Humhandara and hujaya: Virginity, Culture, and Gender Inequalities Among Adolescents in Zimbabwe

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Abstract
Given the significance of gender and cultural norms in producing meanings about sexuality, we address the ways in which rural adolescents in Zimbabwe, aged between 16 and 19 years old, give meaning to virginity and the social processes through which it is produced. We are interested in the ways in which cultural norms are produced and ways in which sexual double standards operate in producing sexuality and girls’ subordination. We argue that while adolescents are not simply dupes of cultural norms, they actively invest in and use virginity as a marker of status. Integral to adolescent experience of and ideals around virginity, there is a significant ambivalence where girls’ virginity is expected, whereas the same is unexpected for young adolescent men. We show that conformity with, rather than resistance to, cultural norms may contradictorily and simultaneously subordinate and empower young women. Choosing to maintain virginity can be seen as an autonomous decision especially when girls position educational aspirations as key to virginity status in order to gain some control over their lives. However, this choice might not simply be about autonomy but occurs in a cultural context where patriarchal values had already made it an obligation. Dominant discourses around virginity and cultural norms stand in direct contradiction to adolescent sexual well-being, albeit with contradictions. Attention to cultural processes through which relations of power are manifest is important in safeguarding young people’s sexual health especially in the context of HIV.

Keywords
Gender, sexuality, culture, adolescent, Zimbabwe

Introduction
In Zimbabwe, as in many other southern African states under patriarchal conditions, where cultural norms and turbulent social malaise have effects for gender relations, understanding and addressing adolescent sexuality is of vital importance in light of young women’s increased vulnerability to early childbirth, HIV, and gender/sexual violence (Bhana, 2018; Masvawure, 2010). Understanding how adolescents make meaning of sexuality is urgent, at a time when studies suggest that adolescent awareness of and information about sexually risky practices does not necessarily translate into safe sex (Bruce et al., 2011; Letamo, 2011; Nubed & Akoachere, 2016). The national HIV prevalence rate in Zimbabwe is 14% in both urban and rural parts of the country though prevalence is higher among women (17%) compared to men (14%) (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency [ZIMSTAT], 2015). Early childbearing among adolescents rises with age from 3% at the age of 15 to 48% among 19-year-olds (ZIMSTAT & ICF International, 2016). Female adolescents in relationships are prone to intimate partner violence with 45% of those aged 15 to 19 years being subjected to physical, sexual, or emotional violence (ZIMSTAT & ICF International, 2016). Sexuality is socially and culturally produced and is closely interconnected with power and domination (Chisale & Moyo, 2016). Understanding how adolescents in rural Zimbabwe give meaning to sexuality involves attention to gender and cultural norms. In this article, we focus on the cultural valorization of virginity as it shapes and is deployed by adolescents as they express meaning of sexuality and gender. As noted in other research in southern Africa, virginity has historical significance (Hunter, 2010; Leclerc-Madlala, 2001; Wickstrom, 2010). Female virginity is used as a bargaining tool in bride wealth negotiations involving cattle, as a chief commodity in bargaining although cash has also replaced cattle as bride wealth (Hunter, 2010; Wickstrom, 2010). In Zimbabwe, female virginity is valued based on gender asymmetrical relations of power and supported by kinship
systems and family values. However, female virginity is contested and challenged especially as young women in adverse economic conditions often use sex and sexuality as a bargaining tool in transactional sexual relations (Groes-Green, 2013; Masvawure, 2010). Virginity may be an important cultural ideal through which adolescents anchor sexuality, however, in reality these ideals are challenged, contradictory, contested, and critiqued. Adolescent girls are thus not simply passive in making sense of virginity and sexuality but actively produce discourses around acceptable feminine conduct as they weave into and contest notions of purity, status, and respect accorded to cultural notions of virginity.

Given the significance of gender and cultural norms in producing meanings about sexuality underlined by asymmetrical relations of power, we address the ways in which rural adolescents, aged between 16 and 19 years, give meaning to virginity and the social processes through which it is produced. We are interested in the ways in which cultural norms are produced by adolescents and ways in which sexual double standards operate in producing sexuality. We argue that while adolescents are not simply dupes of cultural norms, they actively invest in and use virginity as a marker of status. Integral to adolescent experience of and ideals around virginity is a significant ambivalence. Girls are expected to remain or present the ideal of respectability and purity grounded in virginity status while the same is unexpected for young adolescent men.

