


Re-imaginings of women's theology for female bodies: A panacea for a future with hope among teen girls selling sex at Epworth Booster, Harare



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The perpetual decline of Zimbabwe's socio-economic situation can be found in the country legalising prostitution, which it used to regard as an act of criminality. This legalisation promoted the trade from being an offense to a lifestyle and from being an act of immorality to a profession. Prostitutes were also advanced from being social outcasts to commercial sex workers. Although the law appeared to financially empower prostitutes, its negative impact is seen in the level it dehumanises teen girls as they turn themselves into sex objects. Cases of school dropouts among teen girls and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) are some of the evidences of the negative impact of prostitution, caused by their belief that 'unprotected sex pays more'. The location of the study was Epworth Booster in Harare, Zimbabwe. Using an African feminist theology framework, this article aims to analyse how women's theology can be used as a panacea to restore dignity and *hunhu*-ism to the teen girls whose bodies have been exposed to abuse by their purported fathers. The article uses both unstructured and focus group interviews to collect data from three health personnel and 10 teen girls, respectively. The article grapples with the fact that the legalisation of prostitution in Zimbabwe seriously affected both the social and religious life of teen girls as they risk their lives in order to earn a living, and African feminist theology should be applied to defend these vulnerable girls.

Contribution: In the context of socio-economic depletion and laws that suppress women in the name of empowering them, rereading and application of women's theology should protect women and offer them a future with hope.

Keywords: women's theology; female bodies; teen girls; selling sex; Epworth Booster; Zimbabwe.

Introduction

Prostitution is often called the world's oldest profession (Salmon 2010). Its history in Zimbabwe traces back to the colonial era. The patriarchal African society, however, side-lined the word 'prostitute' to refer to women only, thereby creating the name 'female sex workers'. This patriarchal narrative of prostitution led the Shona ethnic group of Zimbabwe to describe female sex workers as *pfambi* or *mahure*, both words referring to female prostitutes. Chitando (2011) stated:

Both *pfambi* and *hure* are derogatory terms given that they imply immorality and deviant behaviour. The words also describe a prostitute as an aberrant woman not worth respecting and one who exists in opposition to celebrated patriarchal womanhood, best defined by the Shona proverb '*musha mukadzi*', literally 'home is a woman'. (p. 93)

The selective use of *pfambi* and *hure* is a clear indication that African society has concluded that the abuse of female bodies for male sexual drive is a patriarchal right, without considering the circumstances that propel women to have their bodies abused for a living and not for leisure.

Apart from the socio-economic struggles of Zimbabwe, the decriminalisation of prostitution by the government is an underhand towards female bodies' abuse. It can be argued that although the enactment of decriminalising prostitution was aimed at protecting women from verbal abuse, the legislation has no respect for female bodies, as they are the only ones labelled by society as *pfambi* and men are presented as cultured and well-mannered individuals (Chitando 2011). Nyengele (2004:73) further argues that African women are not only marginalised, excluded, subordinated and silenced by culture, but they are also silenced by religion and

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particularity by the church in its support and perpetuation of patriarchal values and structures that order and govern the church life. African culture does not give value to women's bodies. This is in spite of the fact that the dignity and value that women contribute to the church, society and the world, as women are sisters, mothers, aunts and grandmothers. Throughout history, men have wounded women's pride, thereby leading them to give up their dignity, pride and confidence as having been equally created by God. Phiri (1997:16) avers that Africa experienced the gospel as a tool of colonialism, racism, sexism, classicism and exclusivism. The above-mentioned vices demand the re-imagination of women theologies in connection to the female body, as the feminine body attracts perpetrators of sexual gender-based violence, and this becomes worse if the female person is a minor (Chisale 2020:197).

This study is located at the Econet mobile network booster in Epworth. Epworth is a peri-urban town 15 km east of Harare. The booster is known to be a hive of women and teen girls selling sex during the night and at times during the day. Out of a population of 15310244 Zimbabweans, 123250 live in Epworth (United Nations 2022). Most of the people in Epworth live in poverty, resulting in the selling of sex being common (Nehanda Radio 2013). Of the people in Epworth, 70% live in substandard illegal settlements which are called *magada*, literally 'staying illegally', and *komboni yatsva*, literally 'the compound has burnt'. These shanty houses are the domicile of most sex workers. Teen girls are exposed to these harsh socio-economic conditions and end up using their bodies for a living (Mujinga 2020:344). The purpose of this study is to analyse how women's theology can be a panacea to restore dignity and *hunhu*-ism to the teen girls whose bodies have been exposed to abuse by their purported fathers.

