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**Venganai, Hellen**

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HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

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# Negotiating Identities through the 'Cultural Practice' of Labia Elongation among Urban Shona Women and Men in Contemporary Zimbabwe

By Hellen Venganai

## Abstract

Dominant Eurocentric discourses on African traditional cultural practices linked to sexuality construct these practices as retrogressive for women in these localities. These discourses take the form of women and sexual rights promoted by some women activists and scholars, whose work mainly focuses on the so-called traditional rural women as victims of these gendered sexual practices. In many ways, such approaches manufacture and exaggerate differences between Western and African women, while reproducing colonial discourses that construct Africans as backward. This article interrogates the modern-traditional binary which underpin conventional representations of some sexual practices as cultural. Following African feminist scholars who argue for research which explores the significance and meanings such sexual practices hold for those women who engage in them, this article draws on a study I conducted with Shona speaking women and men in Zimbabwe who participated and/or were interested in the practice of labia elongation. The targeted women and men, in their 20s -30s, live in relatively affluent houses in Harare, and are identified as urban, modern and middle-class. The study sought to explore why such women (as well as men) who identify as modern were so interested and invested in a sexual practice that has often been constructed as traditional and cultural. By exploring how women and men invoke notions of culture and tradition, the article demonstrates the creative and complex ways in which the young adults position themselves in relation to this practice in particular, and in relation to gender and sexuality more generally.

**Keywords:** Labia elongation, Shona women, sexuality, identities, culture, Zimbabwe

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## Introduction

African cultural practices feature frequently in ongoing intellectual debates about gender and sexuality. Of interest are the debates around the practice of labia elongation and its representation in the medical, human rights and feminist discourses. Labia elongation is a common genital modification traditional practice for some ethnic groups in Africa which involves massaging and pulling of the inner labia using the thumb and index finger, sometimes after applying certain herbal oils or powders to ease the stretching process (Bagnol & Mariano 2008: 576). Although this process can commence when a woman is older, it is normally recommended that it begins and ends before a girl's first menstrual cycle, when the labia is likely to grow faster (Mwenda 2006: 350). In Zimbabwe, this practice has historically been framed around cultural ideals of 'proper' Shona femininity as well as around discourses of sexual pleasure (Mano 2004: 325). However, by the late 1960s, the practice appeared to be losing its relevance particularly for Shona urban women (Williams 1969: 166) suggesting that it was no longer compliant with the lifestyles of these modern women. Yet, in 2012 when I attended a kitchen party in one of the low-density suburbs in Harare, I was confronted with young professional women from middle class backgrounds who seemed keen to undergo labia elongation. This was after one woman who had been hired to advise the bride-to-be about how to 'handle' her husband sexually, spoke positively about the importance of labia elongation in enhancing male sexual pleasure. This prompted me to conduct an exploratory study about middle class people's constructions of this practice, which forms the basis of this article. I begin my discussion by outlining the contemporary theoretical and political debates around labia elongation and other so-called African traditional sexual practices. My aim is to demonstrate the complexities and the significance of these practices in contemporary Africa, both at a discursive level and an empirical level. Next, I provide an overview of the methodological approach I took. Finally, I focus on the summary and analysis of my findings.

## Debates about traditional practices in postcolonial Africa

While African traditional practices such as labia elongation are usually reduced to markers of particular ethnic identities, scholars like Wickström (2010: 534) and de Robillard (2009: 87-88) suggest that we should see these practices as representing much more. The World Health Organization (WHO) classifies labia elongation as a type of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). However, this is contested by some African feminists who argue that the term 'mutilation' carries "powerful negative connotations" (Koster & Price 2008: 191), with others proposing 'genital modification' as a more 'acceptable' term. The argument advanced by these femi-

nist scholars is that WHO's negative representation of labia elongation extracts the practice from the "lived [sexual] experience" of African women, which, in their view, is not always marked by "incompleteness, anxiety and depression" (Tamale 2006: 27). Others even challenge the false dichotomy between practices labelled as FGM – projected in mainstream feminist discourse as backward, oppressive, and harmful to women in the global South – and those classified as Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery (FGCS), which although they also involve genital modification (for example clitoral piercing and labial reduction), are instead linked to positive bodily aesthetics because they are practiced in western countries by western women who are constructed as empowered (Tamale 2006: 27). Within dominant liberal feminist discourses, for example, "modernity is seen as the context within which young, black women can claim power" over their bodies when they distance themselves from customs and traditions (Clark 2006: 12). In other words, women empowerment is equated with discarding so called 'traditional' practices, which are constructed as backward and an impediment to women's progress (Amadiume 2006: 4).

