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When 'No' is not enough: Cultural narratives, bride price, and the struggle for sexual consent in Zimbabwe and South Africa

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Abstract

Sexual consent remains a contentious and culturally loaded concept in many African societies, where deeply rooted patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles often obscure the agency of women in matters of sexuality. This paper critically examines the meaning and reception of a woman's refusal, her "no" in African cultural contexts, interrogating whether it is truly respected as a denial of consent or interpreted as part of complex, often coercive social scripts. Drawing on feminist theory, particularly African feminism and postcolonial gender studies, the study explores how cultural narratives, bride price practices, and marital expectations shape perceptions of female sexual autonomy. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in interpretivist epistemology, the study uses in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and cultural text analysis from Zimbabwe and South Africa. Participants included women aged 18–45, traditional leaders, and community elders. The findings reveal that in many contexts, a woman's verbal "no" is not always taken as definitive; rather, it is often viewed as coyness, resistance that must be overcome, or even as cultural performance before eventual acquiescence. This misinterpretation contributes to high levels of sexual coercion, marital rape, and silence around sexual violence. The paper argues that dominant cultural constructs invalidate the principle of affirmative consent and perpetuate gendered violence. It calls for a recalibration of cultural norms to embed the notion that consent must be explicit, continuous, and respected. Legal reforms, gender-sensitive education, and engagement with traditional leaders are recommended to transform attitudes and practices. Ultimately, respecting "no" as "no" is central to upholding women's bodily autonomy and ensuring meaningful sexual rights in African contexts.

Keywords: African feminism; Culture; Gender; Marital rape; Patriarchy; Sexual autonomy

INTRODUCTION

Sexual consent remains a contentious and culture-bound concept in the majority of African societies, particularly where patriarchal cultures, customary practices, and postcolonial heritages converge to form gender relations, such as in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Despite growing global awareness of the applicability of consent in sex, the ground reality in the majority of African societies continues to be based on deep misconceptions and misinterpretations of genuine, willing consent to sex (Azodo, 2021). In these environments, a woman's verbal denial, her saying "no," is generally not interpreted as an absolute refusal of consent. Instead, it may be understood within the context of a culture that reads it as flirtatious teasing, resistance that must be overcome, or as scripted play in the social game of romantic or marital courtship (Nyanzi, 2015).

The failure to recognise a woman's "no" as an unequivocal boundary is symptomatic of broader socio-cultural norms that diminish female agency and autonomy, especially in matters of sexuality. These norms are reinforced by practices such as bride price (roora or lobola), which can be interpreted as transactions that entitle husbands to unrestricted sexual access (Mwambene and Kruuse, 2018). In both Zimbabwe and South Africa, the payment of bride price is often regarded as a legitimisation of patriarchal authority over women's bodies and decisions, including their right to refuse sex within marriage. In such environments, the notion of affirmative consent as a clear, informed, and ongoing agreement clashes with traditional expectations of marital duty, female submissiveness, and the invisibilization of sexual violence within the domestic sphere (Beare and Boonzaier, 2020). Although both Zimbabwe and South Africa have made significant legal strides in criminalising

marital rape and protecting women's rights, a major gap remains between statutory protections and cultural practice. Legal frameworks such as Zimbabwe's Sexual Offences Act (SOA, 2001) and South Africa's Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act (SORMA, 2007) often fail to penetrate deeply entrenched norms that inform everyday perceptions of sex, marriage, and consent (HRW, 2008). This disconnect is particularly pronounced in rural and peri-urban communities where customary law and traditional leadership hold strong influence over social conduct. In these spaces, a woman's refusal may not only be dismissed but also interpreted as a challenge to male authority or a breach of culturally prescribed gender roles (Azodo, 2021; Beare and Boonzaier, 2020; Sande, 2023).

This paper critically investigates how the concept of sexual consent, particularly the reception and interpretation of a woman's refusal, is understood in selected Zimbabwean and South African communities. The central question guiding this inquiry is: *To what extent is a woman's "no" respected as a denial of consent, and how do cultural narratives and expectations influence this interpretation?* Drawing on African feminism and postcolonial gender theory, the study highlights how cultural texts, marriage customs, and generational attitudes converge to produce a coercive sexual script that subordinates women's choices (Beare and Boonzaier, 2020). Through a qualitative methodology rooted in interpretivism, the research engages with lived experiences and culturally embedded beliefs, offering an in-depth understanding of the contradictions between legal definitions of consent and everyday realities.