This article will use both focus group and semistructured interviews to collect data from 10 teen girls and three selected health workers in Epworth health centres. The article goes further to discuss an African feminist conceptual framework to investigate child prostitution at Epworth booster. This is followed by discussing the influence of the decriminalisation of prostitution and its impact on the girls as they found themselves having sex with elders. The decriminalisation of prostitution is in contrast to the *Sexual Offences Act* 9:21 of 2009 which suppresses brothels and prostitution as well as forbidding sex with minors and/or soliciting or enticing a young person to have extramarital sexual intercourse or to commit an immoral or indecent act (Veritas 2009). It is because of this contradiction of law that suppresses women that a re-imagination of women's theology as a tool to defend female bodies from sexual abuse is engaged to defend women from sexual abuse by men.

African feminist conceptual framework

African feminist framework is a branch of African women's theology that covers the wider concerns of the society, such

as the history of slavery and colonialism, cultural and spiritual imperialism, struggle in the shape of racism, female circumcision, cultural identity, poverty engendered by globalism, neocolonial structures, widowhood, childlessness and inheritance of the tragedy of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), among other issues (Gathogo 2008:1). Phiri (1997:70) adds that African women's theologies are critical academic studies of the causes of women's oppression, particularly a struggle against societal, cultural and religious patriarchy. African feminism as a framework of women's theology puts women's bodies at the centre of feminist conversations (Wang'ondu 2019:1). The framework is committed to the eradication of all forms of oppression against women through a critique of the social and religious dimension of both African culture and Christianity (Phiri 1997). Phiri agrees with Wang'ondu that the African feminist framework takes the women's experiences at its starting point, especially as the framework focuses on the oppressive areas of women's lives caused by injustices, patriarchal domination, colonialism, neocolonialism, racism, capitalism, globalism and sexism. African feminist framework was born out of the oppression of women by the socio-economic, political, cultural and religious structures in Africa as scholars grapple with ways to address the plight of African women in the context of war, poverty, illness, illiteracy, sexual abuse and human trafficking, among other ills (Wang'ondu 2019:1).

The African feminist conceptual framework also emerged from the plight of African female empowerment to fight for a different type of feminism that challenges cultural issues that they feel pertain to the complex experiences faced by all women of all cultures on the African continent (Wang'ondu 2019:1). Njoroge (1997) is convinced that any vision of doing theology must have women in the community at the centre of that theology if it is to make sense. In buttressing Njoroge's assertion, any genuine discussion to protect women should start by having laws that do not put women to self-pity. Going by Njoroge's (1997) assertion, one would argue that, in their quest for God's response to women's experiences, African women theologians engage these experiences as both participants and scholars.

In applying African feminist theology in this article, the aim is to liberate women from the socio-economic and political oppression of Zimbabwe. The oppression is exacerbated by the decriminalisation of prostitution that has resulted in teen girls forcing themselves to use their bodies to earn a living. The framework is a tool that confronts the decriminalisation of prostitution as a case that sidelines teen girls to the peripheries of *hunhu*-ism or *ubuntu*, as they end up using unorthodox means of selling sex in order survive. The application of African feminist theology is also aimed at rehumanising teen girls at Epworth Booster whose bodies have been subjected to abuse by their supposed fathers as clients for sexual satisfaction. Kittling (2006) maintains that:

[I]nstead of the society to view young girls as victims of sexual abuse and exploitation mainly as a result of poverty in Zimbabwe

... these children are generally seen as 'willing participants' and therefore 'victims by choice'. (p. 926)

The African feminist framework challenges such an ideology of believing that female bodies are male objects of sexual pleasure. Chisale (2020:199) expresses the impact of African feminist theology among children as a tool to confront the gender injustice that leads girl children to dangerous survival strategies and that harms their little bodies by breaking and polluting their sexual innocence. Going by the argument of Chisale, it therefore makes sense in this article to apply African feminist theory to challenge the decriminalisation of prostitution in Zimbabwe that has seen the bodies of teen girls exposed to sexual abuses that result in HIV and AIDS among children.