These dichotomies follow a long discursive colonial history of how colonial administrators and Christian missionaries made efforts to denigrate most African practices. Christian missionaries were especially opposed to African female and male initiation practices, as a result, laws were put in place, while Christianised versions of "initiation" schools were established to 'civilise' and redefine the cultural norms and police the sexuality of the colonised, especially women (Tamale 2006: 10-11). Nonetheless, while cultural discourses and cultural practices were initially sites of oppression and policing, they later became "instruments of resistance" (Garuba & Raditlhlalo 2008: 39) within the same colonial period which witnessed a rise in nationalist discourses propagating notions of 'African culture', which became influential in fighting colonial domination.

In a postcolonial context, some argue that references to culture or cultural practices appear to be central to the constructions of Africanness or African identities, in which issues of self-determination for black African people seem to be of paramount importance (Spronk 2009: 509). There is a body of literature arguing that the revival of particular gendered cultural practices – which had been abandoned due to colonial influence – is tied with notions of national cultural identities and nation building in postcolonial nations (Spronk 2009: 502; de Robillard 2009: 88-89). A case in point is the revived virginity testing ceremonies, which are now publicly celebrated in some parts of Southern Africa, notably in South Africa.

Debates about this practice are framed mainly around "return to culture" and "liberation from culture" discourses (Wickström 2010: 534) which are also situated within an HIV and AIDS context. The promotion of virginity testing is to a greater extent seen as a response to the HIV and AIDS pandemic affecting the

African continent, which some politicians and traditional leaders attribute to a 'loss' of African culture (Kaarsholm 2006: 89-90). In this context, the practice thus becomes a gendered "moral regeneration" strategy which others perceive as representing "men's control over women [sexuality] and elders' control of the young" (Kaarsholm 2005: 146). Others argue that rather than simply associating virginity testing with particular ethnic groups or presenting it as a solution to HIV and AIDS, the practice is also:

> a domain in which the girl-child's chastity becomes an index of 'social purity' […] instrumentalised through discourses and political discourses designed to adjudicate which bodies, desires and practices are authentic and which are not, within the national scheme (de Robillard 2009: 89).

It seems, therefore, that women's bodies and sexuality, as well as some gendered cultural practices, are symbolically constructed in relation to the nation, rather than ethnic identities. This has led others to argue that the celebration of 'authentic' African practices or African culture should be seen as significant "political resources" (de Robillard 2009: 88) or "political language" (Wickström 2010: 534). Although this can be traced back to the colonial period, as mentioned earlier, African political and traditional leaders continue to deploy positive discourses of African cultures as a strategy against the dominance of Western cultural practices and products.

However, this article is not so much interested in the constructions of cultural practices (notably labia elongation) by the politically, culturally, and intellectually powerful, but by young adults from urban and middle class backgrounds. Nonetheless, it has been noted that ordinary people also tend to draw on these 'political' discourses to publicly support African traditional practices even when they do not practice them personally and even criticize them in private. In a study about how young men and women in Kenya negotiate sexuality, Rachel Spronk (2009: 501) argues that at times invocations of tradition by young people are merely ideological battles which do not reflect their embodied experiences or individual aspirations. She recalls having an informal conversation about female circumcision with a particular young black urban professional man. The young man is said to have emotionally defended the practice, telling her it was an important part of their community's culture, and that 'Westerners' (like her) were wasting their time advocating for its abolishment because these women were doing this out of choice. Yet, identifying with these practices to affirm one's Africanness only represents one of the multiple identities or subjectivities that one might want to embody in a postcolonial contemporary context. Two months later, the same young man told

her that he 'cannot marry a circumcised woman' because he felt the practice diminished women's chances of enjoying sex (Spronk 2009: 501). Thus, on the one hand, the young man, as a black African, felt obliged to support an African cultural practice in the context of its negative representation by the West. On the other hand, at a more personal level, as a sexual being, this particular 'culture' contradicts his own notions of sexuality where he values the sexual pleasure of both men and women. This suggests that the meanings people attach to these practices are never fixed, but negotiated and contextual.

