

# For Better or Worse: Pedagogies of Premarital Counselling and Intimate Wife Abuse: An African Woman's Interpretation

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## *Abstract*

This article argues that intimate wife abuse and gender-based violence (GBV) is fuelled by premarital counselling. The extent to which Christian and traditional indigenous premarital counselling encourage GBV in marriage contexts by promoting "dangerous masculine and feminine" conceptualisation of marriage, is explored via an autoethnographical methodology and an African feminist critical hermeneutics approach. Findings indicate that the pedagogies of the traditional and Christian premarital counselling are gendered in a way that promotes and justifies intimate wife abuse in marriage contexts complicating women's struggle with GBV.

## **Introduction**

My first attempt to get married failed due to intimate partner abuse by my fiancé. This man was in a process of marrying me; I moved to his family's household and commenced wife duties before he completed the process of marriage. The Ndebele tradition of Zimbabwe allows a woman to join her husband after part of the *lobola* is paid and other marriage requirements are fulfilled such as *ukangaziwe* (know me), *isivula mlomo* (open mouth), clothes for the parents (both mother and father) and *inkomo yeqolo or kamama* (mother's cow). Among the Ndebele from a traditional context, wife violence is not viewed as abuse, but discipline and love.<sup>2</sup> Emotional violence is not considered by this ethnic group as a form of violence, since there are no physical scars on a person's body. I was never physically beaten but my experiences of intimate partner violence were emotional. As a victim of emotional violence, I experienced loneliness and fear: fear of losing this man who was in the process of marrying me and fear of being blamed for failing to be "a good wife." The internal wounds of emotional violence never heal,

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<sup>2</sup> Chisale, Sinenhlanhla S, "Love, Discipline, Punishment or Wife Battering: A View from Ubuntu," *Gender and Behaviour*, 14 no.2 (forthcoming).

the bleeding never stops, the pain endures and fear runs deep. However, it is worth noting that my experiences of violence did not stop me from falling in love; they did not make me hate men. After falling in love, I then decided to get married after some years of a single life.

This time, I got married after I had the privilege of studying feminist and gender discourses from undergraduate and postgraduate courses. I was fortunate to have read theories on gender and feminism that critically engaged discourses of gender stratification, GBV, violence against women (VAW) and wife abuse. My studies engaged feminist and gender theories that explain feminist cultural and religious interpretations such as feminist critical and cultural hermeneutics that empower women.<sup>3</sup> I was fortunate to be a member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter “The Circle”) who guided me on how to apply African feminists’ theologies in my lived experiences. However, my upbringing and belonging to a conservative African Ndebele traditional family made it difficult for me to apply what I learnt from my studies in public domains. Using reflexive methodology and African feminist critical hermeneutics, this article seeks to discuss how and the extent to which Christian and traditional indigenous premarital counselling encourage GBV in marriage by promoting “dangerous masculine and feminine” conceptualisations of marriage.

## **Premarital Counselling and Wife Abuse**

Premarital counselling differs with contexts and themes. Research indicates that premarital counselling covers themes that range from couple’s careers to sexual relationships and the religious affiliation of the couple.<sup>4</sup> Murray’s study asserts that clergy seem to address the following topics in their premarital counselling sessions: (a) commitment to marriage, (b) communication skills, (c) attitudes and beliefs toward marriage, (d) conflict resolution, and (e) the importance of spending time with one’s partner. The least important topics according to clergy are: (a) family-of-origin factors, (b) friendships and social support, (c) careers, (d)

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<sup>3</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Christine. E Murray, “Which Topics are Important to Address in Premarital Counselling? A survey of Clergy,” *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counselling* 60, no. 1-2 (2006): 69-81; See also David. D. Babb, “An Assessment of Premarital Counselling Practices of Pastors of the Wesleyan Church,” *Dissertation Abstracts International* 10 (1992): 3527; Onesimus A. Ngundu, “Mission Churches and African Customary Marriage: A History of Church Marriages and a Case for an African Christian Customary Marriage Ceremony,” *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 30, no.1 (2011): 35-53.