By bringing women's, elders', and traditional leaders' voices to the forefront, this article contributes to the urgent call for culturally sensitive yet rights-based accounts of consent in African societies. Ultimately, it calls for the rebalancing of cultural norms and law to engrain the principle that consent must be affirmative, continuous, and respected regardless of relational or marital context. Affirming and recognising women's right to say "no" is not just a matter of law; it is a fundamental component of gender justice and bodily autonomy.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

International statutes define consent as a voluntary, informed, positive, and ongoing agreement (Beare and Boonzaier, 2020; Mwambene and Kruuse, 2018; SOA, 2001; SORMA, 2007). Feminist theory condemns coercion-based models and advocates for affirmative consent with attention to autonomy and power relations (Beare and Boonzaier, 2020). African feminism places the intersection of colonial patriarchy and local norms at the centre stage in gendered power (Azodo, 2021). African feminism foregrounds historical shifts from women's precolonial authority to subordinate roles under colonial patriarchy, arguing for culturally grounded feminist praxis (Azodo, 2021; Nyanzi, 2015). Postcolonial gender theory interrogates how colonial legacies and customary norms together shape gendered power and silence women's voices (Beare and Boonzaier, 2020).

Bride-price (*roora/lobolo/ukhuthu*) commodifies women and reinforces male sexual entitlement (Mwambene and Kruuse,

2018; Sande, 2023). In South Africa, practices such as *ukuthwala* (bride kidnapping) reflect coercive traditions undermining women's consent (Mwambene and Kruuse, 2018). Though marital rape is legally criminalised in Zimbabwe and South Africa (DVA, 2006; Mwambene and Kruuse, 2018; SOA, 2001; SORMA, 2007), enforcement remains weak due to cultural beliefs that women cannot refuse sex within marriage (Mwambene and Kruuse, 2018). Existing research documents the high prevalence of coercive sex, but less attention has been paid to the interpretive scripts decoding "no" in everyday cultural contexts, especially through in-depth interviews with traditional leaders and women themselves (Beare and Boonzaier, 2020).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by two interrelated theoretical lenses – 'African feminism' and 'postcolonial gender theory', both of which provide critical tools for analysing the power dynamics and cultural narratives surrounding sexual consent in African contexts. African feminism emerges as a response to the limitations of Western feminist frameworks, which often fail to account for the complex intersections of tradition, colonial legacies, race, and socio-economic structures in African women's lives (Arndt, 2002; Azodo, 2021; Lewis, 2001; Nnaemeka, 2004). It is culturally rooted in placing priority on gender justice responses based on culture and opposing the perception of African cultures as inherently patriarchal, advocating for the reinterpretation and redefinition of indigenous values that bring dignity to and empower women (Amadiume, 1997; Nnaemeka, 2004; Tamale, 2020).

In African feminist thought, the women's commodification in bride price forms is studied as a system that sustains male sexual entitlement and undermines female sexual autonomy (Beare and Boonzaier, 2020; Mwambene and Kruuse, 2018; Nyanzi, 2015; Sande, 2023; Tamale, 2020). Such an understanding within theoretical reflections situates women's sex refusal not only as a personal boundary but as a political act against embedded power relations. Postcolonial gender theory strengthens African feminism by analysing how colonialism perverted precolonial gender relations and legalised patriarchal legal and cultural regimes (Arndt, 2002; Lewis, 2001; Mohanty, 2003; Oyěwùmí, 1997; Tamale, 2020). It resists the universalisation of Western constructions of consent and demands the decolonisation of gender discourse, particularly on matters of sexuality, law, and custom. Together, they facilitate a nuanced critique of the tension between cultural traditions, colonial heritage, and modern legal systems that condition the meaning and reception of a woman's "no." They also construct the need for radical cultural and legal change based on African epistemologies.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research design based on an interpretivist research paradigm, which aimed to understand the rich, context-dependent meanings people attribute to their everyday experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2022; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Guest *et al.*, 2023). The qualitative approach was appropriate for the aim of exploring deeply ingrained cultural beliefs, personal experience, and

symbolic meaning of sexual consent and refusal in African cultural settings, particularly in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Data collection was conducted in purposively chosen rural and peri-urban areas of Seke in Mashonaland East Province (Zimbabwe) and Nxau Nxau near Mbombela (South Africa). These sites were chosen due to the continuity of customary practices such as bride price (roora/lobola) and the significant influence of customary leadership organisation on family living and gender norms (Beare and Boonzaier, 2020; Mwambene and Kruuse, 2018; Sande, 2023). Purposive and snowball sampling strategies were blended to engage participants in order to obtain information-rich cases and to establish trust for revealing sensitive information (Guest *et al.*, 2023; Patton, 2015).

