

## **From Bride Price to Sex Price- The Politics of Women's Bodies in Economic Exchange**

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### **Abstract**

*In Zimbabwe, lobola, or bride price, along with sex work or transactional sex work, represent two separate but intertwined forms of economic and bodily commodification embedded in culture, law, and socio-economic structures. While lobola is primarily a marriage custom rooted in socio-cultural and family systems, sex work is situated within a legal framework and is predominantly regarded as a public health, humanitarian, and gender vulnerability concern. The political economy, legal-institutional framework, and empirics of women's lives converge in shaping women's agency, rights access, entitlements, and the services available to them. The principal aim of this literature review is to synthesize literature from law, anthropology, public health, and gender studies to: (1) construct conceptualizations and institutional frameworks of lobola and sex work in Zimbabwe; (2) identify key drivers, harms, and possible merits in relation to gender equity, health, and legal rights; and (3) highlight empirical, theoretical, and policy gaps to inform advocacy, research, and legal reform. Following PRISMA-ScR guidelines, literature searches will cover published and grey literature, legal texts, NGO reports, and policy documents from 2000 to 2025. Sources will be selected using Population, Concept, and Context criteria, and synthesized along legal-institutional embedding, cultural political economy, health and rights, and agency and constraint axes. The review will analyze lobola ethnographic and legal studies alongside public health and human rights literature critiquing the criminalization and stigma affecting female sex workers. Comparative mapping is expected to reveal dominant commodification processes alongside variation in institutional embedding, legal protection, and social legitimacy. This review aims to illuminate the interrelation of economic downturns, gendered exclusion, and legal and policy infrastructures governing women's bodies and work, while underscoring evidence and policy gaps relevant to gender-equitable reform.*

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## **Introduction**

The socio-political and cultural political economic paradigm concerning gender, intimacy, and family structures has been shaped by lobola, sex work, and transactional sex work in Zimbabwe. This socio-political and cultural political economy paradigm has been informed by lobola as bride price and the conjunction of sex work and transactional sex work. While lobola has to do with family and customary frameworks, sex work lies in the intersection of health and human rights as a criminalized activity that brings together public health, human rights, and socioeconomic vulnerability. This enables the analysis of both phenomena as economic–bodily exchange systems, albeit through different institutional, normative, and legal frameworks, and political economies constituting agency and constraints of women in different ways.

## **The Concept of Lobola in Zimbabwe**

In Zimbabwe, Lobola serves as a form of dowry where a prospective groom, or his family, negotiates a form of wealth transfer to the wife's family. Ethnically, Lobola is regarded as kinship engenderment, appreciating the blessings of the wife's family, as well as the socio-cultural acknowledgment of the marriage (Vengesayi, 2021). Legal and anthropological scholars have critiqued this institution of marriage to showcase its more socio-economically oppressive and exploitive tendencies, for instance, the capturing of men and their families as hegemonic servants in marriage (Vengesayi 2021). There have also been empirical and normative studies where concerns of gender oppression have been discussed, claiming that lobola perpetuates patriarchal control over women to the extent of contravening constitutional provisions on equality and freedom (Vengesayi 2021).

The sociocultural and historical studies examine the negotiation and payment methods used among the Shona and Ndebele people, including payment by livestock, cash, or goods (Great Zimbabwe University study, undated). These studies demonstrate that tradition has been maintained, albeit with a shift from livestock to cash equivalents during modern socioeconomic conditions (Great Zimbabwe University study). Other scholars and advocates point out that commodification of lobola, especially within Zimbabwean society, has emerged as irrational, breeding sociocultural tension, financial burden, and potential instability within marriage (Great Zimbabwe University study; Vengesayi 2021).

