

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Crossing the gender line in Zimbabwe

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Dear Peter:

A university professor told me a story about a trip he took with a Zimbabwean couple. The wife is an accountant working in Harare; the husband, an assistant manager for a big company. Yet when the three went to visit the husband's relatives in the rural area, the woman became a virtual servant to the men. Regardless of education or employment, the difference in sex split up the urban, professional couple from the moment they reached the family's ancestral home of thatched huts and tin-roofed shacks.

Within 15 minutes of getting out of the car, the wife began chopping wood. Then she started a fire and fetched water from a well. Her expected chores -- woman's work -- began shortly after the visitors arrived at 2 p.m. and lasted until 9 p.m. The next morning, the female accountant was up before everyone else to heat water for the men's bathing and to make breakfast porridge.

The sympathetic professor offered help. She became furious: "You want me to be blamed?" she snapped. "You're not supposed to do this work: you're a man!" Later, when she had time to talk, she explained that she didn't want to displease her husband's father. Which one is he? asked the professor. He died last year, she said, but his spirit still hovers, watching how she behaves.

Transgressing the customary African social order can incur the wrath of the **mudzimu** or ancestral spirits, which are just as integral a part of traditional Zimbabwean families as grandparents and grandchildren. There's a gender line in Zimbabwe that both men and women have trouble crossing in their everyday relationships at home and at the work place, in the village or in the city. Tradition demarcates that line. That's a word that I constantly hear these days whenever people discuss issues related to women. Many people see the new ideas of women's equality as a threat to Zimbabwean traditions. Wife-beating, infidelity and rape -- wrongs that were condemned not so many years ago as untraditional -- are justified now by men who use the hard-to-challenge argument that such acts are indeed African customs.

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It's not just older or rural people who use tradition as a club to cudgel women into submission. Many who make that appeal to tradition to control woman's behavior are urban men with college degrees. In one incident, about 100 so-called progressive students at the Harare university campus attacked a woman they claimed was violating Zimbabwean cultural standards by her dress.

The 23-year-old woman was walking on campus with another woman headed for a taxi after visiting a friend at the university. Her red miniskirt attracted catcalls, and soon a pack of male students gave chase, whistling and shouting obscenities. The pair sprinted to a taxi and climbed inside, but the mob dragged the woman out and stripped off her miniskirt.

Three days later, about twenty women at the University of Zimbabwe organized a march to protest the attack. They wore miniskirts, low-cut dresses and high heels. The marchers, however, could hardly be seen because of all the men mobbing their group. "All we are saying is give us our rights," they sang, as they held hands and walked through the jeering crowd. Some men among the swarm claimed to be upholding traditional African culture. "Wearing those miniskirts goes against our moral standards," one male student said. And another: "This is not Hollywood, this is Zimbabwe." A few men were there to support the protesting women by echoing their cries that everybody has the right to dress how they want, and by fending off the more aggressive male antagonists in the crowd. "Who are we to dictate how these girls dress?" Modumehlezi Modlodlongwane asked. "There are many traditional laws we have refused to accept." He said the "hooligans" involved in the original attack are not representative of all the male students on the campus. Perhaps not all students feel that way, but most Zimbabwean men do.

Letter to the editor of Horizon Magazine March 1993

Sir -- Commentators debating the issues surrounding the "stripping" naked of that girl at the University have missed an important point regarding our moral values. A license for prostitution is being given to our girls in the very fabric of our constitutional (or is it human) rights to wear as one sees fit. With clothes that know no decent measurement, we are going to wake up one day with girls strolling naked down our main streets. And who will blame the rapist then, unless it is a plot to net and jail all men as they rush to glimpse a naked girl and in the process try to satisfy their sexual desires? Human rights organizations owe posterity an explanation for condoning our sister's dressing habits.

...The West must be choking with laughter. With our politicians manipulating women, so common in Africa, the press seems to have joined in, defending what degrades human dignity. Posterity will spend God knows how long, researching how things used to be before the advent of the guardians of women's delusions.

-- Leonard Murwisi, Mhondoro

Letter to the editor of Parade Magazine, January 1993

With reference to Everjoice Win's Women's Parade column which comes out every month, I would like to make it quite clear to her in case she doesn't know, that women have no other place on earth except in the bedroom.

In some cases they can have a say in the kitchen, but when it comes to business, it is a sphere for men. Please Everjoice, be advised that women have no business outside the bedroom. I see little chance of success in your campaign for what you call 'women's rights.' One wonders what kind of rights the women need.

Or do you want us to exchange rights? Maybe you want us to have the same privileges, as evidenced by (women) wearing trousers and shorts? Have you ever seen a man putting on a miniskirt? You sure are attempting the impossible.