Qualitative research methodology

The researcher randomly selected teen girls selling sex at Epworth Booster between the ages 12–17 years. The researcher is aware that 12 years is not part of the teens, but prostitution at Epworth Booster has attracted girls as young as 12. The selling of sex at 12 years was confirmed by Muyengwa (2014:20–21), who mentioned that 'the extent of child prostitution in Zimbabwe is still unknown due to lack of empirical research on the subject'. However, there is evidence in different writings countrywide that indicate a serious presence of the practice in the country with children as young as 12 years reported to be in the prostitution trade. Given that the paper was dealing with the bodies of young girls, unstructured focus group interviews were applied to hear the stories of these girls. Oduyoye (2001:8) believes that narrating stories is a significant methodology given that 'stories are educational; they lend meaning to events in people's lives and have a cathartic effect on the painful experiences of women'. Oduyoye (2001) further argues that storytelling is a step towards healing, as it also has the purpose of changing the roles of women from being observers and victims into being participants and actors in history.

Focus group interviews were conducted with 10 randomly selected girls. The participants were minors, and it was difficult to get consent from their parents or guardians as most of these girls either ran away from their homes or they did not have parents living close to them. The interview process was also difficult given that teen girls are vulnerable, and they need protection. To this, Chisale (2020:200) argues, the sexual body of a minor cannot stand the power of an adult domineering over it. The little body experiences a sense of helplessness, loss, vulnerability, shame, humiliation and degradation. African feminist theology is conscious and responsive to the challenges and lived experiences of the vulnerable, particularly those of women and children that are oppressive and perpetuated by gender injustice and patriarchy (Chisale 2020:200).

In dealing with the fear of exposing little girls to academic abuses by a male researcher, the researcher identified a female pastor, Rev. Meloreen Mujinga from the Methodist

Church in Zimbabwe, who was working in Epworth Circuit to be the research assistant. The interviewer divided the homogeneous group into two equal groups of five and named them A and B. Group A comprised girls between 12 and 15 years of age, while group B had girls between 16 and 17 years. The groups were informed by the teen girls' experiences of sex, which varies between immature and partially mature.

In spite of being a female interviewer who already knew the challenges of these girls, power, dominance and control over the poor vulnerable girls cannot be avoided, and yet it did not dominate the interviews. The interviewer had developed a relationship with the teen girls, as she sometimes supplied them with sanitary wear donated by the church during her pastoral visitations. Some of the girls were members of the church and the pastor had developed a relationship with them by assisting them to move out of prostitution by not condemning their lifestyle. This relationship minimised dominance, power and control from an elderly pastor. This relationship made the interview more flexible, and the teen girls could share their experiences in a relaxed mood. In addition, the flexibility of the interviewees was also necessitated by the promise of guaranteed anonymity from the researcher during analysis of the data. Ethical requirements of research like voluntary participation and freedom to leave the interviews at any time were also communicated with informants before the interviews. The interviewees were also not promised any reward for providing the information, as the interview was voluntary.

This article also benefitted from purposively selected health personnel from Epworth Mission, Domboramwari and Overspill clinics, as they shared the health risks of female bodies exposed to sexual activities at Epworth Booster.

Prostitution in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has laws and programmes to combat prostitution and to assist child prostitutes as victims of sexual abuse. These laws include the *Constitution of Zimbabwe [No. 20] Act of 2013*, *Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act [Chapter 9:23]*, the *Children's Act [Chapter 5:06] of 1972*, the *Domestic Violence Act No. 24 [Chapter 5:16] of 2006* and the *Trafficking in Persons Act (9.25) of 2014*. Unfortunately, these legislations are seldom enforced to the advantage of girls, mainly because they form part of the vulnerable society of Zimbabwe. Moreover, child prostitutes, being children, continue to see no other alternative than to continue in their trade, thereby creating a vicious cycle of child prostitution (Kittling 2006:926). Zimbabwean legal framework on prostitution is oppressive to both women and teen girls, and passing laws that put women's bodies at high risk of sexual and reproductive health consequences such as HIV and AIDS and sexually transmitted infections that are life threatening is bad governance.