Legal and gender critiques have underscored concerns regarding the high patriarchal lobola payment which reinforces norms that restrict women's autonomy and manageable dynamics in marriage (Great Zimbabwe University study). In specific contexts, significant lobola "investments" may also prevent the termination of marriage, as families may resist divorcing if an economic "investment" is not reimbursed (Vengesayi 2021). However, other public health research, including quantitative studies in urban settings, suggest that in certain socio-demographic contexts, marriages supported by bridewealth negotiations are maintained and associated with protective health and education outcomes, including higher education, delayed sexual initiation, and increased condom use (cited study). These potential benefits, however, are coupled with selection bias and limited generalizability, lack of directional empowerment or constraint concerning cultural norms and women (cited study).

All of these are critical with regard to lobola, which cannot be simplified as a singular institution, but rather one which intertwines cultural tradition, economic transaction, legal recognition, gendered hierarchy, as well as the benefits and burdens of social order and kinship cohesion.

### **Sex Work and Transactional Sex in Zimbabwe**

In comparison to lobola, sex work and transactional sex exist in a more obscure legal and socio-legal domain. Public solicitation, brothel-keeping, and procuring

are all classified as criminal acts under the law the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act (Chikava et al. 2023). The legal boundaries defining sex work curb women's freedoms, which in turn heightens their legal vulnerability to police harassment and restricted social and healthcare services (Chikava et al. 2023).

Public-interest reporting alongside qualitative work, the interviewing and documenting the experiences of sex workers, reveal the social consequences of the law, including the arbitrary detention, police violence, social stigma, and the denial of healthcare and HIV services (UNAIDS feature story 2021). Many of these accounts describe the condition of extreme poverty alongside lack of formal employment as the main motivators for women's engagement in sex work (UNAIDS 2021). The lack of legal provisions to aid sex workers and the criminalization of offering basic services, especially the proactive and preventive healthcare services that are urgently needed due to the high rates of HIV infection among sex workers in Zimbabwe, expose the legal gaps in the country (Chikava et al.2023).

Aside from the criminalized scope, there has been an increase in activism sparked by civil society groups, including advocacy from collectives of sex workers, legal advocacy groups, and coalitions allied with them, who, in one way or another, have been advocating for either decriminalization or protective legal frameworks, and more recently, seeking to reframe sex work as employment that deserves a recognition, rights and protective mechanisms (ZIMSWA 2022; CITEZW 2024). These advocacy narratives focus on counter criminalization as the main obstacle to rights, public health, and the dignity of individuals, and have sought judicial remedy to police abuses of their rights (CITEZW 2024).

A prominent judicial development in 2024 has liberated sex workers from incarceration, which resulted from legal battles fought against the criminal solicitation laws that were arbitrarily enforced upon them (INERELA+ Zimbabwe 2024). This highlights both the contentious nature surrounding the enforcement of law as well as the possibilities that legal action and civil society can influence the interpretation and enforcement of law. The legal landscape is actively changing,

with legal representation, civil society, and sex worker collectives advocating for less legal frameworks and more rights (INERELA+ 2024).

### **Lobola Versus Sex Work Comparison**

Both lobola and sex work can be viewed as forms of corporeal and economic exchange. Lobola operates within a culture and ritual laden social framework, often bolstered by institutional and family support. In contrast, sex work is more episodic or periodic, largely happening within a market framework, often outside of legal protection and under state sanction and stigma, though there is advocacy mobilization opposing these frameworks.

These systems vary along several axes: familial and customary versus state and criminal legal system for institutional embedding; long-term commitment versus short-term encounter for temporal orientation; normative versus contested for social legitimacy; and recognized social practice versus contested and criminalized for legal protections. Despite these distinctions, both practices may be examined through the lens of the economization of women's sexual or reproductive labour, the impact of cultural power relations, and the structural framework relative to women's autonomy, constraint, vulnerability, or agency.

Although lobola may facilitate social integration and familial blending in certain cases, it may also perpetuate patriarchal and socioeconomic systems that hinder a woman's autonomy. Regarding sex work, the dangers of criminalization, violence, and service exclusion are well known. Nonetheless, emerging advocacy frameworks for sex workers offer optimism for a move toward workplace acknowledgment, legal protections, and improved health services.

