


Musha mukadzi: An African women's religio-cultural resilience toolkit to endure pandemics

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Life among most African families and communities revolves around women. In both African religion and culture, women's lives oscillate between two opposite extremes of being at the centre and periphery at the same time. Women are both the healers and the often wounded by the system that respects them when there are problems and displaces them whenever there are opportunities. Their central role is expressed by a Shona proverb *musha mukadzi* (the home is a woman). This proverb expresses how women endure the pain of both religion and culture to create a decent society. Women also endure the pain of pandemics such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and COVID-19 and at times succumb to the same while taking care of some family members who would have fallen victim to the epidemic. Countless married women have been made susceptible to HIV and AIDS as they try to live according to the African cultural dictates of mothering and/or motherhood. Other women and girls also contract the disease because of how religion and culture exert them to some unbearable circumstances. For example, women and girls nurse their ill relatives without protective equipment and clothing. At times they are abused by men because of some cultural beliefs that unprotected sex is a remedy for HIV and AIDS. In addition, most women and girls were also victims of COVID-19 while serving their family members. In doing all the good work to serve families, women are driven by the proverb *musha mukadzi*. Using desk research methodology, this paper argues that *musha mukadzi* is both a toolkit for women's resilience to endure pandemics and at the same time a subtly oppressive statement often used to manipulate and abuse women to stand in places that are too difficult for their capabilities.

Contribution: African women bear the brunt of pandemic burdens such as HIV, AIDS and COVID-19. Sometimes they become susceptible to the same while taking care of their family members affected by pandemics in the name of fulfilling the Shona proverb, *musha mukadzi*. The topic has contributed to the scope of the journal as it advocates to inculcate a peaceful society. The article also challenges African societies not to use *musha mukadzi* to ill-treat women as objects of African religio-cultural patriarchal ideology.

Keywords: African women; *musha mukadzi*; religio-cultural; resilience toolkit; pandemics.

Introduction

Although African society is patriarchal in nature, women play a pivotal role that is also appreciated by their male counterparts. This role is expressed by an African proverb *musha mukadzi* in Shona and *umuzingumama* in IsiNdebele. This proverb is new in African scholarship as most African scholars have not taken African proverbs as worth researching. Both *musha mukadzi* and *umuzingumama* literarily mean home is a woman. The proverb shows that an African worldview is generally the same, and Africans seem to have the same epistemology. Although Africans have the same worldview, this paper will focus on the Shona worldview. This paper is grounded in Africana womanism, and it seeks to illuminate the sacrifice demonstrated by African women as they imbue the pain of different pandemics such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and COVID-19 to fulfil the demands of the society driven by the *musha mukadzi* philosophy.

The article argues that many married African women have been made susceptible to HIV and AIDS as they try to live according to the African cultural dictates that support men's promiscuity and yet compel married women to stick to one marital partner. Moreover, other women and girls also contract the disease as they nurse their relatives both male and female who would have

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been victims of the pandemic. The next section traces the background and definition of the *musha mukadzi* philosophy. This will be followed by arguing that *musha mukadzi* is not only a statement but a household name for political and social engagement. The concluding section proffers that the *musha mukadzi* philosophy is an invaluable African women's religio-cultural toolkit that they can tap into to endure the effects of pandemics but at the same time the phrase can be problematic as it is often used to oppress and manipulate women.

Background and definition of the term *musha mukadzi*

Women have two positions in the African religio-cultural society. One is central where women are the pillars of families and societies during difficult times and the other is peripheral where the same society does not appreciate the crucial roles played by women in African society. On one hand, women are healers of society while on the other, they are often wounded by the system that gives them space when there are problems and displaces them whenever there are opportunities. In centring women, the Shona people use the proverb *musha mukadzi* to express how women endure the pain of both religion and culture in an endeavour to create a decent society.

The term *musha mukadzi* candidly expresses perspectives on mothering and/or motherhood among the Shona people (Muwati, Gambahaya & Tavengwa 2011). The proverb expresses the commitment and sacrifice made by women as they endure the pain of patriarchal and male chauvinistic society to build present and future generations. The proverb evolved from both an African understanding of marriage and the challenges that women go through in these marriages. Among Africans, marriage is a highly celebrated phenomenon, and it is one of the important institutions among the Shona people as expressed in the saying *musha mukadzi* (Mashingaidze 2020:21). *Musha mukadzi* acknowledges the role of women, their tolerance, compassion, resilience, gentleness, dedication and patience in dealing with their everyday life as women. Although the marriage union brings together a man and a woman, women play a pivotal role to stabilise the partnership, and *musha mukadzi* is the philosophy that propels them to endure the challenges brought by married life.