A total of 28 participants comprising 20 women aged 18-45 (10 from each country), 4 elderly community members (2 from each country), and 4 traditional leaders (2 from each country), the latter two cohorts with gender balance were selected for solicitation in this study. The data collection methods included in-depth semi-structured interviews for the Elderly and traditional leaders, and two focus group discussions comprising 10 women in each respective country and target community. All data were collected in local languages (Shona and Siswati), audio-recorded with informed consent, and later transcribed and translated into English. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase method and theme development. Key themes identified included the reinterpretation of refusal, bride price and sexual entitlement, cultural scripts of female submission, and silence around marital rape. Ethical clearance was obtained from the traditional leadership of both countries, following the guidelines recommended by regional gender research institutions (AGI, 2024). Participants were provided with clear information about the study's aims, and their confidentiality and psychological well-being were prioritised throughout the research process (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Guest *et al.*, 2023). Given the potentially traumatic nature of the subject matter, referral pathways for psychosocial support were made available where necessary.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a consistent pattern where a woman's verbal refusal is systematically reinterpreted within cultural scripts that prioritise male sexual access and female acquiescence. Below are verbatim responses from participants, organised by stakeholder group, with analytical comments.

Women's Lived Experiences

"If I say no, he just laughs and says, 'I know you want it.' He says my no is just me being a shy wife." (Woman, 2, Zimbabwe). This highlights the direct invalidation of verbal refusal, framed as a misunderstanding of the woman's own desire, a common trope of coercive manipulation.

"I told him I was tired from looking after the children, and he said, 'That is not my problem. I have my rights.'" (Woman, 4, South Africa). The above excerpt demonstrates the explicit invocation of "conjugal rights" to override a woman's

physical and emotional state, framing sex as a male entitlement.

Another woman raised similar concerns when she said, "After the roora was paid, it's like my body became his property. How can you refuse the owner?" (Woman, 6, Zimbabwe). The forging contribution posed a powerful articulation of the commodifying effect of bride price, where payment is seen as a transfer of ownership, nullifying the concept of consent.

Further to the above, but in contrast with the initial contributions, another participant said, "In our culture, a good wife is patient. Saying no causes problems, so it's easier to just be quiet and let it happen." (Woman, 9, South Africa). Linking the cultural ideal of a "good wife" to silent submission reveals how consent is sacrificed to maintain marital harmony.

The above excerpts, although sounding marginally different, are all in sync with the African feminist theory applied in this study, with key tenets that the women's commodification in bride price is studied as a system that sustains male sexual entitlement and undermines female sexual autonomy (Tamale, 2020). Reviewed related literature indicates that International statutes define consent as a voluntary, informed, positive, and ongoing agreement (Beare and Boonzaier, 2020; Mwambene and Kruuse, 2018; SOA, 2001; SORMA, 2007).

"He will keep asking and touching until I give in. My no doesn't mean stop; it means 'try harder.' That is what he believes." (Woman, 1, Zimbabwe). The above excerpt indicates how the "persistence script", where refusal is interpreted not as a boundary but as a challenge to be overcome through coercion. This also demonstrates the masculine and patriarchal footprints in negotiating for sex.

In relation to the above, another related contribution was "If I refuse, he will ask if there is another man. You are immediately suspected of being unfaithful." (Woman, 7, South Africa). Although different from the first participant's views, the above indicates how the narrative is shifted, where refusal is pathologised and met with accusations of infidelity, adding a layer of social risk to saying no.

Further battering the admission because of poverty and limited choices, one participant said the following: "Where would I go? I have no money of my own. If I anger him, he might throw me out. So I say yes with my mouth while my heart says no." (Woman, 2, Zimbabwe). The foregoing highlights how economic dependency forces consent, highlighting that autonomy is not just cultural but material-based.

