHR for women's advancement and for strengthening women's and girls' rights. This has led to the inclusion of SRHR topics (such as access to family planning, and elimination of child, early and forced marriage) in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):⁸

➤ Goal 3: Good health and well-being, ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

➤ Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

In addition to this, governments and international institutions have recently started to focus much more on the interplay between discriminatory social norms and gender inequality.⁹ Development work aims to bring behaviour change, so that people living in poor and marginalised communities have more power and control over their lives, and feel empowered to make the decisions that benefit them. It is therefore important to look closely at the social norms that are related to SRHR.

It is women and girls who bear the brunt of the burden when their SRHR are not recognised. They are the ones who are forced into marriage at a young age, who experience female genital mutilation (FGM), and who lack the skills and knowledge which allow them to protect themselves from unwanted and unplanned pregnancy.

This case study report will focus on young women's SRHR in Zimbabwe, and will include both male and female perspectives on young women's SRHR.

Methodology

Following an extensive literature review, Progressio recognised that the role of social norms on young women's decision-making with regard to their SRHR in Zimbabwe is not yet well understood. Progressio therefore decided to focus on local people's realities that can help to highlight power relations in communities. We sought qualitative insights, by conducting eight in-depth interviews with individuals and two focus group discussions (each with five and six participants), as a way of initiating a learning process. This publication features extracts from the eight in-depth interviews and two focus groups, capturing the voices of people from different backgrounds in Zimbabwe.

The interviews were conducted between 10-19 June 2015, in and around Harare and Mutare in Zimbabwe. Interviewees were selected by the Zimbabwe Progressio country office, Progressio's partner organisations and by the project lead, Progressio's Policy and Advocacy Officer Fatima Haase. Selection of interviewees was based on their religious affiliation, age, gender or knowledge about young people's access to their SRHR.

The objective of these interviews and subsequent analysis was to foster an understanding of power relations and customary law in Zimbabwe, by identifying key values and beliefs that underpin social norms in relation to marriage and pregnancy.

This objective is related to the overall aim of Progressio's work on SRHR, which is to increase young women's and girls' access to SRHR and tackle discriminative social norms and religious beliefs.

The following research questions were developed, based on the gaps identified by the literature review:

1. Why are early marriage and early childbirth a persisting social norm in Zimbabwe?
2. How, and in which settings, do girls and young women learn about social norms, values and beliefs in relation to their SRHR?
3. Who is upholding these social norms? What is the role of religious and traditional leaders in this?

These questions guided the interviews, which aimed to give the people the opportunity to have their voice heard and share their own stories and perspectives.

Apostolic faith

According to the Multi Indicator Monitoring Survey, 27% of Zimbabweans are Apostolic.

Apostolic churches are spirit-type churches that base their religious beliefs and customs primarily on the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ Each church is led by a prophet who has been called by the Holy Spirit. Once his calling has been confirmed by elders, the prophet founds a new church.

Each church follows the teaching of the prophet, built on the messages they receive from the Holy Spirit. Contrary to what one would expect, given they believe the Holy Spirit speaks to all of them, those messages vary in each church.

While many other faiths around the world focus on the interpretation of scripture, the Apostolic faith focuses on the channel of communication between the prophet and the Holy Spirit – the third person of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is a way for followers to reach God; they ask prophets for guidance and spiritual support. But a prophet may also act upon messages he has received directly from the Holy Spirit. Being ‘connected’ to the Holy Spirit in this way gives individual prophets an enormous amount of power, and in the past this has led to problems related to accountability.

In the Apostolic faith, observing religious rules is seen to have a great impact on a person’s well-being and life. According to the belief, those who are faithful and observe religious teachings and regulations receive protection from the Holy Spirit, while those who are not living their faith will fall ill. This belief greatly contributes to strict regulations of punishment for failure to follow the religious teachings.

Moreover, the Holy Spirit ‘serves as the divine force that guides the church, and equips prophets and some church members with special prophetic and healing powers’.¹¹ Thus in the Apostolic church, health, well-being, prophecy and adherence to church teachings and rules are all seen as interlinked, and have an influence on the power relations between prophet and church followers.

The Apostolic faith was developed in Zimbabwe in the 1930s.¹² The founder of the movement, Johane Masowe, had a religious experience that led him to believe that he had been chosen to be another John the Baptist, and that he had been selected to preach to the people.

Masowe’s preaching has led to the development of a huge Apostolic faith movement over the past 70 years. While some claim that it is difficult to get data on the size of the movement, according to the Multi Indicator Monitoring Survey, 27% of Zimbabweans are Apostolic.¹³ Other estimates claim that only 6% of the adult population follows an Apostolic faith, of which 73% of the population lives in rural areas, and of which 64% of the members are female.¹⁴

Since 1993, an increasing number of Apostolic churches have operated under an umbrella organisation, Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe and Africa (UDACIZA).¹⁵ UDACIZA currently consists of around 500 member churches and gives guidance and training to its members. It was formed in 1993, after leaders of various churches were encouraged to do so by Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCOD). UDACIZA was established with the aim of maintaining communication between the Apostolic churches, Zionists, mainstream churches, as well as the state, in order to help improve the lives of its members in terms of health and education. UDACIZA has since become a vital tool for forging the lives of believers together as a community of faith, and a vital and effective instrument for the formation and education of the people.¹⁶

Interviews



Laurelle, age 30

"I grew up in Mutare, where we were taught that men and women have different roles. A woman takes care of everything that concerns the household. And men, in turn, are expected to provide for the family and bring in money. More recently, there have been slight changes to the traditional roles, such as young women bringing in money as well, but there are still three areas that remain unchanged: women are expected to get married young, have children and take care of

the family.