the couple's reasons for entering marriage and (e) fun and leisure.<sup>5</sup> Some clergy may emphasise the traditional gender stereotypes of couples. According to Bevans, theologically, the clergy are encouraged to contextualise their teachings by respecting people's traditions while remaining faithful to the Gospel.<sup>6</sup> Thus, clergy in Christian premarital counselling may approve of the teachings of traditional premarital counselling. According to theological literature, Christian premarital counselling is informed by missionary practice and western theories.<sup>7</sup> Missionaries emphasised women's submission to men, particularly their husbands parallel to African indigenous cultures that are patriarchal.<sup>8</sup> The construction of women as oblivious and unknowledgeable about marriage exposes them to wife violence. Research has shown that wife violence is common in many parts of Africa; and many women have experienced some kind of violence from their intimate partner. Some have even lost their lives.<sup>9</sup> Baloyi claims that intimate wife violence in Africa seems to be an acceptable way of keeping wives under control.<sup>10</sup> Some Christian women interviewed by Phiri lament that they experience different forms of violence at the hands of their husbands.<sup>11</sup> Purity Malinga quoted in Phiri asserts that "in African culture my wife is not my equal. She is my property. She is like one of my children. I have paid *lobola* for her. Therefore we cannot be equal."<sup>12</sup> This indicates that cultural and religious teachings increase women's vulnerability to wife violence. Some husbands believe that beating a wife or using violence against a wife is a form of discipline. An ordained male student from Phiri's study confirms this when he asked her how he is expected to discipline his wife if beating her is wrong.<sup>13</sup> This ordained student

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<sup>5</sup> Murray, "Which Topics are Important to Address in Premarital Counselling," 70.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Revised and Expanded Edition) (New York, NY: Orbis Maryknoll, 2002), 118.

<sup>7</sup> Mathews. T. Kapolo, "Premarital Pastoral Care and Counselling: A Quest for an African Model," *Word and World* 21, no 2 (2001): 129-134. See also Thinandavha. D Mashau &, Martha. T. Fredericks, "Coming of Age in African Theology: The Quest for Authentic Theology in African Soil," *Exchange* 37 (2008): 109-123.

<sup>8</sup> Lilian Siwila, "In Search of a Feminist Cultural Analysis Model for Effective Dialogue on Harmful Cultural Practices," *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa*, Special Issue 18, no. 2 (2012): 105-120.

<sup>9</sup> Sitawa. R. Kimuna &, Yanyi. K. Djamba, "Gender Based Violence: Correlates of Physical and Sexual Wife Abuse in Kenya," *Journal of Family Violence* 23 (2008): 333-342.

<sup>10</sup> Elijah. M. Baloyi, "Wife beating amongst Africans as a challenge to pastoral care," *Die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 47(1) (2013).

Art.#713,10pages.<http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v47i1.713>, accessed 14 April 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Isabel. A. Phiri, "Why Does God Allow our Husbands to Hurt us? Overcoming Violence against Women," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 114 (2002): 19-30.

<sup>12</sup> Phiri, "Why Does God Allow our Husbands to Hurt us?", 24.

<sup>13</sup> Phiri, "Why Does God Allow our Husbands to Hurt us?", 24.

suggests that there are some Christians who support wife violence. The question I seek to answer, therefore, are: how does premarital counselling encourage GBV particularly wife violence, who are the authorities and why are they the appointed authorities of premarital counselling?

According to McGrath, the primary providers of premarital counselling are the clergy.<sup>14</sup> As much as this is true in the western and Christian context, in African traditional or indigenous contexts the primary providers of premarital counselling are adults in families, community leaders and family friends, especially adult women.<sup>15</sup> In African traditional contexts, it can be argued that premarital counselling begins during childhood and is a continuous process up to marriage. Premarital counselling is a Christian and cultural practice that is imbued with patriarchal ideologies, where the what, how, who and why of marriage is taught.<sup>16</sup> In this article, I present my experiences of premarital counselling from both the Christian and cultural context, explaining how the teachings of each context are an obstacle to gender equality and elimination of GBV in a marriage context.