Contrary to the above but pointing to the same challenges women are facing in these communities in relation to sexual consent, one participant had this to say: "We don't call it rape in marriage. It is just a husband being demanding. Who would I report to? The police will laugh." (Woman, 5, South Africa). The above points to the normalisation of marital rape and the perceived futility of seeking legal recourse due to institutionalised stigma.

The experiences and views of the participants, in sync with the reviewed literature, as literature consulted, reinforced that bride-price (*roora/lobola/ukhuthu*) commodifies women and reinforces male sexual entitlement (Mwambene and Kruise, 2018). The findings also resonate with the Postcolonial gender theory informing the current study, which analyses how colonialism perverted precolonial gender relations and legalised patriarchal legal and cultural regimes (Tamale, 2020).

Perspectives from Traditional Leaders

"A woman's 'no' is like a light rain; it may fall, but the sun will come out soon. It is part of the dance between man and woman." (Traditional Leader, Male, Zimbabwe). The leader used a poetic metaphor to dismiss refusal as temporary and insignificant, reinforcing the idea that it is a ritualised part of courtship, not a genuine boundary.

In relation to the above, another traditional leader added that "When a woman says no, she is testing the man's strength. A real man will know how to persuade her." (Traditional Leader, Male, South Africa). The above participant frames refusal as a test of masculinity, directly encouraging male persistence and legitimising coercive "persuasion".

In furthering the idea of legitimacy of coercion, one traditional leader had this to say: "Lobola was paid. It is a contract. Can you buy a cow and not be allowed to milk it?" (Traditional Leader, Male, South Africa). The above excerpt points to the analogy that explicitly compares women to livestock, reducing them to transactional objects and sexual resources, which forces them to be forced without much resistance.

In line with the above, another traditional leader said, "If a wife constantly refuses, it means the man did not pay enough roora, or she is under a bad spirit. We must look for the root cause, not blame the man." (Traditional Leader, Male, Zimbabwe). The foregoing comment pathologises consistent refusal, shifting blame from the husband's actions to external factors like insufficient payment or witchcraft.

Further to the above, one other contribution from the traditional leaders said, "I know the law says otherwise, but here, in this village, we follow our customs. A man has a right to his wife." (Traditional Leader, Male, South Africa). The foregoing acknowledges the legal-statutory gap but explicitly prioritises customary law, creating a parallel system where women's rights are not upheld.

Agreeing with the above, a traditional leader from a different community echoed similar sentiments when he said, "Our ancestors did not have this problem of 'marital rape.' A wife belonged to her husband. These new ideas are confusing our children." (Traditional Leader, Male, Zimbabwe). The traditional leaders' comments seem to romanticize a static view of tradition to reject modern legal concepts of bodily autonomy and consent within marriage.

The foregoing findings attest to the provisions of African feminism applied in this study emerging as a response to the limitations of Western feminist frameworks, which often fail to account for the complex intersections of tradition, colonial

legacies, race, and socio-economic structures in African women's lives (Azodo, 2021). Though intimate partner rape is legally criminalised in Zimbabwe and South Africa, enforcement remains weak due to cultural beliefs that women cannot refuse sex within marriage (Mwambene and Kruise, 2018)

Views from Community Elders

"In our days, a woman was taught to obey. This 'no, no, no' is disrespectful and brings shame to the husband." (Elder, Female, Zimbabwe). The above excerpt depicts that patriarchal norms are often upheld by older women, highlighting the internalisation of these values and intergenerational conflict.

Although from different communities, a relatively similar conception was raised: "What is this 'consent'? Is it not the same as willingness? But when you are married, you must always be willing." (Elder, Male, South Africa). The above indicates a fundamental conceptual confusion between consent and a state of perpetual obligation, erasing the possibility of momentary refusal.

A bit divergent point was raised by another participant who said, "If she refuses, let him be patient. But if it continues, he has the right to discipline her. A disorderly wife breaks the family." (Elder, Male, Zimbabwe). The patriarchal footprints were present in the above excerpt, as the comment suggests a superficial nod to patience but ultimately sanctions violence in the form of discipline as a legitimate response to a woman asserting her bodily autonomy.