...Myself, at 22, single and happily employed, I regard women as instruments for pleasure. They are there to keep us refreshed and give us hope to live. We want them around so that they do exactly as we tell them.

That explains why it is the male who has to pay lobola and not both (the man and woman). That has also in it, the reason why all prostitutes have more say than any other class of women. Think before you leap, Everjoice.

-- Proud Piwayi Dzuda, Harare.

Women fall into only three categories here. A woman is either a virgin, a wife or a prostitute. The common male view is that a woman's sexuality is like a firecracker: once ignited, she can't be trusted to control her desires. A virgin has yet to be sexually awakened, a wife's libido is constrained by marriage, and a prostitute is a woman out of control. A bachelor attending a teachers' college said that marrying a non-virgin would be like paying lobola for a damaged woman. Lobola is the tradition of paying for a bride by giving her family cattle or money. "And you would be left with doubts as to whether she would stop her ways of going about with men," the man said. Another young student commented: "It is vital that girls preserve their virginity to bring joy and lasting trust to whoever will marry that lady." Most men contend modern culture has "corrupted" women who lose their virginity before marriage, as if only women are vulnerable to "losing their culture" and "corruption." The words culture and tradition carry as much authority as scripture quoted from the Bible.

A well-known women's activist, Everjoice Win, sometimes despairs that her society may never change. She tells how she worked for three years for a women's organization, where she spent

whole days having marvelous conversations with rural women about the anger and misery they seldom express aloud. Together, she and a group of women would talk about what needed to change in order for them to take control of their lives. At the end of day, however, one of the women would say, "But that is our culture." Then the group would sigh in unison and go home. "The whole program dissolved at that point and I wouldn't know where to begin the next morning," Win said. "In our society, the word

tradition has been used to stop people. It's very disturbing."

Incidents like the miniskirt attack and other acts of hostility against women who adopt Western conventions often epitomize the sentiments of both men and women in Zimbabwe. For example, a controversy continues about two ground-breaking laws passed by the government in the 1980s to entrench rights for women. One, the Legal Age of Majority Act, established 18 as the legal age when a person can vote, sue, enter into legal contracts and marry without parental consent. Before the passage of the act in 1982, black men and whites of either sex were considered adults at the age of 21, but black women were excluded. Consequently, they had been considered legal minors throughout their lives. There are stories of young, single women who had money and could buy a house, but were forced to have an uncle, often illiterate, put his X mark on the property deed.

While the act emancipated black women for the first time, it was largely unwelcome. People perceive it to be inimical to African culture because a woman who is 18 years old can exercise her right to freely marry. Many parents think the law tells their children over 18 to do whatever they want and that it encourages daughters to marry without their suitors paying *lobola*. The positive aspects of the law have never been explained to most of the public, who contend its provisions promote immorality and contentious independence by "children." At the root of the problem may be men's fears of getting nothing if a child marries without parental consent because it is the men who are the main recipients of the money and goods paid for their daughter.

The Maintenance Act of 1987 is also still drawing the fire of both men and women because it forces men who make women pregnant outside of marriage to pay child support. The act tried to solve a widespread problem that condemned thousands of unmarried mothers to raise children without adequate financial means. Yet many women remain opposed to the Maintenance Act, saying it encourages women to have babies out of wedlock so they can profit economically from the maintenance payments. Women, as well as men, argue that the act makes women too independent and encourages prostitution. A few women recognize positive results, such as an older woman from the town of Goromonzi. "The Maintenance Act is good because this has discouraged men from spoiling our daughters and then dumping them without marrying them," she said. But most women insist the act breeds promiscuity, and many of those who are married oppose the law because it channels their wayward husbands' income elsewhere.

Even the then-minister of community development and women's affairs, Taurai Ropa Nhongo, publicly attacked the Maintenance Act in the years following its enactment because "women are going out of their way to have children to get money." The story of her retrogression from a women's leader to an apologist for male

domination illustrates the lack of unity among women in Zimbabwe. When I interviewed Nhongo more than 10 years ago, during my first stay in Zimbabwe, she wore blue jeans and colorful African prints, even to her office at the ministry. She had earned her **nom de guerre** as a freedom fighter in the struggle for Zimbabwe's independence. **Taurai ropa** means "spill blood" in the local Shona language. People say she was the first woman to shoot down a helicopter of the Southern Rhodesian government. In our 1982 interview, she told how men and women had fought side-by-side and shouldn't be divided in the new nation by Western ideas, like feminism. "Men realized women deserved what we were asking -- laws giving women the same rights as men," she said. Nhongo believed education, not confrontation, should be a priority in the women's struggle for rights.

