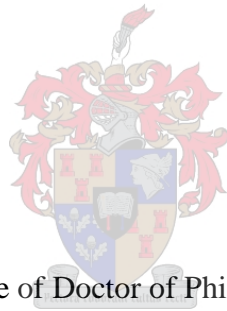


Young urban Shona women and men negotiating gender and sexuality and social identifications through “cultural practices” in contemporary Zimbabwe: the case of labia elongation

by Hellen Venganai



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Declaration

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own original work, that I am the authorship owner thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

Signature:

Date: March 2017

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Abstract

Influenced by versions of feminist theory, post-colonial theory, and critical anthropology, this research seeks to contribute to a growing body of literature which explores processes of identity construction and meaning making among young people growing up in countries in post-colonial Africa. Drawing on these theoretical resources, this study focuses on labia elongation and the significance this holds for young urban Shona, middle-class women and men in their 20s and 30s, in contemporary Zimbabwe. My study examines how labia elongation features in conversations with my participants about “cultural” practices and gender and sexuality, both as a material practice and as a symbolic marker through which they negotiate identifications as gendered and sexual actors in the post-colonial context. These conversations took place in focus group discussions and loosely structured interviews, which I conducted with my participants. In these, I posed broad questions relating to their experiences of growing up and their current interests and identifications as young women and men, as well as questions about the practice of labia elongation and their views and experiences relating to this. I encouraged my participants to set the agenda and steer the conversation by raising and elaborating on issues which they connected with these questions. In analysing my data I take the interviews and focus groups not simply as ‘instruments’ for eliciting information, but as particular social contexts and ethnographic encounters which provide powerful insights on processes of identity construction and negotiation going on in these (mediated by factors such as gender, age, marital status, and sexual experience), and how these connect with the ways issues relating to gender, sexuality and labia elongation were introduced and articulated. My research raises important questions about how labia elongation comes to be constructed as a “cultural” practice, associated with values understood as “traditional”, and why such a practice holds so much interest and relevance for young adults who identify or are identified as “modern”. Working from a perspective that these categories are productive and relational rather than simply descriptive, the thesis demonstrates that urban, middle-class Shona women (and men) are not heterogeneous and do not operate with a fixed idea of what constitutes sexuality, custom, tradition, or modernity. Rather, they provide their own explanatory (and highly contested) frameworks through which they define their personhood and construct their identities in relation to labia specifically and sexuality, tradition, custom, and ethnicity more broadly.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

AIDS	:	Acquired immune deficiency syndrome
FGCS	:	Female genital cosmetic surgery
FGM	:	Female genital mutilation
HIV	:	Human immunodeficiency virus
REC	:	Research ethics committee
HTP	:	Harmful traditional practices
UNAIDS	:	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
WHO	:	World Health Organisation

Key to interview and focus group transcripts

Symbol in transcript	Meaning
Comment []	Words in square brackets are what the researcher adds to clarify a participant's comment
(1)	Pauses are in seconds and are represented by a number in brackets, e.g. one second (1) two seconds (2) etc. to indicate the length of the pause.
<u>Word</u>	A word or phrase that a participant emphasises is underlined.
(Laughter)	Laughter, emotional tone, and non-verbal expressions are noted in brackets.
=	This sign precedes the name of a participant, and what he/she says after interrupting another person and takes over the conversation.
Comment (John: Comment)	When participants are speaking at the same time, what each one says is put in brackets and appears in the same line.
[...]	Conversation has not been quoted in full and certain portions have been omitted
<i>Italics</i>	Emphasis by the researcher; or used when home language is used, which is then followed by the English translation in brackets.

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Chapter One

Mapping the research terrain

Introduction and motivation for this study

One early morning, my maternal grandmother, whom I was visiting at the time woke me up and told me to go to the river to stretch my labia minora as other *Shona* girls from the rural community were doing. I was 11 years old. When I refused, she threatened that my future husband was going to send me back to my parents for not having elongated labia. Still, I refused and threatened never to visit her if she ever raised this issue again. Although I write about this story in hindsight, I found it absurd that my grandmother wanted me to have my labia elongated in preparation for a husband when I was still that young. This made me angry. Moreover, I used to think of labia elongation as a “cultural” practice, which I associated with rural women. Therefore, I told myself that I was not in the same league with these ‘rural’ girls with whom my grandmother wanted me to engage in this practice. This perception changed in 2012, when I attended a bridal shower party in Harare where a hired “*tete*”¹ spoke about various issues on how to maintain the home, keep marriages, as well as on sexual matters including labia elongation. To my surprise, many women there expressed interest in this subject; some even indirectly mocked those without elongated labia (*matinji*)² whom they said were at risk of having their husbands “snatched” away from them by women with elongated labia. By the end of the party, some women took down *tete*’s contact details to get help on modifying their labia supposedly for their husbands’ sexual pleasure. This surprised me that women of my own age, and from middle-class and educated³ backgrounds spoke positively about labia elongation as something they might want for themselves. Events at this party disrupted my taken for granted view of culture as tradition, which is understood in opposition to modernity⁴. Given the circulation of modernity and women empowerment discourses which present “traditional”

¹ This is a *Shona* term for aunt, usually a paternal aunt who is responsible for advising his brother’s daughters about marriage and sexual matters when they are approaching marriage, and is part of the mediators in marriage negotiations. A ‘hired’ aunt in this context refers to a woman, who for a certain fee, acts as pre-marriage consultant, giving advice to the would-be bride at a bridal shower in urban areas.

² *Matinji* is the common *Shona* term for elongated labia, although some women consider it a vulgar term (see Chapter 4)

³ By educated I mean people who have received formal education up to university level.

⁴ In this thesis, I use “traditional” as a discursive category which, in hegemonic discourse, imply rural and backwardness, and is constructed in opposition to “modern” which imply being urban and progressive.

practices as oppressive and retrogressive for women (Clark, 2006), how then might a practice like labia elongation appeal to young, educated, and urban middle-class women?

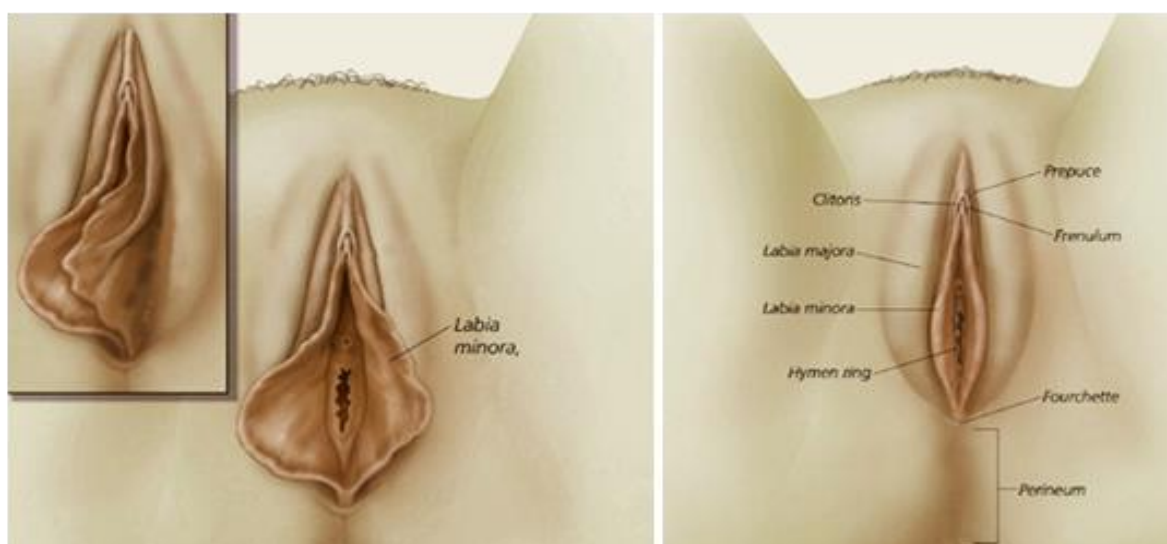
These experiences contribute to the motivation of this inductive study, which interrogates the significance of the “traditional cultural” practice of labia elongation in the lives of young urban Shona women and men (in their 20s and 30s) from middle-class backgrounds in contemporary Harare, Zimbabwe. Because middle-class is a contested category (Archer, 2011) particularly in Africa, in this research, I use it in its relative and loose sense to refer to people who are both educated (at least to the level of a first degree) and salaried professionals (or children of professionals) who stay in medium to low density residential suburbs⁵. In framing this research and the questions it seeks to explore, I begin with an overview of the theoretical and methodological gaps which this thesis aims to address and fill. I also provide a description of the research context in which I situate my research. I then conclude the chapter by offering brief descriptions of the forthcoming chapters and the concerns and arguments they raise.

Perspectives on labia elongation and other African cultural practices

Labia elongation or labia pulling is a practice associated with ethnic groups in a number of African countries, including Mozambique (Pérez, Mariano & Bagnol, 2015), Tanzania (Amadiume, 2006), South Africa (Dionisio & Viviani, 2015), Rwanda (Koster & Price, 2008; Larsen, 2010), Uganda (Tamale, 2006), Lesotho (Khau, 2012), and Zimbabwe (Gelfand, 1973; Aschwanden 1982; Mano, 2004; Bhebhe, 2014; Chisale & Buffel, 2014; Pérez, Aznar & Namulondo, 2014). Girls from these ethnic groups are told to commence this practice before the onset of menstruation, when pulling is considered more effective (Larsen, 2010; Mwenda, 2006). However, it is also common for women to elongate when they are older (François *et al.* 2012; Bagnol & Mariano 2008). It is said to be an elaborate yet painful process, which involves massaging and pulling the inner labia using the thumb and index finger, sometimes after applying certain herbal oils or powder to ease the stretching process (Bagnol & Mariano 2008; Khau, 2012). Conclusions drawn from these studies indicate that elongated labia is associated with enhanced sexual pleasure and a way through which women conform to cultural and marital expectations (Tamale, 2006; Bagnol & Mariano, 2008; Larsen, 2010; Pérez & Namulondo 2011; Arnfred, 2011; Bhebe, 2014). Figure 1 below illustrates the difference between a “normal” vagina and one with elongated labia. While I am aware of how colonial constructions of gender and sexuality have been inscribed in categories of normality and abnormality in disciplines such

⁵ see Zinyama, 1993 for a further discussion of the colonial and current segregated residential areas in Harare.

as psychology and psychiatry, I use this labelling as a heuristic device. The debates around female genitalia suggest that some women are born with elongated labia or develop elongated labia without pulling – also known as the hypertrophy of the labia minora (Gallo *et al.*, 2006) – while there are diverse forms of labia pulling. Indeed, Western biomedical conceptions of a “normal” vagina, as suggested by the picture below, become the reference point for what is “abnormal” or “elongated” in non-Western sexualities. In my work, I question and problematise the labelling of female African bodies by scholars and practitioners in ways that are dissonant with local understandings. As my thesis reveals, participants contested understandings of what were constructed as “normal” female genitalia. For instance, most women participants constructed elongated labia as the norm, while they problematised women who did not elongate their labia as the abnormal Other (Chapter 7).



Vagina with elongated labia

“Normal” vagina

Figure 1: An illustrative image of elongated and non-elongated labia minora

(Source - www.cosmeditour.com⁶)

While labia elongation is seen as quite central to particular ethnic or cultural constructions of femininity, other study findings suggest that not all women from these ethnic groupings feel obligated to engage in this practice. For instance, it is claimed that younger urban women (and younger men) present it as old fashioned (Mano, 2004; Mwenda, 2006; Tamale, 2006; Larsen, 2010; Pérez & Namulondo, 2011). In Zimbabwe, by the late 1960s, Williams (1969) suggested that the labia elongation was losing relevance particularly among *Shona* urban women. Yet,

⁶ <https://www.cosmeditour.com/education/labiaplasty-surgery-can-enhance-womans-quality-life/> Accessed 25 May 2016.

Mano (2004) and Larsen (2010) argue that the practice has actually persisted in some parts of Africa because of the “price” women pay for non-conformity to cultural norms. For example, Larsen (2010) concludes that women in Rwanda collectively practice labia elongation to establish and maintain social networks in order to prevent being stigmatised against. But, as I argue in Chapter 7, other women forego this practice, despite the stigma involved. In my view, this question is rarely raised in most studies about labia elongation, which tend to overlook this particular category of women.

With specific reference to the Zimbabwean contemporary context, there is little scholarly work on labia elongation. This is reflected in a recent review of studies on labia elongation in Africa by Pérez, Bagnol & Aznar (2014), who note that significant research on this practice has been done in Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, and Uganda. Although some white male historians, anthropologists, and medical doctors wrote about labia elongation among the Shona during (and shortly after) the colonial era, they produced limited and unrepresentative narratives about this practice, while constructing the Shona as the homogenous Other (see for example Williams, 1969; Gelfand, 1973; Aschwanden, 1982). It was also not clear who provided them with knowledge about this practice. Thus, this study aims to contribute to the limited knowledge produced about labia elongation by black African women in postcolonial Zimbabwe, while opening spaces for ordinary Shona women and men to (re)define this practice from their own explanatory frameworks.

The most current literature on this practice in Zimbabwe focuses on Ndebele women’s constructions of labia elongation (see Bhebe, 2014); urban men’s understandings of this practice (Pérez, Aznar & Namulondo, 2014); and discussions about labia elongation in one of the late-night local radio programmes (Mano, 2004). Significant discussions by Zimbabweans about this practice are generated through popular culture, for example, on social media platforms such as closed women’s Facebook groups, and some women’s rights activists’ personal blogs⁷, which may not be seen as important sources of intellectual knowledge. In these “non-scholarly” sites, there are mixed sentiments about labia elongation. Zimbabwean women’s rights activists seem to reproduce the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) interpretation of labia elongation as a form of female genital mutilation (FGM), thus a harmful practice to girls⁸ and women, while

⁷ See for example <http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2015/07/labia-elongation-still-relevant-in-modern-zimbabwe/>

⁸ Betty Makoni, who founded the Girl Child Network in Zimbabwe is one of the activists that openly speak against this practice on social media. She argues the practice is harmful with negative psychological implications for young girls subjected to this practice. See for example, <http://muzvarebettymakoni.org/labia-elongation-is-female-genital-mutilation-type-4-harmful-to-girls/>

others celebrate the practice. Rarely does labia elongation feature in mainstream media⁹, which makes it difficult to ascertain how widespread this practice is in Zimbabwe considering the secrecy that surrounds some of these “traditional” practices. This is in stark contrast with male circumcision, which is not only widely discussed in public media in the country, but has been researched significantly, following the government’s adoption of this practice as part of the HIV and AIDS intervention strategies as addressed in detail in the next chapter.

While I specifically focus on labia elongation, it is my hope that my study will not be read only within the context of this particular practice, as if it is a unique practice divorced from other practices constructed as “traditional”. Rather, the study seeks to raise questions about the signification of gendered practices framed as “cultural” or “traditional” when they are situated in contemporary “modern” settings, and experienced by people – such as my educated middle-class participants – rarely associated with these practices in dominant discourses. In other words, what identities, identifications, or subjectivities might these cultural practices produce for such a category of people? In this study, I employ the concept *identities* instead of identity to emphasise their multiplicity and instability, because, as Hall (1996: 3) argues, identity is 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 also refer to *identifications* to show that the way people in my study negotiate around these multiple, shifting, and sometimes contradictory identities, is an ongoing ‘process never complete’ (*ibid.*:2) as exemplified in Chapters 6 & 7.

While there are labia elongation studies that included participants from urban settings (e.g. Tamale, 2006; Thabethe, 2008; Pérez *et al.*, 2014; Pérez *et al.*, 2015), they are not class specific. In my view, although the black middle-class are generally under-researched (Archer, 2011), they are an interesting category to focus on considering suggestions that during colonialism in Africa, most tried to distance themselves from practices they deemed “traditional” (West, 2002). As elaborated in the next chapter, they viewed these “traditional” practices as being incompatible with their newly founded “modern” identities, which were tied to the Christian education they acquired (*ibid.*).

However, in a postcolonial African context, in which I situate my study, de Robillard (2011:89) argues that it is ‘necessary to see tradition and modernity not simply as polarities within a conceptual dichotomy.’ This suggests, as my study also concludes, that these categories are becoming quite entangled, even though the assumption that they are in opposition persists. Some

⁹ The weekly Sunday Mail on 14 May 2014 carried an article about labia elongation titled “The lengths that women go for pleasure”. Available on <http://www.sundaymail.co.zw/the-lengths-that-women-go-for-pleasure/>

African feminist scholars have drawn our attention to what “traditional” practices signify in a postcolonial context. De Robillard (2011), for example, highlights the limitations of analyses that reduce such practices to mere markers of specific ethnic identities. Instead, she proposes an analysis that pays attention to how some of these practices or discourses of tradition are interwoven with postcolonial discourses linked with nation building. Focusing specifically on the revival of virginity testing ceremonies for girls in South Africa, which are funded by the government, she argues that notions of ‘tradition and the strength and the health of the nation are implicated in the processes of making the nation modern’ (*ibid.*:89). Celebrating virgins is then equated to a celebration of the nation’s ‘social purity [...] instrumentalised through discourses and political practices designed to adjudicate which bodies, desires and practices are “authentic” and which are not, within the national scheme’ (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, de Robillard and others (Pattman, 2001; Lewis, 2005) are critical of nationalist discourses of tradition that seem to police women through these gendered practices.

