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Intricacies of African customary marriages expose women to discriminatory practices - study

Lobola creates rigid gender roles, skewed beliefs of entitlement and ownership of women's lives and bodies, as well as asymmetrical power relations. This is what Dr Pretty Mubaiwa, a recent PhD graduate, found based on her research, which critically interrogates the relationship between culture, violence against women (VAW), and the practice of human rights in Africa.

Mubaiwa's research delves into the cultural practice of bride price (also known as lobola) to understand whether the practice is a cause and/or consequence of VAW in family relations.

With her dissertation titled "Human Rights, Modernity and Culture: Do the current human rights frameworks and discourse include traditional African practices such as lobola as a form of violence against women?", Mubaiwa wanted to understand the intricacies of African customary marriages and why they expose women to violent and discriminatory practices and experiences.

Different tribes and countries practise it differently, which makes it more complex. Mubaiwa decided to keep it closer to home. "Of course, that is too wide a topic, so I decided to look at what is familiar to my Shona culture (among others) – *roora*, also known as lobola. This is such a hot topic among the youth in Southern Africa and a recurring discussion on social media platforms as well," said Mubaiwa.

"I wanted to bring together my academic training from the social sciences and law to critically investigate the correlation or causality between the practice [of lobola] and VAW. My research was based on four country case studies: Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia and Uganda. Inherently, African cultural practices are not devoid of the history of colonialism and the outsider gaze, which is usually demonising without being critical of the role these practices play in communities. In this case, *roora* – before colonial and modern influences – was an act of bringing families together to symbolise marriage; it was not monetised. Over time, this practice has evolved and has created different entitlements and power dynamics that expose women to violence."

Research findings

Mubaiwa's research found that *roora* or lobola in and of itself is not a form of VAW. However, the results from her analysis showed that lobola creates rigid gender roles,

skewed beliefs of entitlement and ownership of women's lives and bodies, as well as asymmetrical power relations.

"Secondly, the legal dimension of my thesis established that international, regional and local laws have gaps that continue to leave women vulnerable to suffering from violence that they may suffer in marriage," she said.

In addition, she said, historical and patriarchal concerns dissuade various stakeholders from questioning the role of culture and tradition in the perpetuation of violence against women on the continent. Asking whether the younger generation coming into roles of leadership will actively work to change this, Mubaiwa said she would like to believe so.

"From the research coming out from different institutions around the world on African cultural practices, young academics are providing new lenses to these studies including through using feminist [and] decolonial approaches. There is hope and it is refreshing!"

Story by Elske Joubert, UCT News.



Dr Pretty Mubaiwa

Photo: Robyn Walker

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