We highlight the complex and multivalent dimensions of gender dynamics in the context of rural Zimbabwean adolescents. In the study setting, female virginity is referred to as humhandara, whereas male virginity is referred to as hujaya. Control of sexuality has social consequences on the lives of both males and females (Bhana, 2018). Social values that emphasize virginity till marriage for girls, while not placing the same demands on boys, contribute to the maintenance of unequal gender relations and sexual double standards. We show that conformity with, rather than resistance to, gender norms and cultural norms regarding virginity and sexuality may simultaneously subordinate and empower young women. Choosing to maintain virginity can be seen as an autonomous decision especially when girls position educational aspirations as key to virginity status to gain some control over their lives. However, this choice might not simply be about autonomy but occurs in a cultural context where patriarchal values had already made it an obligation. By choosing to maintain their virginity, they are simultaneously submitting to this regulation but they are not merely doing this to satisfy patriarchal values as such. In this sense, adolescent girls’ awareness of their sexual agency regarding individual virginity status interweaves with alternative framing and interpretation of the virginity discourse. The upshot is the embracing of virginity for self-preserving and self-advancing motives (Bay-Cheng & Goodkind, 2015), thus empowering them to actively determine their personal and educational goals both at present and in the imagined future.

**Virginity, Gender, and Cultural Norms**

Girls’ virginity is monitored through religious, cultural, and medical practices (Chisale & Moyo, 2016; Wynn & Hassanein, 2017). An intact hymen is taken as a sign of virginity, and the first vaginal–penile sex results in the loss of one’s virginity (Abboud, Jemmott, & Sommers, 2015; Kamm, 2016). Although it has been proven that the presence of the hymen or bleeding on first sexual encounter is not irrefutable proof of a woman’s virgin status (Cinthio, 2015; Kamm, 2016), the hymen has sociocultural significance as a sign of purity and upright womanhood (Wynn & Hassanein, 2017). However, there are exceptions. In some cultures in Egypt, if a woman loses her physical virginity through rape, they are regarded as having moral virginity (Wynn & Hassanein, 2017). Similarly, the young men in the US study by Palit and Allen (2016) were of the view that there is need to be emotionally engaged to one’s partner during the first sexual experience for one to lose their virginity status. They stated that as this is not the case in an act of rape, a rape victim cannot be said to have lost her virginity and thus retains emotional virginity (Palit & Allen, 2016).

Virginity is socially constructed (Kamm, 2016), as the hymen has no intrinsic value per se. A woman’s virginity at the time of marriage is highly valued in diverse communities worldwide (Chisale & Moyo, 2016; Kaivanara, 2015). It is regarded as a sign that the young woman is virtuous and respectable (Chisale & Moyo, 2016; Kaivanara, 2015; Lichtenstein, 2000). The honor extends from the individual woman to that of the husband, families, and community (Abboud et al., 2015; Kamm, 2016).

Patriarchal values produce sexual double standards whereby virginity has greater significance for females compared to males (Museka & Machingura, 2014; Palit & Allen, 2016). As a result, unmarried young men have the freedom to engage in sexual liaisons without any adverse repercussion on their social standing; virginity is thus an element of normative patriarchal restrictions on women’s sexuality (Bhana, 2018). Women are unlikely to resist this subtle control as there is an aspect of self-policing and acquiescence, when they are rewarded for accepting and celebrating virginity status (Hunter, 2010). Female virginity serves patriarchal interests as it enhances the status of the future husband, and there are beliefs in Zimbabwe that the marital fidelity of women who get married as virgins may be guaranteed (Museka & Machingura, 2014; Venganai, 2016).

The necessity for young women to maintain virginity is reinforced by its connection to bride wealth paid by the prospective husband to the woman’s family (Museka & Machingura, 2014). For instance, in Egypt the marriage contract spells out a woman’s sexual status with ramifications for the bride price offered (Wynn & Hassanein, 2017). Similarly, in the Shona culture in Zimbabwe, from precolonial era to the present, the husband pays mombe yechimanda as part of the bride price (Vengeyi, 2016).
This is a cow presented to the in-laws to show that the bride was a virgin and as a gesture of gratitude for ensuring that the young woman retained her virginity (Museka & Machingura, 2014; Vengeyi, 2016). If a son-in-law does not pay *mombe yechimanda*, the family loses respect and gets a bad reputation, hence girls are urged to maintain their virginity (Vengeyi, 2016).

The issue of virginity is so crucial that in some countries, such as Egypt and Georgia, men are demanding medical verifications of their fiancées’ virgin status (Kamm, 2016; Wynn & Hassanein, 2017). Iranian women who are not virgins when they get married may experience societal consequences such as divorce, exclusion, and aggression (Ahmadi, 2016). In one apostolic sect in Zimbabwe as recently as 2014, married women who were not virgins when they got married were instructed to acquire virgin girls to compensate their husbands (Vengeyi, 2016). In all these cases men exercise power over women’s sexuality to reinforce their dominant status. As women try to fulfill the social norms encapsulated in the virginity discourse, they have adopted practices such as, anal sex; hymenoplasty, which involves reconstructing the hymen; and insertion of gelatin capsules with fake blood in the vagina on the wedding night to prove virginity status (Kamm, 2016; Steinmuller & Tan, 2015; Wynn & Hassanein, 2017). The alternative ways of providing “evidence” of female virginity, signify women’s simultaneous defiance of the premarital sex prohibition and conformity to the cultural expectations suggesting their ambivalence and contradictions in the regulation of virginity (Kaivanara, 2015). Consequently, virginity goes beyond a mere biological or physical issue; it becomes an important element in gender relations of power, and is contradictory showing women’s subordination and agency.