Prior to Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, 'colonial vagrancy laws and brutal forces that included rounding up hundreds of women and detaining them were used' (Seidman

1984:422). Although prostitution was rampant in Zimbabwe, the profession had long been swept under the rug, flourishing under cover of darkness but ignored by the public except when court cases involving prostitutes made national newspaper headlines or occasional police blitzes ineptly nabbed ordinary women (Mataruse 2001). In the postcolonial era, the Zimbabwean government criminalised prostitution on the pretext that 'in over 100 countries in the world, selling sex was illegal together with associated laws against solicitation, loitering and antisocial behaviour that bring the country's morals into disrepute' (Seidman 1984:424).

Just like most traditional conservative, patriarchal and Christian-dominated countries, female sex work in Zimbabwe was abhorred on moral grounds as an unbecoming means of livelihood which takes away the practising woman's social respectability. (Nyambi 2015:1)

Busza et al. (2017:1–3) argue that 'female street prostitution is a subculture with distinctive patterns of living such as identifiable cultural norms, values, and practices that differentiate them from the dominant culture'. These characters made prostitution an illegal business in the traditional and conservative countries.

During the 20th century, prostitutes were known for visiting beer gardens and bottle stores during the night. This business was mostly done by elderly women. However:

[A]s Zimbabwean socioeconomic life continued to decline, prostitutes started to loiter in the streets scantily-dressed with motley of outfits, from lacy bras, tight-fitting and revealing skirts to low rider jeans. (*The Herald* 2015)

Research conducted by Elmes et al. (2017:1) in Manicaland province shows that female sex work is not only an urban phenomenon, but it is also caused by hyperinflation. Some sex workers accept mobile money¹ transfers like EcoCash, Telecash and OneMoney, arguing that electronic money cannot be traced easily by the police, unlike hard currency.

Another study conducted by the United States Department of State on human rights practices (2002) on Zimbabwe shows that prostitution and related acts, including solicitation, procuring and keeping brothels, were illegal but thriving because of Zimbabwe's depleted socio-economic environment. Mojalifa Mokoale of the Zimbabwe Sexual Rights Center mentioned that:

Crackdowns on alleged prostitution have been a staple of Zimbabwean police departments for decades, starting in the 1980s with *Operation Chinyavada*. Lit. Scorpion, which rounded up commercial sex workers in the early years after independence. After a long pause, police resumed the crackdowns, starting with *Chipo Chiroorwa* Lit. Chipo get married, *Operation Chengetedza Hunhu*, Lit. Maintain your dignity, and *Operation dyira bonus kumba* Lit. Take your bonus home in December 2013 and *Operation zvanjanya*, Lit. It's too much in 2014. (Zulu 2015:n.p.)

1. Most Zimbabweans transact business using mobile money transfers. Econet's platform is called EcoCash; Telecel's is called Telecash, while NetOne's mobile money platform is called OneMoney.

The five operations were efforts by law enforcement agents to criminalise prostitution, and women suffered under these operations. However, the debate on women's prostitution continued, albeit with mixed feelings.

Decriminalisation of prostitution in Zimbabwe

Sex workers in Zimbabwe have always been lobbying for legalisation of prostitution (Mataruse 2001). The debate got its momentum in 2011 with Thabitha Khumalo, the then-legislator for the Movement for Democratic Change. Khumalo argued in Parliament that 'authorising prostitution would address corruption, HIV and AIDS and also promotes women's rights' (ZimEye 2012). Given the level of harassment that female prostitutes were going through, Khumalo continued her campaign unabated, supported by the Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network, apart from the sex workers themselves.

On 17 March 2014, nine women were arrested in the Avenues area of Harare during a police operation code known as 'no to robberies and prostitution' (Zulu 2015). The nine women were prosecuted and charged with loitering for the purposes of prostitution (Nemukuyu 2015). The women filed a court application and the case was heard by the Constitutional Court. The Court stopped and outlawed the prosecution of the nine women who had been charged under Section 81 of the Criminal Law (*Codification and Reform Act*) Chapter 9:23). The section provides that any person who publicly solicits another person for purposes of prostitution shall be guilty of soliciting and liable to a fine not exceeding level five or imprisonment for a period not exceeding 6 months or both. The ruling became known as:

A landmark ruling as it protected the nine women from being arrested only because they were loitering in the Avenues area and that there was no proof that they were actually soliciting for the purposes of prostitution. (Tandi 2015:n.p.)