Among the Shona people, the term *musha mukadzi* can be traced to the challenges posed by African society, particularly during the colonial era where men would go to the city to seek employment and the women remained in the rural areas responsible for the family. The mobility of men from city to city looking for employment left women (*vakadzi* plural and *mukadzi* singular) taking full responsibility for the home [*musha*], and the term *musha mukadzi* is traced from this dual role of father and mother played by women. Other than the dual and multitasking role played by women as a herd (women) tending the cattle, ploughing, gathering firewood, milking cattle and taking care of children, it is evident that some women who remained in the rural areas

ironically became empowered and enjoyed some degree of independence and decision-making authority (Nhongo 2005:vii). This empowerment role entrusted to women also demonstrated their capacity to take care of homes resulting in the use of the term *musha mukadzi*.

African women are guardians of their children's welfare and have an explicit responsibility to provide for them materially. They are the household managers, who provide food, nutrition, water, health, education, and family planning, and these household chores justify the use of the phrase *musha mukadzi* to centre women in African society. The independence that women celebrated by taking charge of *musha*, their resiliency to take charge of the family and doing the purported men's work, and their passion to keep the home also add to an understanding of the origins of the term *musha mukadzi*. Although African women were still bounded by tradition, they practically took charge of the management of the family and the rural home in the absence of their husbands. According to Nhongo (2005):

This is probably the origin of the phrase '*musha mukadzi*', a Shona adage stating that the image, prosperity, and happiness of a family depends on the presence of the woman. (p. viii)

In other words, the *musha mukadzi* concept underscores the significance of a woman in the family.

Apart from the traditional responsibility that women acquired in the absence of men, women also created forums such as women's fellowship groups, clubs, home craft and church programmes where they reinforce their central role at home by emphasising their domesticity (Ndlovu 2018:132). These coming together programmes of women presented them as forces of family cohesion, the homemaker and household managers (Chireshe 2016:119–120). The term *musha mukadzi* also expresses an African womanist thinking that seeks to create the Afro-cultural base in African minds to enable the African society to generate language in a manner that reflects African values, and these include respect for women (Ndlovu 2018:132). As an African metaphor, *musha mukadzi* created values on women that reflect the African ethos that a woman can advise even kings (Ndlovu 2018:132). The assertions raised by Ndlovu on the power of women to advise kings resonate well with the belief that African women possess the power that binds the society together, thereby qualifying the idiom *musha mukadzi*. Women bring completeness to men because, in the traditional African culture, a man cannot qualify to be categorised as a full adult in the absence of being married (Chireshe 2016:120). Women are extremely valuable in the sight of society. Not only do they bear life, but they also nurse, they cherish, they give warmth, and they care for life since all human life passes through their bodies (Hudson-Weems 2004:46).

Musha mukadzi also expresses the indispensability of women since for the Shona people, without a woman, a home ceases to be a real home. This image of a woman is empowering if the woman is given decision-making powers in keeping with

her designation as the essence of the home (Chireshe 2016:120) and not seeing her as an object. This point was buttressed by the findings of Samanga and Matiza (2020) in their study on women's resilience status in difficult situations. The study concluded that most women ascribed their endurance to the *musha mukadzi* philosophy. In emphasising *musha mukadzi* as a coping mechanism during tough times such as nursing an individual suffering from a pandemic, Samanga and Matiza shared, that 'no matter what difficulties a woman faces in the household, she must remain strong as the pillar of the home' (Samanga & Matiza 2020:211). Chipango (2018) avers that *musha mukadzi* brings a perception that when a woman is responsible and organised it helps to bring order, stability and prosperity to the home. For these reasons, Mugandani and Vermeulen (2016:7) allude that among the Shona, the homestead is talked about as something that is aligned with a woman. For instance, when referring to a homestead, the Shona often say *kwamai Tendai* [Tendai's mother's home] as opposed to *kwababa vaTendai* [Tendai's father's home]. As a result, the proverb *musha mukadzi* is even inscribed on the women's basketry and displayed in some kitchens as a wall hanger.