Virginity is mainly considered in relation to women owing to the patriarchal cultural arrangements, connotations of the hymen, and problems in testing the virginity of boys (Chisale, 2016). Consequently, virginity testing of females is practiced, for instance, in South Africa and Zimbabwe, to ensure that girls and young women maintain their virginity until they get married (Vengeyi, 2016). Nevertheless, it has been argued that this practice strengthens male dominance and female submissiveness and has negative implications on the girls’ social status (Chisale & Moyo, 2016). On the contrary, Chisale (2016) proposes that virginity testing can be a basis of women’s power especially in the context of HIV. It is assumed that young women will be motivated to delay sexual debut, thus protecting themselves from sexually transmitted HIV infection. Cinthio (2015) also noted that some young women accept the social valuing of virginity so that they attain the esteem of others. The studies discussed here highlight the patriarchal regulation of male and female sexuality, with a few focusing on the advantages that accrue to women if the prevention of HIV is considered in virginity testing. This article considers rural secondary school adolescents’ lived experiences with the virginity discourse prevalent in their community. Zimbabwe is not very different from the social arrangements discussed above. The findings discussed in this article are part of a doctoral research project which focused on how gender and sexual norms shape and are shaped by secondary school adolescents in rural Zimbabwe. The article focuses on the following questions: How does gender influence rural secondary school adolescents’ understanding of virginity? How do girls and boys accommodate or resist the dominant discourses on virginity in their community?

**Method**

This study took place among the Shona ethnic group in Mashonaland Central province, situated in the northern parts of Zimbabwe. The study was conducted at two rural schools in Shamva district in the province. Data collection involved six focus-group discussions with boys and girls aged 16 to 19 years (total = 44) and 49 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with boys and girls in the same age group. Participants were recruited from learners in the 3rd and 4th year of secondary school. The first author (V.S.M.) who is fluent in ChiShona, the vernacular language of the participants, led the research and conducted the discussions and interviews. Ethical issues were taken into account during this study. Informed consent of all participants was sought (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005), and parents/guardians gave consent for their children to participate in the study. The confidentiality of the participants and schools was guaranteed through the adoption of pseudonyms for the individuals, schools, and surrounding areas (Wright & O’Flynn, 2012). All discussions and interviews were conducted largely in ChiShona and translated into English. In a few instances, participants spoke in English, their second language. Transcripts were manually coded then thematic analysis and interpretation of the emerging themes was done.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee (Reference HSS/0492/015D) and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe (Reference C/426/3 Mash Central).

**Findings**

Three main themes identified from the research findings are: virginity and culture, the role of virginity discourse in understanding and responding to HIV infection, and challenging sexual double standards. Gendered differences in the meaning of virginity were articulated with prominence given to female virginity. The operation of sexual double standards was apparent in the conceptions of the meaning and value of virginity. Virginity was framed more in relation to females who bear the responsibility for maintaining it and dealing with the outcomes of virginity loss. Although this gendered framing places the girls in a subordinate position relative to
the boys, they are aware of the agency that is bestowed on them at the same time. The girls are thus actively embracing the sexual double standard for the benefit of their current educational and future prospects and could thus be both empowered and subordinated at the same time.

Virginity and Culture

Adolescents said they were familiar with the concepts of humhandara (virginity with reference to females) and hujaya (virginity with reference to males) as these are discussed in the family setting, school, and in the community. They voiced gendered differences in the meaning and value of virginity, with prominence given to female virginity, as noted in other studies (Bhana, 2015; Cinthio, 2015; Lichtenstein, 2000). Most adolescents conceptualized virginity as sexual innocence with virginity loss moralized within a heteronormative marriage discourse:

An individual asati aziva murume (who has not yet known a man). (Obvious, boy)

Maintaining humhandara has to do with a girl not being with a boy who is not her husband. She must sleep with a boy when she gets married, that is how I understand it. (Tadiwanashe, boy)

In addition to the concept of sexual innocence, female virginity was also equated with maturation and development during adolescence as explained by Ruby:

A girl will be referred to as mhandara because she would have reached that age when she starts developing breasts . . . Mhandara basically means a girl akazara (whole, a virgin). When you no longer have humhandara, you are no longer a whole girl (akazara). (Ruby, girl)

It is said if you sleep with a boy just once, you lose humhandara, it is gone. Here it is valued because once you have wasted yourself like that, it is over. You are no longer a girl. (Tariro, girl)

Despite the fact that a girl is born with a hymen, she is not referred to as mhandara until she reaches puberty. At that stage, apparently the hymen assumes social significance in that it becomes a marker of identity. Females can claim the identity of “girl” only for as long as the hymen remains intact. As a result, virginity was also taken on dominant ideals around virginity and female purity. These narratives are purchased by adolescent girls as they reinforce and are complicit in their own subordination as they take on dominant ideals around virginity and female purity. The loss of humhandara outside the marriage context is shown to have negative implications for a girl:

My grandmother . . . she says maintaining humhandara has to do with self-control, being decent (kuzvibata, kuzvidzikamisa) . . . [She] says when we girls start having periods we will start having strong feelings towards boys, but as an individual you should be decent and bring such feelings under control. But if you choose to see yourself as a grown-up when you start having your periods and you give in to your feelings, you will be destroying yourself. (Faith, girl)

The meaning of humhandara is based on sexual innocence and is closely interwoven with gender and female purity. Thus, while puberty is a sign of maturation, the girls are not expected to consider themselves as “grown-up.” The loss of a girl’s virginity outside marriage is conceptualized as having calamitous consequences for social status as indicated by the use of the phrases, “no longer a girl,” “destroying yourself,” and “wasted yourself.” Nevertheless, as Faith suggests, virginity is a choice. This choice is indicative of girls’ power; however, virginity is highly regulated. Faith moralizes female virginity weaving into the moral logic concerning the power of virginity and the negative effects of losing virginity (Bachechi & Hall, 2015). Adolescents’ understanding of sexuality is subject to the current discourses and concomitant power (Allen, 2007b). The view that a girl possesses the ability to choose whether to maintain or lose her virginity entails that humhandara becomes an affirmation of female power and agency, but contradictorily this agency is located in the very discourses which regulate female sexuality (King, 2014). It is apparent that there exists a stringent moral code on the subject of female sexuality in the community communicated through the virginity discourse. This discourse generates a particular social reality (Foucault, 2002), which paradoxically embodies, yet rebuffs girls’ sexuality.

In contrast, male virginity was not talked about as much as female virginity, as some adolescents were not aware of any discussions of male virginity in the community:

Ah I do not think so, maybe in the churches. I often hear, here and there that there are churches which mention that. (Peter, boy)

I have not yet heard if boys are encouraged because boys often go to bars and they cannot be told what to do. (Sharmaine, girl)

The lack of emphasis on the concept of male virginity is consistent with other studies which confirm the highly regulatory ways in which female sexuality is considered while for boys and men, sexual expression and activity is positively confirming for the making of heteronormative masculinity (Cinthio, 2015; Lai & Hynie, 2011; Sweet, 2017; Wamoyi, Wight, & Remes, 2015):

It is talked about even at school during assembly. The teacher on duty might tell us that, “Girls you must maintain your virginity,
do not get involved with other people’s husbands and do not sleep with boys.” (Tehila, girl)

The emphasis on humhandara comes to the fore when teachers reproduce gender binaries where the preservation of virginity is related to female respectability. Having sex is framed within a moralistic discourse which is seen as inappropriate especially where younger girls are framed as “sleeping” with husbands. There is no concomitant stress on maintenance of hujaya, which works to reinforce and approve of male premarital sexual experience.

Furthermore, the meaning of male virginity was not easily delineated by both male and female adolescents. Their understanding of it was either not having sex till marriage, or abstinence until one leaves school, or becomes mature:

As boys we should maintain hujaya . . . There is a rule that one should not have sexual intercourse with girls. (Frank, boy)

They say you should have self-control until you are in your twenties. (Brian, boy)

It’s not that I will wait until I get married. When I finish school . . . and I will be having a job. I will know then that even if I sleep with a girl and she gets pregnant, I will be in position to take care of her and the baby. (Rashid, boy)

Discourses of sexual innocence are not outside of age and gender relations although there was not much expectation that male virginity should be maintained until marriage as is the case for humhandara. Flexibility is largely based on male power within sexual relations. Age, however, does have an effect on when teenage boys talked about sexual intercourse. The focus appears to be more on waiting till one is mature or has some economic stability. Sexuality, age, and provider masculinity are thus interconnected. Provider masculinity as Hunter (2010) notes is aligned with male economic power. Sexual relations are thus not biologically defined for men and boys but hinge on age and the ability to achieve provider status. This flexibility on the meaning of hujaya might be a sign of minimal regulation of male sexuality. Another teenage boy thought male virginity is an insignificant matter altogether:

No, hujaya does not operate that way. Even if you sleep with someone it is not usually evident. (Noble, boy)

Noble implied the link between the concept of humhandara and the presence of the hymen which is taken as evidence of a girl’s virginity. On the contrary, the lack of a clear male equivalent of the hymen, gives boys the latitude to engage in premarital sex. The gendered difference in expectations of virginity bring to light that girls’ virginity is more prominent in the discourse (Palit & Allen, 2016; Vengeyi, 2016). According to Connell (1987), sexuality is a social construction in which sexual difference is assumed. The adolescents articulate a difference on the meaning and connotation of virginity for boys and girls. However, power comes into play as the two are not only different but also unequal (Connell, 1987). Adolescents thus reinforce, albeit with some resistance, the naturalness of dominant masculinity and subordinate femininity. Such views and beliefs reproduce unequal gender relations and may lead to endorsement of girls’ subordinate position in the community.