## **Methodological Consideration**

This qualitative reflexive study follows a feminist approach of autoethnography because it focuses on the self (*auto*) and the author's experiences as a person and writer/painter/artist, whilst participating and self-reflexively observing the social world in which I am situated in culture (*ethnos*). In the research process experiences are often expressed in writing (*graphy*).<sup>17</sup> Weiler asserts that "feminist researchers begin their investigation of the social world from a grounded position in their own subjective oppression."<sup>18</sup> As a Ndebele traditional and Christian woman from Matetsi community in Zimbabwe, I have experienced both the Christian and traditional premarital counselling. The theoretical

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<sup>14</sup> Carey McGrath, "Premarital Counselling: Hierarchical and Egalitarian," *Priscilla Papers* Autumn 26, no. 4 (2012), 5-9.

<sup>15</sup> Musa. W. Dube, "Feminist Theology – Who do You Say that I Am?", *Feminist Theology Journal* 15, no. 3 (2007): 346-367.

<sup>16</sup> Fulata. L. Moyo, "Religion, Spirituality and Being a Woman in Africa: Gender Construction within the African Religio-Cultural Experiences," *Agenda* 18 no. 61 (2004): 72-78.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Wall, "An Autoethnography on Learning about Autoethnography," in *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5, no. 2 (2006).  
[http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5\\_2/pdf/wall.pdf](http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5_2/pdf/wall.pdf) (Accessed 9 August 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Kathleen Weiler, *Women Teaching for Change: Gender, Class and Power* (New York, NY: Bergin & Garvey, 1988), 122.

underpinnings of this autoethnographic study are grounded in my personal experiences of premarital counselling from both a traditional and a Christian perspective. I shall use autoethnography to locate my own life story within “the broader contextual analysis which Stenhouse says is a story of action within a theory of context.”<sup>19</sup> Borrowing from Dorothy Smith’s analysis of feminist research, I shall use autoethnographic research to create the space for my absent experience.<sup>20</sup>

## **Theoretical Perspective: African Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics**

African feminist cultural hermeneutics’ starting point is women’s experience and the rejection of patriarchy.<sup>21</sup> It begins with a hermeneutic of suspicion where women are suspicious of some cultural and religious teachings that dehumanise them.<sup>22</sup> A central tenet of African feminist cultural hermeneutics is that the liberation and dignity of women will only be realised after patriarchy is eradicated from all areas of life, since<sup>23</sup> the oppression of women is multi-dimensional.<sup>24</sup> It gives women a starting point to advocate for their rights demanding that oppressive and destructive biblical and cultural traditions like premarital counselling should not be granted any claim to truth and authority in today’s world.<sup>25</sup> According to African feminist cultural hermeneutics, a critical evaluation of scriptures should be done from a particular experience. This is done to develop specific goals and strategies for the liberation struggle against patriarchal teachings of scriptures and traditional religion used to subjugate women in both religion and cultural contexts.<sup>26</sup> This perspective enables me to reflect upon my own experience and social situation in a more subjective way. This research is shaped by the

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<sup>19</sup> Ivor Goodison, *Studying Teachers’ Lives* (London: Routledge, 2013), 6.

<sup>20</sup> Dorothy. E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988), 107.

<sup>21</sup> Mercy. A. Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theologies* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 18; see also Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*.

<sup>22</sup> Isabel. A Phiri & Sarojini Nadar, “What’s in a Name? Forging a theoretical Framework for African Women’s Theologies,” *Journal of Constructive Theology* 12 no. 2 (2006): 5-24.

<sup>23</sup> Eunice Kamaara & Mary. N. Wangila, “Contextual Theology and Gender Reconstructions in Kenya,” In *Theologies and Cultures*, VI no. 2 (2009): 110:133.

<sup>24</sup> Denise. M. Ackermann, “Feminist Liberation Theology. A Contextual Option,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 62 (1988): 14-28.

<sup>25</sup> Mary. N. Wangila, *Female Circumcision: the Interplay of Religion, Culture and Gender in Kenya* (New York, NY: Orbis Maryknoll, 2007), 34.