It is within these complexities that I situate this article, which focuses on the significance and people's appropriations of the practice of labia elongation in a postcolonial Zimbabwean context. While colonial and contemporary hegemonic discourses construct (Western) modernity in opposition to (African) tradition, and African culture in opposition to Christianity, the article draws from scholars who caution against naturalising categories by simply taking "either or" approaches that "posit complex social issues on a binary plane" (Tamale 2008: 48). The article seeks to demonstrate the complex meanings young women and men attach to labia elongation and the symbolic connections they make about this practice with gender, sexuality, tradition, Christianity etc., which go beyond the modern-traditional binary.

## Methodological approaches which informed my study of labia elongation

This article is based on a study I conducted in 2015 with Shona women and men from urban and middle class backgrounds in Harare, Zimbabwe. The study sought to explore how young women and men who identify as modern relate to and speak about labia elongation, a practice that is dominantly constructed as 'traditional'. The article questions representations of the discursive categories 'modern' and 'traditional' as oppositional by interrogating the participants' understanding of the practice of labia elongation, to see their shifting positions and how they reinforce, disrupt, and challenge this discourse.

Motivated by African feminist scholars who urge us to understand these practices from the perspectives of the people who engage in them (Amadiume 2006: 4; Tamale 2006: 27), I explored women and men's understandings of labia elongation through interviews and (one mixed and three single-sex) focus group discussions. My commitment to include men in the research is influenced by the idea that gender operates in everyday life in governing how women and men behave in different socio-cultural contexts. As has been pointed out, "to study women in isolation perpetuates the fiction that … the experience of one sex has little or nothing to do with the other" (Scott 1988: 32). Although labia elongation is practiced by

women, it is usually framed in relation to men's sexual needs and desires, so it is important to also explore men's constructions of the practice.

Thirty participants (20 women and 10 men aged between 20 and 39) were selected for the study, although for this article, I excluded the findings from the mixed-sex focus group discussion, which comprised three men and two women. While the number of participants represents a very small sample, this research was interested more in understanding how different women and men give meaning to labia elongation, and less concerned with generalising findings to the wider Shona population in Zimbabwe. In a way then, the research draws on versions of poststructuralist feminism, which speak against the quantifying and homogenisation of women's (and by extension, men's) experiences. Prominent among these scholars is Chandra Mohanty (1988: 66-68) who is critical of the essentialist construction of women in developing countries as victims of patriarchy and culture. She argues that research should acknowledge rather than ignore the diversity of women's sexual practices and experiences in these localities.

I do not treat interviews and focus group discussions as mere tools of tapping information from participants in terms of what they say, but as particular social encounters in which identities are performed relationally (Pattman 2015: 82). In other words, I do not take what participants said as accounts of truth. Rather, I suggest that what they said or how they said it might have been influenced by the interview context. This is informed by critical ideas constructing interviews as 'contextual and negotiated' encounters (Charmaz 2006: 27). Furthermore, this article is influenced by feminist contributions to methodology that emphasise reflexivity and the significance of situating oneself in the research because. As Charmaz (2006: 178) argues, 'researchers are part of what they study, not separate from it'. I affirm Charmaz's observation here, especially since as a researcher I had a lot in common with the participants. For instance, I also belong to the Shona ethnic group. Like the participants, I come from the middle class, and, like them, I possess a university degree. Although, I did not elongate my labia, I spoke with women who had undergone the practice and those who had not, and views from both groups of women (and some men) are summarised in this article.

I chose not to self-disclose my labia status to my participants, despite feminist arguments that revealing certain personal information by researchers improves participants' openness. My silence about my labia status, however generated interesting data, because in some focus groups and interviews, participants assumed that I underwent this practice. This was clear in the way some women who elongated their labia often asked me to affirm their responses assuming that we share similar experiences. But one woman who indicated she had undergone elongation asked me after our interview whether I had also done it and I told her I had not. My assumption is that had I declared my status at the beginning of the interview,

or if she had asked this question in the middle of the interview, this might have made her talk less openly.

In terms of analysis, I draw from poststructuralist feminism in which language "in the form of a historically specific range of ways of giving meaning to social reality, [is seen as offering] us various discursive positions, including modes of femininity and masculinity" (Weedon 1987: 25-26). Specifically, I focus on how and why participants position themselves in relation to particular discourses of gender and sexuality and tradition or culture in their discussions about labia elongation. As I illustrate later in the article, their interpretation of the practice is very complex in that it was not simplistically reduced to the modern-traditional discursive binary, but produced multiple subjectivities.