I work as a programmes officer. But I work outside of the community where my husband lives, so I only commute to our house on the weekends. When I come home on Saturday, I'm expected to do his whole week's laundry and take care of the household. I'm also expected to tell him how much I earn. In contrast, the man does not declare his funds. He just gives money to his wife when she needs it for things such as fuel, running errands, buying things for the children and so on.

People can make you feel uncomfortable when they visit you at home, if they see you're sitting at your laptop while your husband is cooking, they would judge you. So if you want peace in your house, you avoid behaving contrary to the stereotype. Most women feel comfortable doing this, as then they have peace at home and with their community. For example, you can be a gender activist, but you still have to live up to what others expect from you, including cleaning, looking after the kids and so on.



When I hear about SRHR I think about how, as a woman, I have the right to decide what I do sexually; about my responsibility to ensure I'm healthy; about my right to choose when I want to be sexually active, how many children I want to have and when; and finally, about my access to services in relation to health and family planning. However, when a woman gets married here, many of those decisions are taken away from her. For example, the issue of *lobola* will not go away soon. We've been taught to think the payment of *lobola* is good – women are proud that someone pays for them.

Even before marriage, women are taught what a 'real' woman is through bridal showers, where there is one key message: if your husband is to see you as a real woman, you always need to be submissive, that is why he will marry you. They also tell us our role is in the kitchen and bedroom. All women say it in different ways, but the key message is – 'Get married and be submissive.'



Bridal Showers are attended by your paternal aunt (your father's sister), women from the church, probably the pastor's wife, and your grandmother. In general, these are the women who are seen in high regard. And if you have any problems within the marriage, those are the women you would go to, with the main and first point of contact being your paternal aunt. They act as mediators if there's any trouble. Your Paternal aunt would also play a role in the *lobola* negotiations, alongside the groom's father, brother and grandfather.



"We grow up knowing what is expected from us. And because of this, women are actually upholding these views. Real progress is made by having women who are educated and have different world-views."
– Laurelle



Your husband would also have people to go to, with his mother's brother being the first and most trusted point of contact. The aunts on your father's side are more powerful than your mother, grandmother or mother-in-law. They are the female custodians of culture, as they are the 'female version' of your father.



Once married, a woman's pregnancy is a major issue. Even if you don't feel the pressure immediately, you'll be stressed because you can imagine the upcoming pressure. For example, a friend of mine got married late last year and she is already panicking about what others will say, because she isn't pregnant yet. This is because women are seen as being of value when they get married and have children. In our society, a woman is expected to be pregnant in the first month after getting married. If she isn't, people start asking whether everything is okay in the bedroom. That is what society says, and that is how women define themselves.

We grow up knowing what is expected from us. And because of this, women are actually upholding these views. It's rare that a woman will openly say that she is happy without first being married or having children. Although there are some small steps towards change, they are only baby steps. The real progress is made by having women who are educated and have different world-views.



I started learning about my body and sexuality when I was about 13, through a distant aunt. She explained how it would be when I would get my period and vaguely what it means. She also told me to pull my labia, but there was no explanation as to why I should do it. She then told me my period would stop when I am pregnant, but everything was rather vague.

I would have loved to have learned from somebody close to me, who I felt comfortable with, who would have explained everything. I would have loved to know what to do and why. But I didn't have an older sister, although I did start talking about things with my younger sister when she was old enough.



Access to healthcare wasn't readily available either. Growing up, I learned that health providers are only for people who are sick. When you see someone coming out of the clinic, the first question is: 'What is wrong with you, what are you suffering from?' There was no thinking that someone could go there for any other reason. We weren't told that we could also go to the doctor to get information or to have check-ups. In addition, we knew we couldn't talk to anyone about sexual activity, or anything related to it, because they'd say: 'Why do you want to know? You are very naughty.' But slowly things are changing. From a certain age, we knew we could talk about some issues with friends or, growing up with social media, that the internet would provide some answers to questions we had.

"I would like to have more responsibility on the financial side. When it comes to our future, I would like to decide how many children I have and not be judged by others."
– Laurelle

Nowadays we have youth-friendly services in health clinics. But the youth prefer to find things out by themselves, or from books or the internet, because a female clinic member might ask you: 'Why do you want to know, aren't you too young to engage in sex?' Unless there is someone from the same age, the youth doesn't frequent those centres and services very often. It also depends on where the centre is: can you sneak in without being seen, is it on your way, or is it too central in your community?

I would like to have more responsibility on the financial side. And, when it comes to our future, I would like to have a greater say about how we spend our money, as well as a greater say in family planning. I would like to decide how many children I have and not be judged by others.

In general, from my experience, things only change when women speak out against traditions causing inequality. For example, women spoke out about the uptake of women's employment, and then men considered it. If women don't speak out, nothing will change."



Mary, in her 40s

“In this community, women usually do house chores like cooking, sweeping, gardening and tilling the land. Men are involved in farming and any activities that call for manual labour. I think women are very talented. They have many roles that they perform but they are more comfortable having the role of child-rearing, cooking for the family, fetching firewood and water.