<sup>26</sup> Wangila “Female Circumcision,” 34.

feminist political agenda of research where theorising begins with my own experience of premarital counselling.<sup>27</sup>

## **Pedagogies of Premarital Counselling: Initiation into Marriage**

The initiation of women into marriage in African traditional and African Christian communities is a continuous process up to marriage. The climax amongst the Ndebele of Zimbabwe is during the payment of *ukangaziwe* (know me). What is interesting about initiation into marriage is the internalised oppression by women as they are the ones who initiate younger women into submissive forms of marriage relationships.<sup>28</sup> Initiation into marriage is done through culturally designed systematic pedagogical approaches. I shall discuss the pedagogies that I experienced as well as some which I observed in the Ndebele context of Matetsi.

### ***Fertility in Marriage***

Ancestors in Nguni culture, particularly Ndebele from Matetsi, are described in patriarchal expressions mainly as *obabomkhulu* (grandfather); however, at times it depends on the sex of the ancestor. Amongst the Ndebele people of Matetsi, marriage, in most cases, has links to ancestors and is understood in patriarchal terms as ordained by masculine ancestors for procreation reasons. Hence, Ndebele people consider infertility as the wrath of the ancestors and a terrible curse to the couple. Mbiti confirms this in his discussion of fertility in African religion.<sup>29</sup> Thus, if a couple experiences infertility, a ritual to appease ancestors to open a wife's womb or correct a husband's sexual impotence must be performed. In some African contexts like the Ndebele from Matetsi, infertility is usually blamed on the wife. This emerges in Folkvord, Odegaard & Sundby's study on male infertility in Zimbabwe, where men shift the blame of their childlessness to the wife and her hostile womb.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, *ukuthethela* (rituals to appease ancestors) are mainly focused on women and statements like *vulani isibeletho somntanenu* (open your daughter's womb) are expressed by elders who qualify to appease ancestors.

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<sup>27</sup> Loraine Gelsthorpe & Alison Morris, *Feminist Perspectives in Criminology* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1990), 88.

<sup>28</sup> M.W. Dube, "Feminist Theology," 352.

<sup>29</sup> John. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Longman, 1969).

<sup>30</sup> Sigurd Folkvord, Oystein Odegaard A. & Johanne Sundby. "Male Infertility in Zimbabwe." *Patient Education and Counselling* 59, no. 3 (2005): 239-243.

The primary purpose of marriage in Christian and African traditional religion is for procreation and is a wife's responsibility.<sup>31</sup> Thus, in some traditions a wife goes through an intensive process of premarital counselling about the significance of fertility and bearing children in marriage. I was told never to take my work to the bedroom, because the bedroom is for sex, mainly for procreation. When a woman does not fall pregnant in the first year of marriage "people will start to talk" and the woman will be questioned. After a traumatising miscarriage, my gynaecologist advised me to wait for a year or more before I tried for another baby, but elderly women around my private domain insisted that I stop taking contraceptives and try as soon as possible to fall pregnant, because that is key to my marriage. Emphasis on fertility begins in childhood and runs throughout the marriage process. A popular song among most Ndebele marriage ceremonies was produced by a South African Band, Platform One, entitled *makoti womyakazisa ma elele* (shake him up when he is asleep), which reminds a wife that sex and making children is more of her duty rather than her husband's. Therefore, the woman is encouraged to shake and wake him up when he is asleep to do his duties as a husband.

### ***Ukubekwezela Emendweni (Being Patient in Marriage)***

Among the Ndebele, traditional premarital counselling is purely patriarchal and uses different forms of communication including symbolism, poetry, songs and dance to teach the woman how to handle and sustain her marriage. Songs like *emendweni kuyabekezelwa* (exercise patience in marriage) are used to encourage a wife to exercise patience in all challenges she may encounter in marriage. Men are not taught to be patient; symbolism and song in traditional premarital counselling is directed to the woman. Shangase argues that all responsibility of protecting and sustaining marriage is placed on a wife's shoulders.<sup>32</sup> In agreement, Moyo declares that women must be prepared to enter into a marriage and to keep that marriage strong even if "it means sweating blood in order to keep their husbands."<sup>33</sup> This suggests that the virtue of patience is a wife's role.