The operation of sexual double standards was apparent with regard to the cultural value attached to virginity by the adolescents. This is different for males and females with much significance placed on humhandara in marriage by most adolescents. It was noted that it was extremely important for girls to remain virgins till marriage. One who is not a virgin may find it difficult to get married or may be returned to her people if it was discovered after marriage:

Maintaining humhandara is important . . . When you get married the aunts will spread a white sheet, so that they see if the girl is truly still a virgin. If they discover that you are not, it is said that the girl may be returned to her people. (Noble, boy)

It is important to remain a virgin because you might sleep with a boy then he does not marry you. The one who eventually wants to marry you will say he wants a virgin. Then you may not find someone to marry you at all. (Ruth, girl)

Despite engaging in premarital sex, young men still have the power to demand that a potential spouse should be a virgin. Similar cultural veneration and expectations of female virginity as one of the important markers of suitability for marriage have been noted among male adolescents in South Africa regardless of their own premarital sexual experience (Bhana, 2015, 2016).

Girls may also want the same but they are powerless to carry out actions to back their demands:

. . . boys do not want a girl who has slept with others before. They want one who is fresh . . . Most boys will not be [virgins] . . . Ah, boys have many affairs; it is difficult . . . We also demand that but eish, boys are difficult because some of them get into bars, so a lot of things happen in the bars. (Sharmaine, girl)

If a boy sleeps with someone he might even tell others that he slept with that girl, such that a lot of boys will end up knowing about it. Now it becomes a problem for another boy to go and marry such a girl who is said to have slept with others . . . I have never come across boys having such a problem. (Stickrod, boy)

Both boys and girls stated the importance of humhandara more in terms of its perceived value to a husband. The meanings and value attached to female virginity intertwine with the gender inequalities, characteristic of gender relations in the community. Young women’s sexual innocence indirectly promotes the ego of potential future husbands, notwithstanding the fact that there are no similar expectations for the young men. The young men will not knowingly marry a girl who is said to have slept with others. On the contrary, beliefs concerning the male sexual drive around the heterosexual production of masculinity are
accepted without contestation (Bachechi & Hall, 2015), as articulated by Sharmaine. The sexual double standard is the foundation of the customs and values that produce and uphold acceptable teenage sexuality for boys and girls (Tolman, 2016). The sexual double standard instigates and supports sexual experience in male adolescents but condemns sexual experience in teenage girls (Leclerc-Madlala, 2001; Schalet et al., 2014; Zaikman & Marks, 2016). On the contrary, teenage boys tend to increase their peer status by indulging and making public their sexual forays (Museka & Machingura, 2014; Schalet et al., 2014). This is probably due to traditional gender ideologies that often construct masculinity partly in terms of heterosexual sexual activity, sexual instigation, and the absence of emotional attachment (Ganle, 2016; Mangena, 2015).

According to Ahmadi (2016), women’s sexuality is usually controlled through entrenched cultural discourse and practices. This was evident in the study whereby cultural symbols are linked to humhandara and family honor with no parallel for hujaya:

Being a virgin is important especially when you get married. It is said when they bring jira (fabric to make the mother of the bride’s clothing); your in-laws burn a hole in the middle if you were found not a virgin. Then the jira is of no use because it will be burnt in the middle. (Sharmaine, girl)

It is valued because they say there is some payment to the parents in respect of virginity when one gets married. The parents do not receive this payment if you are no longer a virgin. (Tadiwanashe, boy)

Nothing [for a male virgin] . . . the boy is the one who pays a cow which goes to the girl’s family . . . Ah no you do not get any payment (laughter), it is your own business. (Frank, boy)

The husband is made to pay a cow to the wife’s parents in appreciation of their effort in making sure their daughter was a virgin until she got married. Chimanda refers to the hymen, so mombe yechimanda means a cow that is paid in addition to the roora (bride wealth) to celebrate a woman’s virginity. This is different from mombe yehumai (the mother’s cow) which is given to the mother of the bride for having given birth to the daughter who is now a wife. The latter is paid by the son-in-law regardless of the virgin status of the bride and it is only paid once for any woman the first time she gets married. It is part of standard bride wealth, which in the study setting is eight cows for the father and one cow for the mother plus varying amounts of money. Mombe yehumai has spiritual significance which mombe yechimanda does not have.