In present-day Zimbabwe, women's affairs has been split off into its own department and significantly scaled down. Once it had ministerial status and a large budget, but now it's a tiny office under the president's auspices. The idealistic young women who once worked there have all left, feeling betrayed by how Nhongo waffled on important issues like the Maintenance Act. The department has virtually disappeared from public view and is staffed by a lethargic group of ruling-party hangers-on. Nhongo herself left, accepting a ceremonial position as governor

Letter to the editor of the Daily Gazette,
February 9, 1993:

I know some critics will accuse me of being an obscurantist, male chauvinist or sexist, call it anything, but I wish to express my own perspective on this monster called equal or women's rights.

I am among a host of people who have not supported bestowal of any right at all to women besides what our tradition accepts, even if some impostors think it just because they have their own ulterior motives.

Many people have welcomed the introduction of the "Maintenance Act" whose impropriety -- instead of proving its efficiency by endeavoring to bring a just society, trying to respect women, giving them equal opportunities and considerations at work -- has bred chaos and a society devoid of its upright cultural values.

This makes the whole Act repugnant in that it has, inter alia, in trying to copy the Western culture, debauched women to the extent of misbehaving under the guise of equal rights, resulted in many divorces

This has resulted in women becoming unfaithful, engaging in extramarital affairs, boldly departing from our traditional norms and values which make a wife a legal property of a man knowing very well that they are protected.

As a result, many single-parent households have been established. Their only decent means of survival is prostitution hence the spread of the much dreaded Aids, many common HIV-related deaths and high infant mortality and lack of reverence for husbands.

I am, therefore, of the opinion that our forefathers were right when they confined women to their homes in which limited tasks like fetching water, firewood and preparing food, ploughing in the fields and child bearing, were left for them despite capabilities in other areas. All matters of decision making were left for men only

This makes me conclude that unless the "Maintenance Act" is repealed, women will continue dominating. People should stop talking about rights, women should be discriminated against in all menial work except in limited areas which suit their capabilities. While this seems impractical in this country, however, it will achieve the following: a stable society, successful marriage, society nearly free from prostitution and a society that recognizes men as head of families. -- Pee Zet, Dzivaresekwa, Harare.

of an eastern province. She changed her name to Joyce and remains married to the former commander of the Zimbabwe National Army, who has since become a rich capitalist. In public, she wears only conservative, long dresses now. And she ignores my repeated requests for an interview about women's rights.

Ironically, women activists acknowledge that the father of women's legal rights in Zimbabwe is a powerful male statesman, Eddison Zvobgo. It was he who pushed the legislation through against the entrenched opposition of his fellow male politicians. Some women activists say he acted from a deep-seated sympathy for women and outrage against injustice. Indeed, after the Legal Age of Majority Act's rocky passage, Zvobgo said: "Our government does not need to be persuaded of the need to bring about the full equality of women with men. We have an interest in this that not only is born out of the war experience, but out of self-interest." Others criticize him for drafting and promoting laws on behalf of women without consulting women themselves. But a few who promote equal rights in Zimbabwe say they realize wider public scrutiny may have doomed the "anti-cultural legislation."

Those same few and other activists have rallied to defend these laws against determined efforts to repeal them. And they continue working to change Zimbabwean society. The idealistic women who worked at the defunct Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs scattered to start their own organizations. One group counsels battered women. Another lobbies for changes in other laws to further women's rights. A third organization tries to draw media attention to conspicuous cases in which women are victimized, such as the frequent prostitute sweeps conducted by police. Any woman who is out alone at night can be picked up on suspicion of being a prostitute, so such sweeps have resulted in hundreds of innocent women spending a night in jail simply for lacking a male escort. Such discrimination has become less common because these activists organize protest marches, legal rights teach-ins and letter campaigns to newspapers. Women have persisted in their agitation in the face of males' slanders voiced in the media and even in parliament. As a result, some politicians and development aid groups are beginning to take women's issues seriously. And because of these few activists, more women are publicly discussing issues they once never dared to express. This new

HUMAN RIGHTS ARE FOR WOMEN TOO!
Women are not asking for something unnatural when they ask for Human Rights. Women are human beings, too, and are entitled to the rights of human beings. A WOMAN IS NOT LESS THAN A MAN. Women are as necessary and important to the world as men. Most of the food in Africa is produced by women. IT IS NOT A CRIME TO BE A WOMAN! Women are harassed, beaten, intimidated and insulted as if to be female is to be guilty of an offence. It is as normal to be female as it is to be male. --- Women's Action Group pamphlet distributed in Harare.

language of dissent can be heard in plays, poems and skits performed by women who are exhilarated at their newly found freedom to question old roles. At one conference, the tile floor outside a university lecture hall became a simple stage upon which the women gathered in a circle, intent on several performers acting out the once secret pain of their childhoods:

A young girl in the rural areas is led by the arm and made to sit with older women. They begin to lecture her on how to please a man. For this girl, coming of age will mean thick scars from incisions carved on her stomach and inner thighs to enhance her beauty for a future husband. In private, the older girls later begin the process of repeatedly pulling on her outer labia, elongating them into "ribbons," again as a means to give pleasure to the man she will one day marry. Her cousin in town is continuing her education in hope of becoming a secretary, while the rural girl studies her sexual curriculum on how she can please her husband and thereby prevent other women from stealing him. Loud applause ends the sad scenario as the all-woman theater troupe finishes the skit. The leader felt the need to explain. "Please don't get us wrong: we don't say our culture is wrong, but we want to show what women must reckon with in Zimbabwe," she said. "I've heard people say that Zimbabwean women are so unassertive, but they don't know what we have had to go through."

As more skits and poems were performed and discussions ensued, the theme became pronounced: traditional expectations by both men and women is an oppressive force. In another drama, a young woman who is a company executive arrives home only to be brusquely bossed by her sister-in-law, who traditionally has the right to throw her weight around in her brother's marriage. Afterward, one of the actors asked, "Who is the enemy in this case? It's another woman. This shows how women are playing a role in oppressing each other." An older woman read a poem, first in Shona and then English. I scribbled down part of the translation:

"Who cooks good things for other women's husbands?
 (i.e. having an affair with him) A woman.
 Who makes it hard on our children (while minding
 them) when we go to work? A woman.
 Who says at the work place that they don't want to
 be led by a woman? Other women."

The view that women stand in the way of their sisters' liberation is a common one. This is a reality dividing Zimbabwean women that arises, in part, because so many men here practice infidelity. Women are dependent on husbands for economic survival while the men lavish money on mistresses. Complete autonomy, an option for middle-class American women, would mean poverty for most Zimbabwean women who alienate their men and must leave home. Society does not condone such an option, either. A divorced woman suffers a precipitous fall in social status and is often labelled

a prostitute. Why else would her man kick her out? Even family members oppose a woman who tries to go it alone because they often end up having to support her and her children. The parents might even have to refund some of the lobola. And when couples split up, a man often takes the children away. Under customary law, a woman has no right to keep her children. Even under the general law created by Europeans, women frequently lose the custody battle because their former spouses can better provide for the children financially. Some never even try to fight for custody, knowing that their children's future could be bleak without a man's income to pay for school fees and medical bills.

Even in this oppressive climate, young Zimbabwean women balk at the word "feminism." Rather than representing a progressive force that might give them equal standing with men, women equate feminism with a hatred of men and separatism. The often distorted images of the women's movement in the United States have become entrenched in Zimbabwe. Misogynist slanders of American sexism can be heard from the mouths of Africans across the continent.

One afternoon, after listening to a group of women in a rousing discussion about how to challenge male oppression, my head was buzzing with ideas and opinions. I left the meeting excited about what I'd heard and struck up a conversation with a young man selling newspapers. I told him I'd just heard that most Zimbabwean women are not happily married. What did he think? "Ah, these women are liars! They like how they have it," he scoffed. So women here aren't oppressed? "No, they like to think they are foreign women, not Zimbabwean women, but in our culture the man is the boss. There has to be a boss and that's the man."

A woman about the same age as the vendor scowled at us. "There aren't many happy marriages in Zimbabwe because of infidelity," she said. "Men may marry one woman, but they go out with three or four more. It's our traditional culture of polygamy, where men used to have many wives. And now they still want many women." So would she call herself a feminist? Shock registered on her face. "Of course not!" she said. "Men don't want to listen to women, it's true. But I think women have their own jobs to do and men have their jobs, too. I would not ask a man to cook or clean or change a nappy. They will pay lobola for me, so they will have paid for my work in the house."

But just as there are a few women challenging the gender line, some men are doing so as well. The common American saying: "Behind every man, there's a strong woman," occasionally can be reversed in Zimbabwe. Find a confident and ambitious woman and sometimes you'll find an open-minded husband in the background. Some men are crossing that line in household chores because they are less willing to accept old definitions of what constitutes "men's work" and "women's work." The American feminist Gloria Steinem once said: "Perhaps the psychic leap of 20 years ago,

women can do what men can do, must now be followed by, men can do what women can do." This leap is rare, but surprisingly, it is being made in this transforming African society.