Outcome of the decriminalisation of prostitution

In decriminalising prostitution, 'the Constitutional court banned the arrest of women on charges of soliciting for intimacy in the absence of male customers confirming they were offered the service for fee' (Nemukuyu 2015). The Constitutional Court also stipulated that the conduct of solicitation must be specified. There must be evidence of a proactive attempt to procure a client rather than being based on the person's location and/or clothing (Busza et al. 2017:1). The Court also clarified that the person reported to be solicited must be present in court. The Court ordered the permanent stay of prosecution of the women who were arrested in Harare in March 2014 (*Sunday Mail* 2014).

'The court order was issued in June 2015 and widely reported in Zimbabwe's media as signifying that the police were no longer allowed to arrest sex workers' (Jera 2015). The

Constitutional Court ruling was received with joy by most women and human rights activists as a tool to free women from abuse by police. The Centre for Sexual Health, HIV and AIDS Research (CeSHHAR)² also embraced the ruling as a landmark ruling that protected women from willy-nilly abuse (Busza et al. 2017:1). One sex worker interviewed by *The Herald* (2015) said:

[W]e have agreed to lower prices following the Constitutional Court ruling to stop police from arresting women suspected of soliciting for paid sex. Before the ConCourt ruling, we used to charge high fees because we would consider the risk of being arrested. We would use part of the money to bribe the police and pay fines. We welcome the move as it recognises our profession. We are also trying to make ends meet in these harsh economic times. Charges are as low as ZAR 1 (South Africa Rand) and we want to show our appreciation to our clients because this is what we have always wanted as sex workers. (n.p.)

The Women's Action Group described the ruling as a legal milestone, while the Women in Law in Southern Africa Research and Education Trust welcomed the judgement as a true example of constitutionalism (*The Herald* 2015). For women, the ruling was a reprieve from patriarchal domination which they had endured for years.

Discussion

From the interviews conducted with teen girls at Epworth Booster, it was evident that the abuse of women bodies by their supposed fathers is out of desperation to sell sex in order to earn a living. Teen prostitution is an abuse of female bodies out of their desperation. Jessie Majome, the former Deputy Minister of Women's Affairs, argued that 'we have many girls who are selling their bodies to earn a living' (*Guardian* 2015). This point was buttressed by teen girls during the interviews. One of the girls in group B said:

[I] have grown in this profession. I started in 2014 at the age of 12. I lost both my parents because of HIV. I was the eldest in a family of five, with the youngest who was one year. The young sister was taken to the rural home by our grandmother, and we were left to fend for ourselves. I dropped from school. We struggled for two months without any relative providing for us until my sister, who is a fellow teen prostitute who was in a similar situation, introduced me to the booster. Booster was an answered prayer as US\$1 for a short time encounter was enough for a days' meal with my siblings.'

The above statement presents an individual who has no choice than to allow her body to be used and abused for sex in order to earn a living.

Some teen girls saw prostitution as a survival tactic. One participant in group A mentioned that 'I am only 14 but so far I have already had sex with more than 50 men in less than 5 months in order to survive'. Another participant in the same group testified that:

'[I] went to school as far as Grade 6 before dropping out after my grandmother, who was taking care of me, died. I decided to come to Harare to look for greener pastures, and Epworth Booster welcomed me and solved my financial problems.'

She went further to state:

'[I] had never had sex, and my first time was with an old man who was almost one I used to call grandfather at home. The man offered me US\$5; my friend told me to go for the offer as the rates are usually lower. With some day's clients paying fifty cents or US\$1 for two encounters, "the gods had smiled on you as such offers are hard to come by". I was so afraid, yet I had to offer the services since he had already paid. I was shivering and didn't know what to do; the guy had no time, and he was not lenient with me. At times he could beat me, claiming that he had paid too much for a novice like me.'