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<sup>31</sup> Mbiti, "African Religions and Philosophy," 102.

<sup>32</sup> Ntombikayise Shangase, "Sexual Harassment and Culture," in *Silent No Longer: The Church Responds to Sexual Violence*, edited by Susan Rakoczy (Pietermaritzburg: Joint Publication of Lumko Institute, Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness, National Justice and Peace Commission & Theological Advisory Commission, 2000), 23-26.

<sup>33</sup> Fulata. L. Moyo, "The Red Beads and White Beads: Malawian Women's Sexual Empowerment in the HIV/AIDS Era," *Journal of Constructive Theology* 11, no.1 (2005), 53-66.

I experienced the emphasis of patience in all premarital counselling sessions, as well as on my wedding day. Amongst the Ndebele from Matetsi, it is the women who gather in a room and lecture the bride and the men also gather to address the groom on marital issues. Nonetheless, addressing the groom is no longer the case in Matetsi; it is assumed that the groom is knowledgeable about marriage. The women in this room addressed me on how I should take care of my husband and in-laws. Each elder taught me to persevere even if I faced challenges in my marriage. One elder said to me, "My daughter there are girls who will compete over your husband, at times forcing him to forget you and the children. It is normal. Just exercise patience and pray God will help you..." Patience in marriage was emphasised by every speaker. Women took turns to speak and elevate patriarchy. Dube confirms this and identifies it as "hard counselling."<sup>34</sup> I was advised to submit to my husband at all times. Research has conclusively shown the links between teachings on submission and GBV.

### *Infidelity among Couples*

Infidelity by a husband is not to be questioned because men are traditionally and socially allowed to have more than one wife. I was reminded that *indoda yinja* (a man is a dog), meaning that a man like a dog cannot be tied down to one sexual partner, hence as a wife I should not be surprised when my husband has other sexual partners. This resonates with African feminists such as Tamale and Dube who have observed this in many African traditional communities.<sup>35</sup> A husband's infidelity is blamed on the wife for not satisfying him sexually. On the other hand, a wife's infidelity is forbidden; those caught are humiliated and labelled 'loose' and referred to as *umfazi ongalayekanga* (a woman who did not go through proper premarital counselling). That woman is therefore sent back to her parents for discipline and proper marital counselling, or worse she is divorced for infidelity.<sup>36</sup> Rosewarne presents her personal struggles of being a willing participant in infidelity that resulted in another woman's devastation, as well as her own.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Dube, "Feminist Theology," 352.

<sup>35</sup> Sylvia Tamale, *Women's Sexuality as a Site of Control and Resistance: Views on the African Context*, a paper presented at an International conference on bride price held at Makerere Conference University, Kampala, Uganda, 16-18 February (2004). See also Dube, "Feminist Theology," 352.

<sup>36</sup> Maureen Kambarami. "Femininity, Sexuality and Culture: Patriarchy and Female Subordination in Zimbabwe,." *Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar Series: Culture, Femininity and Sexuality*, Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre (2006).

<sup>37</sup> Lauren Rosewarne, *Cheating on the Sisterhood: Infidelity and Feminism* (California: Praeger, 2009).



According to her, the competition for a man's affection by women undermines gender equality and sisterhood and destroys women's consistency in campaigns for gender equality and justice as men are able to divide them causing unsafe competition.<sup>38</sup> Rather than fighting for the common good, women's attention is diverted to this man, and each wants to win his affection by sacrificing their humanity.