Another school of thought buttressed the issue of colonialism as he said, "The white man's law has come to break our families. They are teaching our women to be proud and disobedient." (Elder, Female, South Africa). Despite the above participant sharing the same gender frames women's rights as a foreign, colonial imposition, creating a false dichotomy between cultural integrity and gender justice.

The findings highlighted are in line but contradictory to the African Feminism theory informing the study, as the theory is argued to be culturally rooted in placing priority on gender justice responses based on culture and opposing the perception of African cultures as inherently patriarchal, advocating for the reinterpretation and redefinition of indigenous values that bring dignity to and empower women (Tamale, 2020). The findings are also related to the literature review, which suggests that African feminism places the intersection of colonial patriarchy and local norms at centre stage in gendered power (Azodo, 2021).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that in the majority of South African and Zimbabwean societies, a woman's "no" to sex is not accepted as an unqualified declaration of not desiring to. Instead, it is usually understood within culturally scripted frames that render sexual submission for women normal and reframe "no" as flirtation, resistance, or ritualised shyness. These stem from the traditionally long-practised patriarchal institutions driven by cultural ideals such as bride price and marital duty that continue to frame gendered sexual

expectations in relationships (Sande, 2023). According to African feminist theory, the study documents how women's voices get silenced and their sexual agency is relegated by patriarchal cultural institutions. The exchange of bride price is particularly critical to affirming the idea of women as property or owed sexual access in marriage. According to Tamale (2020) and Nyanzi (2015), this woman's commodification negates the value of consent by depersonalising women's bodies as things to be negotiated. Even in the criminal law systems criminalising rape in marriage, such as the Sexual Offences Act of Zimbabwe (SOA, 2001) and the Sexual Offences and Related Matters Amendment Act of South Africa (SORMA, 2007), the practice-statute gap remains considerable due to deep-seated cultural resistance (Beare and Boonzaier, 2020).

Postcolonial feminist theory helps to elucidate colonial pasts as having created patriarchal legal and cultural structures to harden, collapsing previously more communal and fluid precolonial gender relations (Mohanty, 2003). Both colonial law and missionary morality institutionalised the dominance of men; colonisation transformed African customary law so that it now handicaps women's autonomy. This colonial heritage also continues to influence contemporary constructions of sexuality and gender in both countries. In addition, cultural silence concerning marital rape and the inability to acknowledge non-consensual sex in sexual relationships enable continued abuses against women's bodily autonomy. The respondents in this study generally stated that rejection in marriage is viewed as being rebellious or disrespectful, thus justifying coercion (Beare and Boonzaier, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study has indicated that in the majority of cultural contexts throughout Zimbabwe and South Africa, a woman's refusal of sex isn't necessarily recognised or respected as a sign of a lack of consent. Extensive patriarchal norms, based on both customary practice and colonial legacy, continue to undermine women's agency, particularly over their sexuality. The perpetuation of practices such as bride price reinforces the perception that, having been married, a woman's body no longer belongs to herself but to others. Cultural myths equating "no" with coy or temporary resistance to be breached reinforce damaging fictions fueling sexual coercion and justified marital rape. Despite advancements in progressive legal reform in both countries, including the criminalisation of marital rape, these laws are constrained by powerful cultural assumptions and a lack of willingness to change.

In order to overcome such barriers, a multirelational approach that not only changes legal systems but also meaningfully engages with cultural norms and traditional authority structures is necessary. Legal reforms need to define consent in clear terms as positive, willing, and ongoing, dispelling ambiguity around implied or coerced consent, especially in marriage. Interventions in gender norms that are imposed or sanctioned by elders and customary leaders need to be undertaken at the community level. These guardians of

culture need to be brought on board to reframe customs to uphold women's dignity and sexual rights.

Additionally, educational systems will have to incorporate realistic, gender-sensitising sex education, emphasising consent, respect for one another, and bodily autonomy from childhood. Media, music, and cultural texts must be recoded to promote narratives that affirm respect for women's choices. Economically and socially empowering women is crucial so that they can assert their rights without fear of economic retribution or social marginalisation. Finally, a culture that most values "no" as "no" is one that sanctions the full humanity and autonomy of women in every arena of life.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is not any conflict of interests regarding the publication of this manuscript. In addition, the ethical issues, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/ or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancy, have been completely observed by the author.

Life Science Reporting

No life science threat was practised in this research.

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