Since the article focuses more on the social identities people associate with labia elongation, I also adopt Hall's anti-essentialist deployment of identity as a relational concept that is both 'strategic and positional', and not one that 'signal[s] that stable core of the self' (Hall 1996: 3). I employ the concept identities instead of identity to emphasise their multiplicity and instability, while I use identifications to show that how people negotiate around these multiple, shifting, and sometimes contradictory identities, in relation to particular discourses, is an ongoing 'process never complete' (Hall 1996: 2).

## Ethics

Owing to the sensitive nature of the topic, part of the ethical procedures was to explain fully to potential research participants about the nature and objectives of the research, so that they can be in an informed position to decide whether to take part in it or not. To achieve this, I drafted consent forms explaining the research, on which participants had to append their signatures. Only one of my participants, a female, withdrew from the research. The said participant had initially expressed interest in taking part in the research. But before we could set a date for the interview, she requested that I tell her some of the questions I would ask her during the interview, which I did. She told me that she was going to think about it, since she would not like to discuss her personal issues with a group of people. She never got back to me, so I replaced her with another female participant. The rest of the participants voluntarily signed the consent forms. With the participants' consent, these conversations were recorded using a digital recorder. In the focus groups, I appealed to participants to keep our discussions confidential. I cannot claim that confidentiality was achieved because there is a possibility that the participants may have discussed the subject matter with their friends. What I managed to do, however, was guarantee them anonymity by using pseudonyms in my transcriptions, which is what I also do in this article. In the focus groups discussions, I

avoided asking questions that were of a personal nature (such as 'have you elongated your labia?'), and only pursued these with participants who voluntarily shared their personal stories. For now, I turn to the study findings.

## Labia elongation: Ethnic pride or sexual practice?

I was interested in understanding how participants constructed their identities in relation to ethnicity, and how these intersected with their other forms of identification as young women and men from middle class backgrounds in contemporary Zimbabwe. I also wanted to find out whether they associated the practice of labia elongation with their own, and/or other ethnicities. Despite displaying knowledge about labia elongation, participants (including those who had undergone labia elongation) disagreed about whether this was a practice specifically limited to the Shona people. Some participants were of the view that labia elongation is 'foreign' to the Shona. They argued that those Shona people who participate in the practice 'borrow' it from Malawian and Mozambican women or from other local minority groups such as the Shangaan, the Venda, and the Tonga.

On the other hand, others said that labia elongation was a Shona cultural practice even though they noted that not all Shona women undergo the process. One man accused young urban Shona women who did not elongate their labia (and young urban men who are not knowledgeable about this practice) of not 'consulting' with people in the rural areas. Presumably, this was because of the way rural people are seen as having the responsibility of imparting knowledge about 'cultural practices' especially to their urban kin who are projected as easily corrupted by Westernisation. Another woman bemoaned the 'disappearance' of sexual traditional practices such as labia elongation among the Shona and urged women to 'follow what we used to do in the past, our culture.'

Interestingly, among the women participants who indicated they elongated their labia, some were not keen to publicly reveal that they had undergone this practice. One woman was of the opinion that many urban women were 'at the forefront of embracing western ways' such that they do not teach their children about labia elongation. Hence, to reveal that they underwent this practice in an urban context carries negative connotations. It would also imply that they 'are very backward people'. Another woman who also elongated her labia, initially tried to distance herself from rural women whom she accused of not 'valu[ing] education' because they were too much into 'cultural things' such as female initiation practices including labia elongation. But when I asked her later in the interview what motivated her to elongate despite her earlier attempts to dissociate herself from the practice and the rural women who engage in it, she said she did it 'for the sake of being girls'. When I asked her to elaborate, she said elongated labia 'is

something that is wanted in your bedroom for it [sex] to be enjoyable'. I propose that this respondent emphasises the relevance of labia elongation as just a sexual practice that may not be tied with people affirming their ethnic identity.

## Labia elongation and Christianity

As alluded to earlier in the article, Christianity influenced a shift in modes of sexual expression for the colonised, especially black African women. However, it also emerged as an important site of identification for the colonised and still does for most people in postcolonial African countries, including for the participants in my study. In Zimbabwe, for instance, 70-80% of the population identify themselves as Christians (Makahamadze, Isacco & Chireshe 2012: 711). Although Christianity is not presently associated with a particular social class, it is worthwhile mentioning that during colonialism it played a central role in the creation of an African elite. To demonstrate this shift in social status in that colonial context, the Zimbabwean middle class, "rejected tradition and custom in favour of modernity" (West 2002:4). However, unlike in colonial times where middle class people tended to dissociate themselves with practices constructed as 'traditional' or 'cultural', women and men in my study took contradictory positions to either justify or critique labia elongation by invoking Christian discourses.