Then there are questions about who can write or speak about these practices, on behalf of which category of women, and from which standpoint (Harding, 1993; Lazreg, 2005; Harcourt, 2009). In Africa, as I elaborate in Chapter 2, this follows a long history of negative constructions of Africans as sexual savages and their sexualities as inherently inferior, diseased, deviant, and unbridled (Weeks, 1986; Becker, 2004; Tamale, 2011). We are made to assume that there is ‘an appropriate civilized norm of sexual behaviour to which all people have to bend a knee’ (Weeks, 1986:33), which only Western (white) bodies supposedly embody. It is against these (mis)representations through which black African feminist work has emerged, which is, according to Weeks (1986:34), ‘simultaneously engaged with antiracist politics’ (1986:34).

This is apparent in the contestations of how female initiation rites and practices in African countries are labelled by some Western intellectuals and powerful institutions such as the World Health Organisation (WHO). When involving modification of genitalia (for example female circumcision and labia elongation) of Third World women, these practices are classified as either *harmful traditional practices* (HTP) or more commonly *female genital mutilation* (FGM). WHO (2016) still classifies labia elongation as type IV of FGM, despite noting that practices in this category are ‘less associated with harm or risk’. Parallel to FGM is *female genital cosmetic surgery* (FGCS), a classification of genital modification procedures (e.g. labia minora reduction, vaginal tightening, and hymen reconstruction) performed on (predominantly white) women in the West (Whitcomb, 2011). This contrasted labeling of essentially similar practices exposes the politics of naming and the implications of these terms in projecting particular women as the

inferior and oppressed Other (Tamale, 2008; Pedwell, 2010; Whitcomb, 2011). Arnfred (2004) regards these expressions – FGM and HTP – as ‘unfortunate’, because they imply that anything “traditional” is a source of harm. She further argues that framing these practices as harmful, ‘enforces a specific morality, an unspoken norm, compared to which that is considered “harmful” ... the implicit morality here is the morality of “modernity”, i.e. of the West’ (Arnfred, 2004:13; see also Becker, 2004). Similarly, Larsen (2010: 815) has argued that ‘at a global level it’s about what constitutes a normal and a mutilated body’, and clearly, the black African body (especially the female body) is constantly represented as mutilated (Lewis, 2005; Tamale, 2006; Abraha-Seare, 2012). If we extend this logic specifically to black bodies and exclusively in an African context, the implication is that women who embrace and embody these practices are “mutilated”, “traditional”, and “inferior”, while those who reject them are “normal”, “modern” and “superior”.

Unlike labia elongation and female circumcision, female genital “cosmetic” surgeries are framed as empowering bodily aesthetics linked to individual choice and agency just because they are practiced in Western countries, by Western (white) women, and performed by medical personnel (Pedwell, 2010; Whitcomb, 2011). In essence, Eurocentric discourses frame the West (and its practices) as embodying beauty while Africa is represented as embodying ugliness (Nuttall, 2006). Nevertheless, these dichotomous constructions, which undoubtedly perpetuate racial stereotyping, have received criticism from feminist writers in and from Africa (Amadiume, 2006; Nuttall, 2006; Tamale, 2006) and even from some white feminist writers in the West (Braun & Kitzinger 2001; Braun, 2005, 2010; Whitcomb, 2011). In my study, labia elongation emerges as an empowering practice for some participants who associated this with bodily aesthetics among other factors.

Cultural practices and sexuality in the era of HIV and AIDS

It is also worthwhile to situate these cultural practices within the HIV and AIDS context, considering how this pandemic has accentuated discussions about gender and sexuality in Africa. Not only has this made sexuality debates more visible in the public domain, but it continues to shape the way discourses of “culture” or ‘cultural practices’ are invoked in contemporary African societies, and especially in relation to gender and sexuality. From a biomedical approach, many (sexual) cultural practices associated with these localities (e.g. polygamy, ‘dry sex’, ‘ethnic’ male circumcision), became the centre of research, as they were blamed for the high HIV prevalence rates in Africa (Hunter, 2010; Venganai, 2012). It is therefore not surprising that many studies about labia elongation and other vaginal practices

have centred on establishing whether these interfere with women's sexual health (Bagnol & Mariano, 2008; Koster & Price, 2008; Hilber *et al.*, 2010; Francois *et al.*, 2012; Vallely *et al.*, 2012). These studies have concluded that women may develop lacerations on their labia during pulling, thus exacerbating their risk of contracting HIV. In contrast, Kesby (2000), based on a study in Zimbabwe, claims labia stretching is actually a strategy that women use to control their husbands' sexual behaviour in the wake of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, although he does not substantiate how this is related. Interestingly, none of the participants in this study made any inference to HIV and AIDS in our discussions about labia elongation. However, a few mentioned itchiness and cancer risks that may come with applying particular herbs during the elongation process, though this did not seem to generate much interest or discussion.

Biomedical research approaches to understandings of African cultures are often criticised for reinforcing representations of African sexualities as 'fraught with menace: sex as dangerous – even murderous – rather than pleasurable, men as brutal and predatory rather than protective partners' (Posel, 2004:60). Responding to a critique of scholarship which reduces African sexualities to sex and disease, is an emerging group of scholars who focus on often neglected themes of female sexual pleasure and desire (Pereira, 2003; McFadden, 2003; Arnfred, 2004; Tamale, 2008; Thomas & Cole, 2009; Hunter, 2010; Nyanzi, 2011; Spronk, 2014). Tamale (2006, 2008) and Khau (2009, 2012) specifically focused on the practice of labia elongation and its association with female sexuality, although they reached draw different conclusions. Whereas Tamale (2008:62) takes the position that this practice enhances women's sexual pleasure and improves 'perceptions of themselves as active sexual beings', Khau (2009, 2012) on the other hand suggests that labia elongation actually suppresses rather than enhances female sexuality. Furthermore, Khau argues that this practice, which she associates with male sexual pleasure, only serves to emphasise unequal gender or sexual power relations in heterosexual unions, and (as evidenced in my study) promotes the denigration of women who have not undergone labia elongation.

However, whether or not feminists should focus more on female sexuality has been an area of contestation among African feminists (Gqola, 2005). Patricia McFadden (2003), for example, writes about the anxieties and silences around female sexual pleasure by African feminists, which she implicitly suggests is associated with their 'tradition'. She urges them to treat female sexual pleasure as a 'fundamental right' and a 'liberating political force' for African women (McFadden, 2003:1). In response, Pereira (2003:3) dismisses McFadden's argument for being prescriptive and 'reminiscent of the deterministic and totalising perspectives of diverse

authoritarian and masculinist regimes', which will be elaborated on in Chapter 2. While she acknowledges that African women's sexuality (especially sexual pleasure) is under-researched and sometimes repressed, Pereira exposes the limitations of McFadden's argument. First, she is critical of McFadden for suggesting that African female sexualities in their entirety are repressed, and that every woman is preoccupied with issues of sexual desire and pleasure. Second, Pereira points out that McFadden does not consider the context under which female sexuality is repressed. Lastly, she highlights that McFadden fails to historicise her assertions by ignoring how Christianity (through colonialism) came to redefine African sexuality as repressed (see Chapter 2).

My research contributes to this diverse feminist literature ranging from interpretation of African cultural practices, African sexualities, female sexual desire, and identity construction by engaging with young adult women and men and their understanding of labia elongation in post-colonial Zimbabwe. I draw on postcolonial and poststructuralist versions of feminism upon which I elaborate in the next chapter. I view these as important theoretical resources, which open up spaces for thinking about gender, sexuality, culture, tradition, and modernity, not as fixed and homogenous categories rooted in nature or essential timeless values, but as discursive, relational, and intersecting categories which are deployed in ways which produce particular kinds of subjectivities and power relations. How do "ordinary" middle-class young adult women and men in contemporary post-colonial Zimbabwe speak about labia elongation, as well as, more generally, about sexuality, gender, culture, tradition and modernity, and what insights do these provide about processes of identity construction and negotiation, as exemplified in interviews and focus group discussions? The central argument I make in this study is that Shona women and men redefine this so called "traditional" practice in complex ways, and in the process redefine themselves. They do so by drawing on and positioning themselves in relation to particular discourses (marginal or dominant) about gender, sexuality, culture, and tradition. In this process they exhibit and exemplify multiple identities and subject positions, which I seek to address and explore in my research.

Research Questions

The main question this research seeks to address is: how do young urban middle-class Shona women and men in contemporary Zimbabwe situate themselves in relation to the practice of labia elongation as a source of identification?

In pursuing this, the following sub-questions will be explored:

- i) How and what do young urban middle-class women (and men) in contemporary Zimbabwe society learn about “traditional” practices such as labia elongation?
- ii) What symbolic meanings do they attach to labia elongation and of what significance, if any, does this have in their lives? What discourses and subjectivities influence how they construct and perceive this and other “traditional” practices?
- iii) What assumptions about gender and sexuality inform these practices and how do these produce certain kinds of identifications and investments by these young urban women and men?
- iv) Do women and men invoke “culture” or “tradition” in their discussions? If yes, in what context, how, and why?

Aspects of the Zimbabwean demographic and cultural context

According to the last census data compiled by the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency – ZimStat (2012), Zimbabwe has a population of 13 million people. Women and men constitute 52% and 48% of the population respectively. In terms of age range, those below 15 years, and between 20 and 40 years constitute 41 % and 30% of the population respectively. A large proportion of the adult Zimbabwean population (58%) are married, while about 29% never married, and 12% are either divorced, separated, or widowed. Non-Zimbabwean nationals are believed to be just approximately 1%, and citizens from Malawi and Mozambique said to constitute 34% and 35% of this population respectively. Only 33% (4,2 million) of the people in Zimbabwe live in urban areas. The majority (47%) of this urban population resides in Harare, wherein I locate this study. Being the capital city and the economic hub of the country, Harare attracts the highest number (21%) of in-migrants from different parts of (and ethnicities in) the country. Whereas the second largest city, Bulawayo also receives high rates of in-migration in the country, most of these migrants come from nearby surrounding areas.

The Shona are the largest ethnic group in Zimbabwe as they account for 82% of the total population, followed by the Ndebele (14%) who mainly reside in the south-west parts of the country (World Factbook, 2012). The ethnic minority¹⁰ groups (Kalanga, Shangaan, Venda, Tonga, Nambya) form 2% of the population. While the Shona are dominantly presented as one

¹⁰ While in this case I use this term to highlight the population demographics of these ethnic groups, I acknowledge that it also highlights the exclusionary politics in the country (see Ndhlovu, 2006). As Muzondidya & Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2007) note, these ethnic minorities are and feel economically, politically and culturally marginalised by the Shona and the Ndebele.

coherent ethnic group since colonialism (Bourdillon, 1976), various sub-ethnic groups fall into this sociolinguistic category¹¹, although there is lack of disaggregated statistics about the population of the groups in this broad category, which I argue might be a strategy to maintain Shona political hegemony over the Ndebele. In fact, as reflected in my study, notions of Shonanness are often deployed in relation to the Ndebele or other non-Shona speaking people in Zimbabwe. Thus, ethnicity is quite central to identity politics in Zimbabwe. But political tensions are rife (although sometimes repressed) between the Shona sub-ethnicities as each fights for recognition and political domination (Muzondidya & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2007), which has escalated the current factional fights within the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF)¹². This is further compounded by the maintenance of colonial divisions of the country's provinces, which are ethnic based¹³ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008).

However, the ethnic political tension that has received much attention in scholarship is that between the Shona and the Ndebele¹⁴. Whereas there are Ndebele politicians within Zanu-PF, people in Matabeleland (literally translated as the land of the Ndebele people) still feel politically underrepresented, and that their provinces are marginalised in developmental programmes (Muzondidya & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008). At the height of these ethnic tensions are not only political struggles, but also issues of culture and identity, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. A striking example is the outcry that followed the appointment of the first Ndebele female chief, Sinqobile Mabhena by President Mugabe in 1996. Some people in Matabeleland, but especially Ndebele male chiefs and intellectuals tried to block her installation. While they blamed Mabhena's family for cultural violation, because 'to have a woman as chief was both against Ndebele culture and tradition', of much concern to them was that she had been "imposed" on them by the Shona (Lindgren, 2000:1). They were also fears that if she were to get married to a Shona man that would automatically transfer the chieftaincy to the Shona, because a man is the head of the household in these patriarchal societies. This was despite the fact that people in Nswazi were supportive of their female chief and had recommended her to the ruling government to take up the chieftaincy following the death of her father (*ibid.*). Since Chief Sinqobile Mabhena's installation a decade ago, and despite arguments

¹¹ The Shona are made up of the Karanga, Manyika, Zezuru, Korekore, Ndau, etc.

¹² Other Shona sub-ethnic groups complain that the Zezuru (affiliated with the ruling President, Robert Mugabe) have occupied more influential political posts while marginalising other groups.

¹³ The names of major provinces in the country paint a picture of the ethnic groups living in these areas, for example Mashonaland (affiliated generally with the Shona, but more specifically the Zezuru and the Korekore), Matabeleland (associated with Ndebele-speaking people), Manicaland (associated with Manyika and Ndau people), Masvingo (affiliated with Karanga people), etc.

¹⁴ The Ndebele is another ethnic category with internal conflicts over who is "genuinely" Ndebele (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008).

that this was against “Ndebele culture”, two more female Ndebele chiefs have taken up chieftaincy in other parts of Matabeleland. This is a classic example that demonstrates how “tradition” and “culture” are constantly being redefined in ways that challenge conventional understandings of these concepts as enduring and static, a discussion I expand in the next chapter. At the same time, it also shows how discourses of culture are often invoked to police women when they seem to transgress particular gendered norms, which is one of the key arguments in this thesis.

However, politics of gender, sexuality, and tradition in Zimbabwe are not limited to ethnicity but permeate the nation and notions of race. Cultural discourses which transcend ethnic divisions are often invoked against homosexuality which is constructed as a Western practice (of the whites) that threatens the country’s moral fibre and national culture (see Chapter 2). I have provided these examples to demonstrate that discourses of sexuality and tradition are key to broader political struggles and concerns about nationalisms, which I elaborate in the next chapter.

In that chapter, I discuss at length the historical role Christianity played during colonialism not only in advancing discourses of modernity but also in reconfiguring gender and sexualities in Africa. Here, I wish to briefly highlight the significance of (Pentecostal) Christianity in present day Zimbabwe not only in matters economic and social, but also in the construction of identities, because as I address later in the thesis (Chapter 5 & 6), it emerged as an important site of identification for most of participants in my study. In Zimbabwe, 70-80% of the population belongs to Christian churches¹⁵ (Makahamadze, Isacco & Chireshe, 2012), but membership in Pentecostal churches is undoubtedly on the rise. The “prosperity gospel” which Pentecostal churches preach appeals to many Zimbabweans (especially in the urban areas) who try to come to terms with socio-economic problems of the country which can be traced back to the period of economic structural adjustment programmes in the 1990s. As Maxwell (1998:369) observes, ‘for many Zimbabweans Pentecostalism provides a framework with which to respond to the pressures of modernisation [and] for others it offers guidelines for material success.’ In other words, some view the Pentecostal movement as a medium through which they can achieve social class mobility (Maxwell, 2005).

¹⁵ There are numerous Christian churches in Zimbabwe including those introduced by missionaries during colonialism (e.g. Roman Catholic, Dutch Reformed, Anglican, Methodist, etc.) and African-initiated churches (which include Apostolic sects which account for 20% of the Christian population and some Pentecostal churches). Ironically preachers of Pentecostal churches mock prophets belonging to Apostolic sects whom they accuse of operating under the influence of evil marine spirits.

The prosperity gospel preachers in Zimbabwe speak against “spirit of poverty” in the country, and in doing so ‘use strongly anti-rural sentiments ... almost as if rural equates with evil. Rural areas are constructed as places where demonic ancestral spirits originate ... witchcraft is rife and non-believing kin pressure or entice born-again back into traditional practices’ (Maxwell, 1998:359). Such messages suggest that some urban congregants’ failure to prosper economically is a result of generational curses crafted by “jealous” rural kin who are seen as non-Christian. This is why urban Pentecostal congregants are advised to cut ties with their rural relatives and instead to make other church members their extended family (*ibid.*), an issue that some of the male participants in my study raised (see Chapter 5). However, this does not suggest that Pentecostal churches have no presence in rural Zimbabwe. It is important to point out that Pentecostal Christian movements emerged (and are still concentrated) in urban areas, because to be Pentecostal ‘is to be urban and modern’, while their expansion into rural areas ‘is viewed as mission work from an urban base’ (Maxwell, 1998:360). As I elaborate later, some of the participants in this study reproduce these Christian discourses which construct urban people as progressive and more Christianised than their rural counterparts. In other instances, they reject and reinvent these Christian narratives as they make sense of themselves as postcolonial subjects in Zimbabwe.

Thinking about interviews and focus groups as kinds of research context

There is a danger in research of fetishising the object of inquiry by looking at a particular practice as the site of origin of meaning. I try to avoid this in my study by focusing not on the labia itself or the actual processes of lengthening the labia, but the discursive processes through which labia and labia elongation are made meaningful and significant by the adult women and men participating in my study. I work with the assumption that there is nothing inherently sexual about the labia or any other feature of the body, but it is only made sexual through discursive practices which carry and convey certain assumptions, positions, and expectations in which people collectively engage. Sexuality, in this sense, emerges out of the discursive first and then to the body. Elements of the body appear out of social discourses as reflected in the narratives people produce and share.

The ethnographic concerns of this project are therefore not “out there”, but in interviews themselves as (temporary) ethnographic spaces. This stems from a critique of conventional ethnographic approaches which entail visiting particular spaces and locations in search of the “truth” by observing and hanging out with people over long periods of time in order to understand their everyday social realities (Henning *et al.*, 2004). An alternative way of thinking

about interviews and focus group discussions is as ethnographic encounters themselves. This is how I understand and engage with these in my own research. Central to ethnography is that the researcher is both an observer and a participant (Henslin, 2001). In the focus groups and interviews I conducted for this study, I assumed these roles by observing relational dynamics between participants, while I injected into these social spaces a degree of reflection from the questions I asked, thereby helping them to de-essentialise these kinds of conversations.

