

Effects of the calls for gender equality and an end to gender-based violence: a case of the Shona of Zimbabwe's Masvingo urban

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Abstract

Gender equality, also known as sex equality or sexual equality, is the goal of the equality of the genders. Equality is the state of being equal in every respect. According to the United Nations Assembly, the fundamental principle governing human relationships is oneness of humankind, that is, the belief that all human beings are equal and have equal capabilities. The equality of women and men is a basic requirement derived from this principle. It is widely believed that equality is in actual fact a right of every individual. For quite some time now various organisations have initiated movements advocating for this equality between men and women in the name of equal rights. They have also called for an end to gender-based violence. Gender-based violence, according to United Nations General Assembly, is any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to people including threats of such acts like coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. The movements have resulted in anti-discrimination laws and almost every government has these anti-discrimination laws. The paper assesses the extent to which these movements have gone in enforcing the laws amongst the Shona of Zimbabwe. In other words it focuses on establishing whether they are doing enough, too little or too much?

Key terms: gender equality, gender-based violence, gender discrimination

1. Introduction

According to Guthrie (1948), Shona (or ChiShona) is a Bantu language, native to the Shona people of Zimbabwe and southern Zambia. The term is also used to identify peoples who speak one of the Shona language dialects, namely Zezuru, Karanga, Manyika, Ndau and Korekore. It is a principal language of Zimbabwe, along with Ndebele and the official business language, English. Shona is spoken by a percentage of about 75% of the people in Zimbabwe. Mutasa (1996) notes that according to ethnologue, the five major dialects of Shona are natively spoken by 13.8 million people making it one of the largest Bantu languages. Other countries that host Shona language speakers are Zambia, Botswana and Mozambique. Shona is a written standard language with an orthography and grammar that was codified during the early 20th century and fixed in the 1950s. Shona is taught in the schools but is not the general medium of instruction in other subjects. It has literature and is described through monolingual and bilingual dictionaries (chiefly Shona - English). Mutasa (1996) further notes that modern Shona is based on the dialect spoken by the Karanga people of Masvingo Province (the region around Great Zimbabwe monuments) as well as Zezuru spoken by people of central and northern Zimbabwe.

In the Shona society, like in almost every other patriarchal society, women were denied opportunities in certain sectors. Traditionally, they were generally thought to be good for nothing creatures who needed the guidance and direction of a responsible guardian throughout their lives. This led to the rise of various Shona sayings in the Shona society like *Usaita semukadzi* 'do not behave like a woman' normally used to discourage weak men to be strong and courageous. Also *munhu wemurume haachemi* 'a man does not cry' which regarded men as supernaturally strong. Similarly a courageous woman would be described by sayings like *uyu murume chaiye* 'this one is a real man'. In the traditional Shona speech community, for instance, brothers would go to school whilst sisters remain at home to learn the duties expected of good wives. Girls' lives were basically about becoming good for their marriages. Their success would be judged against their ability to secure and sustain their marriages no matter how unfriendly the environments were. Women married to working men would man the rural homes waiting for husbands at work in town. They were supposed to be capable of executing all the duties required at a rural home. For instance, during the absence of the husbands, they would be expected to take the cattle and plough the fields. These wives had no say or contribution towards any of the major family decisions. This order yielded sayings like *dare haritongwi nevakadzi* 'issues are not settled by women'. Arguing wives were regarded as having received inadequate tutoring from their aunts before marriage. Such were often sent back for tutoring, a development regarded as a sign of complete failure on the side of the woman and a disgrace for the family as a whole. Where noncompliance emerged in the marriages, the husbands could also employ corporal punishment on wives and never the other way round.

Formal and more secure jobs were usually for males and where both were employed, better ranks were for men. For instance, in the past, though one could come across one or two female teachers at a school, it was so difficult to come across a headmistress. Furthermore, only men had the right to own land and other forms of

property. Wives were, therefore, never seen as mature responsible citizens. For instance, anything they would want to do needed the husband's consent and endorsement and whenever they did anything wrong, the husband would be held responsible. In other words women were perceived as immature beings and husbands had total responsibility and control over their wives just like what fathers do to their children.