In the traditional Zimbabwean village, the men did the heavy work of clearing fields, plowing with a team of oxen, hunting and protecting the family against invaders. The women weeded fields, threshed the grain, processed it into cereal and did routine tasks of collecting firewood and wild foods, gardening, cooking, brewing beer, and making things in an endless round of chores. Times changed and under colonial rule both wildlife and wars diminished, while many men had to migrate to cities for work. When home, men spent much of their time drinking beer. This inequitable division of labor has remained in both rural and urban Africa. In the absence of oxen and fields, urban Zimbabwean men do no domestic labor, leaving all family work to women. However, a small but growing number of men cook meals while their wives are at work, clean up the house, and even change their childrens' diapers. True, a few told me they close the drapes or lock the door so others won't ever catch them in the act of doing "women's work." But as roles begin to change for young Zimbabweans, I believe there's a point when they can't revert back.

An important debate within the women's movement of Zimbabwe concerns the role of these few progressive-minded male supporters. The arguments are similar to historical disputes within revolutionary movements in other countries and other eras about the role of outside sympathizers. Should intellectuals help lead a workers' socialist revolution? Do white Americans belong in a black civil rights movement? And in a similar controversy, closer to Zimbabwe, the two main liberation

From Parade Magazine, March 1993: 'Media Spinsters: Female reporters speak on why they can't get married'

...Ropafadzo Mapimhidze, a journalist with Kwayedza, said she has also observed that many female journalists were single mothers and that the blame lay with men most of whom, she said, felt uncomfortable with women whose jobs involved meeting strangers at odd times...

"Most men do not want challenging women. Women who often meet top men during interviews and sometimes come home later after assignments present unwelcome challenges to their men, who themselves cannot mingle with big people in society. Our men will always be suspicious and develop the tendency to spy on us

A reporter with The Daily Gazette thought the problem was with men and the demands of the journalistic profession. "As journalists we need a lot of freedom to be able to work effectively, but there just aren't many men who are prepared to give us the necessary freedom

"Another factor is that most men accuse us of being arrogant and stubborn just because we are aware of our rights and stand our ground. Our men do not want to be challenged by women. What we need are liberal men who do not get offended when, for example, they see us being greeted by men of high social status."

the two main liberation

groups in South Africa still clash on the proper role, if any, of white supporters. The African National Congress welcomes whites into the ranks of the fight for a multiracial society. The Pan Africanist Congress, on the other hand, rejects whites joining in the revolutionary struggle because "blacks must liberate blacks, since oppressors cannot liberate the oppressed."

In Zimbabwe's similar dilemma, some argue that women need space away from men to understand their own oppression and to forge unity among themselves. One of those spaces is at the Zimbabwe Women's Resource Center. Hope Chigudu, a former research officer under Nhongo, and three other colleagues founded the center that serves as a network for women activists and researchers. Chigudu said there are so few supporters, however, that it's difficult to get enough people together to plan an agenda for a women's movement. She said the first priority is to help women understand how they internalize male oppression; the second, to unite them. Chigudu and others believe even the first has yet to be accomplished and that men can only join women in changing Zimbabwe's culture after the attainment of both goals.

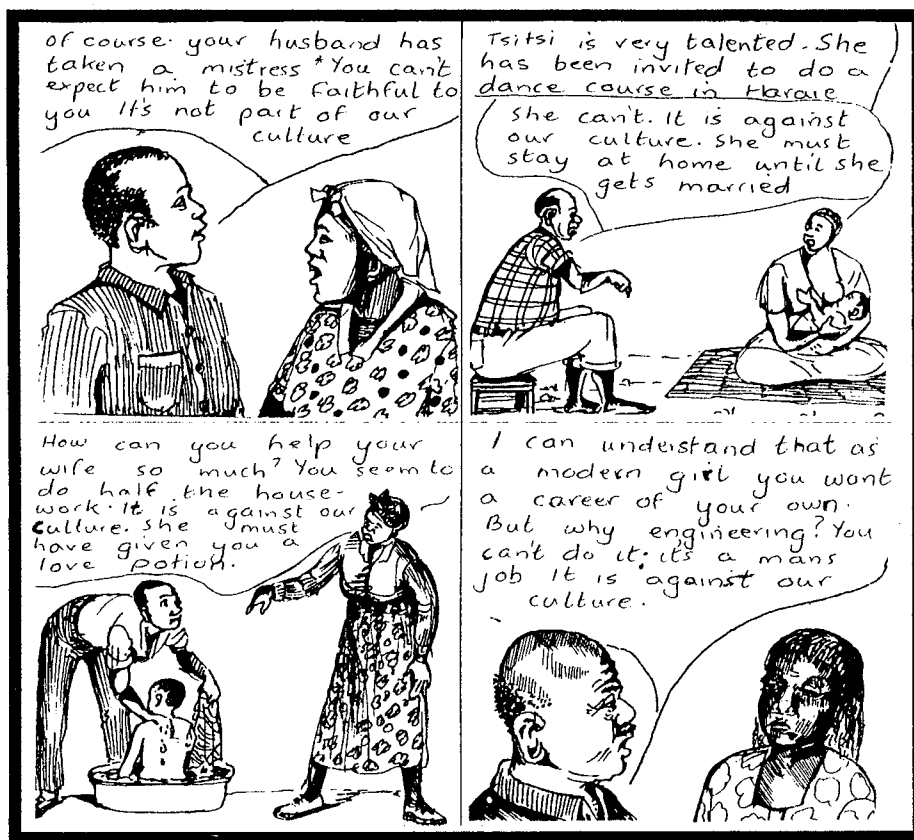
If a woman is born into an oppressive society and then grew up surrounded by that ideology, then she must now go through a process of seeing how she has accepted that oppression, Chigudu said. Without that self-realization, a woman can't work together with a man until she is strong enough and secure enough in her ego to remain uninfluenced by what a man may say. Men find it difficult to fight for women's rights without a personal understanding of their pain, Chigudu said. She compared it to a friend sympathizing with your agony when you are wearing tightly pinching shoes. "Men can come and support us, but finally -- in the end -- the pinch, that pinch of the shoe, is felt by us women. Only if your own shoes pinch can you understand those feelings." Many Western feminists advocate this view. That is why men are often excluded from "Take Back The Night" marches or women's seminars in the United States. Women leaders worry about male domination of discussion and how a man's presence could prevent unguarded exchanges and obstruct woman-to-woman bonding.