Crucially, therefore, I see the interviews and focus groups I conduct not simply as tools or “instruments” for eliciting information from participants (as they are often presented in methodology texts), but as particular social encounters ‘in which identifications are made and relations are established’ and which provide insights, at first hand, on how gender and sexuality intersect and operate as sources of power and identification (Pattman, 2015:81). As such, unlike related studies about cultural practices, I do not take what people say, or stories they share in these research encounters simply as “true” reflections of their lives and realities. Rather, my analytical approach is one which focuses on the relational dynamics established in the interviews and focus groups, and how individuals present themselves and ‘perform’ in these contexts. Performance does not mean the idea of people “putting on” an act as if covering an essential truth, rather it is about what people do and behave in particular social contexts (Butler, 1990). I draw here on the idea of performativity – advanced by the likes of Goffman (1959), Butler (1990), and to some extent Foucault (1982) – as a feature of human interaction, ‘the necessary effort’ one makes as a social being ‘to play oneself “appropriately” to the real or imagined gaze of others, striving to fit and belong within particular membership categories’ (Cahill, 2015: 105).

In conceptualising interviews and focus groups as ethnographic encounters, rather than as extractive instruments, I develop an analytic approach in my research which engages not just with what themes emerge but how they emerge, and how they are debated and contested by the different participants, how these connect with the identifications and relations they make in the interviews, and how these are tied by the participants with versions of gender, sexuality, modernity, culture, tradition, morality etc. Such an approach engages with processes through which knowledges are produced in the processes of doing research. I try to demonstrate this approach by presenting and analysing data from my research and situating what my participants say and how they say it in the context of the research encounters. In order to track themes as they emerge and are discussed in interviews and focus group discussions, I take and reproduce, as illustrated in my findings chapters, substantial extracts from these, and try to analyse processes of identity construction and knowledge production going on in these encounters.

Outline of this research project

This chapter has provided an introduction which addresses the research focus and the motivations underpinning this research. It has also outlined the research questions the thesis focuses on in subsequent chapters. Below, I provide an overview of these chapters, highlighting the themes I shall address in each one.

Chapter Two – Historical and contemporary constructions of culture and tradition and their association with race, gender and sexuality

Written mainly from a level of abstraction, the chapter traces historical colonial constructions of African cultures, traditions, and “traditional practices” and how this has influenced the emergence of particular discourses in the contemporary era. It engages with scholarly work, which for example, demonstrates that discourses of “culture” in postcolonial Africa may operate as forms of ideological resistance to cultural imperialism. The chapter also draws on African feminist literature which highlights how discourses of “culture” may position mainly women and particular kinds of men in contemporary Zimbabwe as potential violators of “African culture”. At the same time, the chapter also attempts to develop a discursive history regarding how concepts such as culture and tradition have been used during colonialism (by colonisers and Christian missionaries), and after colonialism (by politicians and intellectuals in African countries). Focusing on historical meanings attached to these concepts, the chapter aims to provide a context within which I situate my study, especially how my participants use these concepts in their conversations about labia elongation.

Chapter Three - Reflections on the research process

I focus on how I conducted this research and I draw from a range of methodological approaches, including feminist contributions to issues of ethics, interview dynamics, and reflexivity. I also elaborate on why and how I use interviews and focus group discussions in reframing what counts as data. Further, the chapter outlines my analytical focus and approaches for this study. While the chapter focuses on processes of doing research, it goes beyond presenting these descriptively as devices, tools or instruments with which to elicit research findings from my participants. I argue that the interviews and focus group discussions I conduct, *produce* findings by creating interactive contexts through which people present themselves and negotiate relations in particular ways which are pertinent and relevant to the research questions. I also reflect upon my own positioning and the kinds of gendered dynamics produced in these research encounters.

Chapter Four - Women and men “talking sexuality”

Elaborating on the issues raised in Chapter 3, this particular chapter provides illustrative examples of how interviews function as social encounters in which people present themselves in certain ways, influenced by the kinds of relationships they establish among themselves and with the researcher. Specifically, the chapter provides snippets of how women and men in my study negotiated around sexual language to demonstrate their (dis)comfort in speaking about labia elongation and other sexual matters. It also draws attention to the emotions participants expressed during interviews, especially humour. This, I argue in the chapter, was tied to them performing certain versions of femininities and masculinities. I also reflect on my own experiences of conducting different interviews; with women and men in single-sex and mixed-sex group discussions, and women in individual interviews.

Chapter Five – Learning about labia elongation: My participants’ experiences of this, mediated by age and gender

In what I interpret as sexuality education, this chapter focuses on how participants learn about labia elongation and sexuality in general. In the chapter, I reconstruct what this entails and who takes the role of “teaching” this, making connections between “traditional” or conventional forms of sexuality education usually tied with kinship or community ties, and practices and activities which might not normally be understood as forms of sexuality education, like Googling, kitchen parties, and sex academies, which participants themselves raise. Further, the chapter demonstrates the gendering of sexuality education (and some participants’ critique of this) in relation to issues of desire, pleasure, sexual satisfaction, and “responsible” parenting.

Chapter Six – Construction of labia elongation in relation to appropriations of culture, gender and sexuality

This chapter documents and summarises the symbolic meanings that women and men in my study attach to the practice of labia elongation. It engages with how they sometimes identify or dis-identify with particular discourses of labia elongation and the symbolic associations they make with issues such as gender and sexuality, ethnicity, race, and religion. Drawing from the narratives they share, the chapter illustrates the significance of labia elongation both as a source of identification, dis-identification, and dimension of power and inequality.

Chapter Seven – “Complete” and “Incomplete” Women

One of the findings that emerged from my research, to my surprise, was the assumption of labia elongation as a kind of norm and the rendering of those who had not undergone this as “incomplete”. Therefore, the chapter focuses on how the category of “incomplete” women is produced in relation to versions of “complete” women, and accentuates the experiences of women who are constructed as “incomplete” for not undergoing labia elongation. The chapter engages with how women deemed as “incomplete” respond to (and negotiate around) the derogatory labels attached to them. Since some of these “incomplete” women participated in both individual and group interviews, that chapter also raises methodological questions regarding what can (or cannot) be said in particular interview contexts.

Chapter Eight – Pulling it all together

This is the concluding chapter, which highlights the key themes emerging from what people in this research said about labia elongation, while drawing attention to how these connect to issues of identities and identifications as experienced in a postcolonial context. The chapter reflects on theoretical contributions and methodological lessons learned from trying to develop participatory ways of researching labia elongation and young women’s and men’s views about this, and more broadly, about sexuality.

Chapter Two

Historical and contemporary construction of culture and tradition and their association with race, gender and sexuality

Introduction

This chapter provides a theoretical orientation to the conceptual categories that I am using in this research. It explores the discursive history of concepts such as culture, tradition, and modernity, and their relationship with constructions of gender, sexuality, and race. This is to provide a context through which to make sense of their current appropriations and invocations particularly in postcolonial Africa. Tradition, culture, and modernity emerged in the conversational interviews I conducted about labia elongation, as key sources of identification for my urban and middle-class participants. Furthermore, the way participants addressed and deployed these concepts, often carried certain kinds of pejorative connotations about gendered and sexual practices.

The chapter comprises three parts. The first provides an overview of the theoretical perspectives informing this research namely, social constructionism, poststructuralist feminism, and postcolonial theory. I highlight how these theories draw attention to processes through which categories such as gender, sexuality, tradition, and culture are constructed historically, and how they operate in everyday discursive practices as media through which people position themselves and negotiate relations. In drawing on these theories in relation to my research, I raise questions about kinds of power relations which mediate discursive constructions of gender, sexuality, culture, modernity etc., rather than taking these categories for granted and assuming that talk of these is purely descriptive rather than productive (Butler, 1993). I engage with the theoretical contestations around the concepts “culture” and “ethnicity” to illustrate this, while also exploring why and how in certain contexts they continue to be used in their essentialist and idealised forms.

Considering that this research is inspired by feminist poststructuralist ideas, which foreground the need to understand the historical and social contexts in which particular practices take place (Carabine, 2001), the second part of the chapter focuses on the colonial construction of culture and tradition and how this was intertwined with race, gender, and sexuality. In particular, I focus on the role that Christianity played, as a “modernising” discourse (Schmidt, 1992; West, 2002),

to denigrate specific African traditions. More importantly, I draw attention to how Christianity redefined African sexualities, especially by regulating black African women's sexuality through specific women-centred sex education. I hint on the continuities and disruptions of these colonial constructions, by noting how Christianity remains an important site of identification in postcolonial Africa and for my participants in particular, who drew on Christian discourses when they spoke about labia elongation.

The final part of the chapter focuses on how discourses of culture and tradition operate in a postcolonial context. In that section (as in Chapters 4, 6, 7), I demonstrate that discourses are modes of representation and regulatory frameworks, which work to produce and maintain differences, at the same time attempting to 'govern' how people ought to behave (Hall, 2001; Foucault, 1978, 1982). Drawing from the work of Fanon, I highlight how "culture" is invoked by the politically powerful as an anticolonial discourse to challenge Western cultural hegemony. In arguing this, I look at how discourses of authentic "Africanness" are produced to counter "whiteness," which has historically been framed as the norm, upon which other racial identifications were or are measured. In critiquing Fanon's work, I go on to write about how different African feminists position themselves in relation to dominant versions of "African culture", and how I also position myself between these perspectives. Specifically, I seek to demonstrate how culture is often invoked in gendered ways to castigate particular people (especially women) who are seen as violating culture (for example, gays and lesbians), and how discourses of culture and tradition may be used in ways which legitimate a status quo which may appear to marginalise the very people who deploy such discourses. I raise questions about why people may be invested in certain discursive constructions of culture, and the kinds of identifications and subjectivities these produce.

The chapter concludes by addressing when and how certain practices come to be framed as "traditional" or "cultural". In attempting to answer this, I focus specifically on my previous research about people's constructions of male circumcision, and the contradictory positions men in Zimbabwe took, presenting this practice as symbolising tradition in particular contexts, and modernity in others. This case resonates with how my participants in my current research position themselves differently in their associations of labia elongation with either tradition or modernity. For now, I turn to offer a brief description of the theoretical perspectives informing my project and my methodology and analytic focus.

Social constructionism, poststructuralist feminism, and postcolonial theory and their treatment of identification categories

Social constructionism and poststructuralist feminism are guided by similar principles, which emphasise anti-essentialism, historical and cultural specificity, and centrality of language or discourse in production of meaning (Weedon, 1987; Brickell, 2006). Both social constructionism and poststructuralist feminism are anti-essentialist in their approach to social categories (Burr, 2003; Brickell, 2006). With specific reference to gender as a category, these perspectives maintain that ‘there is no authentic or natural maleness or femaleness’ (Brickell, 2006: 89). Instead, there is a socially constructed ‘natural attitude [that] demands that one accomplish either a socially acceptable maleness or femaleness’ (*ibid.*: 93). Hence, they are critical of essentialist perspectives which take gender categories (masculinities and femininities) as biologically determined, rather than socially constructed. As Butler (1990) argues, masculinities and femininities are not just discursive categories in the sense that they are labels applied to essential qualities, but they are categories materially achieved and performed.

Poststructuralist feminists, however, go beyond challenging the binary construction of men and women as natural categories that explain sex differences, by also turning to the problematic social construction of the category of women. They raise concern about the construction of women as a universal and homogenous category in which ‘to be a woman is, by definition, to be in an oppressed situation’ (Butler, 1988: 523; Mohanty, 1988). This point suggests that gender as an analytical category, should not be limited to understanding social construction of differences between women and men, as this reproduces assumptions that gender is the same as sex. Gender analysis, as it appears from this perspective, should extend to analysing differences within a particular category (Mohanty, 1988). Within the category of women, Butler (1988:524), for example, observes that, ‘there is a sedimentation of gender norms that produces the peculiar phenomenon of a natural sex, or a real woman’. The naturalisation of these categories is constituted in the language individuals use to perform gender according to prescribed cultural scripts (Burr, 2003; Brickell, 2006).

In light of this, I pay attention to what my participants frame as “natural” in relation to culture, gender and sexuality. I also work with the assumption that knowledge production is relational, in that what we regard as the “real” world out there is a product of ‘social processes and interactions in which people are constantly engaged with each other’ (Burr, 1995:4). The language used in interaction between researcher and participants or between participants themselves thus becomes paramount because ‘identities are partly forged through the language

we used to describe ourselves in relation to others' (Pattman, 2010:3). In my study, men were frequently taken (either implicitly or explicitly) to be naturally sexual, and wives as having 'marital obligations' to fulfil their husbands' sexual urges (Chapters 5 & 6). Discursive constructions of "authenticity" relating to gender and aimed at women in particular were common, as if these carried moral injunctions about how women ought to be. Similar to the idea of a '*real woman*' (Butler, 1988), a number of my women participants invoked the category "complete woman" to refer to a woman who has undergone labia elongation, with the implication of course that those who had not were "incomplete" (Chapter 7).

Postcolonial theory was influenced significantly by Foucauldian poststructuralist insights about discourse, particularly the nexus between knowledge and power in producing and maintaining hierarchies of domination and subordination (Gandhi, 1998). From Foucault's perspective, there are hierarchies within knowledge systems, with some forms of knowledge portrayed as superior and more rational than others (Sawicki, 1991). According to Gandhi, 1998:44), postcolonial theory is 'against the cultural hegemony of European knowledges' and seeks 'to reassert the epistemological value and agency of the non-European world'.

This is demonstrated in Edward Said's work, who has called attention to the negative representations of non-Western cultures by former colonisers which perpetuates cultural imperialism (Said, 1978). Western representations of 'the Orient' are, according to Said, Western projections of the Other onto which are hung fears and desires. To be projected as the Other, according to Said (1978), is to be framed not only as different, but inferior, which is an image that is often projected by dominant Western narratives on people in postcolonial countries. Said's ideas have undoubtedly been influential to African intellectuals and political figures, as I discuss later in the chapter. Nonetheless, while Said's notion of Othering focuses on relationships generated by forms of imperialism, I extend this concept to processes of Othering by my own participants, in which some were constructed as "too traditional", or "incomplete" (Chapters 5, 6, and 7). Yet, these categories are not natural, and therefore should not be taken for granted, as I demonstrate below.

Reflections on my informal discussions with colleagues about labia elongation

In 2014, I attended a research course at my university, in which we were asked to talk briefly about our research topics. When my turn came, I explained that I was interested in exploring the significance of labia elongation in the lives of young Shona urban middle-class women and men in Zimbabwe. Among the course participants were three (one male and two females) Shona

Zimbabweans, whom I had only met through this course. During the tea break, they approached me, and asked these questions: *Why are you focusing on urban women? Do you think you will get any data from urban areas? Only the rural women would have something to say about labia elongation and not these modern educated women. Why don't you go to the rural areas around Chiredzi where the Shangaan live because they do this as part of their culture? You mean educated women in urban areas do this traditional practice? Maybe you should talk to old women and not these young women. Is it even a Shona practice?*

These were questions emerging from educated people about how they thought I should research this topic. The questions introduce the concern in my project not to take for granted labia elongation as a “cultural practice”, which, according to these colleagues, only old women living in rural areas know about, instead of “modern educated women”. It was as if these two categories of women are opposites, and as if labia elongation and knowledge of this is dying out and only available from people stereotyped as “traditional” and “cultural”. Nevertheless, as I found out, labia elongation was a very significant practice for the “modern” women who participated in my study.

Brubaker & Cooper (2000) caution against using categories not only in an abstract sense, but in ways which might promote ‘essentialist connotations’ and reification of identity-related categories such as ethnicity, tradition, race, and class. By this, they mean the tendency to treat social categories as showing all-encompassing attributes distinguishing one group of people from another. Alternatively, Brubaker & Cooper (2000:4) urge us to focus more on what they term *categories of practice*, which they describe as ‘categories of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors ... in everyday settings’. I read this as being attentive to whether and how different people use specific categories in everyday interaction.

Culture, ethnicity and the “anthropological” gaze

Since the beginning of the 20th century, meanings of culture and ethnicity have been contested within the fields of anthropology and cultural studies. Yet, despite these disputes, there is usually an assumed direct correlation between these two concepts, where one is seen to imply the other. As Barth (1969:9) puts it, we operate with the logic that ‘discrete groups of people [or] ethnic units correspond to each culture’. This represents conventional perspectives, whereby culture denotes a set of shared practices, traditions, norms, and values unique to particular social groups (Wright, 1998). Social groups in this case imply ethnic groups, each imagined to have ‘one

language [...] a distinctive set of [cultural] practices, and a shared common systems of beliefs [and] common interests (Sharp, 1988:79).

Such assumptions are certainly embedded in ethnic essentialist discourses, in which ethnicity becomes synonymous with race. However, providing critical understandings of ethnicity and race, Anthias (1990), for instance, distinguishes between ‘race’ which implies ‘notions of biological or cultural immutability of a group that has already been attributed as sharing a common origin’ and ethnicity as ‘the identification of particular cultures as ways of life or identity which are based on a historical notion of origin or fate, whether mystical or ‘real’’. In the context of studies, such as mine, that make inference to ethnicity it is important to pose some questions. For example, to what extent is ethnicity addressed like race as an essential, all determining and homogenous category in particular anthropological discourses? Do such discourses under the guise of cultural relativism reify ethnicity and treat it as sociologically fixed and essential, like race? Or do they associate ethnicity with particular socially constructed values and identifications which derive from common social, cultural and political histories reinforced through, for example, living in similar geographical locations and sharing same languages, but which are not unidimensional?