Hudson-Weems (2004:67) also mentions that *musha mukadzi* gives credence to the view that Shona and/or African mothers are cultural bearers as teachers and co-partners in the survival of Shona and/or African families since the home is the woman's domain. *Musha mukadzi* entails that for a home to be stable, there is a need for a woman to preside over it with the consent of her male counterpart. Among Africans, the woman stands at the centre of all the life-affirming activities and projects that sustain the family. She regulates and manages the rhythm of the home and the family, and she is free to perform her triple roles of mother, partner and breadwinner (Hudson-Weems 2004:67). Moreover, *musha mukadzi* provides women with some spaces within which they can exercise some level of control. This is regardless of the other views that have projected *musha mukadzi* as a way of domesticating women (Manyonganise 2010).

Musha mukadzi centres women to the extent that the Shona people believe that removing a woman from the home means doom for the whole household. Both young children and elders suffer serious emotional loss. This loss is defined in the context of mothers being regarded as the glue that keeps the families together, and this is expressed by the idiom *musha mukadzi*, which means the woman makes the home for both the children and the man (Dodzo & Mhloyi 2017). From the background and the definition of *musha mukadzi*, it cannot be denied that the term empowers and centres women as the anchor that holds the centre of African society. This pivotal role is not only explained but also lived as will be explicated in the next section.

***Musha mukadzi*: A household name**

As discussed earlier, the phrase *musha mukadzi* is not just an expression to show the importance of women in the Shona culture, but it is also a brand name to identify with both the wives of some key politicians and some key female politicians

in Zimbabwe. These women use *musha mukadzi* to advance their positions in marriage, philanthropic work, and their political careers either as spouses or as politicians. Grace Mugabe, wife to the late President Robert Mugabe, once boasted 'Some of you see me doing all this charity work and reckon that it is all my thinking and doing, but that is not the case. VaMugabe [Mr Mugabe] is very supportive of women because he knows that *musha mukadzi* [a woman makes a home]. He supports me in everything' (Smith 2012). In addition, Marry Mubaiwa, the former wife of the Vice President of Zimbabwe Dr Constantino Chiwenga, formed the *musha mukadzi* non-profit making organisation called Musha Mukadzi Zimbabwe Armed Forces Foundation (MZAFF), that helps wives, widows, and children of either serving or retired members of the armed forces (Rauel 2022). During the days of Mubaiwa as the patron, MZAFF aided several people including donating groceries, clothes, blankets and paying medical bills for some ailing women, and assisting selected men who were in need (Dziva 2023).

Another key politician who popularised *musha mukadzi* is the Minister of Defence and War Veterans – Oppah Muchinguri-Kashiri. Muchinguri-Kashiri used the term *musha mukadzi* to name her housing cooperative in Mutare as Musha Mukadzi Housing Cooperative to emphasise that the importance of women as centres of African society is possible only when they have decent accommodation (Whiz 2018). For Muchinguri-Kashiri, the term *musha*, without a house or a home remains a rhetorical speech. Although there were some challenges associated with the Musha Mukadzi Housing Cooperative with the City of Mutare and the Land Developers (see Chiketo 2019; New Zimbabwe 2019) (which is not part of this paper), the cooperative aimed to provide women with decent accommodation. All these examples help us in unpacking the meaning of the proverb *musha mukadzi*.

A musician Tiny Machivenyika also known as Allannah on stage, released an album titled *musha mukadzi* where she was reminding people that there is no love like a mother's love (H-Metro 2020). Machivenyika mentioned that 'we have to remember all the sacrifices those precious souls made for us by our mothers. [*Moyo wekubereka unana mai vedu*] [the maternal instinct inherent in our mothers], we can never find it from anyone' (H-Metro 2020). Another singer, Hope Masike also dedicated a song to women especially after going through the trauma of missing her mother to inspire audiences to love and respect the women in their households (Roosblad 2013).

***Musha mukadzi*: An African women's religio-cultural resilience toolkit to endure the effects of pandemics**

Religion and culture always exist in a close relationship which allows them to mutually penetrate each other. In this inter-mutual relationship, religion constitutes culture and culture constitutes religion (Beyer 2017). This symbiotic relationship is revealed in the motivation and manifestation

of cultural expression where culture expresses how humanity experience and understand religion as a fundamental way to appreciate the world (Beyer 2017). Ting et al. (2021) argue that:

[T]he relationship between religion and culture can be conceptualised using six frameworks namely religion as a part of the culture, religion constitutes culture, religion includes and transcends culture, religion is influenced by culture, religion shapes culture, and religion interacts with culture in influencing cognitions, emotions, and actions. (p. 2)

Given the seamless relationship between religion and culture, it is not possible to separate the two when discussing how pandemics have and are affecting women, and how women are enduring the effects of these epidemics.