In Christian premarital counselling I was encouraged to pray for my husband through 'thick and thin' and Prayer Women's League (PWL) from my church expressed that a woman's suffering in marriage is normal. This corresponds with Phiri's findings that women who experience violence in Christian homes state that they pray hoping that prayer will change their husbands.<sup>39</sup> Parallel to Phiri, Owino asserts that wives believe that prayer and submission to suffering will change their husbands.<sup>40</sup> This assumption encourages women not to apply critical hermeneutics of Biblical scriptures and reason. Therefore, a disturbing number of religious women, particularly Christians and Muslims, suffer and endure pain at the hands of their husbands because of naive religious interpretations.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Sex in Marriage***

Initiation to sex in marriage was explained in patriarchal terms such as "give him sex", "serve him his food", "arouse him", "give him his cake", as if marriage was only for serving the sexual desires of husbands. This is parallel to Baloyi's assertion that "sex and marriage in an African context are inseparable."<sup>42</sup> There are assumptions that in order to enjoy unlimited and guaranteed sex, a person must be married. For this reason, premarital counselling is used to socialise and instruct women on how to erotically please their husbands by moving the lower waist and twerking following the sexual rhythm of their husbands during sex.<sup>43</sup> All

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<sup>38</sup> Rosewarne "Cheating on the Sisterhood," 10

<sup>39</sup> Phiri "Why does God Allow our Husbands to Hurt us?," 24.

<sup>40</sup> Kennedy Owino, "'Maleness' and its Possible Influence on Abuse and Domestic Violence in South Africa: A Critique of some Expressions of Evangelical Theology," *Journal of Constructive Theology* 16, no 2 (2010), 146-168.

<sup>41</sup> Marie M. Fortune, Salma Abugideiri & Rabbi. M. Dratch, "A Commentary on Religion and Domestic Violence" (2010), *Faith Trust Institute*, [www.faithtrustinstitute.org](http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org) (accessed 10.01.2016).

<sup>42</sup> Elijah M. Baloyi, "An African View of Women as Sexual Objects as a Concern for Gender Equality: A Critical Study," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 31, no. 1, (2010), Art. #380, 6 pages. DOI:10.4102/ve.v31i1.380.

<sup>43</sup> Moyo, "The Red Beads and White Beads," 58.

this is in an effort to keep the husband happy, while superseding the happiness of a woman.

In Christian premarital counselling, the clergy, prayer women's and men's leagues use the Biblical text to counsel women and men. PWL constantly reminded me about my expected role as a wife and woman in the community. Paul's letter to the Ephesians (5:22-33)<sup>44</sup> was frequently interpreted by both my marriage pastor and women from my church to promote my subjugation in marriage. PWL and my marriage pastor used counselling sessions to emphasise male dominance, female obedience, submission, fruitfulness and patriarchal philosophy. The creation story in the Book of Genesis was constantly used to highlight the importance of my submissiveness to my husband. Rothman observes this in her discussion of "patriarchal kinship."<sup>45</sup> She argues that patriarchal kinship is found in the Book of Genesis, in the "begats." Adam as the first man qualifies each man to have "begat a son in his likeness, after his image."

## **An African Feminist Hermeneutics of Premarital Counselling**

Traditional and Christian premarital counselling re-socialises women to gender hierarchies. This is parallel to Dube's findings that "marriage is another stage where gender roles are fully reiterated and reinforced."<sup>46</sup> Christian counselling uses theological epistemologies based on the Bible while traditional religion uses cultural epistemologies to interpret marriage. The dictum *for better or worse* is usually explained out of the context of GBV and intimate wife abuse, indicating that the contract of marriage is biased and is an institution that embodies patriarchal power relations.<sup>47</sup> This dictum motivates women to stay in abusive relationships because they expressed these words as an oath on their wedding day.

The level of education plays an important role in empowering women to find their own hidden transcripts of resistance. A good example of this is my mother who was a professional teacher, who during the formal

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<sup>44</sup> <sup>22</sup> Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. <sup>24</sup> Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands (English Standard Version).

<sup>45</sup> Barbara. K. Rothman, "Beyond Mothers and Fathers: Ideology in a Patriarchal Society," in *Mothering, Ideology & Agency*, edited by Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang & Linda Rennie Forcey (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 139-158.

<sup>46</sup> Dube, "Feminist Theology," 352.