If the young woman’s aunts establish that the young man has already made her pregnant before the payment of roora, he is liable to pay pwanyaruzhowa (damages) to the father of the young woman. This is usually any sum of money which the bride’s family decides on. It is the young man’s acknowledgment that he had unsanctioned premarital sex with the young woman even if it may have been consensual. If no pwanyaruzhowa has been paid, the assumption is that the bride is still a virgin when she is handed over to her husband (kuperekwa). The young man’s aunts were traditionally responsible for inspecting the bedding of the couple after the wedding night to ascertain virginity status of the bride. However, nowadays this rarely happens as people usually spend the wedding night on honeymoon or just somewhere away from the extended family. The husband is, therefore, tasked with informing the rest of the two families regarding the bride’s virginity through jira remasungiro. This fabric, which maybe a minimum of 6 metres in length, is untied and inspected at the bride’s family in the presence of invited relatives and friends. Family ululate and dance if it is intact. A big hole in the middle of the fabric signifies to all that the parents failed in their duty to bring up a respectable daughter and the husband will not pay mombe yechimanda. These two, mombe yechimanda and jira remasungiro, are paid once in a woman’s life. Thus, if she loses her virginity before marriage these will not be paid, unless she eventually gets married to the one who “deflowered” her.

Gender and power inequalities are maintained through cultural practices ostensibly celebrating female virginity and honoring both the bride and her parents. These cultural practices and symbols serve to regulate female sexuality and maintain sexual double standards that give men power over women (Bhana, 2016). Boys are not held responsible for their supposedly irrepressible sexual desires while it is considered vital to control similar feelings among the girls (Tolman, 2016). Cultural practices supportive of the virginity discourse accentuate the relationship between discourse and socially entrenched systems of power (Allen, 2007b; Foucault, 2002). The discourse informing male and female sexuality is not neutral, it is closely interwoven with gender relations of power. That it is the husband who pays something in lieu of the wife’s virginity and never the other way round, indirectly reinforces men’s power and control over women’s sexuality.

Interestingly, the value of hujaya was not similarly constructed as humhandara nor is it intricately linked with one’s identity as a teenage boy:

Male virginity is less valued; these days we are being naughty, plus as far as boys are concerned it cannot be found out that one was no longer a virgin. (Tadiwanashe, boy)

A boy’s virginity is less valued compared to that of the girl . . . a girl may not find someone to marry her (if she is no longer a virgin). They will be saying, “We are through with that one, she is useless now.” The one who would have taken away your virginity might even go around telling others about it. (Ruth, girl)

Rarely (laughs). It is difficult to understand boys; some value it but quite few. Others just think that virginity has to do with girls only. So they believe that it is not important for them as boys. (Tehila, girl)
Boys’ virginity is not as cherished or policed by society as female virginity. The absence of clear motivations for maintaining male virginity may be a result of the sexual double standard or that it is not constantly mentioned in the community’s virginity discourse. The higher status accorded to *humhandara* in the marriage context creates the notion of the good/bad girl dichotomy which is not equally applicable to the boys (Cinthio, 2015; Dunn & Vik, 2014), as indicated by the adolescents:

Obviously, even if you get married to someone of your choice, but if you have misunderstandings and he knows you were not a virgin you will have big problems. (Munashe, girl)

It is valuable because when you get married your husband will trouble you if you had done something before (*misikanzwa*), or engaged in *zewupambi* (prostitution). So it can lead to problems in the marriage. (Tehila, girl)

... it seems there is a stronger bond when you marry *akakwana* (a virgin), than in a case where she is not a virgin. In addition, if we have marital problems I cannot scold her using obscene words like “prostitute” or whatever; because I would be aware that I found her *akakwana*. Even if we have problems, we will be able to solve them in a good way. (Ryan, boy)

A girl’s virginity is presumed to enhance marital bonding between the spouses, while engaging in premarital sex is regarded as misbehaving and equated with prostitution. Ryan even refers to a virgin by use of the word “*akakwana*” meaning wholesomeness and therefore good. By implication the girl who has sex before marriage is bad. Constructing normative sexualities makes gender and sexual differences fundamental and valid and also upholds gender and sexual inequity (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Renold, 2006). Although girls are made to value their virginity, it is only so that males have power over them when they choose who to marry, providing justification for leaving a deflowered one on the pretext that she is of loose morals (Cinthio, 2015). According to Foucault (2002), discourse influences the meaning and activities presented and accessible to actors. Within virginity discourse, female sexuality is regulated while male sexual drive is essentialized such that boys’ premarital sexual activity is not viewed in a negative light. Although *humhandara* is an affirmation of female agency, it does not inherently provide young women with any leverage in similarly insisting on virginity in potential husbands in this context.