The phrase *musha mukadzi* is the religio-cultural determinant of the African women's sacrifice to endure the pain of pandemics such as HIV and AIDS, and COVID-19 either as the affected or as the infected.

The UNAIDS 2020 report shows that globally, about 53% of the estimated number of people living with HIV (PLHIV,) are women aged 15 years and above. In sub-Saharan Africa where the majority (70.5%) of PLHIV, women ... represented 63% of HIV infections among adults aged 15 years and older ... an estimated 4200 women aged 15–24 years become infected with HIV every week and are twice likely to be living with HIV than men in sub-Saharan Africa (UNAIDS 2012a, 2013).

The statistics presented above demonstrate the pain that women must go through in the name of fulfilling the *musha mukadzi* religio-cultural expectations of society. Gray and McIntyre (2006) allude that:

HIV infection impacts the lives of young girls and women globally, with both populations being socially and biologically susceptible to HIV acquisition. The predominant mode of transmission in most parts of the world is heterosexual contact. (p. 365)

Among the Shona people, this global effect of HIV on women is propelled by the fact that women have no right to choose safe sex or are allowed to discuss their sexuality as the *musha mukadzi* philosophy teaches them to respect their husbands and to keep relationships by remaining silent on matters of sex, including sexual abuse. This silence is also promoted by gender norms that promote multiple concurrent sexual partners for men while women are expected to be monogamous and unquestioning of their partner's behaviour (Pettifor et al. 2004). *Musha mukadzi* gives women a secretive identity that causes them to endure emotional pain and yet they will be expected to be the pinnacles of family life even if they are wounded healers.

Human immunodeficiency virus has a range of negative consequences on women living with HIV and their families; and these include poor physical health, moral and psychological impact, and intimate partner violence. HIV infection propels a significant burden on women in low- and middle-income countries like Zimbabwe. The infections

often lead to severe detrimental impacts, not only on women but also on their families and communities to fight for better homes because *musha mukadzi* pushes women to exercise self-sacrifice to the point of self-pity. Given that 53% of all people living with HIV globally are female (Fauk et al. 2022), it is evident that most families are manned by women who endure their pain to teach, encourage, motivate and provide for the family because without women there is no home (without *mukadzi* there is no *musha*). Similarly, women are inclined to be religious which is why the mother's demeanour and her spirituality sets the tone for the whole homestead [*musha*]. This religious quality qualifies the *musha mukadzi* philosophy as it demonstrates the unique role played by women in their families (Chiuslekuda 2012).

The *musha mukadzi* proverb is often used to emphasise the vital role played by women, yet even in that role of family anchor, women's lives and well-being are often threatened (Manyonganise 2015). Women living with HIV encounter other difficult experiences such as enduring stigma and discrimination perpetrated by other HIV-negative people within families, communities, workplaces and healthcare settings, manifesting in various discriminatory and stigmatising attitudes and behaviours. These negative vices do not consider the crucial role that women play in the social order even if they are infected or affected by HIV to fulfil their role as women (Nhongo 2005; Rehle et al. 2010) as instilled by the *musha mukadzi* philosophy. Amid all the stigma and discrimination, women are often expected to continue upholding the moral traditions of their societies while feeling sorry for themselves because being HIV-positive is usually considered as evidence that the infected women have failed to observe sexual purity.

Although sub-Saharan Africa is a male-dominated society, women in this part of Africa continue to bear the effects of the epidemics with the percentage of infected young women being much higher in comparison to their male counterparts. Men are regarded as the heads of the families, decision-makers, and the ones who control resources and finances, while women are expected to respect their husbands, accept polygamous relationships, and fulfil family and community tasks (United Nations 2012b). Such cultures include the Shona culture whereby the *musha mukadzi* philosophy is also used as a tool to pacify women and further push them to accept themselves as second-class citizens who survive at the mercy of their male counterparts. The cultural expectations imbued in dominant masculinities socialise men to assume the patriarchal attitude that wives and daughters are to be treated as men's possessions, and most husbands expect or demand their conjugal 'rights' (UNAIDS 2012b). When such acts of forcing love are happening, any resistance tendered by women is seen as a problem because women are regarded as culturally obliged to take care of the family as stipulated by the *musha mukadzi* philosophy.