Another teen in group B also reiterated that:

'[M]y mother died when I was in Grade 2, and I have never known my father. My grandmother was taking care of me, and unfortunately, I had to fend for myself after her death. A friend I grew up with back in my rural home who had come for Christmas invited me over in Epworth, saying I could try to look for a job rather than starve to death at home. With no option I joined her ... when I got here, I found out that she was already a sex worker at the age of 14. She introduced me to sex work, saying that was the fastest way I could earn a living and pay rent and buy food.'

Although some of the teen girls found prostitution as a difficult way of life, one sex worker from group A confessed that prostitution is a profession and a way of self-sustainability. The above verbatim suggests an interplay between orphanhood and prostitution, and this is a policy failure and lack of political will to protect the vulnerable members of the community which African feminist conceptual framework aims to fight. Moreover, the other girl in group B mentioned that, in Epworth, every man can afford US\$1. Even street vendors can afford at the end of the day to pay that amount. It is hard to find a man who wants to spend US\$20 one time. They have to 'push volumes' because they can more easily get 10 men with a dollar or two rounds than have one man with US\$20, but they really have to work hard.

Teen prostitution has become very much rampant because men prefer to quench their sexual desire with young girls rather than the elderly ladies, as mentioned by one teen girl in group B. Although teen girls are the ready market for men at Epworth Booster, a teen girl in group A shared three sad moments that she encountered in the process of using her body to earn a living. The girl bitterly narrated the breaking of her virginity by a man she never loved, unprotected sex with an old man for the first time and continuing in prostitution with different men as serious offenses against her body, but she had no solution to protect the same body from abuse. One teen girl in group B stated:

'[W]e have those who come with better offers, such as US\$5, and these are the ones who want unprotected sex; I have had unprotected sex on several occasions, willingly and unwillingly.'

2.The Centre for Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS Research Zimbabwe (CeSHHAR Zimbabwe) was registered as a trust in January 2012. It was previously known as the Regai Dzive Shiri Project, which has operated in Zimbabwe since 1999; CeSHHAR Zimbabwe houses a number of HIV prevention and sexual health research and programmatic projects. In 2014, it was registered as a private voluntary organisation with the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare (CeSHHAR 2014).

I fear falling pregnant [*more*] than sexually transmitted diseases or HIV, because I will still die, but with pregnancy you will be out of business for a while after birth, and no one will take care of you. As such, I use contraceptive pills.'

One purposively selected nurse from Epworth clinic mentioned that 'these girls avoid visiting the local clinics for medical assistance because they are known. As such, they visit other locations for treatment.

Most teen sex workers in both groups agreed that they could not be employed as housemaids because most of them did not have identity documents. One informant in group B confessed that:

'[I] don't enjoy this business of prostitution, and I have never enjoyed it, but I cannot do without it because I don't have any form of identification, which has made it worse because nobody wants to employ me.'

In 2017, the Zimbabwean Parliament was concerned about child sexual exploitation in Harare and sanctioned the then Minister of Public Service, Labour and Social Services, Hon. Prisca Mupfumira, to carry out a research on the subject. In her report, Hon. Mupfumira acknowledged that the problem is a countrywide phenomenon, although she only conducted her research in Harare. Hon. Mupfumira's research confirmed that most children are sexually abused, and some had no identity documents. The possible causes of children being sexually exploited are poverty, coercion by caregivers, lack of supervision, dropping out of school, peer pressure, drug abuse, orphanhood and abandonment by parents or caregivers. Some children have resorted to performing in dance groups in beer halls, thereby further making themselves even more vulnerable (Mupfumira 2017).

An analysis of the contributions of interviewees shows that the socio-economic challenges of Zimbabwe push teen girls to compromising choices of having more money through unprotected sex and risking contracting sexually transmitted infections or remaining poor by refusing to forgo condoms. The medical interviewee from Overspill Clinic stated that although unprotected sex is a socio-economic risk, some of the teen girls are given hope to continue in the trade by taking postexposure prophylaxis (PEP) after indulging in unprotected sex to protect themselves from HIV. Postexposure prophylaxis is normally prescribed to people who have potentially been exposed to HIV, usually through rape. One interviewee from group B had this to say:

'[I]f PEP can be used by raped victims to prevent HIV infection, we can also use them after having unprotected sex. It is a treatment pill to some, but to us it is a passport to having more money.'