The religious and traditional leaders mostly work to ensure that there is peace in the community. When there are disputes, the traditional and religious leaders do counselling sessions to bring back the harmony. The local leaders also play the role of marriage officers who officiate marriages.



For me, SRHR means that as a woman, I have sexual rights and I also have the right to protect my body from diseases like Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs). I have the right to do what I want, and also to have sexual intercourse when I want, without force. It also means I have a right to be tested.

“The decision-making powers of women, in regards to sexual issues, do not exist.”

– Mary

The decision-making powers of women, in regards to sexual issues, do not exist. Culture does not allow women to refuse sex from their husbands, as the husband has paid the *lobola* for them. This makes them have a lower status as they have been ‘bought’ by the husband and are expected to serve him.

Women’s roles, and what is expected from a woman (including in regards to SRHR) are usually discussed in a family setting by aunts. But I also got to hear this information at a women’s workshop, where these expectations were outlined. I first learnt about my body and sexuality from my aunt and mother and I later discussed it with my friends. But now some of the information I’ve learnt is from books and workshops that I attended. The current generation should learn more from the books and workshops, because the teachings from the aunts, though very helpful, can be misleading.



Marriage is the coming together of a man and a woman, so they can be together as husband and wife. The wife comes in to be a helper to her husband, and the status changes when a couple gets married. In the family and community setting, you gain a certain level of respect once you’re married, because as a woman, you are now identified with the family you married into. Marriage also results in one being given responsibilities. For example, at church both the man and woman get positions to serve.

In the process leading up to the marriage, it is the close family members and relatives who are involved. These include the parents, aunts and uncles. The father of the groom also plays a central role, as he’s expected to add to the bride price that his son would have saved. He would also give his son cattle to add to the *lobola*. This is a sign that he’s accepted the bride and is supporting his son’s marriage. The religious and traditional leaders are not really involved in this process; they are only introduced to the bride after the marriage negotiations are over. Their importance is seen after the ceremony, where



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– Mary



"You gain a certain level of respect once you're married, because as a woman, you are now identified with the family you married into."

– Mary

they do counselling sessions with the couple.

Marriage is an occasion that is celebrated by many. When someone gets married they are given advice to be on their best behaviour and never embarrass the family. The girl is encouraged to respect her in-laws, work hard and make her family proud. The couple also receive blessings and good wishes for conception. The girl's status immediately changes and she is no longer identified by her name, but will be addressed using the husband's surname. And when the couple has a child, they will be called by their child's name.

The state officiates marriages and gives certificates. It also approves transfers of married couples who work in different areas to be in the same area, as long as the couple is able to produce the marriage certificate.

The religious element of the marriage is very important, as it results in a change of status. This includes being given leadership roles, and the couple also qualifies to have the church uniform, which gives status to the individuals.



I think cultural values need to be challenged, as women are not given leadership roles – or if they are, they don't have total control. The man's voice is still audible in the background, even though the woman is in the front.

Change can only be experienced through awareness-raising from workshops, and also by revisiting the issue of *lobola* and what it means to both parties. Key people should be made more aware, especially traditional leaders, so that they can advocate for change."



Bertha, age 70

"I grew up in a small-scale farming area, where most of the farming was done by women. Men sometimes worked in the area, but most of them went to South Africa in order to work in the mines. A woman would work at home, take care of the family and do the farming work, such as harvesting. But in those years, all decisions were still made by her husband – what crops to use, what to sell and so on. Even the family planning decisions were made by men.

➤ **Men would decide how many children** they wanted to have, and they all had the mentality of a boy preference. If a couple would have three girls, the husband would encourage having more children until he got a boy. Fortunately, I grew up in a family in which this was very different. My father was a minister of religion and my mother recognised the need for women to have a voice in the church. She formed the first women's movement in the church.

My mother was also a midwife, and witnessed many maternal deaths. Therefore she got engaged in supporting orphans, which influenced my work today very much, as I grew up with them and cared for them like my biological siblings.

All my experiences as a young girl got me interested in learning more about female decision-making, and luckily my husband is very understanding. The one thing that really stuck with me, is that I found out most women are not involved in the decision-making about child-bearing.

➤ **The main story that shows how a girl is valued** and what her role in life is, is the story of her education and marriage. The value of the girl really depends on the family and is not decided in the community. When a family doesn't have enough money, the father will only send his son to school, while the girl has to help in the household. Then, when she wants or needs to get married, the father will decide how much *lobola* he wants. He doesn't even take into account that she is uneducated. Out of the three cows he might get for her, he keeps two for himself and she will only get money for the equivalent of one.

➤ **I grew up in a christian family** and all my older sisters are nurses. They told me about menstruation and talked about marriage. From the church, we had youth groups where we talked about marriage as well, but my mum had strong reservations about letting us attend the evening functions there.



"A girl should learn what makes her a girl, and that her body is precious. And a boy should learn that he is a boy, and that he has to contain himself and not abuse or use a girl."

– Bertha



"It worries me that girls don't go to school, that they are supposed to be pregnant quickly, and that they don't get any money from the lobola."