The payment of bride price (*lobola*) is often used as a ploy for treating women as objects, 'owned' by their husbands. Because of the often insanely exorbitant cost of *lobola*, many

men in relationships are unable to 'pay' for the woman they would like to marry, resulting in some men moving from one relationship to another, leaving the woman (more likely with his children) to economically fend for herself and the children. Although such women feel the pain of a deserted husband, society consoles them with the statement, *garira vana vako, musha mukadzi* [stay for the sake of safeguarding your children's welfare, the home only becomes complete because of the woman's presence]. In health and in sickness during pandemics, women remain loyal carrying the husband's name and staying among her relatives in the spirit of *musha mukadzi*. The problem of spreading HIV comes when women look for other partners resulting in a complex web of cultural practice and multiple partnerships placing both men and women at a high risk of HIV infection (Mfecane 2008).

A multitude of factors increase women's vulnerability to HIV infection, including, biological, behavioural, socioeconomic, cultural, and structural risks (Ramjee & Daniels 2013). The socioeconomic, cultural, and structural risks are defined by the African patriarchal society that treats women as appendages of men who should always act on the instruction of men. The belittling of women results in an increase in HIV infection rates among women and girls. HIV diagnosis among women or mothers also causes negative outcomes for the education and well-being of their children and child-mother separation or child-parent conflict which can have an extremely detrimental effect on the children's mental health (Ramjee & Wand 2013). Children also suffer from mental health because, in many African countries, young girls are encouraged or forced to marry older men which can make young girls vulnerable to HIV infection in several ways (Samuels, Blake & Akinrimisi 2012). The major justification for forced marriage is for young women to provide decency in the homes they are married on the pretext of *musha mukadzi*. The change from virginity to frequent unprotected sex increases the risk of HIV infection for girls (Mujinga 2022). The *musha mukadzi* philosophy further exposes the women's risk of HIV infection because among the Shona people, like in most African societies, the real fruit of marriage is childbearing, and this is only possible through engaging in unprotected sex. What makes *musha mukadzi* prone to propelling women to endure the pain of HIV is that among the Africans, all sex in a marriage is normal sex and there is no room for marital rape as culture treats a woman as a sexual object on the pretext of paying lobola.

Apart from marriages, poverty also exacerbates the effects of HIV as some women are forced to get married because of different Shona cultural demands (Mujinga 2020). The UNAIDS (2012b) confirmed that poverty has also led to the serious transmission of HIV to women. This international body also cited low-income status coupled with lower condom use. The two factors are also propelled by *musha mukadzi* because most domestic work in the African setup is done by women as men will be spending time with friends or at work. Without appreciating the hard work that his wife would have been doing the whole day, the husband demands

sexual rights, and the African culture does not allow the wife to refuse these conjugal demands. If she declines, the husband might suspect that she is cheating on him with other men, resulting in intimate partner violence. Young people growing up in poor conditions have limited access to education, resultantly jeopardising their prospects. Furthermore, sex becomes a way for passing the time because of a lack of recreational facilities (Mujinga 2022).

Human immunodeficiency virus prevalence is also exacerbated by the Shona cultural belief that girls are born to be married while boys are born to be business people. These socialisation roles are evident when two children, a boy and a girl, are growing together. Emphasis is put on marriage life for the girls and whatever mistake they make at whatever age is regarded as reflective of a poorly performing future mother who would fail to take proper care of *musha* [home]. Even with this patriarchal dominance, it is interesting to note that a husband among the Shona, when he is at home with the children, if a passerby enquires, '*pane vanhu here?*' [are there people here?], his usual answer would be, '*hapana, amai havapo*' [there are no people here, my wife is not around]. Such a discourse is a clear indication that *musha mukadzi* and women are the people.

Apart from causing untold suffering to women through the pain of contracting HIV, the *musha mukadzi* philosophy has also exacerbated women's vulnerability to the effects of COVID-19. One of the reasons for these casualties is that all the difficult experiences endured by women are compounded on *musha mukadzi* as both religion and culture compel women to face pandemics head on, in a bid to prove the fact that women are the anchors of the family's life. Zembala-John (2021) confirmed that COVID-19 affected all aspects of life for men and women. However, women were hit the hardest by the pandemic. The study by Zembala-John found that 51.8% of women affected by COVID-19 experienced high stress – 76.4% had mental well-being affected, 55.9% mentioned physical effects, 30.2% decried that their family relations were worsened, and 40.5% mentioned their relationship with friends deteriorated in comparison to pre-COVID time. In 78.5% of cases, a sense of security was worsened as compared to before the pandemic (Zembala-John 2021). With these statistics, Zembala-John concluded that COVID-19 had an intense impact on women's lives particularly their health and wellbeing changed their health behaviours. Most women had to endure the trauma because they could not run away from their ailing husbands or family members since society expects them to nurse the ailing relatives. Goldin (2022) adds that more mothers and other women who were caregivers during the peak of COVID-19 were stressed and frustrated because they did not leave their jobs of their own volition; they were forced to exit the workforce or cut back their working hours to take care of their relatives. Most people who researched the impact of COVID-19 generally agree that across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 were exacerbated for women and girls simply by their gender which exerts religio-cultural responsibilities that do not respect women's