There was no consensus about whether Christian churches teach (or should teach) about labia elongation, and whether the practice is against Christian values because of its usual associations with 'culture' and tradition. It seems some of the participants' invocation of religion was linked to their affirmation of their Christian and middle class identities drawing from discourses that conflate Christianity with modernity. For example, there was a view that women should not practice labia elongation because they were created 'complete' and if elongated labia were necessary 'they should have been created big like some body parts'. Another woman suggested that women who engaged in labia elongation, especially rural women, had 'no clue about what the bible says'.

The counter-arguments, some which were also framed in religious terms, were quite secular and also individualistic in rendering people's bodies as projects on which to work and improve through their own actions. This was reflected in the kinds of modern (gendered) analogous projects of self-improvement which participants engaged in and which they compared with labia elongation. In a focus group I conducted with men, one man commented that labia elongation was tampering with God's 'perfect' creation. In response to this, some men made an analogy between labia elongation and going to the gym to build muscle. Pulling labia, the men suggested, was like building muscles (in the gym). Here, labia elongation is equated to body building and is presented by men both as a positive

modern bodily (and gendered) modification in women. In discussions with women, some also equated labia elongation with applying make-up on their faces, as exemplified in the excerpt below:

> […] the issue is, it's not all about God created me without [elongated labia]. If it was like that, people would not be applying those Black Opal; they would not be trimming their eyebrows because you were not created [without them]. God created you with all those eyebrows, so why are you removing them? [For me], it's all about what people are encountering in their day-to-day lives. Even in churches, people would not be wearing trousers, people would be walking around naked because we were created naked.

Such self-improvement discourses and practices seem to resonate with key features of modernity. Yet, ironically, they are used by the participants to justify a 'traditional' or 'cultural' practice of labia elongation. Here, labia elongation is spoken about in terms of its aesthetic value just like applying make-up, or wearing clothes, supposedly to improve from where God left off. What is more striking, however, are the analogies used (of trimming eyebrows and applying make-up), which I argue, are signifiers of middle class femininity.

In other interviews, while participants were not sure whether labia elongation is 'satanic or if it is godly', religion was framed (and labia elongation justified) by some around husband-wife relationships, which – as the following extracts from two women in separate interviews show - are characterised by unequal power relations:

> [The] bible respects the fact that as a wife you should do just like the [husband wants]. [The] husband is commanded to love his wife, [likewise], the woman is commanded to respect and submit to the husband. So if the husband thinks that matinji (elongated labia) he wants them on his wife, the wife can go out of their way to have them. So I guess it's not out of line. (Tanya)

> What happens in churches is that they say that one thing that you must value most if you are a married woman [is] your husband. So what your husbands wants, that's what you do; meaning that it is not a [biblical] teaching that is done openly because maybe another man doesn't like it… (Chido)

What the two respondents say here reflects how "in some cases the Bible is un-

fortunately evoked to support the superiority of men and the subordination of women" (Machingura & Nyakuhwa 2015: 95). This is a case where women themselves (and not men) employ biblical discourses on female submission, in reinforcing rather than challenging female subordination. They emphasise that a good Christian wife must always do what the husband 'wants' as the Bible commands. Nevertheless, this also demonstrates the reification and deification of the Bible as a powerful person, the same way 'culture' is often personified by people (especially men) in relation to gender and sexuality (Pattman 2001: 235). These contradictions point to the complexity of the meanings my participants attach to labia elongation in relation to Christian religion and the particular significance this holds for them in different contexts.

## 'Complete' and 'Incomplete' Women

Earlier in the article, I alluded to how African women who engage in the so-called cultural practices are projected in dominant Western feminist discourses as oppressed victims of culture. Nevertheless, there is also a tendency by some educated African scholars to project rural and uneducated African women as the Other, which has been highly criticised by other African feminist scholars. Zulu Sofola, for instance, is critical of educated, urban African women who look down upon rural women for 'accepting' certain cultural practices (Sofola 1998: 62-63). She makes her argument by drawing parallels between polygamy (which she implicitly associates with rural women) and monogamy (which she associates with educated urban women). Because of the educated African woman's supposed preference for a monogamous union, Sofola accuses her of being "totally alienated from her culture, [because] she does not even know how polygamy is organized and operated" (Sofola 1998: 63). While Sofola raises important concerns about the tendency by educated African women to denigrate other women whom they perceive as 'uneducated', I am critical of her portrayal of rural women as 'carriers' (and educated urban women as 'violators') of culture. I find, her construction of these two categories of women in oppositional ways rather limiting in that it replicates, rather than challenge, the Othering of particular women, while reinforcing the idea that they are distinctly different from each other.