– Bertha

When we asked others about what was happening at those functions, they told us about the pulling of the vagina, the cutting of ears, tattooing of the belly and permanent dots which were placed on the girl's face. Elderly women would perform those things, with the parents' permission, to make the girl more beautiful. It was all for the pleasure of the man, which was the terrible thing about it. I'm happy I don't have any of these marks, because of my mum. I also remember learning about my body and sexuality in school. We had youth groups in school, as well as career lessons, that would incorporate messages about healthy relationships and our choices. They would tell us that marriage is between a man and a woman, and then they would explain how to make it work. Other messages were – 'You should be a firm person, your body is yours and not everything can be decided upon you.'

I think the next generation should learn about issues relating to the body and sexuality earlier, not only when they are grown up. Also, it should not be left to talk about it in one place or be a taboo subject. Everybody should learn about it in the family, the community and in school.

When I got married, I joined YWCA. I learned about cookery, what is expected in marriages and so on. Later I went to kitchen parties, which also taught me a lot about marriage. Some of the messages are applicable to my own context, and some not so much, but it's still nice to hear about it.



A girl should learn what makes her a girl, and that her body is precious. And a boy should learn that he is a boy, and that he has to contain himself and not abuse or use a girl. The learning needs to be age-appropriate, but also start early, so that it doesn't come as a surprise to learn these things. They should grow up learning that all the issues are not a taboo and they should learn about their roles in life.

I think that something we really struggled with is contraception. In the 1970s it was not easy for someone to access contraception. Women wanted to use family planning, but men really didn't want it. Women were trying all means; they would secretly run away to the clinic and get pills, and then hide them in the kitchen as they needed to be clever about where to hide them. Nowadays it is not a problem, many are using contraceptives, such as the pill, injections or condoms.

Some of the things that were common when I was younger were harmful. They absolutely depend on the culture and they are disappearing now. Changes happen through education, and especially with increased understanding of the female body. Understanding is fostered by NGOs, churches, discussions on the radio and so on. Education is coming from quite a number of areas. But in particular, women's organisations are crucial because we spend a lot of time with women, so we can discuss issues at length.



In our community, two leaders are important. First, the traditional leaders, who usually work on issues that have to do with the community, such as family disputes. They sort out the problem by, for instance, negotiating a fine for inappropriate behaviour. And second, the religious leaders, who are more focused on counselling and helping for a long-term change. If there is a dispute and the family asks the religious leader to help, he will keep on checking if the issues are resolved, and will try to help as long as the problem persists and until harmony is installed."



Grace, in her 40s

“Religious leaders are also considered moral leaders and people look up to them, like role models. People believe and follow them. They try to imitate how they carry themselves. The religious leaders make religious and social laws. But if they go off track and don’t follow the rules themselves, for example on child marriage, they are still respected regardless of the law of the country.

The customary law guides how people carry themselves, which traditions to follow and so on. Traditional leaders resolve conflicts, especially in rural and peri-urban areas. Some of their roles are established by the constitution, but sometimes they refer cases to the police, especially in cases of sexual abuse. Traditional courts normally refer to local beliefs in their rulings. Traditional healers focus on inner health and physical issues, and faith healers are religious leaders who pray for people and help with spiritual problems.

There are different traditional leaders with different roles in each community. For example, the Chief, who inherits his role, is responsible for jurisdiction and oversees a large area or district. He also appoints the Headman, who is the ears and eyes of the Chief and responsible for the Kraal Head, who has responsibility over the village.

Traditional beliefs prescribe how and when a woman can engage in sexual activity. Also, traditionally, women are supposed to pull their labia such that they become elongated, but they are never told the real reason why it’s necessary for them to do so. They just say that you should not embarrass your family. Nowadays this practice is classified as a form of FGM.

➤ **A person’s attitude towards SRHR is informed by** their personal, religious and educational background. The term, to me, means that there are specific rights that come with sexuality. It also relates to body politics: a person should decide when and how to engage in sex, what to wear, and have knowledge and control over their body. I have authority and control over my body.

I go to a lot of bridal showers and kitchen parties and I find them so disempowering, because it is only about the man. No one looks at the girl, who gets married too. The church organised my kitchen party which means it was really conservative. The key messages were: ‘One who finds a woman finds a good thing,’ and ‘You need to be good to your husband by submitting yourself.’

➤ **Lobola is a good way to appreciate the woman’s parents,** but it should not be commercialised because that results in men taking their wives as properties they acquired. It is mostly the father who charges the *lobola*, whilst the mother only gets a very small portion. Some can even build houses using the money they charge for *lobola*.

The main impact of *lobola* on the woman is that she has no decision-making



**"Traditional beliefs
prescribe how and when a
woman can engage in
sexual activity."**

– Grace



power about the number of children she has, negotiating safe sex, or sexual activity. And then more generally, the status of a family which has received *lobola* changes, especially if they receive cattle. Your cattle is your wealth, so your status automatically changes if you receive 5-10 cattle as *lobola*. Then you become someone in your community.



When there is no child in the marriage, the groom's family often say things like – 'But we paid so much for you,' as if they bought you for your womb to bear their families' children. Civil society talks about the pros and cons of *lobola*, and about its impact on the union in general."

Fortunate, age 31

“Lobola can be stigmatising. Every mistake is referred back to the price paid for you. There is a saying – ‘You are an empty tin’ – meaning you haven’t been worth that price.”
– Fortunate

“Lobola can be stigmatising. Every mistake is referred back to the price that was paid for you. There is even a saying – ‘You are an empty tin’ – meaning you haven’t been worth that price. You will be reminded of this price, as well as your values and role in the family, every time your family gathers, or even if you burn food. Men feel like they can do what they want because they have paid for you.