### **Purpose of a Scoping Review**

The years 2020 to 2025 outline an important window in the legal and socioeconomic landscape of Zimbabwe. It has been reported that the increasing economic burden of rampant unemployment, soaring inflation, and exclusion from participation in the formal workforce has spurred the commercialization of lobola.

This, in turn, is amplifying the economically burdensome, power-laden, and inequality-ridden—and marriage associated—dynamics. Concomitantly, civil society initiatives and litigation seem to shift the landscape of sex work regulation that has historically been stagnant. There are organized collectives of sex workers, in conjunction with human rights groups, who are actively advocating for the decriminalization of sex work, protection from violence perpetrated by state officials, and integration into public health services.

While there is some emerging research in the legal, anthropological, public health, and gender studies fields, there is still a noticeable gap in comparative and interdisciplinary work on lobola and sex work in Zimbabwe in relation to the legal dimensions, health implications, women's rights and autonomy, and gender equity. There is a lack of interdisciplinary research focused on lobola and sex work that analyzes the Zimbabwean context concerning legal frameworks, healthcare implications, women's autonomy, and gender equity.

We argue that a scoping review will be useful to: (1) map the evidence across all domains, (2) reconstruct the methodological frameworks, (3) emphasize conceptual and empirical gaps, especially in the discourse of agency versus coercion, cursory gaps in legal reform, health and human rights, and (4) enhance legal protection, public health responsiveness, and gender equity.

This review will employ political economy, feminist legal sociology, and gendered institutional analysis. Some pertinent aspects of the review include: (i) commodification as the pegging of an economic value to a woman's reproductive and sexual work; (ii) the agency versus structure dichotomy of whether women have the ability to bargain, take a choice, face some form of coercion, or navigate socio-legal layers; (iii) legal-institutional embedding of the changing customary and statutory recognition of lobola as juxtaposed with the criminalization and enforcement frameworks in sex work; (iv) and the socio-public health and gendered economic exclusion of the health and economic crisis.

## **Outline of the Review**

Following the Introduction, the Methods section will outline the scoping review protocol which defines the Population/Concept/Context (PCC) criteria, the chosen databases and sources of grey literature, the formulation of the search strategy, the screening and data extraction protocols, and the outline for thematic analysis. In the Results section, literature mapping will be presented, starting with a quantitative overview of literature volume and document characteristics, followed by thematic presentation along the legal frameworks, lived experience, gendered power, health, economic drivers, and identified research gaps. The discussion will interpret the findings in relation to the theoretical framing, and policy and research implications will be provided with emphasis on legal, public health, and feminist policy considerations.

## **Methods**

### **Scoping Review Framework**

This scoping review was carried out in accordance with PRISMA-ScR (Tricco et al., 2018) which stands for “Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews.” PRISMA-ScR provides a framework for the systematic consideration of concepts in a given body of literature, mapping zones, identifying core concepts, and clarifying definitions and gaps. Given the multidisciplinary body of literature on lobola and sex work in Zimbabwe, which includes anthropology, law, public health, gender studies, and even policy reports, a scoping review was the most appropriate design because it accommodates diverse study designs, grey literature, and cultural and legal texts.

### **Eligibility Criteria**

This review complies with the Population, Concept, Context (PCC) criteria as given by the Joanna Briggs Institute in 2020.

1. Population: Female participants of lobola marriages from Zimbabwe who are sex workers or engaged in some form of transactional sex.
2. Concept: Economic, legal, cultural, and socio-political studies of lobola and sex work incorporating elements of agency, constraint, commodification, and gendered results.
3. Context: Zimbabwean studies from the rural and urban divide and customary, statutory, and civil society.
4. Source Types: Academic publications under peer-review and articles in socio-culture, economics, law, public health concerning Zimbabwe and other relevant discourse, including reports from government and non-government organizations, legal texts, policies, and grey literature.
5. Timeframe: Between the years of 2000 and 2025, with a focus on 2020-2025, a publication during this window scrutinizing the legal, economical, and socio-culture Zimbabwe in that period was identified.