Nevertheless, Sofola's observations about the denigration of rural women were reflected in the interviews I conducted as I illustrate later. But I also witnessed other processes of Othering with regards to how women who had not undergone labia elongation were presented and spoken about as the Other. Labia elongation was presented as a process that girls and women have to do in order to get married, and to give pleasure to husbands as elaborated in the next section. More significantly, it was symbolically constructed as signifying a woman's 'completeness'.

This is also what other scholars observe about female initiation rites in Africa, that these practices and the accompanying discourses, are "about the creation of women" (Arnfred 2011: 45), which produces particular versions of femininity which become normalised.

In my study, labia elongation emerged as a medium through which some women who have undergone this practice seemed to derive a sense of self-esteem. This was apparent in the way they celebrated the practice by constructing themselves as 'complete women', superior, and sexually attractive, while denigrating those who had not undergone the practice. Among the female participants who glorified the practice, one said that a woman with elongated labia was 'a woman among women'. Women who underwent labia elongation and those who did not were ranked differently in terms of women's (sexual) attractiveness and status. Women without elongated labia were associated with derogatory euphemistic labels such as 'open holes' or 'houses without a door' in order to emphasise their incompleteness. Another participant boasted about possessing (long) labia, which she claimed was the reason her husband was 'always' sexually satisfied. This emerged when women were debating about whether having elongated labia resulted in a reduction of male promiscuity. In the following extract, one woman suggests it is 'disrespectful' to be compared with women without elongated labia, and seems quite critical of men who cheat on their wives with elongated labia with those without:

> […] it pleases him that my wife is a woman among women, and the chances of him going out they are slim. Of course men "go out" but the chances of him "going out", can you imagine when you have a complete woman, if you do it [sex], even your guilty conscience it will tell you that why are you disrespecting this woman by going to someone who doesn't have. (Mary)

Nonetheless, not all women with elongated labia were publicly proud of it. Chenai, for example, seemed concerned with revealing her labial status even to other women. She had the impression that she would be mocked and labelled as 'backward'. When I asked whether she was suggesting that labia pulling was a sign of backwardness, Chenai was noncommittal, explaining instead that:

> Some [women] are ashamed to openly say that I have them. Like now if I had to bath in the presence of others, if they [my labia] are long, the current generation will be laughing wondering 'what it is…we saw her with a string [elongated labia] down there'?

The mention of elongated labia as resembling a string, and the laughter this may supposedly generate from other women, shows that Chenai was not associating it with female (sexual) attractiveness. Even more important here is Chenai's version of a 'modern woman' who has no interest in practices such as labia elongation, which she claims is as source of ridicule associated with 'backwardness'. Her construction of labia elongation as symbolising backwardness is, therefore, at odds with how other 'modern' women construct elongated labia as a source of attractiveness, 'completeness' and pride. Similarly, other women and men argue that elongated labia are unattractive and a source of 'dirt', partly because of the 'protruding flesh' and 'folds' which might produce a foul smell 'when not thoroughly washed.'

I then asked three of the women who told me they had not undergone labia elongation to respond to the derogatory remarks other women said about women like them. They told me they were not bothered by being constructed as 'incomplete'. The first one said labia elongation was not 'a measuring stick of superiority or inferiority.' She also said that women who made such comments were 'uncivilised'. The second one said she was not concerned because 'no man has ever said that to [her]' and that she 'would get worried [only] if [her] boyfriend says it'. The third woman presented other women's construction of a 'real woman' only in relation to sexuality, and particularly through possession of elongated labia, as quite narrow-minded. Interestingly, in as much as these three women initially presented labia elongation as of little significance in their lives as exemplified in their narratives above, it was only after I asked whether they ever discussed this issue with their sexual partners that it emerged that not having elongated labia sometimes bothered them. For instance, they all confessed that they initiated this topic in order to elicit their husbands or male sexual partners' opinion. Implicitly, this expresses their desire to be constructed as 'complete' women. More importantly, their concerns reflect the influence of cultural discourses of labia elongation which attempt to push women to conform to particular versions of femininity as defined in this socio-cultural context.