Since women have been achieving higher levels of education, the price men have to pay is increasing. But the higher prices are also linked to the economic situation in a country. For example, if a family doesn’t have many financial means, *lobola* becomes an opportunity to receive money. So in times of economic crisis, a high bride price becomes important.

In the past, *lobola* was only a token, a recognition and a sign of gratitude. This has changed. Young girls are now respected more in their society when they become wives and mothers. When a young girl isn’t married by the age of 16, she is called *tsikombi*, a specific term for girls who have reached a ‘marriageable’ age but have been unable to find a suitor.

There are many practices related to early or forced marriage and *lobola*. A common practice is spouse marriage: if your husband dies, you then marry his brother. Such practices make it hard to break the cycles of inequality, because if your children grow up seeing this, they won’t be raised to believe in gender equality, due to the low value attached to you.

However, this isn’t always the case. Educated women, for example, are more independent, because they have knowledge about their rights and so wouldn’t allow this to happen.



It is hard for women to access healthcare. Often, traditional midwives haven’t received standardised training. They just help with delivering babies as they ‘always did’. And some Apostolic sects don’t even allow women to be near a health clinic, because of their belief in faith-healing.

The ministry of health is trying to implement some training with traditional midwives. But it’s not that simple. If you approach them and speak about the necessity of being trained, they would say to you: ‘I helped your mum delivering you, so why should we change our practice? Is there anything wrong with you that happened because of my help? If not, why should I change and what’s your point?’”



Philemon

“Apostolic churches and issues with culture have a close link. It is difficult to differentiate between the church and the community. In both settings, decisions are mainly made by the man. Men are dominating leadership positions in the church, and even if a female prophet heads a church, she is cooperating with men when it comes to decision-making.

“Stereotypes of how females and males should behave are reiterated by church leaders.”

– Philemon

It's difficult to separate church and communities, because people are educated and trained to behave in a certain way in the church, and that behaviour is then seen in the household and the community. This can be seen even just from looking at procedures in church sessions.

For example, little boys do tasks to maintain order, and so you see young sons telling their mothers what to do, and where and how to sit. Those little boys are more in control than women. Another example can be seen during the prayer session, where there is an order: men come first, then boys, then women, and last the girl child. There is a ranking of groups and very visible power relations. These are maintained through such procedures.

Stereotypes of how females and males should behave are reiterated by church leaders. For example, if a little boy cries, you can be sure that the leader, or another senior person, would say he is behaving like a girl and not like a boy.



Within the home, the stereotypes are also held up - a woman is expected to focus on child-bearing, looking after the children, tilling the land, doing laundry and cooking and all the other responsibilities in a household. Young girls are drilled to help in the household and boys are trained to look after the cattle.

Churches don't talk much about responsibilities in the household, they would rather talk in general about what a woman and man should do in life. Gender roles are cultural, not religiously inspired. But then, when we do use scripture, it's difficult to convince the religious leader and seniors in the church that texts which speak about gender equality can be used. For example, we had a workshop on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and the Bible last month. As facilitators, we referred to Genesis 1, Verse 1-27, and we looked at the bit that says women and men are made in the image of God. The response was that this is just one part of the Bible and, if we read further, we can learn that Eve was made out of Adam's rib, and therefore men and women are different. All these views have to do with power, and those men are not easily giving up this power.



My basic understanding of SRHR is that it has to do with issues of sexuality, sex, gender roles, as well as the rights of the sexes and groups to safely practice their roles. However, from a cultural or church point of view on rights regarding marriage and pregnancy, it is a bit different. A prophet can say he had a dream of Peter and Anna getting married, and so this gets arranged. Peter and Anna might not know each other, but if the Holy Spirit has spoken, all will be arranged accordingly. The arrangements can happen either really quickly, or at



**"Being married to the prophet means a lot of respect for the woman, it is like getting married to Prince Harry."
– Philemon**



times take up to two years. Because of the power of the prophet, in 80-90% of cases, saying 'no' to such an arrangement is not part of the game. They see it as a blessing from God.

The story we tell women is that they are expected to have many children and look after the husband. Elder women train them on what's expected when they get married. Before they get married, there are trainings and initiations which we call 'wadare'. This is where a group of elders sits down with girls or boys, and then girls learn how to satisfy their husbands sexually. They are also told that contraception is against God, and that they must multiply like sand at the sea. Those elderly women are chosen by the prophet, either because of their long service to the church, or because the Holy Spirit has selected them.

In terms of education on the body and sexuality, younger boys and girls learn about their bodies probably in school. But there are very few churches that pick this up and teach about it. The church plays a different role. For example, it would wait until a certain age and then conduct virginity testing, which is done by senior women who don't have any medical skill or expertise. The way they conduct the testing can be harmful for girls, and it is embarrassing, especially because the results will be displayed.



The virginity test involves the girls and women going to the river, and after the testing is done, they collect leaves. A hole is put in the middle of the leaf when the girl is not a virgin any more, or intact leaves are given out to those girls who are still a virgin. The girls then carry those leaves with them, and everybody knows their status, which is humiliating for the girls and the family.

Virgins are chosen for older men in the church – but I don't know why, to be honest. This activity is just one example of why we need campaigns and programmes that focus on SRHR.