It is quite clear that the inequality was so unfair on the part of women and the movements calling for equality and an end to gender-based violence were well over due. When these movements came, they focussed upon bringing an end to this kind of discrimination and injustice. It is, however, the purpose of this paper to assess the extent to which the efforts are being carried so far. It is so obvious that the objective behind them was basically to bring an end to the inequality as well as gender-based violence and put equality in their place. This means that bringing to life another form of discrimination and inequality would be well against the original aims of the movements in question.

2. Statement of the problem

Men of the Shona society are apparently crying foul due to the extent to which the movements against gender-based violence and gender inequality are now taking the fight for women's rights. They say it now appears the movements are seeking a complete revenge for injustices traditionally practiced by men against women by fighting for women's rights to an extent where they devour men's rights. In other words the movements seem to strive for another form of inequality instead of total equality. This position has triggered the researcher's desire to find out the truth on the ground.

3. Research Objectives

Amongst the leading objectives for this research are to:

- Assess the extent to which the movements fighting gender discrimination and gender-based violence have gone
- Find out the truth about the effects of the movements
- Come up with possible suggestions for rectifying the problems caused

4. Research Questions

Amongst the leading questions of the research are:

- Are the movements addressing the situation doing enough towards fighting for equality between men and women in all sectors?
- Are the apparent inequalities against men genuine?
- What could be the best solution for the emerging problems?

5. Research methodology

The research is based on a qualitative analysis of data attained through oral interviews, analysing newspaper articles as well as observations of the movements' effects on the Shona speakers of Masvingo urban. The research population was purposively sampled to yield a sample consisting of Shona speaking police officers, prison guards, employers, lecturers, shop assistants, and various married men and women in Masvingo urban. Data were either recorded by a cell phone or taken down into the researcher's notebook and analysed qualitatively in the light of the research questions.

6. Findings

It came out that, as a result of the movements in question, in every family both sons and daughters now get an equal opportunity to go to school. An assessment of the statistics in schools highlights a balance in the numbers of male and female students. The opportunity to proceed with education is now based on capability rather than gender, that is, apart from financial constraints. Statistics in higher and tertiary institutions also demonstrate minor differences in the numbers of males and females. This shows a considerable improvement from a situation where only boys would go to school and where both did only males would go to greater heights. Some sayings have since emerged to praise the power in women like *mwanasikana ndiye anochengeta* or *mwanasikana haakanganwi kwaakabva* 'girls are the ones who truly care for their parents'.

Observations indicated that most men now stay with their wives in town whether the wives are working or not. It was also found out that both men and women now get into jobs previously exclusive to men or women such as nursing, security, police and army. They also have opportunities to perform well and rise to all ranks, though some informants were quick to highlight that though headmistresses are now common, up to this date no males can rise to the level of matron in the nursing profession.

However, whilst the research has generally yielded the positive picture above resulting from the efforts, some informants indicated the general feeling that the movements are taking the exercise too far to the extent of creating another inequality now in women's favour. The research established the following examples as evidence

to support the position in question.

The number of men abusing their wives physically has significantly fallen leading to a rise in females abusing their husbands. In the homes, the research established that it is very difficult for men being abused by their wives to equally find assistance. For instance, men reporting of being physically abused by wives are hardly taken seriously yet it is true that many women are beating their husbands. According to www.dvmen.org 40% of domestic violence involves women against men adding that it is only that no efforts have seriously bothered to call for men to open up that most of it goes unnoticed. This is quite a considerable percentage. The extreme cases of such scenarios are typically captured in newspapers like Sunday mail and Kwayedza. For example, the Sunday mail of 23 August 2012 presents a pathetic picture of a helpless man being physically abused by his wife. There are people who indicated that they often come across thoroughly beaten husbands avoiding reporting since they are ashamed of being identified as so weak. Some indicated that they know pretty well that they would never be taken seriously even if they report. This is evidenced by the absence of lawyers freely fighting for abused men yet there are a lot for women. It surfaced as well that whenever a husband and a wife fight, the woman is said to have been abused and if she wins the battle she is said to have been defending herself. Thus, despite the new turn, men are still considered to be the only ones who are aggressive yet a close observation of some indoor conversations demonstrates the presence of some women whose language is very aggressive. Shona sayings have also emerged that are typically used by men such as *ini ndiri murume chaiye handioni munhurume mberi kwangu* 'I am a real man, I do not fear any man'. It appears society is yet to realise that the movements in question have reversed both men and women's approaches to life and a considerable number of women has become equally aggressive claiming to know their rights.