## Sacrificing sexual desire and pleasure as 'good women'

What was striking is how most women spoke about labia elongation in ways that gave prominence to men's pleasure rather than their own. This is reflected by one of the female participants who said that 'when a woman pulls, she pulls with a purpose that I want my man to enjoy.' I propose that the accentuation of male sexual pleasure rather than female sexual desire by these women had less to do with embarrassment and was connected with them performing particular versions of femininities constructed around making sexual sacrifices as wives and

lovers. Usually women only spoke about female sexual pleasure in response to my question about whether they benefitted from elongating their labia or not. Other women then told me that having elongated labia also enhanced their own sexual arousal.

In different interviews, some women with elongated labia drew parallels between the level of sexual arousal women supposedly experience when their nipples and elongated labia are caressed. They claimed that, unlike breast nipples which 'lost' their sexual sensitivity over time through 'breastfeeding', elongated labia have 'feelings' of their own which do not disappear. Yet, even though these women construct labia elongation as enhancing female sexual pleasure, they ironically see this as a dangerous problem. During a discussion about how long elongated labia should be, one woman alleged that 'it becomes a problem' when pulled labia are 'too long' because 'they bring a lot of [sexual] feelings.' Because of this, she said she discouraged girls from pulling beyond the 'normal' size, since that would cause 'a lot of' sexual feelings that 'you even fail to control yourself.' Another woman shared a story of a married woman whose labia were 'cut' by her husband after she became promiscuous. This story was in my view to emphasise the policing of women's sexuality.

Many women in my study seemed concerned with 'pleasing their men' sexually, and their support of labia elongation was tied to assumptions that this would curb men's promiscuity. Here, I draw on feminist literature on the relational construction of men and women's sexuality in patriarchal cultures and discourses. However, I do not intend to portray African sexual cultures or practices as more patriarchal or as the Other and very different from Western cultures. In the Western context, for instance, the so called female genital cosmetic practices are also framed around pleasing men as articulated by many Western scholars, including Morgan (1991: 47) and Negrin (2002: 21). This is despite their hegemonic representation as practices of Western "autonomous" women. I also want to refer to Hollway (1989: 64), who argues that regardless of cultural context it seems, men and women are respectively subjects of 'male sexual drive' and 'have/hold' discourses. In other words, in heterosexual relationships, men are constructed as having an insatiable appetite for sex or a natural sex drive, while women are seen as more concerned with commitment. This was framed and played out in discussions about labia elongation, between women, and the significance of this in 'holding on' to their men.

I use the term 'holding on' both literally and metaphorically here. In its literal sense, women undergo labia elongation to keep their men/ lovers/ marriages (hence 'holding on' to them). But the expression also connotes the discourses surrounding labia elongation (as echoed by some of the female participants in this study): that elongated labia 'firmly holds' the penis so that the man 'enjoys' the

sensation that the friction from the labia causes on his penis. However, divisions and conflicts emerged between women over their presumed abilities to hold on to their husbands, and (related to this) the pleasure they presumably are able to provide for him. The majority of female participants expressed the view that the practice guarantees husbands' marital fidelity based on the assumption that this satisfies their husbands' sexual desires. Rudo, who was married and had undergone elongation, said having elongated labia ensures that:

> your husband doesn't leave you [because] if you don't have those things [elongated labia], your husband will leave you for those who have them. All men are mischievous, where can you tie him?

This is illustrative of constructions of men and sexuality which naturalise men as sexually 'mischievous' and position women as wives in relation to mischievous men. This position, too, was common in most female participants' narratives. Nevertheless, other participants (both women and men) disagreed that labia elongation reduces the likelihood of husbands cheating on their wives. These participants insisted instead that it is 'natural' for men to be promiscuous.

But while (most) female participants seemed to praise labia elongation as a solution to hold on to their men, most male participants drew parallels between labia elongation and virginity. They held the view that it is by marrying virgins, rather than women with elongated labia, that they feel they can 'hold on' to their women. Men's focus on the importance of marrying a virgin was premised on the belief that these women would remain faithful to their husbands as exemplified in the men focus group conversation extract below:

> Ras: At least if you are the one who removes her virginity, you won't imagine that she will sleep with another man
>
> Obert: Yeah!
>
> Taurai: Because she has nothing to compare with, you are the reference point, you see.
>
> Masimba: Exactly! Exactly!