From the stories of the teen girls presented above, it is clear that one of the most difficult scenarios in child prostitution is the fact that it is a means for survival. Although laws protect children from sex, Mushohwe (2018) mentioned that:

It is a challenge to successfully prosecute someone because such cases rely heavily on the complaint that is the police report and the testimony of the victim who is a child. Given the socioeconomic decline in Zimbabwe, some child prostitutes do not see themselves as victims of any crime or of having been wronged in any way by anyone. Instead, they see themselves as having voluntarily entered into the sex trade as a way of income generation. (p. 15)

Mushohwe (2018:15) adds that, 'at Epworth Booster, teen girls roam the area, soliciting for potential clients as early as 6pm'. Although some teen girls are school dropouts, most of them are learners during the day and sex workers during the night, as they are driven into the sex trade by the socio-economic conditions of Zimbabwe.

In a compromising use of their bodies for a living, teen girls see their clients as invaluable to them and as such, they do not want to be seen to be scaring them away by reporting to the police. (p. 17)

Given the impact of colonial rules (Mushohwe 2018):

Child prostitutes are unwilling to make any report to the police, let alone to go on to endure the 'shame' of giving such explicit testimony in court on a subject matter that is generally viewed as taboo in society and generally abhorred in society. (p. 18)

This situation makes crimes involving child prostitution very difficult to unearth, thus making any prosecution practically impossible.

The arguments from different scholars, writers, interviewed teen girls and health personnel generally agree that women are using their bodies for unpleasurable sex because of poverty. What is disturbing is how the government is failing to find reason to chastise perpetrators of child prostitution. This negligence of vulnerable and innocent teen girls calls for re-imagination of theologies of the marginalised, women's theology being the liberative force of the abused female bodies.

An African feminist theology's response to teens selling sex: A liberative God-talk of female bodies

Religion defines the morality of a society and the regulatory mechanisms for moral behaviours. It also defines an alternative moral system regulating sexual behaviour. Although religion regulates society, teen prostitutes remain outcast in most churches. One of the reasons of their exclusion from church life is the fact that religion colonised culture so much so that it has become a major hindrance of freedom. Interviews conducted with teen girls show that while churches read the Bible as a tool of liberation where Jesus befriended prostitutes, the same churches use the Bible as a tool of oppression. The primary concern of African feminist theology is to voice their protest against such sexism, whose roots are in religion and culture (Nyengele 2004:72). It is also clear from the data presented above that the bodies of women are abused without the world hearing their screams. The victimised women have nowhere to turn to because even the

churches label them as outcasts worthy of suffering. African feminist theology challenges Christianity to revisit its Graeco-Roman world, where women flocked to Christianity because of the ways the religion gave them more dignity than the male-centric Jewish cultures (Grishan n.d.).

An African feminist rereading of the Bible demonstrates that women were at the centre of Jesus' ministry, but society pushed them away. This is the aim of African feminist theology: to create a forum that would seek to liberate African women from the oppressive structures in both the society and the religious institutions, especially the Church. Jesus praised women for their faith (cf. Mt 15:28). He also rehumanised those who were condemned by society (cf. Jn 8:1–11). The position and attitude of Jesus towards women is the starting point of African feminist theology, which aims to protect women in general and girls in particular, as they are victims of decriminalisation of prostitution in Zimbabwe. African feminist theology draws its power from Jesus' attitude towards women, as he did not only give them space but also broke the patriarchal barriers by attending to the women prostitutes (cf. Lk 7:38).

African feminist theology thrives to rebuild the lives of teen girls from the perspective of Jesus, for example, in Luke 7:36–50, where he allowed a sinful woman to wash his feet with her salty tears and later her unbound hair and expensive perfume. While the biblical account leaves out the sensational details of the woman's past, it is known she had an immoral reputation (Pokrifka 2016). It is clear from this text that even prostitutes are on God's divine plan. The church which discriminates against teen prostitutes on account of their social standing has the habit of the Pharisees in the time of Jesus, who were offended by sinners because in their view, God loved only the righteous who kept the law. The colonial church, just like the Pharisees, distances itself from the so-called 'unclean' sinners in their delusions of self-righteousness, and yet the African feminist framework repositions women as equal citizens.

