

# Sexual revolution, sign of Zimbabwe times?

The following article excerpted from *Moto*, Zimbabwe's National Magazine, illustrates that while we may be more technologically developed, our views on love, sex and marriage are not, with few exceptions that far apart.

"THIS was unheard of in out days," is the lament one often hears from the older generation when they talk about the 'sexual permissiveness' they see or think they see in the younger generation. While this might be true to an extent, it is also true to say each generation has always felt that the one succeeding it was more permissive and less morally 'upright' than itself.

During the past century or so, Zimbabwe has moved from being a traditional society steeped in its old culture to a relatively modern one. With this change, it is inevitable that society's sexual mores would change.

In the Black Zimbabwean culture, sex education from parents to children is considered taboo. Traditionally, it was aunt of the girl or in the case of a boy, his grandfather who taught him or her all there was to know about sex. This education was given as preparation for marriage and it was not acceptable to talk about pre-marital sex or contraception to unmarried women. A girl could only have a boyfriend if his intentions was to marry and then he had to be introduced to the parents through the aunt.

The rural setting was closely knit and it was difficult for young people to get opportunities to 'misbehave'. But if they did and the girl got pregnant, then either they got married or they would bring shame on the whole family.

children will make them promiscuous, there also seems to be a general agreement that young people should have sex education. "Sex education would help because sexually uneducated girls are more vulnerable. Sex education does not encourage sexual activity ... sexual activity is natural, but it would enable the girls to make better and more informed decisions," said Trish Swift, a lecturer at the School of Social Work.

Urbanisation and increased educational opportunities for women have allowed for a rapid increase in the number of women living on their own without parental supervision. The easy access to contraceptives has also meant that the choice of the kind of sexual life the girls lead has

portance of virginity as a criterion for a good marriage. In the old days, a lot of importance was attached to virginity and it was difficult for a woman to marry well once she had lost her virginity. But as Dr. Farrell explained, "this was more of a concern to the parents of the girl rather than to the girl herself because it was the parents who lost out if their girl could not marry well."

Most women interviewed did not attach much importance to virginity, as they feel men do not consider it as a condition for marriage anymore. "Men don't attach so much importance to virginity as long as the girl is steady," said Theresa, another student at the university.

Men's attitude may have changed on virginity, but there seems to be an unwillingness to marry women who already have their own children. "It is largely because of societal pressures that men do not marry women with their own children. Marrying a woman with her own child carries a stigma," said Theresa. "Another reason might be that they feel that the child will be a constant reminder to them of the woman's past."

Another area where attitudes have changed very little is in the area of *roora* (bride price). It has been argued in most quarters that the practice of *roora* keeps women down in marriage as the men demand subservience from their wives on the grounds that they have paid *roora* for them. On these grounds, one would be tempted to think that women in Zimbabwe accept *roora* only because it is imposed on them by their parents. But this does not seem to be the case.

Young women in Zimbabwe feel that they would not consider themselves married if *roora* has not been paid for them. "Unlike a ring which you can just throw away when you are fed up, I think *roora* give permanence to a relationship," said Georgina, also a student at the university.

Women are aware that by having *roora* paid for them their claim to equality in the marriage is compromised but then most of them do not demand or want equality in the home.

"I think talking about equality in the home is nonsense," said Martha, "equality should be restricted to the work place but in the home, the man must be given respect." Another girl interviewed felt that the issue of equality should not be pursued too far and that people here must adopt only those aspects of western culture which fit into the local cul-

ture and leave the rest.

However, all the women interviewed felt that they would be pleased if their husbands out of affection for them volunteered to help with household chores, "I would not demand it, but at the same time, I think men need to know that if their manliness is there, washing dishes won't corrode it," said Barbara.

So while Zimbabwean women are keen to see laws which will prevent them from being discriminated against at work places in favour of men, they are very conservative when it comes to the issue of equality in the house.

Trish Swift thinks this conservatism could be attributed to the fact that young women are afraid to offend their in-laws and members of their own families by demanding equal treatment in marriage. The clinical psychologist said that as women became more educated, they would begin to question their attitudes towards marriage and sex. Before women were educated they tended to put up with anything from their husbands.

All the girls interviewed said that although they did not think divorce was the easiest answer to marital pro-

blems, if the man were unfaithful or cruel, that would be enough grounds for divorce.

With more women able to look after themselves, marriage is much more a relationship based on compatibility rather than one where a woman is dependent on a man for her very survival.

"In the old days, women saw marriage as the end in all because they depended more on men. Nowadays, if a husband clearly shows me that he has stopped caring for me, then I would consider the basis of the relationship to be finished," said Martha.

According to the clinical psychologist, the liberation war had a liberalising effect on women's attitudes to sex and equality, but this was countered by the fact that most girls who had been in the war came back to a very stable society and settled into it. They did not turn things on their heads as had been expected, she said.

That there has been a change in young people's attitude cannot be denied. This change is still taking place today, but the sway of culture is strong. Most young people find themselves torn between two worlds.

On the one hand, there is the traditional society and its values which offer security through customs like *roora*. But this society also has aspects in its culture like widow inheritance — which has now taken the form of widow's remaining property-less and discarded by their in-laws which young women view as wrong and they call for legal change.

At the same time, young women wish to be part of the western world where equality and sharing and 'love' is the basis of a relationship. Zimbabwean youth are in a transitional period where their old supports, like aunts and grandfathers are no longer there. But they have not found yet new support systems.

Young people are more open in their approach to sex, but fear of society keeps them in check. Many express a strong abhorrence in baby dumping and prostitution, but at the same time are more willing to accept that there are circumstances which force a girl to dump her baby and drive a girl to prostitution. Meanwhile, the older generation cries for lost innocence and the old morality.

"Young people who learn about sex through friends usually end up with many wrong facts."

Today, things have changed. Rapid urbanisation has meant that the traditional aunt or grandfather is not there to instruct the young. Even in the rural areas, young people are often away at boarding schools so they find themselves without guidance. Most young women interviewed said they had learnt about sex from friends, but as a clinical psychologist explained, "young people who learn about sex through friends usually end up with many wrong facts".

At present, the issue of sex education seems unsettled. There are some people who feel that it must be pursued boldly with contraceptives made freely available to young women in order to prevent what appears to be an epidemic of school-girl pregnancies and the resultant baby dumping. Most parents however are against sex education if it involves teaching girls the use of contraceptives because they feel that this would encourage promiscuity.

While there is a general feeling, justified or otherwise that making contraceptives readily available to school

been largely their own. Ms. Swift felt that rapid urbanisation had led to a loosening of sexual attitudes and to an increase in sexual activity, "but the problem is that young girls are being blamed for this social trend."

But it would appear that with a few exceptions, the attitude of most young women as regards premarital sex is still the traditional one — it is wrong. While some of them are held back by the fear of getting pregnant, some feel that their boyfriends would lose interest in them once they sleep with them.

According to Dr. Farrell, although to an outsider it would appear that there is a high rate of girls falling pregnant at the university, most of the girls who fall pregnant are in fact married in the traditional sense as they have had *roora* paid for them, though they might continue to use their maiden names.

However, some female students and other girls interviewed of the streets saw nothing wrong with premarital sex.

The issue of cohabitation raises the question of the im-



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