Indications from my study are that in contemporary Zimbabwe, discourses of ethnicity are fluid and open to change and may attain or lose significance as sources of identification depending on the social and political context. It maybe that in certain social contexts people express strong identifications with ethnicity and derive a sense of ‘ethnic pride’, notably, where they feel common grievances or share common experiences of marginalisation, although this is not always the case as I hope to clarify with some examples provided in this chapter.

Critiquing the tendency in certain anthropological studies to reify and homogenise ethnicity by attributing distinct and “authentic” cultural practices to particular ethnic groups, critical anthropologists, such as Dionisio & Viviani (2015:210) have explored how different ethnicities in South Africa are constituted through processes of mutual picking and mixing of cultural practices between ethnically defined groups. Focusing on male circumcision as practiced by the Venda, Dionisio & Viviani argue, for example, that this is not a fixed and timeless practice which defines Venda culture. Indeed, they point out that the Venda were not originally a “circumcising group”, but adopted this practice in the early 1900s because ‘it was dangerous for an uncircumcised man to travel through the neighbouring Sotho territory’. Somehow, over the years, male circumcision has become such an important symbolic marker of Venda masculinity, that men who do not undergo this practice are portrayed as “weak” (*ibid.*). Similarly, in my own

study, a number of my participants suggested that labia elongation is not traditionally a Shona practice, but has been borrowed either from other local minority groups or from neighbouring countries (Chapter 6).

Where a particular ethnicity is socially stigmatised, members of this group may try to downplay or reject their ethnic identity or attributes (Eidheim, 1969). This was also evident in my study, where some participants tended to dissociate themselves from their “own” sub-ethnic groups because they did not want to appear “traditional” and “backward”. I report on emotionally engaged discussions my participants had about whether labia elongation constitutes a Shona cultural practice (Chapter 6). I explore, too, how many of my participants distanced themselves from particular ethnic groups that they constructed as “traditional” and “cultural” for undertaking certain sex educational practices (Chapter 5).

Critical anthropologists in Southern Africa have pointed out also how people may come to amplify their ethnicity in particular instances and social contexts to resist political and economic domination and marginalisation by making claims to particular citizenship rights or resources such as land (Boonzaier & Spiegel, 2008; Robins, 2008). Certain events in post-apartheid South Africa highlight this. A case in point is that of the Bushmen San, who were not only stigmatised, but also forced off their land by both the apartheid and post-apartheid governments (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2008). However, with the support of lawyers and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), they regrouped, laid a land claim under the African National Congress (ANC) government’s Land Restitution Act, and received financial restitution (Robins, 2008, Comaroff & Comaroff, 2008). Concurrently, the San established the South African San Institute (SASI) to fight for financial rewards from the pharmaceutical sale of *hoodia gordonii*, a plant whose medicinal benefits they claimed to have discovered (Robins, 2008). What is interesting from these cases is that, although the San publicly put a united front as an authentic ethnic group when they laid these claims, internally there were ‘divisions between those deemed to be “traditional Bushmen” and those considered “modern” and thus less authentic’ (Robins, 2008:200). It seems, those who considered themselves as more authentic expected more rewards from these claims. More importantly, these examples illustrate that ‘ethnicity is an elusive concept’ (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2008:86), because even though it is constructed in relation to other ethnicities to mark “differences”, within the same ethnic group, other members may be constructed as inferior.

While “culture” may be understood as timeless and associated with claims to “authenticity”, my interest in this project is on how “culture” is invoked, deployed and understood by my participants and how they position themselves as particular young men and women in relation

to versions of culture. This is precisely because “culture” often linked with ‘tradition’ emerged as an important and significant but sometimes contentious category for my participants when they were discussing labia elongation, and raising broad questions about gender, sexuality and normative expectations. It is worth stating that in the field my participants often used the Shona phrases *chivanhu chedu* or *tsika dzedu*, which translate into either culture, tradition, or custom. I maintain loyalty to this local nomenclature by using these concepts interchangeably in my thesis. Notwithstanding, I am aware of scholarly debates that endeavour to make distinctions between them, although these attempted definitions at times complicate rather than clarify these concepts (Thornton, 1988). Fanon (1990), for example, treats custom and tradition as one and the same thing to refer to what used to happen in (or what can be traced from) the past, while culture is something complex and fluid, which he locates only in the present. Ranger (1997), links tradition – which he argues is an invention – to an idealised past, while he views custom as a more flexible and softer version of this. Yet in other instances, he speaks of customs as synonymous with repeated rituals.

In this research, I take culture ‘as a discursive category rather than taking it for granted as something “real” to which discourses refer’ (Pattman, 1999:85). For example, it has been noted that ‘in its hegemonic dimension, culture appears coherent, systematic and consensual [which] tries to look like an object, a thing beyond human agency, not ideological at all’ (Wright, 1998:9). However, common versions of culture, as frequently invoked by participants in my research, which contribute to its reification and deification, which associate this with “authenticity” and ‘a checklist of characteristics’ (Wright, 1998:14), have been challenged. It should be of note that issues of “authenticity”, as they relate to constructions of culture, carry a certain moral injunction that can only be understood in the context of postcolonial African societies, where ‘inauthenticity is condemned as a loss of [African] origins’ (Minh-ha, 1989:89). That is, the fear that African people have been warped by colonial and Western discourses and practices. Culture therefore, as articulated by Fanon (1990), becomes a resource deployed against colonialism or cultural imperialism. Yet, as I shall illustrate later in the chapter, this version of a coherent, consensual, and authentic (national) culture, while empowering as an anti-colonial discourse, is problematic and has been critiqued by some African feminist writers for being masculinist and patriarchal (Wilson-Tagoe, 2007; McFadden, 2003).

Exemplifying a kind of essentialist orientation and approach to researching and writing about “culture” is Michael Gelfand’s *The Genuine Shona*, a study of presumed Shona “cultural values and practices” including labia elongation, published in 1976. “Genuine” implies an essential

cultural identity in opposition to corrupted and artificial forms. Gelfand (1976) writes about “Shona” men and women as if they are enacting essential roles, framed by commitments to consensual cultural values. His writing not only deifies, reifies, idealises and de-historicises “Shona culture”, but also reproduces colonial constructions and projections of “authenticity” on to the Other. In Gelfand’s construction of Shona culture, the contribution of colonialism in lumping together various ethnic groups in the formation of what is collectively known as “the Shona” (Beach, 1994) is ignored. Gelfand’s research not only renders “the Shona” passive ‘cultural dupes’ (Walby, 1990:93), but also, as we see in his account of labia elongation as a Shona custom, he plays down, ignores and justifies gender, sexual and age inequalities and their intersections:

A girl is told that in order that her married life be successful she should be properly trained and that her body should be prepared to receive the man. This can be ensured by having the labia minora of the correct length and shape [...] the object of this – they call it a custom – is to ensure that a girl will one day be properly developed. This is stopped once menstruation starts and is performed by the girl in the same way as she might practise physical exercise. In no way is it intended as a form of sexual excitation. [Gelfand, 1973:169].

Gelfand writes about culture in a highly prescriptive way which renders Shona people dupes of culture who lack agency and labia elongation as simply the mechanical enactment of prescriptive cultural norms. Furthermore, his emphasis that ‘*In no way is it [elongation] intended as a form of [female] sexual excitation,*’ speaks volumes about how female sexual desire and pleasure are (dis)regarded in this society, which he surprisingly does not interrogate. Indeed, drawing on Said (1978), one could argue that this exemplifies an unreflective Western anthropological gaze which is voyeuristic and androcentric and which constructs people in Africa as the Other, through sexualising simplifying and rendering them exotic and cultural (in implicit contrast to being individuals with agency)

In its contemporary discursive conceptualisation, culture is understood as a political and relational term that is intrinsically linked with issues of power and politics (Clifford, 1986). As a result, it is worthwhile to consider culture as ‘dynamic, always negotiable and in the process of endorsement, contestation and transformation’ (Wright, 1998:10). This represents an important shift from trying to come up with an all-encompassing definition of culture, to focusing (as I attempt to do in this study) on the contentious nature of this concept, and how, when, and why people use discourses of culture in their everyday lives, particularly in postcolonial contexts. In a research, such as mine, where “culture” is raised and discussed in emotionally engaged ways by

participants, this does not mean rejecting constructions which reify and connect “culture” with fixed and timeless values. Rather, it means focusing on how and why they make these connections, and why they have emotional investments in such essentialist and prescriptive understandings of culture.

In the 1990s, much to his surprise Pattman (2001), who was an expatriate lecturer at one of the teacher training colleges in Zimbabwe, encountered many black Zimbabwean people who spoke about “culture” frequently and in animated ways as if it were a person. Such talk about culture in terms of what *it says*, he argues, contributed to the production of a sense of a shared identity connected with an idealised pre-colonial past. Culture was deified and constructed as if it carried a moral voice which proclaimed what was truly or authentically African, while prescribing what people, especially women, should do to be “cultural”. DePalma & Francis (2014:10) have equally asserted that ‘culture is reified [and deified] as an authoritative institution that goes beyond the humans who constitute it’. This may give the impression that people are dupes of a pre-existing culture and have little agency.

Gendering and sexualising culture

One of the salient features of culture, as it is constructed, understood and deployed in prominent discourses in colonial and postcolonial contexts in Africa is how it comes to be gendered and sexualised. This is often ignored in the sorts of ideological contestations of culture in relation to issues of identities and nationalisms which I highlighted above. In the next few sections, I focus on the gendering and sexualisation of culture in pre and postcolonial Africa. I start by demonstrating how historically, notions of culture and tradition were materially and symbolically tied with gender and sexuality under colonialism. Drawing on a range of research studies, including my own previous research on “cultural” and “traditional” practices in Zimbabwe, I explore the continued significance attached to gender and sexuality in relation to “culture”; the forms these discourses take, the contestations around these, and the subject positions which they produce.

Constructions of culture and tradition in colonial Christian discourses

Colonialism in Africa, which came disguised as a civilising or modernising mission, had Christianity as an accompanying ally (Chitando, 2002). Part of the civilisation missions was to turn people from their indigenous practices to Christianity, by making ‘every effort ... to bring the colonised person to admit the inferiority of his culture’ (Fanon, 1990:197). This was

achieved through the “invention” and construction of tradition relationally to versions of modernity (Ranger, 1997), which included Christianity. For example, colonial authorities and Christian missionaries (more specifically) denigrated most of the traditional cultural practices that related to ancestral worship and initiation practices (for example circumcision), and ceremonies marking transition from childhood into adulthood (Schmidt, 1990; Maxwell, 1998; Mate, 2002; Makahamadze & Sibanda, 2008). Consequently, young Christian converts found themselves withdrawing their participation in initiation ceremonies as an expression of devotion to their new religion (Oduyoye, 1977). These customary practices (especially those relating to sexuality) were, according to Schmidt (1990:623), ‘repugnant to European concepts of morality’. What seems clear, which I will elaborate in detail below, is that Christianity, with the support of colonial authorities contributed immensely to a redefinition of African cultures and sexualities and gender relations (Schmidt, 1990; Mate, 2002; Wilson-Tagoe, 2007, Tamale, 2008).

Nevertheless, the alliance between colonial administrators and Christian missionaries was never a stable one (West, 2002). Sometimes colonial administrators created alliances with local male patriarchy in opposing missionaries. In Namibia, for example, Christian missionaries were opposed to *efundula*¹⁶, a practice that was part of female initiation rites of the Owambo (Becker, 2004). They were particularly critical of what initiates were expected to wear, which they argued promoted women’s ‘nakedness’ and indecency (Becker, 2004). On the contrary, the colonial administrators together with local male traditionalists supported the preservation of these rites, which they regarded as ‘cornerstones of healthy tribal traditions’ (Becker, 2004: 43).

In an effort to counter these cultural rites, Christian missionaries established their own versions of “initiation” practices and associations to cater for their converts, especially women and girls, whom they redefined as guardians of family morality (Hinfelaar, 2001; Tamale, 2011). According to West (2002:69), ‘missionaries were particularly eager to groom proper Christian wives for the African ministers and teachers on whom the success of the missionary enterprise ... ultimately depended.’ They established the Wayfarers movement whose role was to impart Christian values and spread messages emphasising sexual purity and sexual restraint to adolescent girls (Delius & Glaser, 2002; West, 2002). At the same time, Christian women’s unions were created to introduce and promote ideas about female domesticity and female sexuality which were in tandem with Victorian ideals (Mate, 2002), which the middle-class gladly accepted (West, 2002). Within this Victorian era, ‘dress, behaviour, and mores were geared to erasing any hint of sexuality’ (Tamale, 2011:15). More specifically, it was a period

¹⁶ Efundula is a generic term for puberty and marriage rites performed by groups of Owambo girls and women

characterised by a repression of sexuality outside the confines of the matrimonial bed (Foucault, 1978). Yet, it has been argued that even within marriage, colonial Christian discourses were ‘silent on the possibilities of women’s entitlement to sexual satisfaction within marriage’, while they also portrayed sex as ‘bad or filthy’ (Pereira, 2003:2).

Christianity not only influenced a shift in modes of sexual expression for the colonised, especially black African women. It also emerged as an important site of identification for the colonised and still does for most people in postcolonial African countries as I discussed in the previous chapter in reference to Zimbabwe. 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 (Oyewumi, 1997). This was achieved most significantly through missionaries who were the first to offer formal education to black Africans (Schmidt, 1992; West, 2002). This is why Christianity was seen as ‘an agency of social mobility’ for Africans, especially during colonialism (West, 2002:60). 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). Partly, this was to show that they had progressed than their uneducated counterparts. More significantly, taking this position seems more connected with Christian teachings in missionary schools, which sought to denounce African traditions as earlier discussed.

In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, I show that these normative Christian ideas about African “traditional” practices still resonate with some of my middle-class participants, who identified as Christians, and were critical of labia elongation for being contrary to Christian practices. However, unlike colonial times where middle-class people tended to dissociate themselves with practices constructed as “traditional” or “cultural” according to West (2002), the majority of the women in my study had undergone labia elongation. Furthermore, many took complex and contradictory positions, both criticising and supporting labia elongation at different moments in the focus group discussions, by invoking Christian discourses. This is a topic specifically addressed in Chapter 6.

“Culture” and its deployment in contemporary Africa

I now shift my focus from the colonial context, and the role Christianity in particular played to reshape African cultures and sexualities. In this section, my interest is in exploring how “culture” is used in a postcolonial African context, in which my own research is situated. Before I address this, it is important to point out that even though colonialists attempted to undermine

African culture, through particular racialised colonial discourses as discussed in the previous section, discourses of a homogenous “African culture”, created by black African nationalists and intellectuals, emerged as ‘instrument[s] of resistance’ (Garuba & Raditlhlo, 2008:39) to colonial domination. Behind the success of African nationalism was the idea that Africa possessed a collective culture, which had to be defended from colonial influence. This united colonised African people against the white colonisers, as articulated in Frantz Fanon’s writings. For Fanon, nationalist struggles were about issues of culture (and race):

[T]o fight for national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation, that material keystone which makes the building of a culture possible. There is no other fight for culture which can develop apart from the popular struggle. (Fanon, 1990:187).

While this describes colonial events, culture re-emerged ‘as a central site of ideological battle, with grand narratives of the continuity or discontinuity of cultural identity being drawn on to either legitimate or challenge the new social and political order’ (Clark, 2006:8) in postcolonial Africa. It is therefore understandable that Fanon’s ideas about the power of a collective “African culture” (although discursively framed) remain relevant and resonate with political elites and postcolonial intellectuals who seek to challenge Western imperialistic discourses.

Contemporary construction of “Whiteness” and “Africanness” in relation to culture

Earlier in the chapter, I alluded to how colonial discourses constructed Africans as sexual savages whose (sexual) culture was not only inferior but also lacked morals (Fanon, 1990; Pattman, 2001; Delius & Glaser, 2002; Mate, 2002; Tamale, 2011). Since then, the West is constructed in dominant liberal discourse as “cultureless” and as more progressive than the rest who are seen to be still clinging to old traditions and customs (Phillips, 2003). According to Salusbury & Foster (2004:98), ‘to claim culturelessness is to claim normalcy’, which has implicit renderings of Africa as exotic and cultural. Salusbury & Foster made this analysis from their study of white English speaking South Africans (WESSAs) who were presenting themselves (in opposition to black South Africans for example) as not having a culture. Projecting culture on to blackness, Salusbury & Foster argue, is a way which allows WESSAs to take themselves for granted, while reinforcing the invisibility of whiteness as particular kind of normative position and identification. By focusing on how “whiteness” is constructed in opposition to “blackness”, for instance, one can see how the former functions as ‘a strategy of authority rather than an authentic or essential identity’ (Bhabha, 1998:21). Guess (2006), who

focused on the significance of “whiteness” in understanding racial relations in American society, argued that the notion of “whiteness as the norm” helps to maintain racial hierarchies. This is not only in terms of political dominance as Bhabha (1998) suggests, but also in terms of social and cultural superiority (Guess, 2006).

In *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon (1986) writes about mixed race relations between black men and white women, and between black women and white men. For the black man, Fanon asserts, to marry a white woman is to ‘marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness’ and when his hands ‘caress those white breasts they grasp white civilisation’ (1986: 45). For the black woman, ‘she asks nothing, demands nothing, except a bit of whiteness in her life’ (*ibid.*:29). In both cases, Fanon presents both black women and black men as objectifying white men and women, respectively, because they embody the temptation produced by cultural imperialism.