To stay with the examples of virgins; they are often chosen by older men who are in polygamous relationships. When the man approaches the virgin, it is very difficult for her to say no. The elder men are seen as powerful, and the girls want to have a better status. And being married to a powerful older man will definitely change her status. For example, being married to the prophet means a lot of respect for the woman, it is like getting married to Prince Harry.



Every church has its own rules, depending on the prophet. For example, some Apostolic churches do not have a problem with contraception. But a large chunk of the churches have a big problem with contraception, as the church doctrine is to encourage women to have as many children as possible.

The leader of The Johane Maranke Apostolic Church has around 500 children with 96 wives. It's difficult to believe this is true, but that's what happens on the ground. And because he is so respected as the head of that church, his behaviour is trickling down to the congregation and is imitated. Johane Maranke is very well known, all over the country.

The key value for Apostolic sects is the issue of multiplying. I actually don't know where it comes from. This man with his 96 wives does not do anything else but move from one woman to the other. The wives themselves try everything to please him. They prepare the room well, look for the best food, and generally try to present themselves at their best, as it's a celebration of their husband coming to their house.

Once you say you belong to a church, the priest and church elders become very important people in your life. The family then plays a peripheral role. There might be clashes if the family is not Apostolic. For instance, when a child decides to join an Apostolic church, but his or her parents don't belong to the sect, their social norms are then guided by different beliefs. Still, some things are the same. For example, *lobola* is negotiated at the family level, and then for weddings the churches take control again.



My personal view on *lobola* is that it is a good thing, because it is an appreciation of the girl being raised well. This is the view from the African perspective. But *lobola* can also be used as a tool to oppress women. Some men say: 'I paid so much but you are not worth anything.' But we also have cases when some men haven't paid *lobola* to the women's family because they simply don't have the money yet, and are also behaving badly towards their wives. So I don't think that *lobola* is the problem, but we have to address some of the underlying issues, which are the power structures set up within homes and churches.

"If I could change one thing, then I would change the practice of marrying too many wives."
– Philemon

Power structures can be changed, firstly, by increasing the education of girls and creating employment for women, in order to empower them fully. When the wife is working, the power dynamic between the couple changes. It doesn't automatically mean that they are both now 50/50 in charge, but still it changes things.

Secondly, we need to focus on men, namely talking to them about gender-based violence. Many NGOs focus on women, but we also need to acknowledge that often there is resistance from men, and without tackling this resistance we will not come very far.

Once I talked to a woman about an empowerment workshop she received. She said: 'I learned all there is to learn about my rights. I am aware that I have rights and how I should be treated. And I believe in it. But once I arrive at the gate to my house, I need to leave this knowledge behind me and adjust to the rules of the household, which have been made by my husband.'

Unfortunately, using the masculinities approach and working with men as agents of change for women's empowerment, is seldom used at the organisational level.



If I could change one thing, then I would change the practice of marrying too many wives. We need to train women and girls on advocacy and encourage them to talk about the disadvantages of such practices, so they can come up with their own solutions. I also think we need to highlight more issues that are in the constitution, including GBV and the right to choice."



Father Chiromba

"In rural settings, most women feel comfortable taking care of their home because the community expects it from them. When women want to work to earn additional money, there may be a conflict between the mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, as usually the older women don't agree with it. The main reason for women wanting to take up work is if they lost their husband due to the AIDS epidemic, as then there is no income.

"In our society, if someone is married, procreation is expected."

– Fr Chiromba



The role of church leaders in marriage is to be the first to pronounce the couple as wife and husband. The groom-to-be has to approach the in-laws for *lobola* negotiations, and when that's agreed, the girl can be taken to the groom and they can be married. To prepare them for their marriage, a priest gives them lessons and then officiates the wedding.

Marriage lessons continue even after a couple has been married, often conducted by couples who have been married a long time. The lessons are either for an individual couple or for several of them, depending on capacity and resources. The idea is to accompany the couple through marriage, and the priest's role in this is to train the couples to become trainers.



In our society, if someone is married, procreation is expected. Our culture is like the Old Testament, women are longing to have children and they are wailing if they don't manage to get pregnant. Back in the day, we had larger families, but now, because of recent diseases, children die younger.

In terms of a person's status, once a boy and girl get married, they become adult and mature. So their status changes immediately, both in society and in church. They will move from youth groups to adult groups, and similar things happen in society. Once people are married, others have a greater respect for them and they are seen as more mature. And if they die, they have the full rights as adults. There is more respect.



From a church perspective, my understanding of the term SRHR is that it boils down to expectations and what rights one has in a specific context. When it comes to the church, its position is very liberal. For example, when it comes to responsible parenthood; we give responsibility to the couple. But you can also understand it in legal terms.

The church's role in communications about SRHR is varied, it does a bit of everything. It gives norms but also educates. It's not always easy to engage, but there are methods like workshops, retreats and spiritual guidance. But people are sometimes hesitant to engage in these areas. Sometimes they may approach someone from the church, but not the priest or sister because they would argue from the scripture. If a question on moral acceptability comes up, this is where the conversation ends.



"Lobola as it stands is a good custom. But people exaggerate the payment and it is used as a punishment. The financial side of the deal should not be at the centre."
– Fr Chiromba





Education about the body and related issues should be at all levels. The first stage of it should start from the family, as families follow the growth and maturity of their children, and so they can decide what is appropriate. We also have the schools, where subjects like biology are taught and subjects like marriage and procreation can be discussed. This education needs to be carefully introduced and properly planned.