While a few men expressed that labia elongation enhances the sexual experience for men, most argued that there was no difference when a man sleeps with women with or without elongated labia. Only when having sex with a virgin was the sexual sensation 'strikingly different', they claimed. Therefore, while women believed

that labia elongation was a necessary marital and sexual sacrifice they must engage in for their husbands and lovers, most men in my study contradicted this view by instead placing more emphasis on a woman's virginity and not whether she has elongated labia or not.

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that through framing labia elongation in particular ways, Zimbabweans, especially urban Shona women negotiate their identities in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. More significantly, labia elongation emerges both as a material practice and as a symbolic marker through which young urban middle class adults negotiate identifications as gendered and sexual actors in a postcolonial African context. But rather than reproducing the communities of belonging usually associated with cultural practices – such as symbolising ethnic pride and/or ethnic identity – labia elongation, as constructed and experienced by participants in my study, produces other modes of identifications and communities of belonging than ones easily recognised.

I have demonstrated, that human beings are "site[s] and subjects" of multiple discourses (Weedon 1987: 97). As such, as they engage in constructing their identities, they "can only identify their 'own' interests in discourse by becoming the subject of particular discourses" (ibid.). The way participants spoke about labia elongation was not just about how they perceived this practice, but was also about "a staking of [their] identities" (Pattman 2001: 235). In other words, how they symbolically constructed this practice was in relation to how they positioned themselves against an array of possible femininities and masculinities, for example, as women (with or without elongated labia) or men, as modern urban middle class people, as sexual beings, as Christians, etc.

The article has shown how participants attempted to construct labia elongation as a cultural practice but in ways that do not make them appear traditional or cultural. This is evident in how they invoked Christian religious discourses to either justify or critique labia elongation. Others emphasised discourses of self-improvement to critique dominant Christian discourses which construct labia elongation as cultural, and therefore 'unchristian', for going against nature. The positions taken by this group of participants were in many ways a demonstration of how significant this practice is in their lives even though they identify themselves as Christians. Whereas colonial Christian discourses constructed most African practices as 'traditional' and pagan, and therefore incompatible with Christian values and modernity, the participants in my study blurred these boundaries. This is apparent in the disagreements they had about whether churches were teaching women about labia elongation or not, and whether this was a practice compatible

with Christian values. Some participants felt labia elongation was tampering with God's creation, because women were created 'complete', a position that appears to project the dominant narrative which presents (Christian) religion as separate from culture. Yet, even if these Christian discourses might appear totalising, individuals may produce other discourses, no matter how marginal, to reinforce or challenge dominant discourses. This is illustrated by some of the female respondents who argue that since the bible emphasises female submission, married women must elongate their labia upon their husbands' requests. In this regard, these women are drawing on Christianity to construct themselves as 'good Christian wives' in ways which defer to their husbands' authority.

What also emerged from the study, are the multiple levels of Othering exemplified especially by female participants. For instance, most of the women who had undergone labia elongation and spoke positively about this practice criticised those who did not undergo labia elongation (whom they constructed as 'incomplete' women). Nevertheless, the same women who praised labia elongation tried to distance themselves from women of particular nationalities and ethnicities (including their own) whom they considered to be rural and therefore 'traditional'. Having elongated labia that are too long was associated with rural and old women, for example. Hence some of the female participants wanted to dissociate themselves with labia elongation.

Finally, the article examined participants' efforts to construct labia elongation as a social and gendered sexual practice that transcends ethnic boundaries, in which the women (and men) were affirming their 'modern' 'middle class' identities. Contrary to other research findings, in reference to young women in Mozambique, that labia elongation is "out of fashion" (Perez et al. 2015: 703), the findings in my study suggest that the practice is very much 'in fashion' among the Shona considering the way the female participants in my study linked it with issues of class and modernity. This article has demonstrated the entanglement of the 'modern' and the 'traditional' in people's everyday lives, rather than a distinct separation of the two as often projected in dominant discourse. Working from a perspective that these categories are productive and relational rather than simply descriptive, the article demonstrates the slippery nature of these categories and the fluidity of identities. My findings thus beg the question: Why are civil society interventions about genital modification practices in Africa such as labia elongation focused on 'rural' and uneducated women, as if their gendered experiences are distinctly different from those of their urban and educated counterparts?

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**Hellen Venganai** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology & Social Anthropology at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. Her research interests are gender, sexuality, culture, and postcolonial studies.
Email: helvenganai@gmail.com

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