**Virginity Discourse Informing Understanding and Response to HIV Infection**

Cultural beliefs and myths regarding the health of boys and girls engaging in premarital sex are resorted to in a bid to dissuade girls from losing their virginity:

I hear about it [the issue of humhandara] here and there in the village. They say you should not sleep with a boy . . . they say once you do that while you are still young your body will not be strong anymore. They [boys] are told not to sleep with girls because they might impregnate them. (Kundai)

As boys’ bodies are not believed to lose their strength in the same way as those of girls, they can engage in sexual activity only taking care not to make the girl pregnant as explained by Venus:

Yes they are told that they should put on a condom when they are going to sleep with someone . . . They say the best thing to do [for girls] is to say no [to sex]. (Venus, girl)

The excerpts above point toward the use of condoms more for contraception rather than as protection from sexually transmitted infections while girls are expected to abstain from sex. Virginity status was considered decisive in apportioning blame in the event of HIV infection of spouses:

The one who was not a virgin will be blamed for instance in cases of *chirwere* (illness/disease). It will be said you are the one who was not a virgin when you came here and you can’t deny that. (Obvious, boy)

Getting married to a woman *asati ambozivikanwa nemumwe murume* (who has not had sex with another man) builds trust. Just knowing that your wife was faithful in the past; means that she can be faithful now you are with her. Even when I pay at her home, I will pay without any doubts that this is my partner. Even in terms of *chirwere* [illness/disease/HIV], if she was not born with it she is still safe. (Ryan, boy)

Fidelity is assumed to be guaranteed in marriage if the wife was a virgin. It is also linked to issues of trust in light of HIV infection. This is assumed to be vital in clearing one from suspicion of bringing HIV into the union. The young woman becomes powerless to deny such accusations if she was not a virgin bride. Besides bringing to light the misconception that marital sex is always safe, the adolescents also draw attention to how gender and power inform their understanding of, and response to, HIV infection. The sexual double standard marginalizes young women, but does not sanction young men for pre- and extra-marital sex. It gives them power to hold females responsible for HIV infection in the marital union merely for not having been virgins at the time of marriage. These young people’s misconceptions portray how discourses of power generate knowledge and truth in particular social milieu (Allen, 2007b; Foucault, 2002). The virginity discourse has convinced the boys and girls to accept as true, erroneous assertions on the relationship between virginity status and HIV infection. The patriarchal ideology permeating the virginity discourse indirectly buttresses the truth effects of such gender-biased “knowledge.”
Challenging Sexual Double Standards

Although it was clear that the adolescents were cognizant of male privilege intrinsic in the virginity discourse, some boys challenged the sexual double standard in the connotation of virginity:

It (hujaya) is very important but . . . not much emphasis on boys' virginity . . . however I think it should be fifty-fifty. What is done by the females should also be done by males. If I cannot maintain my virginity how can I expect somebody to maintain hers when I am failing to do so? So it starts with me, if you want to be a leader you lead by example. (Ryan, boy)

But as boys we must value hujaya . . . such that when you marry your wife she can clear you of bringing STIs into the marriage because she would have found you a virgin. (Ryan, boy)

Male virginity is not easy . . . As for me, my virginity is very significant to me. Just the knowledge that I have not yet slept with a girl makes me proud. I have not yet had sex, and I do not have chirwere; that is very important for me. (Rashid, boy)

By emphasizing that there should be similar expectations for males and females, the boys are resisting the prevalent inequitable discourse on virginity. They draw attention to the view that masculinity is not inflexible; and young men can also be accountable for their sexuality. In addition, they underscore the role of males as partners in the fight for gender equality. This brings to light the multiplicity of discourses that can co-operate to create social reality in a community. Subjects negotiate, question, and create their own meaning of these contending discourses (Allen, 2007a). Although the virginity discourse which privileges male sexuality appears to dominate the culture, there is room for it to take another form (Foucault, 2002), promoting similar meanings and experiences of male and female sexuality. As noted by Tolman (2016), there is need for recognition that girls have real sexual feelings similar to those of boys in order for the double standard to transform.

Nevertheless, virginity was largely framed more in relation to females who bear the responsibility for maintaining it and dealing with the outcomes of virginity loss. Young women's rationalizations for maintaining virginity go beyond the social value and requirements by prospective husband; it is also their way of delaying sexual intercourse and its potential problems:

. . . if you are no longer a virgin, you are no longer able to make a choice regarding the man you want to get married to, maybe you will just accept anyone because hapana zvamwe neuchiri (you are no longer someone of importance). (Munashe, girl)

If you maintain your virginity you grow in good health . . . You will be someone who fully understands what to do in life because you will not have been disturbed in the past. Once you lose your virginity you will accept whatever happens in your life even if that is not what you wanted. (Tashia, girl)

The girls' observations concerning the impact of virginity loss on their self-identity and life choices demonstrate that sexuality does have significance on one's existence (Murphy, 2012). Although this gendered framing places the girls in a subordinate position relative to the boys, they are aware of the agency that is bestowed on them at the same time:

A girl should not allow her body to be touched or have things done to it [by boys]. You need to think about your future, so there is need to protect yourself. (Monalisa, girl)

By giving meaning to safeguarding of humhandara on their own terms and informed by their future prospects, girls produce reverse discourse (Foucault, 1978), and gain power from an essentially constraining social system:

. . . If I do not maintain my virginity now and I get pregnant I will not be in a position to do anything because once a boy knows he has made you pregnant, he may end the relationship. That is what the boys do; he may even go around telling people that I made so-and-so pregnant. (Faith, girl)

The girls are thus actively embracing the sexual double standard for the benefit of their current educational and future prospects. Virginity maintenance may be the route to educational success and economic independence from men. The girls make a direct link between losing virginity and pregnancy as contraceptive use is not encouraged among unmarried youth in Zimbabwe. Therefore, they are cognizant of the possibility of getting pregnant from first sexual intercourse.