Exclusion criteria: Excluded from consideration were the studies conducted in Zimbabwe with focus exclusively on male participants and those which were deemed empirical, legal, or policy-less. Also excluded were theoretical works that were not Zimbabwean in nature concerning legal or policy matters.

### **Information Sources and Search Strategy**

The electronic databases that were actively searched include PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, African Journals Online (AJOL), and Google Scholar. Also pertaining to the discourse on lobola and sex work existed of Zimbabwean government and NGO webpages ZIMSWA, CITEZW, UNAIDS Zimbabwe, and other media archives which constituted grey literature. ZIMLli supplied legal texts, complemented by scholarly discussions on the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act, customary law, and post-2000 women's rights legal scholarship.

The search strategy combined the keywords and vocabulary “Zimbabwe,” “lobola,” “bride price,” “marriage payments,” “sex work,” “transactional sex,” “women’s bodies,” commodification,” “legal framework,” public health,” and “gender equity.” Results were further improved using Boolean operators (AND, OR). In addition, reference lists of the retrieved articles were examined manually for additional studies.

### **Screening and Selection Process**

The search results were brought into Endnote 20 for deduplication and thereafter title and abstract screening was done. Two reviewers independently screened studies against PCC criteria. Any disagreements were discussed and resolved by consensus or by a third reviewer. Full-text articles were assessed for eligibility and documented reasons for exclusion. A PRISMA-ScR flow diagram was used to visually display the number of studies identified, screened, included, and excluded.

### **Data Extraction and Charting**

A form was designed to systematically chart and extract the following data: the author and year of publication, study design, demographics and other characteristics of the population, context, findings of the study, legal or cultural considerations, health outcomes of the study, and policy insights including thematic considerations. Extraction applied the following themes: economic exchange, commodification, agency, structural constraints, legal embedding, and gendered outcomes. To achieve uniformity, two reviewers independently extracted data, and any disagreements reached consensus.

### **Data Synthesis**

A thematic strategy was employed to map and synthesize data from a multitude of sources. Classifying the organized data into key themes yielded the following which also served to outline the synthesis.

1. Legal and institutional frameworks: lobola under customary law and the 2022 marriages act; sex work under the criminal law (codification and reform) act.

2. Socioeconomic drivers: economic necessity, exclusion from the labor force, and inflation-driven constraints.

3. Cultural and political economy: ritual and symbolism, commodification, and patriarchy.

4. Health, human rights, and gendered outcomes: heightened risk of contracting HIV, reproductive autonomy, domestic servitude, and service access.

5. Agency and constraint: negotiation power of women, structural constraints, and advocacy.

In addition to the thematic framework, some descriptive statistics were calculated including frequency counts, types of publication, and study designs which were displayed in tables.

The overarching themes, noted contradictions, and gaps which required further analysis that were overarching were all captured using narrative synthesis. One of the comparative studies looked at lobola alongside sex work and noted their shared themes of commodification, as well as contrasting the legal and social legitimacies of each and their impact on women's autonomy.

### **Assessing Quality**

In scoping reviews, the quality appraisal is not typically standard procedure. That said, the established inclusion criteria set the limits of the scope. Furthermore, the data for this work was collected and analyzed by several researchers, providing clear mapping, which ensured transparency and reproducibility. Legal texts and gray literature were benchmarked against government and NGO publications to test the literature's trustworthiness and the reliability, resulting in corroboration.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical issues do not arise in this study because no primary data was collected; the study was conducted on literature that is in the public domain. Despite the lack of primary data, ethical issues were taken into consideration especially pertaining

to the narrative interpretations of a female sex worker to ensure that there was no stigma or judgement in the reporting.