I raise these ideas (about how “whiteness” has operated historically) in light of my findings, in which some participants associated white people with superiority and higher class. As I discuss in Chapter 6, they tried to dismiss my question about whether labia elongation was a cultural practice of the Shona. They told me it was not cultural because ‘even white women do it’. In that chapter, I argue that presenting oneself as not having, or not subscribing to a culture, by evoking “whiteness”, represents a powerful position. Firstly, it allows one to present oneself as a spokesperson for interests which transcend “cultural” boundaries. Secondly, it suggests one embodies a superior identity; in this case being modern and from a middle-class. Be that as it may, presenting oneself as “cultureless” does not always carry positive connotations.

This is particularly evident in a postcolonial African context where, white people are constructed as having ‘neither culture nor traditions nor customs’ (Boonzaier & Spiegel, 2008: 198). As such, ‘blacks have denied whites the right to identify as Africans on racial or cultural grounds’ (Boonzaier & Spiegel, 2008:202), suggesting that black Africans are the authentic bearers of African culture. This was exemplified by some black African girls in a study of young people’s experiences of schooling in contemporary South Africa (Pattman & Bhana (2009). They complained about being discriminated by Indian girls and teachers, but drew on “Africanness” as an exclusive and empowering (black) identification category, through which they positioned themselves as authentic beings in contrast to Indians whom they constructed as foreigners and aliens who should return to their homes (Pattman & Bhana, 2009).

According to Spronk (2009:502) ‘Africanness indicates the emic innate sense of “being African” as a shared history, race or culture’. In her study on how young urban young people negotiate

issues of sexuality and cultural identification, Spronk (2009:506) noted how ‘images and rhetoric of “Africanness” are invoked and used by diverse factions of [Kenyan] society because of the widespread notion of loss of culture’, which is associated with Westernisation. In light of this, it can thus be argued that constructions of African “culture” or “Africanness” as superior to “whiteness” operate as counter-discourses to Western cultural imperialism and at times to forms of marginalisation related to race (Pattman & Bhana, 2009; Spronk, 2009). While “Africanness” implies ‘testifying to an African or black commonality that they [black African people] are proud of’ (Spronk, 2009:509), some researchers have observed how notions of “Africanness” are raised in criticisms against girls who “abandon” their culture, who get labelled in derogatory ways for being “too” Western (Pattman, 2001, 2005).

An example is the ‘*Salad*’ phenomenon in Zimbabwe. According to Pattman (2005), “*Salads*” is a derogatory label used in Zimbabwe that only applies to particular relatively affluent urban girls, though in my personal experience and in this study, it cuts across gender. The term “*Salads*” (just like a *Salad* made up of a combination of ingredients) is given to these girls because it is felt they are suffering from an identity crisis. This is either because of their English accents, their love for particular clothes and diets, their disconnectedness with their parents’ rural homes, or their ignorance of their “culture”, which are seen as ingredients of the Western culture (*ibid.*). ‘*Salad* girls’ were constructed against the more “traditional” girls who are termed ‘Cabbage girls’, who instead come from poor backgrounds and are not materialistic but have connotations of not being nice looking. However, many “*Salad* girls” preferred not to be identified as such because of its connotations with bad morals (*ibid.*). Interestingly, my participants also mentioned and deployed this term during our conversations as explored in Chapter 5.

In many African countries, including Zimbabwe, “African culture” is also officially and institutionally invoked against those black people who identify as or support homosexuals, whose sexual orientation is seen as a Western import that is un-African, un-cultural and ungodly (Pattman, 2001; Tamale, 2007; Robins, 2008; Msibi, 2011; Anguita, 2012; Epprecht, 2013; Morrissey, 2013; Nyanzi, 2013). In the 1990s, Patricia McFadden, a feminist, faced deportation by the Zimbabwean government for defending the rights of sexual minorities whose sexual behaviour has repeatedly been described by the Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, as ‘worse than dogs and pigs’ (Pattman 2001; Msibi 2011). She was accused of betraying ‘Zimbabwean culture and family values’ (McFadden, 2003). The ‘workings of heterosexual hegemony in the crafting of matters sexual’ (Butler, 1993: xii) through homophobic discourses

are not only expressed by the dominant and powerful, but permeate to ordinary people. This is reflected in my own research. In one of the sections in Chapter 4, I focus on how some male participants asserted their heterosexual identities by distancing themselves from activities which normally signified male bonding, but which they now associate with homosexuality, for example holding hands or bathing with other males. ‘We don’t want to be associated with that’, one of them said. They rationalised their homophobic attitudes by implicitly invoking notions of African cultural socialisation, through statements such as ‘we were raised to be straight’.

The point I wish to make here is that while Fanon’s (1990) work draws our attention to the emancipatory potential of anticolonial discourses, it also cautions about the dangers that might come with the idealisation of “African culture” as homogenous and real. This is exemplified in how powerful politicians, for example, invoke “African culture” is used to vilify those whose sexual identities do not conform to the prescribed norm, as discussed above.

Feminist positions on culture and how I position my study in relation to these

While providing important and critical insights on black people’s investments in versions of “culture” in the postcolonial context, Fanon, has been criticised especially by African postcolonial feminists, for focusing more on the racial operations of “culture” while disregarding how gender is implicated in nationalist discourses of “African culture”. Wilson-Tagoe (2007:224-225), for example, argues that ‘women may be located differently within nationalist struggles’ as they may be subordinated by men ‘even within the revolutionary movement’. Others have argued that, in postcolonial Africa, ‘culture continues to be a pivotal way in which gender and “race” are produced and performed as part of the maze of identity and power’ (Clark, 2006:8). This might stem from claims that women are first and foremost seen as ‘biological carriers of race’ (Williams & Chrisman, 1993:17), and secondly, as carriers of culture (McClintock, 1991; Clark, 2006; Miescher, Manuh, & Cole, 2007). As such, male-centric nationalist discourses of African culture and identity are said to place the burden on black women to ‘represent an original African essence untouched by Westernisation’ (Lewis, 2005:19). Lewis further asserts that black African women are made to believe ‘that they are acceptably African only if they are traditional’ (*ibid.*:20). The argument here is that discourses of “African culture” are invoked against those women who do not abide by their “culture” or customs. In fact, some politicians and male traditional leaders have even argued that a loss of culture is behind the spread of HIV and AIDS in Africa (Kaarsholm, 2006). To deal with the pandemic, they have advocated for the revival of traditional practices such as virginity testing ceremonies, which were once abandoned under colonial influence (Kaarsholm, 2006;

Wadesango *et al.*, 2011) as a strategy of “moral regeneration”. In response to this, feminist critics have raised questions about the operation of double sexual standards, and how “culture” is used and invoked to justify and legitimate oppressive gendered practices, and police black women’s sexuality (Posel, 2005).

While some African feminist writers have focused on the androcentric ways in which culture is constructed, used and invoked, others such as Sofola (1998) have argued for recognition and celebration of “traditional cultural” practices in which rural “traditional” women, they argue, are attributed much power and authority, in contrast to their “modern” counterparts. Sofola is critical of “Western educated” African women who look down upon rural women for their “lack” of knowledge and power. 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). Polygamy, Sofola (1998:63) argues, “weakens” a man’s power because he is a ‘shared commodity’ among many women, unlike in a monogamous marriage where he commands more power because he is ‘the central focus.’ 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’ (*ibid.*).

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 idealisation of “traditional culture” and women’s position in this. She seems to idealise polygamy as a marriage institution marked by harmony, and beneficial to all women in that union, while rendering the man “powerless.” She characterises polygamy as the norm for all rural people. Thus, her work, which seems to draw from postcolonial theory, borders on uncritical versions of cultural essentialism and cultural relativism. Furthermore, she portrays rural women as “carriers” (and educated urban women as “violators”) of culture, a position often taken by males (Pattman, 1999), as I elaborate below when I provide empirical examples of how people invoke culture in their conversations. Lastly, her construction of the “rural illiterate” woman and the “urban educated” woman in oppositional ways, is rather limiting. This is because it replicates, rather than challenges, the Othering of particular women, while reinforcing the idea that they are distinctly different. My own empirical encounter with the “cultural” practice of labia elongation as practiced by urban middle-class women in Zimbabwe points to the need to interrogate these binaries rather than take them for granted.

Sitting between the two feminist positions discussed above, is the work of Ifi Amadiume, with which I tend to identify. Similar to Sofola (1998), Amadiume (2006) criticises the tendency by urban people to construct rural people as inferior and traditional, but from here, their points of departure differ. Sofola is more concerned with what she considers the four cornerstones of “African womanhood” – ‘as a woman, the equal of a man in essence; her reality as a daughter; and her reality as a mother ... [and] her reality as a wife’ (1998:61). Yet, Amadiume begins from another cornerstone missing in Sofola’s work: a woman’s reality as a sexual being. Amadiume (2006:4) cautions the African educated ‘urbanites’ to be wary of reproducing the West’s portrayal of rural Africans as sexually ‘uninformed’, ‘primitive’, and “traditional”. She is critical of feminist versions which give the impression that sex by Africans is ‘mechanical and only for male gratification and female procreation for which a woman is simply a depository’ (*ibid.*:3). By this, Amadiume foregrounds the need to focus on issues of (female) sexual pleasure, rather than to think of sex as dangerous for women as characterised in dominant framings of African sexualities.

She writes positively about what she calls “traditional” practices such as labia elongation, and about sexuality education in some rural African societies, where young girls and women are practically taught ‘sexual movements to heighten sexual pleasure’ (Amadiume, 2006:5). Interestingly, in my discussions in Chapter 5, some women in my study were critical of this type of sex education, which they described as “traditional” and which they saw as “too sexual”, especially if targeted at young girls. Nevertheless, Amadiume (2006) notes that within these cultural contexts, there is regulation, subordination, and violation of female sexuality, although she emphasises that this does not represent all sexual cultures in Africa. She is, for example, critical of practices which she argues suppress female sexual desire and pleasure such as female circumcision.

The strength of Amadiume’s analysis is that it operates at different registers. While she is among scholars who reject racist and Eurocentric representation of African cultures and sexualities as inferior and dangerous for women (Pattman, 1998; Arnfred, 2004; Dellenborg, 2004; Lewis, 2005; Tamale, 2006; Pedwell, 2010), she does not blindly defend all African cultures either. Rather, she raises the ambiguities of African sexualities oscillating between pleasure and danger, while also noting how issues of gendered power are entangled in these. These are useful insights on which I draw, especially in Chapters 5 and 6, when addressing how participants spoke about labia elongation in relation to female and male sexual pleasure, and assumptions about gender power dynamics in heterosexual relations which inform these. While both Amadiume and Sofola

identify a form of Othering of rural women by educated urban women, my research highlights different forms of Othering which occurred in the processes through which my participants (young, middle-class, urban, well-educated women and men) positioned themselves in relation to each other in the focus groups I conducted (Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7).

Culture and Tradition as invoked by “ordinary” people

My research departs from this anti-essentialist critique of culture offered by Fanon, Said, or feminist writers whose work I discussed above, in that I focus more on how discourses of “culture” and “tradition” are invoked by people who are not marked as powerful political or intellectual elites. In other words, I am interested in exploring constructions of culture by ‘ordinary people’ such as my middle-class participants. This analytic approach, which engages with discourses of culture as they emerge in research encounters, such as interviews, is exemplified in some empirical studies, which I have found very influential.

In a study about how young men and women in Kenya, who identify as modern, negotiate sexuality, Rachel Spronk, (2009) 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, being a white researcher, 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. Two months later, the same man participated in her research about young people’s love lives and declared that he ‘cannot marry a circumcised woman because I want us both to enjoy sex [...] how can I have a fulfilling sexual experience while my girlfriend cannot?’ (Spronk, 2009:501). This is illustrative of how “culture” as used by black Africans in a postcolonial context can operate to challenge what they consider to be Western imperialist narratives. More importantly, this kind of study influences my own analytic and methodological approaches, which focus on how culture emerges and is invoked in different and even contradictory ways by the same person in the interviews and focus groups I conducted.

When is a practice “traditional” or “modern”? – An example of male circumcision

One of the central questions this study raises is when, why, and how are some practices constructed as “traditional cultural”, drawing insights from the ways my participants spoke about

labia elongation. I argue, this is an important question to pose in a study like mine, which attempts to take an anti-essentialist approach to categories, which are ordinarily taken-for-granted. While the different ways my participants symbolically constructed labia elongation in relation to this category are addressed in Chapters 5 and 6, here I write briefly about my masters research (Venganai, 2012), in which I explored how urban men and women in Zimbabwe perceive the practice of male circumcision. By alluding to this, I hope to shed light about the complex ways people may identify or dis-identify with a practice that has historically been framed as “traditional”. Furthermore, as examined in Chapter 6, participants in my current research also mentioned and spoke about male circumcision, which they constructed as a gendered male equivalent of labia elongation. The Zimbabwean government, through the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare, introduced male circumcision from 2009 as part of its national HIV prevention strategies.

I had a keen interest in this practice because prior to this intervention, Zimbabwe was predominantly a non-circumcising country, where only 10 percent of Zimbabwean men (especially from ethnic minorities and migrant communities) were said to practice circumcision as a rite of passage or for religious reasons (Peltzer *et al.*, 2007). There is also a long discursive history of negative constructions of this practice since colonialism through institutional discourses, not only in Zimbabwe, but in Africa generally (Maposa, 2011). Even after colonialism, emergent dominant human rights discourse presented this practice as a violation of human rights, because particular communities supposedly coerced their male members (especially children) into this practice (Cruz *et al.*, 2003). Alongside this discourse, was an earlier health discourse, in which ethnically based male circumcision was portrayed as a source of HIV infection because it was performed in “non-hygienic” ways and by “untrained” people (Gwandure, 2011). This is still implicitly stated in the current hegemonic representation of male circumcision for HIV prevention promoted by WHO, which is said to be ‘Safe, Voluntary, Informed male circumcision’ or ‘Voluntary Medical male circumcision’ (UNAIDS/WHO, 2011). In other words, any other male circumcision procedure (other than the one performed by medical personnel) is portrayed as “unsafe” and “coerced”, which implies that it is of inferior quality.

In the interviews and focus groups I conducted with men from what are regarded as traditionally ‘circumcising’ and ‘non-circumcising’ ethnic groups, I discovered that they constructed the practice in multiple ways. On the one hand, there were those from the Shona group who were critical of the practice because they felt it has connotations of assuming particular ethnic

identities. Specifically, they seemed concerned that getting circumcised (regardless of the supposed health benefits) meant they were undermining their Shona identities by associating themselves with minority ethnic groups (such as the Shangaan), whom they constructed as backward and traditional. Yet, other Shona men spoke positively about male circumcision and associated it with notions of modernity. They appeared to be attracted to the positive images of a circumcised modern man who not only embodies better penile hygiene, but also offers better sexual pleasure to his woman. These images were packaged in circumcision campaign adverts, like *Pinda musmart* (Be smart), which have connotations of being fashionable, modern, and wise. The adverts particularly featured charismatic local young male music personalities and politicians to appeal to the urban populace.

On the other hand, Shangaan circumcised men I spoke to were supportive of this HIV prevention strategy. However, this is not because they actually believed in the claims that the practice prevents HIV transmission, but because as one participant summed it, ‘we used to be ashamed to talk about our ethnic group as circumcising because of the stigma that came with being circumcised’. In other words, for them, circumcision provides an important source of symbolic identification and empowerment given that it has taken on a positive connotation in modern medical discourses in a postcolonial context in which they experience forms of denigration.

What this study also demonstrates is that male circumcision can symbolise either ‘tradition’ or ‘modernity’, depending on context, and on who performs, or speaks about it. I take this logic from Fischer (2006) who focused on how particular sexual acts are constructed either as “moral” or as “immoral”. He concluded that no act is inherently “moral” or “immoral” since meanings assigned to each category derive not from the act itself but from the social actor performing them. In a contemporary context in which genital modification practices such as labia elongation and female circumcision are framed as “cultural” or “traditional” and retrogressive in dominant neoliberal feminist and human rights discourses (Tamale, 2008), how and whether my middle-class participants position themselves to these popular discourses of labia elongation is an area I address in this study (Chapter 5, 6, 7).

Breaking away from binary understandings of traditional and modernity: Engaging with the complexities of identity construction of people’s everyday life

Earlier in the chapter, I alluded to how colonial discourses constructed (Western) modernity in opposition to (African) tradition, and African culture in opposition to Christianity, which served to produce hierarchies (Yanagisako & Delaney, 1995) and assert the superiority of the colonisers

(Fanon, 1990; Mate, 2002; Trouillot, 2003; Tamale, 2011). African scholars like Tamale (2008:48) advise us to be wary of naturalising categories by simply taking ‘either or’ approaches that ‘posit complex social issues on a binary plane’. Certainly, there is a growing body of empirical research situated in postcolonial African contexts, in which these superficial dichotomies are increasingly being questioned.

Clark’s (2006), for example, reflects this in her research which explored South African black women’s narratives about how they experienced apartheid and experience post-apartheid South Africa. She discovers ‘the complexity of the self-reflexive endeavour [by these women] to simultaneously position oneself (and to be discursively positioned) for and against modernity, for and against indigenous tradition’ (Clark, 2006:14). These complex and contradictory identifications are also reported in Ferguson’s (1999) ethnographic research on the lives of miners in Zambia. According to Ferguson, his participants, although they lived in urban areas, some ‘displayed a strong ethnic or regional identity’ because they visited their rural homes often. This category of miners often presented themselves in opposition to those who had no rural ties, whom they constructed as ‘properly urbanised’ (*ibid.*:83) – a label that carried negative connotations for some of these men, since it implied one was too Westernised. I revisit Ferguson’s ideas in Chapter 5, when I discuss about how particular men in my study were disparaged for lacking knowledge about labia elongation because they have no contact with their rural kin (who presumably have the prerogative to teach about such traditional cultural practices).