The next place to talk about these issues is in a church setting, where we have youth groups. A trained lady or a man talks to the youth about these issues, and there is one in every parish. They are also turned to for help when young people have problems in their marriage. Traditionally, the family would put that responsibility to the father's sister, as she's somebody they feel comfortable with. But due to the distance between families, this responsibility can't always be taken up by the aunts, and so now falls on all other members of society.

Normally, at the church youth groups, young boys and girls are in the same groups, except during certain discussions. The facilitators of the groups are usually chosen depending on their education (a lot of them are teachers) and they are known for being good Christians. But in rural areas, they are often chosen because they are well respected.

Regarding contraception, the church promotes natural family planning, but some feel not competent and therefore prefer to seek other methods. It is common knowledge that many people behave otherwise.



Lobola as it stands traditionally is a good custom. It seals a bond between two families. But people exaggerate the payment nowadays, and it is sometimes used as a punishment. It also creates difficulties if the man sees his wife as an object he paid for. Part of the church's role is to check if *lobola* was paid; if not, the priest can't give the blessing and perform the marriage ceremony. We need to go back to the original tradition.

Interestingly, traditions can change with circumstances. For instance, in times of scarcity of employment, when the boy doesn't have a job, but the girl is working, she might give him the money for her *lobola* to pay her parents. But in such cases, everybody knows what has happened.

Sometimes, in difficult economic situations, we see greedy behaviour by the parents who want to better their finances. This happens especially if they assume that the son-in-law is rich, or will be in the future. But greedy behaviour by parents can jeopardise the relationship between the couple.

In fact, at church we talk about the traditional value of *lobola*, and also say it has to be a symbolic token. We emphasise that families should look at what they are gaining: both a son, and a daughter-in-law. The financial side of the deal should not be at the centre."



Reverend Innocent

“With regards to churches, most are Messianic. No one can say something against what the prophet preaches, and you can’t argue that anything is wrong. Most of the leaders who developed the sect are dead now, and the laws were made in between the 1940s-60s. They are out of date, especially as most Apostolics don’t know the new constitution, they don’t watch TV or engage with other stakeholders outside of their community. The room to engage and learn is closed. They are not

sound in new techniques and technologies.



At UDACIZA, we encourage them to learn from other stakeholders, because we want to be better and start competing with others – trying to improve their members’ lives. But they can’t do that if they’re stuck with old laws and old ways of doing things. UDACIZA uses advocacy and awareness-raising to tell them what is good for them, and especially for their children. We teach them how they can compete with other denominations.

“In our communities, there is seldom a girl aged 20 and above who is not married.”
– Rev Innocent

By learning about the successes of others, Apostolics are opening up and begin to feel competitive. For example, there are Catholic schools and universities, but most children from the Apostolic sect don’t go to school. So, if we tell them that their children will be disadvantaged because they are missing the trend, they start listening and are more open. Most of those leaders haven’t been to theological school, so they lack counselling skills. We equip them with basic skills, so they can do their job better.

We also train midwives so they are able to do their task better. But we can’t reach them all because we lack resources. It is something that needs to change, because when a woman is pregnant she only goes to a midwife from the eighth or ninth month of her pregnancy. And if she has a complicated birth, she is accused of being bewitched. We want to spread the word about how complicated a woman’s body is, so that it can be dealt with properly.

Another issue is that babies don’t get birth certificates when they are born, which also means we can’t say which age they are getting married at. They are just seen as ready for marriage from the moment their bodies develop. There are no birth certifications, no education and, when they are menstruating, girls are seen as ready for marriage. In our communities, there is seldom a girl aged 20 and above who is not married.



In our communities, cultural and religious beliefs are saturated. For example, a common practice is that if your brother dies, you need to take care of his wife and family, and you need to marry her even if you have a wife already. We have a tradition that girls change their family name when they get married. Because we want the family name to continue, we nurture our boys.

Love is the pillar of the churches, who believe in the Bible. But, we also believe in the Holy Spirit. We need to look into how the Holy Spirit is used to

“A raped girl wouldn’t report the case to the police, because she will fear death.”

- Rev Innocent

manipulate people and violate girls’ rights. For example, prophets are taking girls to the mountains and raping them, saying they had a vision that the Holy Spirit told them to do it. And it happens very often. Recently someone said he is Moses, and needs to be in bed with two women.

Prophets instill fear in people. The community says if you go against a church leader then you will die. And a raped girl wouldn’t report the case to the police, because she will fear death, but there is no proof whatsoever that something bad will happen to her.

Our approach is to encourage most church leaders to be theologically competent. If they can read the Bible, they can learn not to threaten people, but rather to encourage them to live a better life. If the church encourages children to go to school, then they compete with children from other denominations and get important decision-making power.

The issue of multiplying has been a misinterpretation of the Bible. Indeed, Genesis says you shall multiply and be fruitful. But from the theological point of view, we must understand that if you have four children, you should be able to support them, which means getting all of them in school and caring for them if they need you. But most prophets have little knowledge about theology, and we need to strengthen that.”

L Nyangombe

“My church encourages its members to visit the hospital for check-ups, and in cases of barrenness, to seek medical assistance. The church also encourages couples to use contraceptives for family planning. And, as the church is not against its members going to the hospital, it also embraces the methods of family planning that are encouraged by the doctors and nurses.