1. Legal and Institutional Frameworks - Lobola under customary and statutory law, sex work under criminal law, recent reforms, enforcement practices.
2. Socioeconomic Drivers and Commodification - Economic strains, inflation, survival sex, commercialization of lobola.
3. Health, Rights, and Gendered Outcomes - Risks of HIV/STI, reproduction, domestic authority, and service provision.
4. Agency, Constraint, and Advocacy - Women's agency, negotiation power, structural limitations, advocacy, and legal and civil societal interventions.

## **Results**

### **1. Legal and Institutional Frameworks**

#### **Lobola: Customary and Statutory Regulation**

Lobola is traditionally governed by customary law and has operated as an institution for sociologically and economically linking families and communities (Vengesayi 2021; Great Zimbabwe University 2020). Zimbabwe's 2022 Marriages Act attempted to incorporate elements of customary marriages like lobola payments and sought to balance elements of traditional marriages with modern legal frameworks aimed at women's rights (Government of Zimbabwe 2022). The Act underlines the nature of customary marriages and affords some rights to women regarding property, inheritance, and divorce solicitations. The effective enforcement of these rights is, however, patchy, particularly along the rural-urban divide (Chikava et al. 2023).

Scholars, however, cite legal inconsistencies, privacy of the family, and local customs dominating lobola practices as reasons for the variation in form, amount,

and obligations associated with payment (Great Zimbabwe University 2020). Over the last few years, lobola has increasingly become commercialized, where families are demanding payments in cash or expensive goods in exchange; this particularly becomes an economic obstacle to marriage for younger, low-income men.

## **2. Socioeconomic Factors and Commodification**

### **Economic Factors and the Commercialization of Lobola**

Economic volatility characterized by hyperinflation, unemployment, and income inequality, and the deeper commercialization of lobola are developments occurring simultaneously (Betweentwocultures 2024). The perception of economic value assigned to daughters by families enhances lobola's demand as a fee to unlock high-value marriages. Ethnographic accounts document instances where lobola demands exceed several thousand US dollars, making marriage economically unfeasible for a large number of young men, and further entrenching a patriarchal system of dominance over women and their marital choices (Vengesayi 2021).

Some studies regard lobola as a marketized exchange and, consequently, part of the broader commodification of women's bodies and the social and reproductive work that they perform (Great Zimbabwe University 2020; Manasekudzai 2015). The movement from symbolic to material practices of lobola payment is a consequence of sociocultural dynamics responding to economic structural forces.

### **Transactional and Survival Sex**

Managing one's economic responsibilities can foster sex work. The qualitative studies highlight how sex work is undertaken within the context of unemployment and the need to support a family (UNAIDS, 2021; Chikava et al., 2023). The need to earn urgent supplementary income or fulfill household financial demands leads to the occurrence of transactional sex in urban centers and border towns (ZIMSWA, 2022). The use of physical labor to achieve economic survival portrays women's structural constraints. This is similar to the commodification of lobola, but

here, the lack of social recognition and legal framework surrounding marriage makes the case worse.

Digital platforms are increasingly reported to mediate informal and brothel-based sex work (CITEZW, 2024). While broadening the clientele, the changing technologies also intensify the risks of exploitation and policing. The relentless economic pressures, coupled with commodification, are the driving forces that change the political economy within women's bodies. Unlike the differing social and legal contexts, women's bodies are seen and treated as commodities for economic transactions, i.e., exchanges.

## **Health, Rights, and Gendered Outcomes**

### **Sexual and Reproductive Health**

Research demonstrates that women with high-lobola marriages deal with both protective and adverse health outcomes. Some quantitative studies suggest improvements in women's health outcomes when beneficial negotiations accompany lobola, as negotiations are linked with increased condom use, higher educational attainment, and postponed sexual debut (Chikava et al. 2023). Nonetheless, high-lobola situations may strengthen marital obedience, limit reproductive autonomy, attempt to mandate sexual relations, and elevate domestic sexual coercion (Vengesayi 2021).