These worries appear to be borne out in experience. A West German development worker told me the story of the first handicraft workshop held in the countryside of Zimbabwe's Weya communal area. She had intended to teach an all-woman group, but community leaders strongly opposed the exclusion of men. So enrollment was open to all who came to the initial class. On the first morning, about 10 older women and three or four young men attended. The introductory exercise consisted of drawing an animal. The women felt shamed, for they even needed help to correctly hold the paintbrushes. Yet the art instructor marvelled at their pictures. The women painted chickens, cows and goats in exacting detail because they know every crease, claw, bend and curve as a result of a lifetime of household toil. The men, on

the other hand, confidently drew wild pictures of hunters with guns and sable and lion torn by bullets, leaping into the air in their dying agony. None of them had seen a living sable or lion, yet they boldly drew their preconceived notions. At the next meeting, none of the old women returned because they felt overpowered by the arrogant, belittling attitude of the men. The art teacher held more workshops later, but for women only.

There are other women, however, who are trying to involve men in the struggle to improve the family relationships between men and women. By educating men about women's suffering, these women hope to provoke an enlightened awareness among men. Men are not sadists by nature, they say. How could any human inflict such cruelty except in ignorance? Colonialism devastated African family life by sending men away as migrant laborers to the cities of Southern Rhodesia and the mines of South Africa. African women were forced to raise children by themselves in the rural Tribal Trust Lands. Why continue to foster that deep schism in society? they ask. Any effort to improve relationships between men and women should try to reconcile and reintegrate family life, not drive deeper wedges between them, these female leaders say. A founder of the most vocal organization, the Women's Action Group, uses a metaphor of survivors in a shipwreck. "The men are in the lifeboat and the women are in the water," she said. "Everyone says women have to liberate themselves, but if you're in the water then you've got to have a hand in. The men at least have to make room for the women, and we don't want to polarize society by creating another lifeboat full of women only."

Perhaps one of the boldest step in this direction will come with the distribution of a seven-volume book, "Building Whole Communities: An introduction to Women in Development." This isn't a book for university students, though God knows they need to read it. More than 2,000 people -- predominantly women -- from villages around the country participated in its making. They contributed poems, stories, songs and ideas to the book and democratically shaped its final form. A team of five people compiled each chapter after testing drafts at workshops held in those same villages during the two-year writing period. It's a simply written book, full of cartoons and pictures, explaining the importance of women in development. The book's sponsors at the Community Publishing Programme intend it to help change the negative attitudes of both sexes toward women. The topics include economics; education; culture and tradition and their impact on women; legal and political issues; and women with special needs, such as prostitutes, the elderly and the disabled. Members of the production team say that their encouragement of mixed groups to participate made the discussions livelier and gave a broader perspective of what makes a "whole community." At the book-launching ceremony, skit performers portrayed resourceful and hard-working rural women oppressed by husbands who squander the families' meager earnings. The moral of the story became apparent



From Building Whole Communities, Volume Four.

when the converted, ideal husband helped with household chores, fetched water and tended the garden. Everyone has more money and happiness when men and women work as equal partners. In the audience, an unimpressed senior politician commented afterward that such a conversion isn't realistic. "You would not expect to find the Shona men doing that," he said. "Yes, the struggle must continue, but with men of a younger generation." And it is.