Nonetheless, identifications by urban people which sway between being “modern” and being “traditional” appear connected to what Garuba (2003:264) terms ‘re-traditionalization of Africa’. He describes this as an assimilation of European elements of modernity ‘into the matrix of traditional ritual and culture’ (*ibid.*). He emphasises though that the process is not in any way unidirectional:

Re-traditionalization thus entails two different but related processes that run concurrently in postindependence Africa. The first involves the assimilation of modern forms into traditional practices by a “traditional” elite; and the second refers to the practices of “modern” elites. The latter involves the recuperation of traditional forms and practices—such [traditional] praise songs at presidential inaugurations, and sacrifices to protect a car—and their incorporation into the forms of Western modernity. [Garuba, 2003:264-265]

What Garuba appears to assert here, is that in everyday practice, categories of modern and tradition do operate in their naturalised form as stark opposites. From what has been discussed in this section, and which is further explored in the findings chapters, it seems precarious to present oneself as “too traditional” or “too modern” especially in a postcolonial context marked by universalistic discourses of modernity on the one hand, and anticolonial discourses emphasising authentic “Africanness” on the other. As such, this is likely to have implications of how women and men in my study may choose to present themselves by emphasising or suppressing certain identities in the way they speak about labia elongation in particular interview contexts.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to provide an account of how I engage with key concepts which emerged in my research, notably culture, tradition, ethnicity, race, gender and sexuality. Taking insights from poststructuralist theory, my concern has been to define these in terms of how they are used and deployed in conversation, and the contextual meanings which are attached to them, rather than giving dictionary definitions, with the presumption that they are, themselves, just descriptive categories which refer to an independent world outside. This is why, methodologically, a key concern in this research is to encourage conversations around the categories people raise so as to analyse the multiple and shifting identifications they produce and negotiate in the context of focus group discussions.

Furthermore, the chapter draws on postcolonial literature, which raises questions about the historical construction of these categories especially “tradition” and “culture”. Rather than taking these concepts for granted and at face value by associating these with timeless values, the chapter demonstrates how in Ranger’s (1997) words, “tradition” is historically “invented”. More fundamentally, the chapter provides foresights about my research which partly explores how and why “tradition” operates as a significant category in my discussions about labia elongation with young people in contemporary Zimbabwe who identify as modern and well educated.

The chapter examined popular ways of deploying “culture” in postcolonial contexts as a set of proclamations, which personify “culture”, as in “culture” *says*, which are tied with normative expectations relating to gender and sexuality. I share Harry Garuba’s (2003:268) argument that, ‘even when discourses are based on mystification, they still possess real effects and, through the power of normalization, exert an influence on subjects and an impact on culture.’ In linking this with subsequent chapters, I draw on poststructuralist feminism in combination with postcolonial theory to engage with gender power relations, and the kinds of subject positions made available

to men and women through these discourses. In addition, I pay attention to how these discourses were negotiated and subverted (on which I elaborate in Chapter 4). The next chapter examines the methodological approaches I used in this study, in generating and analysing data.

Chapter Three

Reflections on the research process

Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on the research approaches I took in conducting this research. While I developed a particular research structure (themes and questions I wanted to explore in particular kinds of interviews), the emphasis was on developing an inductive approach, which encouraged participants to set the agenda in the interviews. In this methodology chapter, as I hinted in the introductory chapter, I am not simply going to provide a description of the methods I used as if these were simply pre-defined instruments for eliciting information. Rather, I elaborate on how I take these methods as social encounters by providing some snippets of the research in action. These include the kinds of relations established in the research which affected how participants presented themselves and what they said. Focusing on processes of knowledge production and the relational dynamics in the interviews, I raise questions about what counts as data, which directly informs the later research findings chapters.

The chapter also pays attention to ethics and ethical issues as they emerged and arose in the research. But rather than taking ethical concerns as abstract principles which can be checked off and confirmed in advance of the research (as constructed in ethical clearance forms), I am interested in taking these interviews as unpredictable social or ethnographic encounters (Pattman, 2015), which can generate unpredictable ethical concerns. There have been concerns within and outside feminist research that, ‘routinising ethical review can work against the inductive, improvisational character of qualitative research’ (Devault & Gross, 2012:226). In light of this view, I provide illustrative examples of some of the unexpected ethical issues I encountered during the process of doing this research which were outside the university’s ethics checklist. In this research, I do not reduce ethics to procedural aspects in research concerned with ‘harm minimisation’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Dawson, 2009; Bryman, 2012). Instead, I broaden the ways of thinking about ethics by stressing the ethical importance of talking about sexuality and labia elongation in a context in which so much significance is attached to sexuality as a source of (gendered) identification, and dimension of power.

As this research draws on feminist contributions to methodology that emphasise the significance of situating oneself in the research (Bolak, 1996; Hesse-Biber, 2007), I begin the chapter by an appraisal of theoretical insights informing this chapter, before discussing why I used the research

methods I selected. Later, I comment on the kinds of relations I established with different participants in the process of doing this research. I am particularly influenced by the position that ‘researchers are part of what they study, not separate from it’ (Charmaz 2006:178). According to Pattman (2010:3), ‘how we act and behave and what we say depends on the context and the people with whom we are interacting.’ In other words, knowledge produced in different kind of interviews is co-constructed, as it is tied with the kinds of relations participants establish with each other as well as with the researcher during and outside interviews or focus group discussions. I conclude the chapter by describing how I will analyse my data, using a number of analytical tools drawn from grounded theory, discourse, and narrative analyses.

Theoretical assumptions informing this research methodology

This research broadly takes an inductive approach, borrowing ideas from grounded theory. An inductive approach is one ‘without the restraints imposed by structured methodology’ (Thomas, 2006:238), for it allows data to ‘tell its story on its own terms and not on the terms of extant theory’ (Gummesson, 2005:322). As such, in terms of content, I do not treat my theory, methodology, and analysis chapters as if they are linear, unidirectional, and exist independent of each other (Robertson, 2015). I alluded to this in the preceding chapter, when I explained that the theoretical concepts I focused on in that chapter are informed by the data which emerged from my research. In this methodological chapter, I also do not present it as a stand-alone chapter, which is concerned only with spelling out the data collection methods used. Instead, I integrate these methods with part of my findings, to illustrate their strengths and weaknesses empirically.

The general principle of grounded theory is that theory should emerge from the data, rather than forcing data on pre-selected theories as is the case with deductive approaches (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Gummesson, 2005; Bowen, 2006; Charmaz, 2006; Silverman, 2011). Grounded theory approaches question positivist assumptions that only quantitative methods can collect data systematically; and that data collection and data analysis are distinct and linear stages of the research process (Charmaz, 2006:6). Unlike other qualitative analytical approaches, with grounded theory, data analysis is not left until the end of data collection, but begins immediately after the first set of data is collected (Charmaz, 2006). This inductive approach not only provides reference points for emerging concepts which can be further investigated or comparatively analysed in subsequent interviews, but also allows for rigorous analysis of data (Bryman, 2012).

Used in its most radical form, a grounded theory approach discourages reviewing literature prior to data collection for fear that preconceived categories and theoretical positions may cloud one's analytic judgement to the extent of discarding data which may seem incompatible with these assumptions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Gummesson, 2005). This however raises questions about whether research can be truly grounded, if we are to consider that researchers never enter the research field as blank slates (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Gummesson, 2005). Although researchers might bring with them theoretical "baggage" to the research, they are urged to be reflexive, allowing their prior assumptions to be challenged by adopting an inductive approach that attempts to understand social phenomena from the perspective of the research participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2003). Thus, the direction interviews take should largely be determined by interviewees because they are "experts" about their social realities, as they construct and experience these, and the interviewer needs to pay particular attention to those themes deemed significant by them (Charmaz, 2006; Pattman, 2010).

By setting out to explore women and men's understandings of labia elongation through interviews and focus group discussions, my motivation was not to discover an objective truth. My methodological approach is informed by social constructionist epistemologies which reject assumptions that 'knowledge is based upon objective [and] unbiased observation of the world' (Burr, 1995:3). This approach invites us to be critical of categories such as gender and sexuality which may be highly significant in relation to the ways our research participants construct their identities but may also be taken-for-granted and naturalised.

My research is also grounded in *feminist politics* (Morrell *et al.* 2012:6) which encourages researchers to reflect on the political motives behind their research choices (Bennet & Pereira, 2013). This is because 'research is a political, rather than neutral, process' (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002:18). At the same time, Gillies and Alldred (2012: 44) argue that 'questions of ethics cannot be separated from political aims and intentions'. Against this background, this study seeks to empower young black women by creating spaces for them to actively speak and participate in sexuality research, if we are to take seriously that 'women are experts on their own experience' (Montell, 1999: 46). In fact, the overarching goal of feminist research, as Taylor (1998:360) puts it, 'is to make women's experiences visible, [and] render them important'. In this regard, this research is motivated by ethical concerns to open up participatory spaces for young women to talk about gender and sexuality in ways which engage with their constructions

of these and the pleasures, concerns and anxieties they experience which are connected to the practice of labia elongation.

Another concern of this study, is to explore the significance of gender as source of identification and difference, as exemplified in the positions which men and women took up in the focus group discussions and interviews (see Chapter 4, 5, and 6). Even so, within the single-sex group discussions, I draw insights from postcolonial and poststructuralist feminists who reject the construction of “women” (or men) as a stable and homogenous category. One such feminist is Mohanty (1988:65) who notes how ‘the discursively consensual homogeneity of 'women' as a group is mistaken for the historically specific material reality of groups of women’. While noting that women in my study were from a similar social class and to a greater extent similar ethnicities, I was looking out for other differences. During different interviews, for instance, although I did not ask them, it emerged that some women had engaged in labia elongation while others had not. These differences had effect on some women, especially those who had not engaged in the practice, as it affected what they could (or not) say within group contexts (see chapter 7 on “complete” and “incomplete” women).

Personally, I chose not to self-disclose my labia status to my participants, despite feminist arguments that revealing certain personal information by researchers ‘increase[s] reciprocity and rapport in the interview process’ (Hesse-Biber, 2007:128) by creating impressions of common identities and shared experiences between the interviewer and the interviewees (Oakley 1981; Reinharz, 1983). 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 affected her responses. Nevertheless, my decision not to self-disclose generated interesting data, where, as I demonstrate in Chapters 4 and 7, some women often thought that I underwent labia elongation. This turned to be an advantage as Hesse-Biber (2007: 142) observes, ‘being an outsider might encourage you to ask questions you might have taken for granted as shared knowledge’. I found myself posing questions that made the participants reflect on taken for granted assumptions they held of this practice and its connections with sexuality.

In as much as I have written about my own interest in undertaking this study, it also emerged that my participants also had their own reasons for participating in my research. For example, two female participants (one who was by then considering doing a masters degree, and another already pursuing a part-time masters degree) told me about how they might want to use the focus

group method for data collection and so by participating, so, they wanted to see how I facilitated the discussions. They revealed this to me without me asking them. In fact, I never asked any of my participants why they agreed to take part. This made me think that as researchers, we need to start exploring the motives behind participants taking part in our research. Specifically, because participants are active agents in the research process and not simply objects from which only researchers have the privilege to solicit data (Pattman & Chege, 2003).

My commitment to include men in the research might go against dominant feminist standpoint theories and research influenced by these that privileges women's voices. Yet, if we are to take seriously that gender operates in everyday life in governing how women and men behave in different socio-cultural contexts, then I want to argue that men too can be participants in feminist research (Burns & Chantler, 2011). As Scott (1988:32) points out, 'to study women in isolation perpetuates the fiction that ... the experience of one sex has little or nothing to do with the other'. Inspired by studies drawing from theoretical understandings of gender as a relational category (see Frosh *et al.*, 2002; Pattman, 2010), I pay attention to how, in the various interview contexts, male participants for example constructed and performed 'particular kinds of masculinities ... in relation to particular versions of femininity' (Pattman, 2010:3).

Getting ethical approval and meeting ethics in the field

Ethics, as understood in social research, 'refers to the moral deliberation, choice and accountability on the part of researchers throughout the research process' (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002:14). Ethics have come to be associated with taking measures to ensure confidentiality, reducing discomfort which may arise from participation in research and ensuring that participants are informed of their rights to discontinue their participation whenever they wish (Mouton, 2001; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). In terms of the university's ethical procedures, my research automatically fell in the "medium risk" category because of its focus on sexuality and women. As captured in research (Pattman, 2005; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Flicker & Guta, 2008; Harrison, 2008) these ethical concerns may derive from assumptions that: sexuality is a sensitive matter, sexuality is limited to sex, and sex or sexuality is essentially dangerous for young people and women. As such, seeking ethical approval meant convincing the ethics committee that my research was not "too sensitive" to cause emotional discomfort to my participants. I had to argue in my ethics application that I was adopting a broader understanding of sexuality in my research as defined in Chapter 1; one which was not limited to sex, but sex differences and organisation of masculinity and femininity. I stressed in the previous chapter that my research was about how specific social and cultural practices such as labia elongation aid our

understanding of what it means to be a woman, or a man, or a sexual being in different social and cultural contexts.

Nonetheless, even though the mere topic of my study raised the ethics flag, topics not meant to yield ethical concerns sometimes yield unpredictable ethical outcomes. An example is of an ethnographic study by Mayeza (2014) which focused on how school-children aged between six and ten years, in one township primary school in South Africa, construct and experience their gendered identities through play. On the basis of his research topic on “children’s play”, unlike me, he did not have to convince the research ethics committee (REC) that his study was not “sensitive”. Yet, much to his surprise, sexuality as a source of identification emerged as a key theme in his inductive study, when some of the children spoke about homophobic bullying. In the end, he found himself writing about sexuality in the research findings, although in his ethics application (because he did not anticipate this) he did not indicate that he would explore this issue. Despite the ethical implications of these findings, he decided to pursue this theme because he regarded ‘children as the authorities about their lives ...[which] encouraged me to listen and take seriously what they were saying rather than ignoring them on the basis of ethics as defined by the REC’ (Mayeza, 2014:39).

Part of the ethical procedures is 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 or withdraw from the research (Fisher & Anushiko, 2008). To achieve this, I drafted consent forms in both English and Shona for the benefit of participants who had to append their signatures. I explained that there would be no payment for participating in the study, although I provided refreshments and snacks specifically in two focus groups which I conducted during lunchtime. This was to motivate participants to attend (Beyea & Nicholl, 2000; Mansell *et al.*, 2004). With the participants’ consent, these conversations were recorded using a digital recorder. None of my participants withdrew from the research except one female who had initially seemed interested 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, and 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. Since then, she never contacted me and I did not make an effort to contact her. I respected her decision not to take part, but the rest of the participants voluntarily signed the consent forms. In fact, most participants seemed too eager to sign by asking me “*tosaina papi?*” (where do we sign?), before even reading through the forms. Nevertheless, the issue of getting informed consent may pose challenges in unplanned research

contexts that present themselves in the process of doing research, as I shall elaborate later in this chapter when I write about how an “unplanned” kitchen party emerged as another source of data.

In the focus groups, while I appealed to participants in my introductory remarks to keep our discussions confidential, I cannot claim that confidentiality was achieved because participants may have discussed the subject matter with their friends (Smithson, 2008). What I managed to do was guarantee them anonymity by using pseudonyms in my transcriptions. However, while ethical codes stress participants’ anonymity, questions have been raised about whether participants themselves want to remain anonymous. Some of the 6-10 year olds who participated in Mayeza’s (2014) study, for example, wanted their drawings to be identified with their real names rather than pseudonyms. In my research, however, although I did not ask whether my participants wanted their names changed, the desire for anonymity seemed quite important for my last interview participant, as illustrated in the following extract:

HV: So you might want to introduce yourself a bit, like who you are, how old are you, are you married and so on.

Chido: (looking surprised and unsettled), You want my real name?

HV: Yes, your real name, but when I get back to school I will not use your real name, I will change it, so now I want you to give me your real name so I can easily identify your interview once I have recorded it, but later I will give you a fake name.

Chido: (laughs) Okay. I hope you don’t mind if I speak in Shona.

I was prompted to reflect on the question of guaranteeing anonymity while reading Mupotsa’s (2014:33) research, in which she indicated that she did not use pseudonyms because none of her participants asked her to. I wondered how all my participants would have responded had I given them an option to either keep or change their names instead of prescribing anonymity beforehand in the consent form as I did.

Selection of research site and participants

I situated my research in Harare and not in any other Zimbabwean city because of its particularities as a capital city. As alluded to in the introductory chapter, Harare is the “melting pot” where ethnically diverse people converge from all over the country. Considering the limited period that I had to conduct my research, Harare was also a convenient research site because I already had established friendship networks there. I focused on research participants in their 20s and 30s, born just before or after the country’s independence in 1980, because it presents a clear distinction of lifestyles and assumptions about politics of culture and identity between younger and older people. More importantly, researching people from the same age group, class, and

ethnolinguistic group as me was a feminist attempt to democratize power relationships between the researcher and the researched. I argue that these commonalities with my participants allowed me access to certain insights and to engage with more intimate conversations, which might have been a challenge for an “outsider” researcher (Tafira, 2012).

My interest in researching participants from middle-class backgrounds is also a political stance I take in view of the tendency by researchers within the disciplines of Sociology and Anthropology to ‘study down’ – researching people from marginalised communities or lower socioeconomic backgrounds than that of the researcher (Tafira, 2012). Furthermore, much of the visible anthropological work on African cultures, for example, was (and still is) produced by white non-African scholars. This, Tafira (2012: 116) argues, perpetuates racialised power differentials between the researcher and the researched while extending “colonial” and historical ‘fascination with the Other’. However, this is not to suggest that African scholars themselves do not also ‘study down’, because most do. Researching Shona women and men from similar backgrounds as me is an attempt to speak to Tafira’s (2012:116) critical question: ‘In what ways can we do research without furthering or entrenching alterity?’ This is quite crucial for my study that is respectively situated within feminist methodologies concerned with democratising research relationships (Chapter 3), and versions of African feminist perspectives, which challenge historical misrepresentation of African women, African cultures and sexualities (Chapter 2 & 8).