As a church, we believe that everyone should get married as it is in the Bible. The wife is the helper to the husband; hence every man should find someone to marry so he can have a companion who can help him. We do not encourage polygamy because of the advent of HIV and AIDS.

The family members are involved in the marriage process. The church should only know that their member has been married. The leader of the church is the one who weds the couple.



Cases of divorce are not encouraged in the community. When there are marital problems, the church elders are responsible for counselling couples and ensuring that couples stay together. However, there are some cases that lead to divorce, such as infidelity, unresolved problems and inability to take care of the wife and children. But, a lot of stigma is attached to divorce, and women who get divorced are stigmatised in the society. It’s easier for divorced men to remarry than for women. Women are often blamed for the failure of the marriage.



Once a woman gets married she is expected to have children soon after. She should take care of her husband and children. If she delays having children because of barrenness, the women prophets pray for the couple and give them Holy Water to aid them to conceive.”

Key quotes

Quotes from focus group discussion one

Featured six participants aged between 20-25. Five females (F) and one male (M) took part.

- "Women are the pillars of any marriage, because without them there is no marriage and they look after the family. And, in this day and age, they also contribute to the financial upkeep of the family."
Kudakwashe (M, 23)
- "Social expectations on women cause women to be suppressed. The term musha mukadzi means that it's the responsibility of the woman to ensure the success and continuity of marriage and family life. This suppresses women."
Mandy (F, 25)
- "Men and women are equal in marriage."
Kudakwashe (M, 23)
- "Women and men are not equal, because we live in a society where a woman cannot speak up, because doing so would bring shame to her family and she would be considered disrespectful. She is thus suppressed."
Runyararo (F, 25)
- "Culture and religion play the same role in suppressing the woman, because in both contexts the woman is under the man."
Elizabeth (F, 23)
- "In the home, sex is talked about as a point of discipline. For example: 'Don't have sex or you will get pregnant like so and so's daughter and bring shame on us.' "
Talent (F)
- "The way sex is talked about to girls and to boys is different. For girls it is something they must never do outside of marriage, yet if boys do it, they are considered 'men'."
Talent (F, 22)

Quotes from focus group discussion two

Featured four female participants aged between 17-25, two of the participants were married (MD) and two were single (S).

- "The woman is expected to get pregnant immediately after marriage, and if this does not happen the woman is blamed and called names by the husband's family, such as ngomwa (barren)."
Mitchell (MD, 21)
- "The wife is expected to respect the husband and his family, as well as be submissive to the husband. The woman is expected to never say no to sex, and also is expected to satisfy the husband. That is why women often go to instructors for chinamwari, where they are taught how to behave during sex so as to please their men."
Mitchell (MD, 21)
- "Contraception is accepted in their community and they can easily access it."
Beauty (S, 17)
- "Marriage represents maturity and so earns you respect in the community, because it means you are moving from childhood to parenthood."
Charity (MD, 25)
- "When things go wrong in a marriage, the aunts and uncles in the family are involved, and in other instances community leaders such as pastors and chiefs are involved."
Mitchell (MD, 21)

Conclusion

The interviews highlighted key values that influence young women's and girls' attitudes towards marriage, pregnancy and their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The norm that girls are not respected until they are married came out strongly from the interviews with both men and women. It is clear that prior to marriage, young women and girls lack self-confidence, a feeling of being appreciated and they are not respected by their community.

This cultural attitude contributes to the tradition of early marriage of girls in Zimbabwe, as marrying young is associated with transitioning to a higher social status. Girls and young women's self-confidence increases when they are married, because they prove they have been raised well. In addition, early marriage is seen as a means of averting pre-marital sexual relations and preserving purity.

The interviews demonstrate how, for young women and girls, the ability to decide freely when and whom to marry is closely linked to their social status in society, and to negative cultural attitudes about unmarried women. Marrying early is seen positively, regardless of their readiness for marriage.

A second key element that emerges from the interviews is the value attached to giving birth. Culturally, women are expected to give birth soon after marriage in order to prove their fertility. The Zimbabwean society values large families with many children. Giving birth will improve a woman's status in society even more.

This social expectation of having early childbirth after marriage in order to prove fertility is denying young women and girls the right to decide freely and responsibly about when to have children, and how many children to have. This is in contradiction to having access to their Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights.

In addition, the interviews have also shown that a woman's marriage and ability to give birth are closely linked to the bride price, referred to as *lobola*, the cultural tradition manifests social norms that impede on young women's and girls' free decision making over when and how often to get pregnant. In some cases, the husband would refer to the high price paid, expecting his wife to fulfil the duties society associates with being married: having many children.

The interviews highlighted people in the family and community who have an impact on the ability to make decisions, regarding women's and girls' SRHR. Paternal aunts and older, respected women from the community, are informally educating young women and girls about what society expects from them.

Social events like bridal showers and kitchen parties are used by respected women to teach girls about traditional expectations, in which women are solely viewed as wives who need to submit to their husbands. These events put further pressure on women and girls to conform to norms, reducing their agency to make free decisions regarding their SRHR.

From the interviews it is apparent that religious leaders from mainstream churches and traditional leaders play a less important role in influencing young women's and girls' access to SRHR. However, religious leaders from Apostolic churches are more likely to influence women and the religious communities with their views on contraception, the desired age of marriage and other SRHR issues. They exert more influence on social attitudes on SRHR because of their powerful status in the faith community.

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