Gender-sensitive men do exist in this country, such as the Zimbabwean university professor mentioned at the start of this essay. But they are few -- and lonely. Friends rarely understand why any man would refuse to spend hours drinking beer and ogling women in the bars with his buddies. Family visits can be an ordeal to non-traditional men. Their brothers grind their teeth with anger when their sister-in-law won't be at their beck and call. Parents worry the wife bewitched the husband. The man's sister arrives for spot inspections. In the end, these men are ostracized by society if they publicly treat their wives as equals. They remain isolated in their new form of masculinity. A friend of mine, Jethro Goko, finds few allies in his efforts to maintain an equitable partnership in his marriage.

I first met Goko, 35, at his home when I went to pick up a photograph to be published along with an article I wrote for an American magazine. Goko, a free-lance editor, juggled his baby daughter on his hip while stirring a pot on the stove. His wife was attending night school. I'd never seen anyone like Goko in Africa. Most men haven't either. "My friends talk behind my back," he said. "I haven't many left. They used to call me up and say 'Let's go watch soccer or let's go drink.' I'd tell them no, that I had plans with my wife. They don't understand that. And when I was out with men, what did we do? Men go around aimlessly from place to place, drinking and looking for girlfriends."

Goko's parents were quite religious and that made a difference in their son. Usually, missionary religion in Africa reinforces the idea that men are superior. But in the Goko house, his parents became close to the white missionaries and tried to emulate their egalitarian ways. Goko grew up cooking and cleaning and his sisters worked in the garden and fixed things. Even so, his relatives can't accept a similar style of marriage. They think Esther, his wife, gave him a love potion "to make a man's head soft." Esther Goko acts very differently when Goko's numerous brothers, aunts, uncles or cousins are around. And in an African household, there is a relative who drops by to hang out almost every day. She is scared they will influence Goko to divorce her. So when his brothers are over at the house, she acts very timid. Said Jethro Goko: "Esther is exhausted by having to fake it like that, but she'll keep it up until at the end of the day, when the bedroom door closes and she can be herself again."

Goko may balk a bit at some things, like changing the soiled diapers on his baby girl, but he does it. To him, even the less-pleasant chores are a welcome price to pay for partnership with a strong, independent woman like his wife. Every day he sees the alternative: traditional relationships in which the women lack free will and can't speak their mind, suffering abuse in silence.



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"I feel sorry for my two sisters," he said. "I see them miserable in their marriages. Or Esther's sister -- she's just as independent as Esther, but her husband beats her badly. I remember visiting her once when she was laid up. What do you say? I can't tell her to divorce him. A divorced woman is dead in this society. People would say behind her back: 'Ah, there goes the woman whose husband kicked her out for causing a fuss!' And they make up stories about how she slept around. If you're religious, you can say 'God will help you.' But I know it won't change. Not for years and years. These women really have no hope."

In Zimbabwean men like Goko, the level of awareness varies, as does the motivation for accepting an equal partnership with the women in their lives. Some men have an emotional understanding of women's pain and suffering caused by the domination of men. For others, their support is not so much from the hearts, but more cerebral -- and it has its limits.

For agricultural researcher Roger Mpande, his solidarity with women began as a teen-ager when he demonstrated, along with the girls at his high school, against the Southern Rhodesian government. He began working frequently with women and accepting them as comrades in political work, experiences that have led him to support Zimbabwean women's struggle for equal rights. Mpande is a powerful advocate for women in the world of non-governmental organizations debating development strategies. He acts as a representative of women who are targeted by these agencies to be "developed." He gives their ideas and priorities a voice in his studies and papers presented to the organizations. That's a novel attitude for a man in a technical field. But his understanding is largely confined to theoretical discussions and analyses, perhaps because his sensitivity to women's issues came as an intellectual realization. "I'm not consciousness-raised per se, but I debate with myself on a class level, where I see an oppressor exploiting an oppressed," Mpande said. "I understand gender from a political point of view, but it's very difficult to translate into my own family in terms of household matters. If you talked to my wife, I don't think she would tell you that I'm all that sensitive."

But then there's 27-year-old Davef Muzwidzwa, who pressed his lips together in anger when he talked about how his father treated his mother in a traditional polygamous marriage. His mother was one of three wives. "I realized that women have a lot of suffering," he said. "I saw my father beating my mother for no reason. One time, for example, he drove all his wives into the bush. As a young person watching, that was too powerful for me to ignore. I'm in open rebellion against how our father brought us up. I vowed that I wouldn't have that happen to my wife."