I got my participants through snowballing and purposive sampling strategies. Purposive sampling allowed me to select women and men who possessed characteristics relevant to the research questions, while snowballing enabled me to tap into my friendship networks and those of my initial participants (Bryman, 2012). Combining these two sampling procedures was strategic in the context of my research topic on sexuality, which others might have regarded as sensitive had they been approached by an unknown person.

I was however aware that snowballing might generate a homogenous sample, which some researchers see as a limitation. Nevertheless, in light of my research interests, this worked in my favour because it proved easier to gain access to participants within the same (middle) class category (Siziba, 2013). Although my initial sample consisted only of my friends, which may be limiting when all participants are drawn from the same friendship network, I had ‘several different starting points’ (Hennink & Hutter, 2011:100). I made sure I approached some of my friends who did not know each other (and whose friends I did not know) in order to broaden the social networks within which I gained access. In the end, 20 women and 10 men took part in the

study. The youngest participant was 20, and the oldest was 39 years old. While this represents a very small sample, as characteristic of qualitative studies, this research was more interested in understanding in depth how different women and men give meaning to labia elongation, and ‘not driven by the need to generalise findings to a broader population’ (Hennink & Hutter, 2011:84). This is because the research draws from versions of poststructuralist feminism, which speak against the quantifying and homogenisation of women’s experiences (Mohanty, 1988; Chadderton & Torrance, 2011; Burns & Chantler, 2011).

These sampling procedures, notably snowball sampling, had their own limitations, as they generated samples that I had not initially envisaged. For instance, I explained to my initial sample of participants that I wanted to have discussions with Shona, educated, middle-class women in their 20s or 30s and asked them to recruit their friends matching this profile. However, this posed some challenges. The first problem, which I only picked up during the introductions in the second all female focus group, was that one participant invited her Ndebele-Sotho friend (who spoke fluent Shona). I could not ask her to leave because of the commitment she had made to stay after work, and at the same time, I could not ask her to just sit and listen while others talked as that would have made others uncomfortable, and compromised group confidentiality. Consequently, I let her become a participant. Snowball sampling not only led to a “corrupted” sample but over-recruitment in this particular focus group, because while I was anticipating a maximum of six to seven participants, the group ended up with nine participants which made it difficult to facilitate.

I need to state that the women who participated in this study were not selected based on whether they had undergone the practice, and neither did I select men on the basis that their wives or girlfriends had elongated labia. These details sometimes emerged during our conversations when some women would disclose their labial status. It was only in those interview contexts where I felt comfortable with the participant that I would ask about whether they pulled their labia. To get people to participate in the research, I only indicated that I was keen to talk to women and men who (matching the specified characteristics) were interested in speaking about labia elongation.

How I conducted my research

Broadly, I was interested in exploring how young women and young men talk about labia elongation, the symbolic meanings they attached to this practice, and how they relate these to their own identities and experiences. Drawing from the social constructionism paradigm, whose

emphasis is on ‘the significance of relational processes as opposed to individual [meaning-making]’ (Gergen & Gergen, 2007:465), I decided to conduct focus group discussions with women and men, and in-depth semi-structured interviews with women. I also ended up observing events at a kitchen party. These approaches allowed me to see how different people give multiple and complex meanings for the same phenomena (Crotty, 1998; Creswell, 2007; Hennink & Hutter, 2011). I was aware that the interaction of the focus group members might influence what participants say but also how they say it (Wellings, Branigan & Mitchell, 2000; Mansell *et al.*, 2004).

My approach to the field was one with ‘an attitude of openness’ (Mabry, 2008:224) characteristic of inductive research where I took those who participated in the research as producers of knowledge and authorities about the social worlds they construct (Pattman, 2010; Devault & Gross, 2012; Mayeza, 2014). This meant that in as much as I started off by focusing on labia elongation as a specific case, I allowed the research participants to set the agenda, thus incorporating themes and issues which seemed significant to them (Robertson, 2015), which ultimately influenced the direction that the research took. I conducted the interviews and focus groups mainly in a local language – Shona – to allow research participants to express themselves freely although in some instances participants preferred to combine both Shona and English.

In the following section, I elaborate on these methods to justify why I chose them. At the same time, I allude to how I organised and conducted the different kinds of interviews; how easy and difficult they were for me as a researcher, and how I found each research context as well as some of the ethical issues that emerged in the process. I discuss some of these issues in much detail in the research findings chapters.

Lessons learnt from organising and conducting focus groups

The focus groups I conducted largely comprised ‘pre-existing groups’ (Kitzinger, 1994:105) with friends and workmates. In the male focus group for instance, one of the participants invited four of his gym mates, while I also invited two other participants who were unknown to this friendship group. In the first female focus group, all the participants were my friends (two of whom were biological sisters), and most of them had met each other before. The majority of those who participated in the second female focus group were work colleagues, although they were not necessarily friends. I added a second all-female group because I wanted to observe any similarities and differences in the relational dynamics between the two groups, since in the latter group I only knew two of the nine participants.

There is no consensus on how many participants constitute a focus group, although there is a general view that they should have between 6 and 12 participants (Smithson, 2008). However, some, for example, Brannen & Pattman (2005), have conducted focus groups with as few as two people, but raised the limitations of having very small groups which end up resembling a group interview where the moderator had to pose questions to participants one after the other. Two of my focus groups (the first female group and the mixed-group) comprised of five participants each, the all-male group had seven participants, while the second female group was the largest with nine participants. It is often reported that in small groups there is more likelihood for all participants to talk, while a few individuals are said to dominate in larger focus groups (Bryman, 2012). Yet, from my observations in the focus groups I conducted, this had less to do with group size, but more to do with the kind of relations established between participants as well as the theme under discussion. I demonstrate this point in forthcoming chapters, specifically how specific themes induced active participation from group members in both smaller and larger group contexts. What I can say is that, ‘some individuals [were] more forthcoming than others’ (Smithson, 2008: 363).

Others claim that this is a result of commonalities or differences of participants in terms of gender, class, age, and other social identification categories, as these may influence what they say, or may not say (Kitzinger, 1994). Against this background, some advocate for homogenous groups in terms of sex, age, employment status for example, but as experienced by Brannen & Pattman (2005), such groups are difficult to organise. This is not to say that focus groups should necessarily be comprised of participants with homogenous characteristics, since heterogeneity in focus groups allows researchers to observe ‘how people theorise their own point of view’ in relation to others (Kitzinger, 1994: 113). Smithson (2008) is also of the opinion that both heterogeneity and homogeneity of focus groups can generate interesting data especially if one incorporates group dynamics when analysing focus group data. In the focus groups I conducted, there were both elements of homogeneity and heterogeneity among the participants. In terms of class, all participants were from a middle-class backgrounds, while in terms of ethnicity, they were all Shona except for one participant who was Ndebele. In the mixed-sex focus group, although participants differed in terms of gender, they were in the same age range, were all single, and students pursuing their university degrees. In the single-sex groups, some were married while others were not, even though they were relatively of the same age. In the next chapters, I explore how particular characteristics influenced the group dynamics and the data generated in these groups.

Organising focus groups was a challenge particularly when it came to having participants meeting at a particular time and place (Morgan, 1997). The first female group discussion was delayed by almost three hours, because Miranda, who was one of the participants and had offered her house as the venue for the discussion, was stuck in a church meeting that took longer than she expected. When she eventually came out and we drove to her house, her husband (whom she had earlier asked to excuse himself when our discussion was initially supposed to take place) had returned. Miranda's husband was asked to sit outside in the car to allow us to have our discussion. Nevertheless his "presence", even when he was outside the house, affected Miranda's participation in the discussion because she would speak in low tones while occasionally casting glances outside the window, as if to make sure her husband was not hearing her speak. Organising the second female group posed less challenges, because all (except two) participants worked at the same company where the focus group was conducted. This group represented a kind of convenience sample, which Bryman (2012:201) argues 'is simply available to the researcher by virtue of its accessibility'. However, one participant came approximately 45 minutes into the discussion. In the mixed-group, participants only arrived at the venue two hours after the expected starting time, just when I was now thinking of cancelling the discussion. In the male focus group, conversations initially started with five participants, two more participants phoned 30 minutes into the discussion requesting to be collected, which made me stop the recording while we waited for them to arrive.

Because the focus groups started after the scheduled times, some of the participants indicated that they had to leave before the end of the conversations, and this happened in two of the focus groups. This had implications on how I ended up conducting the focus groups. While I wanted to play a moderation role by allowing participants to set the agenda and have a free flowing and unstructured discussion, I also had in some instances to interrupt and pose certain questions as a way of 'ensuring that essential topics are covered in the time available' (Smithson, 2008:361) before some of the participants left. Some participants simply failed to turn up despite agreeing to participate in the focus groups. The focus groups lasted between one to two hours. In total, I engaged with 28 participants through focus groups.

It took less than a week to organise the all-male focus group, but it proved quite difficult to organise the all-female focus group in Harare. Twice in two weeks, we cancelled the meeting because most of the participants indicated that they had other commitments, which ranged from attending church meetings, shopping in town, attending to their children, and doing housework.

This was further compounded by the fact that Saturday, which was supposed to be the only “free” day, was not that free for these professional female participants.

Despite these drawbacks, I conducted focus groups in order to elicit “general viewpoints” (Warr, 2005; Smithson, 2008) about labia elongation, which I then further explored with some female participants in individual interviews. Focus group discussions have increasingly become a preferred method of generating data in feminist research because they allow for a shift in the balance of power towards the participants (Wilkinson, 1999; Larsen, 2010). In other words, the researcher has less control in determining the direction of the discussion because participants supposedly set the agenda. What I aimed to do in the focus groups I conducted was just to ‘initiate a conversation’ (Montell, 1999: 48), allowing participants to build on each other’s responses, but this was partially achieved in some group contexts. In the mixed-group, for example, there was less interaction among the group members, and I would constantly pose questions to participants. This also happened in the second female group, although group interaction improved towards the end of the discussion.

As I elaborate in the following chapters, focus groups allowed me to generate different kinds of data by paying attention to the interaction of participants (Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 1997; Montell, 1999; Wilkinson, 1999; Brannen & Pattman, 2005; Duggleby, 2005; Warr, 2005; Farnsworth & Boon, 2010). Furthermore, since focus groups enable researchers to observe how meanings are ‘co-constructed’ in interaction (Wilkinson, 1998; Duggleby, 2005; Wibeck, Dahlgren & Öberg, 2007), this afforded me an opportunity to focus on identifications and dis-identifications, agreements and disagreements among participants, in how they positioned themselves in relation to particular discourses around labia elongation.

Yet, these group encounters, unlike semi-structured interviews did not allow for probing of individual opinions of participants (Morgan, 1997; Merriam, 2009)). This is because, depending on the group composition, focus groups may inhibit contributions from participants whose views might go against shared group opinion, or in contexts when they deem particular research topics to be “sensitive” (Wellings *et al.*, 2000; Mansell *et al.*, 2004). This, I witnessed in my study when women who did not undergo labia elongation were cautious to reveal this in a group context where they were framed as “incomplete” women (see Chapter 7), while women in general were embarrassed to speak about labia elongation and sexuality in focus groups (see Chapter 4). Moreover, focus groups may pose challenges for the researcher to build rapport and manage group dynamics (Morgan, 1997; Larsen, 2010; Hennink & Hutter, 2011). In order to build rapport with participants, researchers are generally advised to begin their group discussions

with very general questions before posing those specific to their research, more so in sexuality research where there is need to create a conducive mood to hold a “comfortable” conversation. Nevertheless, in the following short extract of the male group discussion, one man – during group introductions – seemed very eager to speak about labia elongation.

Ras: Ok I am Ras. I am, I am a technician, okay. I have been through a lot especially relationships, and so on, you know, waal, but one thing I like is that my new girlfriend has got dem (speaking in Jamaican accent) (group laughter). Whooooaa! Yeesss! (more group laughter)

Obert: Next

Ras: I enjoy her (group laughter)

HV: (Laughing) Hang on Ras, we will get back to that (group still laughing)

Here, I was caught between trying to build rapport with the rest of the group and allowing the participants to dictate the direction of the discussion. This was the first time I was meeting the most of these men, and I was not privy to the kind of relationships they have, other than that a number of them went to the same gym. I was still to establish whether the men could all speak freely like Ras had, hence I took Obert’s cue ‘next’ and group laughter to signal that others may not be prepared to discuss this issue yet.

Conducting interviews with women

I chose semi-structured interviews (to complement focus groups) because they allow ‘free interaction between the researcher and interviewee ... [and] opportunities for clarification’ (Reinharz, 1992:18). Additionally, they are useful for ‘generating full accounts of individual’s personal experiences’ (Brannen & Pattman, 2005:538). However, as demonstrated later in the thesis, not all the women I spoke to individually were as forthcoming about their personal experiences. I managed to conduct ten interviews with women. Of these, six participated in the focus groups. Drawing from studies that have included same participants in group and individual interviews, for example (Frosh *et al.* 2002), one of the aims of this research was to compare how these women presented themselves in a group context, and in individual interviews. I would ask them to reflect on their experiences of both contexts in terms of which context made them more relaxed and comfortable. I had a desire to interview more women, but it proved challenging within the four-month period I had to carry out the research, as some of the potential participants kept on postponing the interview appointments, and some cancelling last minute citing work-related commitments.

The interviews lasted between 27 minutes to just over an hour, although the majority were approximately 45 minutes. I had prepared an interview memoire (see Appendix B) with a list of broad questions and themes that I wanted to explore from the women. The questions became only 'guides to conversations, rather than as instruments that dictate the topic of talk in ways that do not fit with how participants want to talk about their experiences' (Roulston, 2010). Since I wanted the women to set the agenda, I used this guide with caution, only referring to it for themes that the participants had not touched on (Seidman, 2006). Most times, I waited for participants to raise the issues themselves. The interview interviews allowed me to probe their personal opinions, which they might have alluded to during focus groups, and I would ask them to elaborate with examples.

However, time was a constraint in setting interviews with female participants considering that they were all professional women. Time limitations made it difficult to talk to them during their lunch break, and sometimes I felt their workplaces were not particularly suitable for sexuality discussions. Nonetheless, the first interview I conducted was in the car park at the woman's workplace. She worked odd hours and in an open-plan office so it was going to be a challenge to talk to her any other time. I suggested that we hold the interview in the car to keep us away from the prying eyes of passers-by, but she preferred that we sit outside in the car park because she wanted to bask in the sun since their offices were cold. For the majority of the women, I had to sleep over at their homes since I had to wait to conduct the interviews after they had come back from work, and had attended to their domestic chores. While these incidents raise ethical issues as I reflect in Chapter 8, framing my study within feminist methodologies, I pose a pertinent question: what is more feminist than working with participants' schedules and preferred spaces?

Interviewing some women in their homes meant that there were interruptions either by husbands or by children who would seek their attention. Farnsworth & Boon (2010) made similar observations in their studies with mothers where they sometimes temporarily stopped the interviews to allow mothers to attend to their children. In one interview, I conducted it went well after midnight because the participant had a late night shift, and any other time, the presence of her children and husband during the day did not provide a conducive environment to conduct the interview. On this particular day, the husband was away, and the children had gone to bed, and although she initially seemed tired, we both agreed that this was the best moment to do the interview without being disturbed. In another interview, we had to interrupt the interview twice for the woman to answer her husband's call, which forced her to leave the house for about 30 minutes to run her husband's errand. The second time we stopped the interview to allow her to

welcome her husband from work. This disturbed the flow of the discussion, and posed a challenge to pick up from where we had left off.

The “impromptu” kitchen party and ethical issues that came with it

While purposive and snowball sampling are the most widely accepted strategies in qualitative inquiry, researchers sometimes resort to *opportunistic sampling* or convenience sampling where ‘a chance presents itself to gather data...and it represents too good an opportunity to miss,’ (Bryman, 2012:201). Two months into the research, one of the female participants (and my friend), Tanya, invited me to a kitchen party that women in her church had quickly organised to welcome a new bride who had married a congregant in their church. When I started out my research, I had not planned to attend any kitchen party; yet attending this event allowed me to observe the proceedings first hand rather than having to rely on a second hand account from my friend (Merriam, 2002).

It is worth mentioning that during fieldwork I stayed with Tanya, her husband, and their two children at their house. I attended church services with them, since Tanya’s husband is the pastor for this particular church. When I attended my first church service with them, he introduced me to his congregants as his *maiguru* (his wife’s sister). This created an impression among the church members that I was a relative, yet the reason he calls me *maiguru* is simply because I am a close friend of his wife, but slightly older. In the weeks that followed, I interacted with many of the female members in this church who treated me with great respect. I would occasionally sit in the women’s meetings held after the church service since I had to wait for Tanya and her husband to finish their pastoral duties before we could go home together.

When Tanya told me about the kitchen party, she indicated that labia elongation was likely to be among the topics of discussion at this event, considering that her husband, in the previous week, briefly talked about this topic when he officially opened the first women’s meeting for the year. Unfortunately, I did not attend that particular meeting because they had asked me to attend their daughter’s sports day on their behalf. Hence, the kitchen party was an opportunity for me to collect ‘naturally occurring data’ (Calvey, 2008:913) through participant observation. Nevertheless, I was confronted with an ethical dilemma with regards to whether or not I should reveal my identity as a researcher to everyone who attended this kitchen party. I had gained access to this event, firstly, by virtue of Tanya’s invitation who knew about my research interest, and by being a ‘member’ of this church for a few weeks. I became concerned about the implications of revealing my identity. Did I want these women to construct me as a researcher

each time they saw me in church, when in fact I had been attending their Sunday church services as an ordinary ‘member’ of the church?