<sup>47</sup> Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 158.

premarital counselling sessions with men present, agreed with the patriarchal discourses of marriage that women taught me. After premarital counselling, she voiced her resistance by reminding me that I am an educated woman and I must act like one and respect my rights. Sultana's ethnographic study in the northern region of Bangladesh confirms this; she examines the awareness of women towards their rights in the household.<sup>48</sup> Her findings indicate that women's education was a key indicator of women's greater awareness of their rights in the family, because "it helps to increase women's consciousness about gender relations and organise them to engage in grassroots struggles for their rights."<sup>49</sup> Although women in premarital counselling reminded me that I am a woman and a wife before I am an educated woman, I knew my rights in marriage. I was able to detect some of what was taught, particularly patriarchal discourses that elevated my husband. However, I was not able to voice them because of the conservativeness of the context I found myself in. In such contexts I applied my own hermeneutics of suspicion and hidden transcripts and protested in silence. African culture socialises women not to be outspoken.<sup>50</sup> Tamale articulates that "while silence can work to reinforce oppression, it can also be a tool of resistance and struggle, especially for the marginalised."<sup>51</sup>

Although I was among the educated, in all premarital counselling sessions my age qualified me to be marginalised. Among the Ndebele, respect is earned by age rather than gender and class. Research indicates that women across the continent have adopted creative and unique methods of resistance and contestation of hegemonic sexual discourses, including silence.<sup>52</sup> Silence and tolerance mean that women find their own hidden transcripts of resistance within their situations and this works to their benefit as the oppressed and marginalised, since it is "unengageable" and ambiguous.<sup>53</sup> As a form of respect, my age prohibited me from engaging with the elders in premarital counselling; rather I engaged with them in silence.

African feminist cultural hermeneutics conscientised me that it is women who use culture to enforce women's oppression. Kamaara & Wangila

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<sup>48</sup> Alam Sultana, "Patriarchy and Women's Gender Identity: A Socio-Cultural Perspective," *Journal of Social Science* 6, no. 1 (2010), 123-126.

<sup>49</sup> Sultana, "Patriarchy and Women's Gender Identity," 125.

<sup>50</sup> Dube "Feminist Theology," 352.

<sup>51</sup> Sylvia Tamale, "Women's Sexuality as a Site of Control and Resistance," 23.

<sup>52</sup> Tamale, "Exploring the Contours of African Sexualities: Religion, Law and Power," *African Human Rights Law Journal* 14 (2014), 150-177.

<sup>53</sup> Tamale, "Women's Sexuality as a Site of Control and Resistance," 23.

rightfully argue that "...women are not only victims but also perpetrators of oppression against themselves", where they encourage younger women to appreciate and accept patriarchy and its traditions, keeping women subjugated in marriage for the benefit of men.<sup>54</sup> As a result, Kanyoro's argument, that such activities be conceptualised as "women's violence against women,"<sup>55</sup> is relevant and critical in campaigns against VAW and GBV. Campaigns against VAW should acknowledge that women are as much perpetrators as they are victims. The gendering of marriage has consequences to women, who may silently go through abuse in respect of what adult women taught them. Premarital counselling made me and other women vulnerable to all forms of violence. Both traditional and Christian premarital counselling teachings are hierarchical and autocratic, pushing women into submissive roles that promote intimate wife abuse.

## Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have argued that my hermeneutics of suspicion reveals that there is a thin line between premarital counselling and GBV and that this is ignored in efforts to eliminate GBV. In conclusion, I wish to argue that since premarital counselling is patriarchal and enforces women's submission to men, it is a death sentence for women. Its teachings are biased and dangerous to women. The findings of this study join growing literature in the field of religion, gender, GBV and wife violence in critiquing religious and cultural pedagogies that promote "dangerous masculinities and femininities" that enforce women abuse. My research offers empirical evidence as well as a theoretical explanation for how cultural and religious teachings introduce the newly married couple to androcentric and binary views of marriage. The results support theories that see wife violence within the intersection of gender constructions. My experiences of premarital counselling reveal a disturbing hegemonic patriarchy engraved in premarital counselling that exposes wives to GBV or intimate wife violence. Thus, to be sincere to myself as an African woman, African cultural hermeneutics allows me to reject any teaching that enforces the oppression and victimisation of women.

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