Muzwidzwa, a member of a collective that develops training materials on all subjects for impoverished Zimbabweans, has many ideas about how to promote women's equality. He envisions public

debates or a huge campaign such as the current AIDS awareness publicity blitz helping men understand women aren't trying to take anything away from them. "That's the first misunderstanding to remove: thinking that women are struggling against men," he said. "We have to accept that women are simply justified in trying to be equal. The struggle is with men and women against preconceived notions of who men and women are." Encouraging anti-male antagonism could backfire on women activists, because women may be forced to choose between men and their new ideas, he said.

Muzwidzwa believes equality has a bottom-line benefit, meaning that intelligent women can benefit the family and learn skills to make money. At his two-room, cement-block home in the Warren Park high-density suburbs -- what Americans would call a slum -- Muzwidzwa and his wife once ran a soap-making enterprise. He provided the know-how and she provided the labor. His latest endeavor is a gold-mining operation. Muzwidzwa expects his wife will eventually keep the books and take over the management.

But his actions and beliefs can be contradictory, showing he is not completely free of traditional influences. While he said women should be involved in family decisions, he also insisted that control should rest with the partner earning more money. Muzwidzwa himself won't let his wife be employed, at least not outside of his own business ventures where she conveniently supplies her labor. He admitted sharing decisions with his wife is his weakest point and he has to work harder to be democratic. A firm-minded feminist would discount Muzwidzwa as a sexist dog concealed under the fleece of a sensitive man. Such awareness and self-criticism, however, is uncommon to hear in typical relationships here. When Muzwidzwa questions his assumptions, it's a sign that a fundamental, healthy change is taking place.

A more radical thinker, 36-year-old Jonah Gakova, said he is disappointed Zimbabwean women are not angry or aggressive enough to force men to give them equal rights. Said Gakova: "I hope that women might someday come to say: 'We don't want anything to do with you fuckers!'" In developed countries, you can see women are angry when you talk to them. And look what they accomplish." He said he thinks differently than most men because of his mother's role at home. She was strong in a difficult economic situation, and Gakova's father left all the decisions to her. His father worked as an evangelist for churches, making only a pittance. Most household finances and school fees were paid for by his mother's earnings from sewing and selling small items. In a common Shona phrase, people would say of such a creative woman, "She works like a man." Said Gakova: "My father didn't mind my mother taking a leading role in the family because he accepted that she provided more money. He was an understanding man."

Gakova also studied religion, like his father, and today he organizes ecumenical study trips for groups in Zimbabwe.

Tradition, like the Bible, can be interpreted in many different ways, he said. In some African traditions, women were recognized for their strength and played an important role. In today's interpretation of tradition, such as the commercialization of *lobola*, women become commodities. Such traditions have to change and be dynamic, he said. "I'm not saying we bid a goodbye to everything traditional, but I'm saying we can't continue to live with those aspects of tradition that are oppressive." Like Jethro Goko, Gakova and his wife adjust their behavior when relatives visit. He doesn't want to shock visitors by putting on an apron and cooking. He and his wife are introducing changes in their public image stage-by-stage so, for instance, Gakova serves his parents tea while his wife looks on. "The environment at the village level is so difficult, sometimes you just give up," he said. "It's so easy to go back to a situation where you are the boss, you are the man. There's not much support outside your home, so the world says one thing and you do another. It's always a struggle to be conscious of a new way of doing things."

I feel amazed and proud at discovering men who are trying to find cures to the destructiveness of what some have called the "virulent strain of patriarchy" that is found in Africa. Yes, I'm a man, so perhaps I'm too quick to make heroes out of men who exhibit what should be normal behavior in an ideal society. Yet I want to acknowledge the decency and courage they possess to make that hard choice again and again to reject male privilege. It's too easy for men to drift back into a comfortable lifestyle of domination instead of making the daily effort to maintain an equal relationship. And some reading this essay may question why these men aren't standing up and making a more public stand for their beliefs. One reply is that culture here is an integral part of every individual, so much more so than in the United States. A man raised in Zimbabwe's culture who tries to change how he understands his role, his society, and his behavior toward women tears himself apart from the inside out. Few people, men or women, are ready for such an enormous challenge. Gakova, for example, decided to host a get-together for like-minded men to discuss forming a group to support women in their struggle for equality. Invitations were sent out and follow-up telephone calls made. On the day of the event, he cooked a pot of beans and another of rice, barbecued chicken and chilled dozens of bottles of beer and soda. And he waited. I attended, too, hoping to interview other gender-sensitive men. After a two-hour delay, the one Zimbabwean guest and the two of us began to eat the now-cold food. It wasn't an auspicious beginning for a men's movement.

Some might argue that the poor turnout means feminism and pro-feminist men are inappropriate, foreign notions. And the opposition of some women themselves to equal rights appears to strengthen the argument. But as an American friend once said: "Women's equality is a foreign idea in the United States, too."

Sincerely,