On the other hand, sex workers deal with reproductive health challenges, including heightened risks of contracting HIV and other STIs. Stigma, the criminalization of sex work, and the denial of critical services compound these risks (UNAIDS 2021; Chikava et al. 2023). Services designed to address the health needs of sex workers are severely limited to peer education, condom distribution, and poorly designed safe space initiatives. While scarce comparative studies suggest that both lobola and sexual intercourse involve the use of one's body, sex work exposes women to far greater and more public risks related to health and the law, especially those in lower socioeconomic strata.

## **Gendered Power Dynamics**

With respect to lobola, there are sociocultural and genealogical blocs that embody a patriarchal system that restricts a woman's agency to a private sphere and her volition to terminate the marriage (Vengesayi 2021). While a marginalized occupation, there is a certain degree of agency available in the form of constrained, immediate integration of services and payment—albeit against a backdrop of legal jeopardy and social ostracization (ZIMSWA 2022). In this respect, empowered agency has been demonstrated to be ephemeral and varies concerning social standing, legal acumen, and access to social safety nets.

A central theme in comparative research is the degree of socio-economic connection to women's bodies, whether evaluative, commodified, or subordinated to an economic structure. This socio-economic connection has shaped social, health, and autonomy outcomes in the domain of traditional marriage or market-based sexual work (Manasekudzai 2015; Chikava et al. 2023).

## **Advocacy, Agency, and Constraint**

### **Negotiation and Autonomy**

Women exhibit distinct forms of negotiation power in both contexts. Within lobola payment systems, women and their families have some control over payment scheduling and the conditions of obligations, but the groom's family retains ultimate control (Great Zimbabwe University 2020). Agency in sex work manifests as selection of clients, payment setting, and negotiation of service terms, though these occur within constrained legal peril, institutional oversight, and economic vulnerability (CITEZW 2024).

### **Civil Society and Advocacy**

Advocacy groups have emerged for sex workers and provided integral support for social and legal rights, legal educational advocacy, police advocacy, and coordination of health services (ZIMSWA 2022). On the other hand, lobola advocacy is mainly embedded in the quest for gender equity and legal reforms for

legislative provisioning of property and marriage rights, including the moderation of lobola demands (Vengesayi 2021).

### **Legal and Policy Interventions**

In Zimbabwe, there have been judicial cases and NGO-sponsored efforts that show some hope for reform. In the area of sex work, there is a record of successful legal challenges to the arbitrary enforcement of solicitation laws that suggest some measure of rights-based legal interpretation (INERELA+ 2024). Many lobola-centered approaches focus on raising community awareness regarding legal provisions for basic rights and reasonable negotiation (Government of Zimbabwe 2022). These approaches imply that there is some level of structural hope for change, slow as it may be, and that progress, albeit uneven, is being made in both rural and urban areas.

### **Discussion**

#### **Comparative analysis of lobola and sex work**

This scoping review has highlighted lobola and sex work as both processes of economization that occur in Zimbabwe, although they differ significantly regarding institutional legitimacy, legal protection, social acceptance, and structural embedding. Lobola, in contrast, is accepted in society, customarily supported, and falls under customary law and the 2022 Marriages Act (Government of Zimbabwe 2022; Vengesayi 2021). On the other hand, sex work is primarily criminalized and socially and legally marginalized (Chikava et al. 2023; ZIMSWA 2022). Despite these discrepancies, both domains illustrate a fundamental form of commodification in which women's reproductive and sexual labor is exchanged within, and as a result of, a socio-economic system alongside other relations of a more overarching gendered political economy.

The legal and institutional frameworks shape women's experiences of autonomy and constraint in distinct ways. Lobola especially confers some social benefits such as intergenerational recognition, social legitimacy, access to property, and

marital stability. On the other hand, patriarchal norms, combined with high payment expectations, severely limit agency (Vengesayi 2021; Great Zimbabwe University 2020). On the other hand, sex work possesses some degree of flexible negotiation autonomy within a contractual framework. Still, it suffers from some legal harassment, police scrutiny, and social stigma. Such factors contribute to vulnerabilities that compromise health, rights, and autonomy (Chikava et al. 2023; UNAIDS 2021). This comparison shows the intertwining of culture and law, and thus the scope and nature of women's agency within and outside economic and bodily transactions.