The girls connect the loss of female virginity to pregnancy and its culmination in humiliation and loss of economic opportunities for girls in the future. In Zimbabwe, young people’s sexual activity and childbearing outside of marriage is denounced (Remez, Woog, & Mhloyi, 2014), thus pregnancy as a result of premarital sex usually leads to the couple having to get married. However, this often leaves teenage girls at a disadvantage in cases where the young man is not willing to do so. Brian explains young men’s reluctance as follows:

You should not rush to start a family when you are still young. If you do so the union may not last due to various reasons or you may just fail to understand each other. (Brian, boy)

The traditional gender ideologies which celebrate female virginity until marriage and indirectly sanction male sexual experience reinforce inequalities in gender power relations. Therefore, girls have much to lose when they engage in premarital sex, as the virginity discourse makes them responsible for negative outcomes of virginity loss (Bachechi & Hall, 2015). Hence, the girls conform to the cultural norms which subordinate them as a way of resisting patriarchal power and
achieving power over their own future (Bachechi & Hall, 2015; Renold & Ringrose, 2008)

Conclusion

Cultural ideals concerning sexuality may wield powerful control of adolescents’ sexual decision-making, hence this study focused on adolescent views of cultural norms associated with virginity. Such analyses of social and cultural norms may be used to strengthen efforts to address the ways in which gender inequalities, sexual double standards and girls’ vulnerable position is produced. This will be helpful in increasing our knowledge and supporting advocacy efforts for education policy and broader approaches to shape and change social and cultural norms that are based on gender inequalities.

Feminization of sexuality means young people’s choices regarding sexual activities are influenced by cultural constructs of masculinity and femininity located in gendered power relations. Girls bear more responsibility for premarital virginity loss. The self-preserving stance adopted by the girls also brings to light the adolescents’ unmet need for contraceptives which needs to be addressed. Sexually active unmarried adolescents in Zimbabwe have the most unmet need for contraception (62%), when compared with their married counterparts (19%; Remez et al., 2014). This unmet need has more consequences for girls as it usually results in pregnancy, school dropout, and fewer job prospects thereby perpetuating poverty and dependence on a male breadwinner.

Findings also point to the influence of culturally instigated and supported sexual double standards on adolescents’ understanding and valorization of virginity. The emphasis on the virginity ideal as indicative of respectable femininity may constrain young women’s choices in relation to their sexuality and legitimate gender inequalities. Although female chastity is policed and celebrated, cultural ideologies on masculinity often mean that males’ risky sexual activities are not questioned although they do play a role in the spread of HIV. Findings of the study highlight that adolescents’ misconceptions and gendered understanding of HIV infection are to some extent influenced by the prevailing norms around virginity. Contrasting notions of female virginity vis-à-vis male prerogative for multiple premarital sexual partners are not problematized or contested by some young people with regards to beliefs and attitudes toward HIV. This adds force to a misleading notion that hold women responsible for the scourge of HIV (MacEntee, 2016). In this respect, gender inequalities promote the spread of HIV by not holding young men responsible for their sexuality.

Nonetheless, cultural scripts do not merely constrain girls, they do foster agency in relation to their bodies and sexuality. In an unsupportive cultural environment with regard to female premarital sexual activity and where contraception is not readily available or encouraged, adopting a self-preserving and self-advancing stance might be one of the available options enabling girls to complete school and become economically independent. The traditional ideology on female virginity thus evolves from a form of patriarchal control of female sexuality, to girls’ recognition of power over their own sexuality and sexual vulnerability. Redefining of masculinity was also evident with a few males also valuing their virginity, taking responsibility for their sexuality and questioning the double standards embedded in the virginity norms. Although this is not widespread, schools can build upon such sentiments as a preliminary stage to long-term social transformation of adolescent sexual behavior and well-being.

Teachers are well placed to stimulate the debate on cultural norms informing adolescent sexuality. This has implications for the role of the school in supporting adolescents to interrogate and challenge the prevailing virginity discourse. The gendered power inherent therein needs to be understood and questioned by both male and female adolescents, as an effort to dismantle some aspects of the gender relations of power. The idea of valuing oneself and recognizing one’s own power to effect change in one’s life and relationships needs to be highlighted in virginity discourse. Teachers need to build on adolescents’ agency and reframing of virginity so that it becomes a matter of personal choice aligned to one’s power over their sexuality. There is need to draw on adolescents’ experiences and viewpoints on sexuality to promote critical assessment of how culture, gender, and power operate in the virginity discourse in particular and male and female sexuality in general.

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