In John 8:6–7, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees wanted to set a trap for Jesus so that they could humiliate him in public. They executed this plan by bringing in a woman whom they claimed was 'caught in the act of adultery' and asking Jesus whether she should be stoned in accordance with the Law of Moses. The woman was used as a pawn in a power play to discredit Jesus. Instead of giving them a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer, Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with his finger. Then Jesus stood up and said, 'Let the one among you who is without sin cast the first stone!' The focus of Jesus was not to humiliate the hypocrites but to save the woman from embarrassment, and he did this by not condemning her but instructing her to go and sin no more. According to Pokrifka (2016), Jesus did not mean that adultery is good, but it is just one of many other sins. This text, together with others, has the capacity to liberate women from a theology clothed in male chauvinist language and patriarchal dominance.

While the Bible remains a tool of oppression, African feminist theology is a tool of liberating female prostitutes in Africa. Teen girls suffer sexual abuses from men, and it is the duty of liberative African feminist theology to question whether prostitution or any exchange of sex for something of financial value, voluntarily or involuntarily, is good in whatever circumstance. Women who are prostitutes have described it as 'paid rape' and 'voluntary slavery' (Catholic Education Resource Centre 1995). This statement shows that women's prostitution constitutes sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, physical assault and verbal abuses as choices for survival. It is the role of African feminist theology to retain the lost pride of female bodies by rereading the Bible with a postcolonial eye. Wu (2001:1) argues that although prostitution is a choice, there is no justification to abuse female bodies, voluntarily or involuntarily. The African feminist reading of the Bible endeavours to relocate women in the divine plan of God – in Jesus, who never condemned women in public but radically approached his congregation who were accusing women in order to give them equal status with the so-called righteous. African feminist theology also defends female bodies from being labelled as sexual objects by challenging the communities that perpetrate prostitution.

Teen prostitutes are future leaders, future mothers and also socio-economic and religious beings of a colonially free country. Instead of exposing women to condemnation, African feminist theology advocates for the abused teen girls by entering into their colonial world of sexual exploitation and loves them not as outcasts but as human beings, equally created by God, with the right to safety. It is sad to note that prostitutes are viewed as miserable creatures who are mere masses of rottenness and vehicles of disease, while men who use prostitutes are viewed as simply indulging a 'natural impulse' (Harris 2012). African feminist theology's role is to give a future to the teen girls whose hope has been derailed, because Jesus had a space for the vulnerable people of his society. African feminist theology also challenges the church in Zimbabwe not to condemn teens who sell their bodies for a living, but rather strive to be a safe nest where the sexually used and abused women are assured the love of God. African feminist theology also calls upon the church to challenge governments not to treat their vulnerable people as subhumans; rather, they should strive to provide a safe space for them to realise their future dreams.

Conclusion

An African feminist study on prostitution at Epworth Booster is an indication of how the colonial Zimbabwean government is challenged to decolonise its own people. Teen prostitution is exacerbated by the socio-economic religious life in which teen girls find themselves. This article observed that in prostitution, men remove women's *hunhu* or *ubuntu* [dignity]. Paying a woman in prostitution gives men the power to turn their bodies into sexual objects. Prostitution compels a woman to deny her body and those qualities that define her

as an object of sexual abuse. Prostitution leads women to view themselves as things that men want them to be, and yet African feminist theology challenges the same women to defend their bodies from unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections because they are forced into unprotected sex, which they also claim is the best-paying method. Although teen girls are not prepared to risk losing clients by reporting those who sexually abuse them, African feminist theology values female bodies more than abusive partners. This article also found that the tragedy of child prostitution is that nobody – including the church – seems to care for the abuse of their bodies, and yet African feminist theology is expected to be the liberative force of female bodies. It was also discovered that although Jesus was a friend of prostitutes and social outcasts, he never left them in that condition; he liberated them from societal abuse and rejection, which is what African feminist theology aims to do, that is, to rehumanise the teen girls at Epworth Booster to leave the Booster.

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