It has also come out that men reporting rape cases would have police officers being asked to enquire again and again till most withdraw, a method believed to have been adopted to deny them a chance to be heard in court. Some female police officers indicated that there are some male victims who had apparently very genuine cases but got frustrated on the way and withdrew. Evidence in place demonstrates that, very few males if any win cases of being raped yet almost every man accused of rape will not be found not guilty. Some male informants indicated that there are women who even threaten males saying they would cry saying we attempted raping them if we deny them certain favours. For instance, some promiscuous women are getting opportunities to sleep with men of their choice as no one would ever bother to scrutinise their claims of attempted rape.

In support of this, some informants vehemently attacked discrimination at some organisations like universities where entry requirements are higher for males than females. For instance, at some universities like the University of Zimbabwe in 1999, Law and Accounting degrees were only accessible to males with 15 points as well as women with 13, 14 or 15 points. Furthermore, in most institutions, after interviewing candidates, the panels go on to settle also for one or two women just for ensuring some gender balance. 'This makes us appear as if we doubt the equality between men and women which compromises the movements' emphasis on equal opportunities based on capability' said one informant who was disadvantaged by his gender at one institution.

It also came out that male and female security guards have equal access to the job, equal off days but women never come for night duty. In supermarkets the male and female assistants indicate that they get equal payments and off days but where there is need to lift heavy weights, only men are asked to assist. In the police and the army it emerged that about $\frac{3}{4}$ of women are into administration work and when there is war they rarely get into the bush. All these inequalities bring to life some kind of environment in which in one area we do not want discrimination arguing that we are equal and in the other we regard ourselves as not so equal and must be treated as such. This then leads to a situation where the equality appears as one that is just in quotation marks and fully enforced only where there are benefits for a protected group but ignored where there is some challenge associated with real equality. To support this, it also came out that right now the new constitution is calling for hanging but only for men. This makes men cry foul as there is no more reason for continuously discriminating in a country where equality has gained so much ground. There is demonstration of the inability to live in a state that is free of discrimination as there is mere substitution of one form of discrimination for another. One informant said 'we must not act as if we are up to imposing equality when we must be promoting what is actually there'. Thus, there is need to allow each person to fairly earn what he or she requires.

7. Discussion

As the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (2012) notes, there is a lack of appropriate support services for men and boys, or that men are not making use of those resources that could potentially offer help because either the men themselves and/or their environment do not perceive the violence they experience as such. This indicates that violence against men really prevails but is not being perceived as such. It appears the call has just resulted in a change of goal posts in favour of a sacred cow. Women with their male sympathisers are now like a team that is playing and referring at the same time. Inequality is still being promoted and it is only that the seesaw now steeps in women's favour and it appears the movements aim at making sure men are in the very position women used to be. As long as there is a continuous fight for this

inequality then people would never believe the equality to be real. It would remain equality in quotation marks. Furthermore, in no time the inequality would be so pronounced that other movements would soon be required to put an end to it.

8. Recommendations

The leading question is “Do people ever doubt the equal capabilities of the sexes?” If not then lets:

- have the platform promoting real equality
- allow equal opportunities for everyone for all to demonstrate the equality
- not act as if we are covering up for a younger brother or sister
- encourage women to participate in sectors where their numbers are few and thereafter make their ability determine their chances

Suggested Reading

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