### **Socioeconomic Drivers and the Commodification of Women**

The enduring economic crises of Zimbabwe, especially high inflation and unemployment as well as a limited formal job market, drive the commodification of lobola and sex work (Betweentwocultures 2024; Chikava et al. 2023). In lobola, families are increasingly demanding cash payments, with some exceeding thousands of dollars.

This illustrates the marketisation of culture (Great Zimbabwe University 2020). This commodification shifts the boundaries of marital entry restraining them alongside increased familial scrutiny, economic reliance, and surveillance of economic dependence, thus transforming women's autonomy within the institution of marriage (Vengesayi 2021).

To some extent, entering into sex work is a result of an individual's unemployment, poverty, and a lack of under-resourced education (UNAIDS 2021; ZIMSWA 2022). These socio-economic factors, in conjunction with socio-cultural norms, reduce a woman's body to an object's body to be used in transactions within both, the formal and informal work sectors. This notion supports interpretation in political economy where both lobola and sex work are positioned within systemic inequalities, albeit in different societal and legal frameworks.

## **Human Rights Concerns and Gendered Health Outcomes**

There are notable distinctions in health and rights outcomes with the respective forms of exchange. Concerning mediations of lobola, some studies suggest protective outcomes, including the delaying of sexual debut, improved academic performance, and increased condom use in certain contexts with some degree of female bargaining power (Chikava et al. 2023). Conversely, the issue of excessive lobola payments serves to reinforce a dominant socio-political order, restricting women's reproductive autonomy and their capacity to escape undesirable and abusive marriages, revealing the mixed health and rights outcomes (Vengesayi 2021).

Sex work complicates healthcare access and HIV/STI risks due to stigma and criminalization (Chikava et al 2023; UNAIDS 2021). Although peers, NGOs, and advocacy groups have made attempts to address these issues, there remains a lack of legal frameworks to close the societal and structural barriers to healthcare that sex workers face, indicating the need for a rights framework (CITEZW 2024; ZIMSWA 2022).

The absence of social funding and legal frameworks for comprehensive rights prioritizes health and wellbeing detrimentally. On the one hand, positive outcomes, to some extent, of a patriarchal system provide acceptable health protection and result from social inequities wherein women possess legal acknowledgment, for example, in systems such as lobola. On the other hand, women in a criminalized and socially marginalized context, like sex work, experience lower structural vulnerability, but remain within an oppressive social and political framework.

## **Agency, Constraint, and Structural Inequalities**

In the case of lobola and sex work, agency is mediated by the context. In lobola marriages, women have some agency in negotiating how much lobola is paid, the timing, and some conditions of the marriage. However, her agency is mitigated by the constellation of marriage and family system supervision (patriarchy) (Great Zimbabwe University 2020). In sex work, women who negotiate payments, choose

clients, and dictate how the service is to be rendered, are, nonetheless, legally, socially, and economically constrained (ZIMSWA 2022; CITEZW 2024). This is consistent with Kabeer's (2020) work who suggests that legal, sociological, and normative theories of feminism conceptualize agency as something that is always formulated within structural limits or normative bounds that are never absolute.

In both practices, the socio-temporal layers of inequality and economic vulnerability are inextricably interwoven. In lobola, some women do not have the domestic and marital autonomy, while in sex work, women suffer violence, criminalization, and lack of protective services. In both scenarios, women's bodies are objectified. In lobola marriages, women's bodies are legally and socially integrated, while in sex work, women's bodies are morally and legally excluded.