health rights. COVID-2019 also led to less defined domestic roles and responsibilities, leading to a redefinition of the boundaries between home and work. More work was done at home, but the demands of sanitisation, fumigation, and face masking forced some women to be victims of the pandemic as they were nursing their sick relatives.

The pandemic also led to a horrifying increase in violence against women because COVID-19 forcefully caged men, women and children together during lockdowns. The UNAIDS (2020) report confirmed that nearly one in five women worldwide experienced violence in 2019 as many of these women were now trapped at home with their abusers, struggling to access services because of lockdown restrictions. The UNAIDS report also confirmed that the human development crisis unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic was putting the fight for gender equality at risk. The immediate effects of the pandemic were manifested in different dimensions, from health and education to the burden of unpaid care work and gender-based violence (UNAIDS 2020). Hsu et al. (2020) also concurred with the UNAIDS report, stating that while the COVID-19 crisis affected everyone, women and girls face specific additional risks because of deeply entrenched inequalities, social norms and unequal power relations. These social inequalities are caused by the Shona philosophy of *musha mukadzi* which treats women as the centre of the home only for the benefit of their families. With the closure of schools and pre-schools, women with children were faced with a sudden increase in childcare responsibilities and household labour. These urgent household chores were made possible by taking care of the family victims who were victims of COVID-19 as women.

The COVID-19 pandemic further caused dilemmas for the most vulnerable populations around the world. Mandatory lockdowns and movement restrictions created negative implications for women's attainment of economic, social, cultural, political and civil rights, and intensified pre-existing gender inequalities between women and men (Mwenyango 2022). These inequalities are created by a society that is not perturbed by seeing women at risk but is only concerned about what they can do as expected by the society, to nurse the ill and forget about their wellbeing because *musha mukadzi* and no one else can take such risk besides a woman.

Conclusion

Although it is evident that *musha mukadzi* is a religio-cultural toolkit for women to endure the effects of pandemics, the concept is also a weapon for abusing women especially if they are left to deal with family problems singlehandedly. This point was also buttressed by Ndlovu (2018:132), who argues that *musha mukadzi* is a metaphor that expresses the objectification of women as gifts that can be given to men as chickens, and to others they have to submit to the idea that they are inferior and that men need to be satisfied by many women.

The pain that women go through in the name of *musha mukadzi* was buttressed by Marry Mubaiwa who commented on her Facebook account saying that as a woman sometimes you have to soldier on, there are a lot of things that we go through in the name of *musha mukadzi*, we suffer abuse from violent men *zvichinzi* [as it is said] *musha mukadzi* or *kugarira vana* [staying for children]. (Mubaiwa Facebook 20 August 2020)

The other reason that makes the *musha mukadzi* philosophy a tool for oppressing women is the fact that in Zimbabwe in particular, the experiences of religion and culture, tend to privilege men and understate the value of women (Chitando, Chirongoma & Manyonganise 2022). Some men place value on women only when they have been taking religio-cultural responsibilities that give men credence at the expense of the suffering women.

As in most African societies, the Shona woman remains under the control of her husband who is the household manager to the extent that she cannot make independent decisions about the household although she is expected to bear household burdens, including offering support to the victims of the pandemics. Women, who are supposed to have influential and supportive voices in the family remain at the centre of the problems because religion and culture have positioned them as helpers only. For example, the common adage, 'for every successful man, there is a woman behind', demonstrates that men cannot succeed without the support of women, and yet African society rarely celebrates women as anchors of wisdom and ideas. The women's role in African societies remains in the peripheries of the African religio-cultural settings that have not been beneficial places for women besides the priceless token of *musha mukadzi*.

From biblical times, women have always been viewed as an afterthought, and yet their role in any culture demonstrates that they are the anchors of society. Unfortunately, they are always the first to suffer displacement when problems turn out to be opportunities. Instead of empowering, *musha mukadzi* also functions as a disempowering tool that relegates women as it purports to give them power while taking it away with the other hand. In many instances, the wife remains a 'stooge' of her husband whereas her husband's leadership will continue on the hegemonic trajectory.

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