### **Advancement of System Change**

Recent studies show that systemic change in civil society can be achieved through new and different avenues. For example, in Zimbabwe, sex worker advocacy organizations target decriminalization, community stigma, and intra-community boundary policing while carrying out legal advocacy and community rights education activism (ZIMSWA 2022; INERELA+ 2024). Advocacy for gender equity in lobola also addresses unfairness and inequitable bargaining in enforcement of women's constitutional property rights (Vengesai 2021; Government of Zimbabwe 2022).

Some advancements have occurred in legal advocacy, most notably, the arbitrary arrest of sex workers no longer occurs, and legal protection is available to women in lobola marriages (INERELA+ 2024; Government of Zimbabwe 2022). Such changes underscore the influence of civil society activism on the empowerment, rights, and health of women, while simultaneously indicating social and legal transformations as well as economic and cultural changes.

## **Policy Considerations**

1. Informed by legal analysis, the Review of these Policy papers lead to the conclusion that the decriminalization of sex work, and the revision of lobola contracts to include the rights of women, African women, and legal protection of sex work in Zimbabwe, will improve social health determinants (Government of Zimbabwe 2022; ZIMSWA 2022).
2. Economic Empowerment: The degree of educated women affects the extent to which campaigns to economically empower women and increase job opportunities can alleviate dependence on transactional sex and lessen coercive marriages (Betweentwocultures 2024).

Health Program Interventions: The autonomy and wellness of women can be improved by expanding peer-led sexual and reproductive health programmes, especially for sex workers, and integrating marriage counselling along with reproductive health education in the context of lobola (UNAIDS 2021; Chikava et al. 2023).

Advocacy and Social Norms: Programmes aimed at awareness of harmful practices, and increasing the agency of women in public life and civic and legal protections, can lessen harmful practices and increase the agency of women in both public and private spheres (Vengesayi 2021; ZIMSWA 2022).

## **Research Gaps and Further Exploration**

While the literature is broadening, the following gaps remain:

1. There is a lack of comparative studies assessing the health and economic impacts of lobola and sex work.
2. There is a lack of longitudinal studies on the effect of high lobola on a marriage's stability, the autonomy of the wife, and the overall wellbeing of the family over time.

3. There is a lack of literature on sex worker advocacy and legal protection frameworks which results in the absence of regulatory and policy frameworks.

4. Research gaps concerning age, socioeconomic status, rural-urban dynamics, and HIV risk exposure seem to ignore the potential structural inequities.

With these gaps filled, we could inform and promote advocacy for more targeted legal, public health, and social policies that would mitigate risk while empower exploitation and improve agency and control over one's sexuality and increase gender equity in Zimbabwe.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

With the political economy, feminist legal sociology, and gendered institutional analysis frameworks, this review articulates the intersection and the complete political economy of Zimbabwe. Her analysis captures that in Zimbabwe, the bodies of women are assigned an economic value in a customary and criminalized manner, albeit through different logics and social legitimacy. The health, autonomy, and rights determinants to women are also shackled in the institutional, legal, and social frameworks. This also analysis sustains the theory of agency and constraint, which in Zimbabwe's case, is primarily structural, resonating with the theories of situated autonomy, structural inequity, and commodification (Kabeer, 2020; Manasekudzai, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

In Zimbabwe, lobola and sex work represent extreme cases of the economic and political commodification of women's bodies. Although they both represent commodification, lobola and sex work differ sharply regarding legal recognition, social acceptance, health implications, and other structural limitations. While sex work offers some degree of negotiating agency for women, it is largely criminalized, stigmatized, and comes with considerable health risks. In these two spheres, women's labours are most profoundly shaped by economic realities, culture and systemic inequalities, and the urgent need for comprehensive policies,

legal frameworks, and public health approaches that work towards the recognition, protection, and social equity of women.

This review illustrates the need for longitudinal and comparative studies, intersectional frameworks, and the evaluation of women's health programmes. The absence of these critical elements constitutes an important gap in the literature. Addressing these gaps can inform the design of women-focused economic development programmes, facilitate women's entry into economic transactions, improve relations between the genders, and impact public health positively.

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