I took into consideration that this kitchen party was an enjoyable occasion that was supposed to benefit those women who had attended. Therefore, I felt that revealing my identity and research interests to everyone was likely to make the women feel uneasy. Consequently, I opted for *semi-covert*ness (Calvey 2008: 907) by revealing my research intentions to one of the women’s leaders who was leading the proceedings, and tasked with giving a talk on labia elongation and other sexually related advice to the bride and the rest of the women in attendance. She did not mind, and even during her demonstrations, she seemed unaffected by my presence. I suppose this was because I already had established rapport with her each time she welcomed Tanya and I to church, and when I conversed with her after each church service. I am not certain whether she told other women in the leadership about the real reason I attended this event, but I recall one elderly woman instructing people to switch off their phones, probably to stop people from recording the proceedings. However, I had decided beforehand that I was not going to record the kitchen party proceedings, and instead would just observe and listen. I listened to the topics presented in the kitchen party, and observed the speakers who demonstrated various sex styles, while noting the reaction of the audience to these presentations.

My decision not to fully disclose my identity in the context of this kitchen party was an attempt to ensure that guests acted ‘naturally’. Through this decision, I found myself aligning with researchers who argue for covertness in specific kinds of research contexts (see for example Lugosi 2006; Calvey 2008; Spicker 2011). These ethical problems that arose in the process of doing my research, which Guillemin & Gillam (2004) term ‘ethics in practice’, are illustrative of the limitations of institutional ethical clearance forms, which are drafted based on assumptions that ethical issues can be dealt with prior to research (Mayeza, 2014).

Informal discussions about my research topic at “home”

My staying with Tanya and her family, to some extent made my research ethnographic. I was ‘hanging out’ with them and informally conversing with them about my research, and this had ethical implications. A day after I arrived in Harare to begin my fieldwork, Tanya’s husband asked about my current research topic. He was aware that I had also recently researched male circumcision so I explained to him that my current research was on labia elongation. To my surprise, he seemed very interested which was in contrast to his attitude on my research on male circumcision. He started asking me a number of questions, the most explicit one being

makadhonza here? (have you pulled your labia?) Initially, I just brushed his comments aside because we often joke about many issues including sexuality. His references to labia elongation became frequent. Upon my return from each interview, he would ask about what my participants said, but I would not divulge exactly what they said. One day he went on the Internet and invited me to look at the images of elongated labia because, according to him, he did not know what they looked like.

Other times, he would, in my presence, pass remarks to his wife like, ‘*huya tidhonze matinji ayo*’ (come let us pull those labia). When he made such remarks to Tanya, I observed her frowning at him, as if to express her irritation at his insistence on this subject. This made me feel rather uncomfortable, because each time he raised the topic I imagined he was taking advantage of my research to entice his wife to pull her labia. I started thinking about how our friendship might be jeopardised should he, “riding on my research”, force her to do it. Could I just ignore these incidences as non-events and omit them from my data findings since these informal discussions happened outside the interview and focus group contexts to which Tanya had given consent? Was I to ignore her husband’s comments because after all, he was not officially a participant in my study? What if my research, through her husband’s comments, was actually causing emotional harm to my friend? I battled with these ethical questions for some time, until I decided to explore her feelings regarding these issues when I eventually interviewed her. As Charmaz (2006:16) says, ‘everything you learn in the research setting(s) or about your research topic can serve as data ... [depending on its] relevance for your emerging interests, and usefulness for interpretation’. I used the interview I had with Tanya as a platform to ask her about whether her husband had previously raised the issue of labia elongation prior to my research. In the following interview extract, instead of directly asking whether she found her husband’s comments disturbing, I asked Tanya to reflect on how the research might be affecting her. Immediately she referred to her husband’s remarks:

HV: Okay, so just reflecting on this research, you’re kind of part of this research process (laughing), you know, do you feel like this research is, is actually affecting you somehow?

Tanya: Yes it has because now my husband says I think we should try it (laughs), I think we should try to have them but then myself (2) [...] I think he has said it in passing in the past but not seriously but now because of this research and you being here these days, we have gotten to talk about it more and more (we both laugh), more and more, and I think he is actually interested in me doing it, but he doesn’t want to push me, so he is just taking it nice and slow I guess...

HV: What do you think, do you think his interest in this issue is, has been pushed because of this research or it's something that he was interested in prior but probably just using this as a platform to talk about it?

Tanya: Exactly, I think it could be something, I think it was there somehow but maybe it's something which he didn't, he didn't have a platform to talk about it, but now that there was someone who was talking about it, it made him to maybe start thinking about it a lot, to start thinking that aah, we can try it ...

Whereas the above extract provides insights into labia elongation and the interest this holds for men in particular; for the purpose of this chapter, I am concerned more with how I attempted to resolve ethical dilemmas that my friendship with Tanya and her husband posed in carrying out this research. By asking not only myself, but Tanya about these questions I was attempting to practice feminist *ethics of care*. According to Edwards & Mauthner (2002), feminist ethics of care are concerned with the nature and safeguarding of relationships between the researcher and participants, some of which begin or continue long before or after the research. They do not see ethical dilemmas as 'abstract but rooted in specific relationships that involve emotions and which require nurturance and care for their ethical conduct' (*ibid.*:21). Ethical issues are therefore contextual rather than predetermined, in that, how they may arise when there is no prior relationship between the researchers and the researched are likely to be totally different from those encountered by researchers researching friends or researchers spending more time with research participants. Consequently, these social relationships have implications on how the researcher resolves ethical dilemmas. The ethical concerns that I encountered point to the limitation of universalised procedural ethics, which do not put into consideration prior and existing relationships between the researcher and the researched (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002).

How I used the research diary

In order to complement recorded interviews (Mayeza, 2014), I also had a diary in which I would write brief notes at the end of each day that I conducted an interview or focus group. I avoided taking notes during the recordings allowing myself to pay more attention to what participants were saying. In the diary, I documented some of the emerging themes. What I wrote from memory in my diary became points of reference and comparison and a basis for posing questions in subsequent interviews/discussions, and enriched how I analysed my transcripts. Therefore, I conducted preliminary analysis in the diary noting key issues raised in each focus group or interviews, and the research processes. I wrote brief notes on how participants in different interview contexts expressed (dis)comfort during our discussions and about how easy and difficult it was for me to conduct some of the interviews and groups discussions.

Transcription and translation of the voice recordings

While the process of transcribing data was tedious, I self-transcribed the recordings, allowing myself to engage with my data and through this process picked up on emerging themes. I transcribed all focus group discussions during (and individual interviews after) fieldwork. I firstly transcribed the voice recordings verbatim, implying that I did not paraphrase or summarise what participants said (Mayeza, 2014), and neither did I try to correct their statements into “correct” and coherent Shona or English. I then translated the original transcriptions to English for the benefit of a wider audience and my supervisors who have no proficiency in the Shona language. Some of the meaning however might have been lost in translation (Temple & Young, 2004; Van Nes *et al.*, 2010) because certain Shona expressions are either ambiguous cannot be easily translated to English. Even though I am a native Shona speaker, in cases where I doubted my own translation, I would read out the statement in Shona to my Shona colleagues, and ask them to translate the sentence into English. I relied on my colleagues for back-translation because of limited research funds which did not allow me to hire a research assistant.

In an effort of verify the accuracy of his transcripts, Mayeza (2014) reviewed them with his participants (both children and teachers), however, this proved impossible with my participants who indicated that they had no time to go over the transcripts. I tried co-transcribing with one of the focus group participants, but she only did it for a couple of minutes before saying that it was a laborious process which she could not continue doing.

Analytical approaches employed in this research

This study goes beyond conventional ways of thematic analysis. Whereas Bennet & Pereira (2013:5) have argued for research that ‘takes the processes of research as seriously as the findings’, in the context of my study, I go further to argue that these processes actually constitute findings. Rather than drawing themes only from what people say in interviews, and in attempting to make my analysis not only richer but also holistic, I took up Pattman’s (2010:3) advice to also ‘focus on the research context and the dynamics of the research encounter.’ In other words, the research context has implications on *what* participants can or cannot say. Pattman (2010) who analysed the relational dynamics between boys and girls in a mixed-sex focus group observed how boys monopolised the discussions and spoke about girls in provocative ways. I also draw comparisons between what women say about gender and sexuality, and labia elongation when interviewed individually and in focus groups. I am working with the assumption that discourses

(or discursive practices) ‘facilitate and limit, enable and constrain what can be said, by whom, where and when’, as such, they ‘offer subject positions which, when taken up, have implications for subjectivity and experience’ (Willig, 2003:171).

Understanding discourse as contextual is to pay attention to ‘parameters [such] as participants, their roles and purposes, as well as properties of a setting, such as time and place [because] discourse is being produced, understood and analysed relative to such context features’ (van Dijk, 1997: 11). This is informed by critical ideas about social construction and performativity (Butler, 1990), which construct interviews as ‘contextual and negotiated’ encounters (Charmaz, 2006:27). I shall therefore explore the relational dynamics in focus groups in terms of how participants interacted in single-sex groups and mixed-sex groups as well as in individual interviews, and how (un)comfortable they (and I) were in these social encounters. Putting myself in the picture is premised on the idea of reflexivity; a position that ‘research is a process driven by both the researcher and the researched [and] has to be understood from both perspectives’ (Siziba, 2013:93; see also Gergen & Gergen, 2007).

In addition, taking a leaf from scholarly work on sociology of emotions (Kemper, 1981; Thoits, 1989) my analytical chapters also focus on emotional expressions as important data which complements verbal data (Scollen & Scollen, 1995; King & Horrocks, 2010). I focus at those instances when participants raised or lowered the tone of their voices, which words and statements they repeated or emphasised, their facial expressions, and the significance of laughter, pauses, and silences in the way they narrated their stories.

Grounded theory analytical approach

In identifying the key themes, I did not wait until the end of my fieldwork to start analysing data, but I followed the grounded theory approach to collect data while simultaneously analysing it (Merriam, 2002; Charmaz, 2006; Bryman, 2012). For example, I transcribed the first focus group before conducting the next one, and picked out the themes that participants had raised, and pursued these with other participants in subsequent focus groups and interviews. I then compared the themes that participants introduced in the different research contexts. Specifically, I wanted to identify themes which participants spoke about in focus groups but not in individual interviews, and vice versa. I also paid attention to the themes that seemed significant to women and men who took part in this study. In her study with women suffering from chronic illnesses, Kathy Charmaz (2003: 87), an authority of grounded theory research, says that she ‘felt compelled to explore their concerns about disclosing illness, which I had not anticipated

studying but which had emerged as a significant theme in the data.’ Similarly, in my research, in my interview aide memoire, I had not included questions relating to religion, virginity, or race, but they emerged as some of the very crucial themes in some interviews. Following the ‘constant comparative method’ (Bowen, 2006:17), I pursued these particular themes and compared how different participants spoke about them.

Once I completed gathering and transcribing my data, I started reading and rereading my transcripts and coding my data. Charmaz (2003:93) defines coding as ‘the process of defining what the data are about’ and goes against applying pre-determined categories to the data. While Glaser & Strauss (1967) encouraged grounded theory researchers to engage other people to separately read and code similar transcripts to ensure coding reliability, this was not achieved in my study. However, this does not delegitimise my study because in a few instances I relied on two colleagues to read the anonymous transcripts and in all instances we identified the same themes. My invitation of colleagues to co-read and co-analyse my transcripts was also an acknowledgement that in my (over) familiarity with the data, I might miss other important themes participants were raising. Cornish, Gillespie & Zittoun (2014) call this *collaborative analysis*, which they credit for bringing ‘a diversity of perspectives to the analysis.’

Because ‘grounded theories can complement other approaches to qualitative data analysis, rather than stand in opposition to them’ (Charmaz, 2006:8), I borrowed some analytic elements from discourse analysis and narrative analysis. The limitation of grounded theory is that it does not pay attention to the relational dynamics in interviews and focus group discussions nor the relationships between the researcher and the researched, which could influence what they say and present themselves. Furthermore, it does not emphasise on language as a significant medium through which participants position themselves and negotiate their identities (Pattman, 2010). Those who favour narrative analysis, also criticise the coding method associated with grounded theory for being so fragmented that it leads to the disruption of the smooth flow of the narrative (Reissman, 2001).

Foucauldian discourse analysis

I take note that there are multiple approaches to discourse analysis (Lynch, 2007), but for this research, I chose the Foucauldian discourse analysis analytical framework because as I highlighted earlier in the chapter, our theoretical interests influence our analytical choices. A Foucauldian discourse analysis seeks to ‘identify the ideological and power effects of discourse’ (Burr, 2003:18). The interplay between discourses of gender and power is therefore one of the

areas of interest for poststructuralist feminists (Weedon, 1987; Alba-Juez, 2009), which is why they make ‘discourse the primary unit of analysis’ (Gannon & Davies, 2012:72). Although, according to Alba-Juez (2009), Foucault (credited for the concept discourse) did not develop clear guidelines of how to analyse discourse, there are some researchers who have carried carry over from where he left off. Carabine (2001), for example, proposed a Foucauldian genealogical discourse analysis with 11 steps. I am particularly interested in five of them, which are attentive to: inter-relationship between discourses; absences and silences; resistances and counter-discourses; the effects of the discourse; and contextualising the material in the power/knowledge networks of the period (Carabine, 2001:281). Carabine applied these analytical steps in analysing representations of sexuality in social policy material. Focusing on the absences and silences, she discovered that female sexuality featured a great deal in policy documents, while male sexuality did not. Thinking about my own study, silences about female sexual pleasure emerged as one of the significant findings, which I shall discuss in Chapter 5 and 6.

Of major interest is what Foucault (1978:11) terms the ‘the over-all “discursive fact”’ used ‘to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said.’ I am specifically interested in identifying dominant and marginal institutional discourses as well as counter-discourses that my participants draw on in their interpretations of labia elongation. Since a Foucauldian analysis has the capacity to analyse ‘multiple and conflicting discourses’ simultaneously (Sh’hada, 1999:23), I will pay attention to normative and counter-discourses on gender, sexuality, and culture, because as I have said in previous chapters, without a discussion of these, I will not be able to explore fully the significance of labia elongation in contemporary Zimbabwe. I draw from poststructuralist feminism which ‘turns to discourse as the primary site for analysis’ (Gannon & Davies, 2012:72). From this perspective, language ‘in the form of a historically specific range of ways of giving meaning to social reality, [offers] us various discursive positions, including modes of femininity and masculinity, through which we can consciously live our lives’ (Weedon, 1987:25-26). As such, I also look at how and why participants position themselves in relation to ‘popular and influential discourses’ of gender and sexuality (Pattman, 2010:3). I pay attention to the shifting subject positions young women and young men take up during the different interviews, and why. The idea of subjectivity is linked to ‘gender scripts’ which inform what is framed as “appropriate” ‘masculine and feminine norms’ for people of a particular ‘background, culture, ethnicity, religion, and class [which] then play into the membership categories that they perceive they belong to’ (Cahill, 2015:104). Since ‘subjectivity is neither unified nor fixed’

(Weedon, 1987:21), I shall use these insights, for example, in analysing women's (and men's) narratives, trying to understand how and why they position themselves in different interview contexts in relation to labia elongation specifically, and as such in relation to culture, gender and sexuality in general. I exemplify this in Chapters 5, 6, & 7 in which participants take different subject positions, for example, as women/men, mothers/fathers, wives/husbands, Christians, or as modern, and the implication these had on what they said.

In taking the Foucauldian analytical perspective further, I am also interested in exploring the (emotional) 'investments' they make in the positions they take up. 'Investments' is a term I borrowed from Hollway & Jefferson (2000:15) to describe 'someone's desires and anxieties, probably not conscious or intentional, which motivate the specific positions they take up and the selection of accounts through which they portray themselves.' In light of this, I explore what motivates different people to assume different subject positions in relation to constructions of labia elongation in respect of particular categories such as culture and tradition.

Narrative analysis

Some participants shared their personal stories with me (and other participants), and in analysing these, I borrowed ideas about the narrative analysis approach from the work of Catherine Reissman (2001) and Michael Murray (2003). Reissman (2001) argues that narratives are co-produced from the interaction between the researcher and the participant where stories might be told in response to questions posed. In group contexts, she further argues that narratives should also be read as performance in that participants 'negotiate how they want to be known by the stories they develop collaboratively with audiences'. Similarly, Murray (2003: 122) views group contexts as facilitating the 'co-construction of [the] narrative'. Both authors appear to share the view that personal or group narratives are central to how individual or collective identities are constructed. With reference to my study, while I started my research broadly categorising my participants as Shona, in my analysis, I reflect on how the participants self-identify, and how they construct their gendered identities in relation to self, and in relation to other participants. I therefore also looked at how these stories emerged and whether the participants offered their personal accounts or if their narratives were answers in direct response to my questions.

Grounded theory abstraction

In this sub-section I briefly describe how my data analysis frame combined discourse analysis, narrative analysis, and grounded theory. Having fully transcribed one interview, I read it using a

Foucauldian analytic lens through which I conducted latent and manifest thematic analysis aimed at identifying discourses of power and powerlessness, negotiations of the in-between power and powerlessness. Codes emerging from the data were assigned to transcripts excerpts. The names of these codes paid attention to participants' language of both power and powerlessness, for example, notions of "completeness" and "incompleteness" (Chapter 7), "good women" and "bad women" (Chapter 5 & 6), Salads (Chapter 5 & 6). These highlight how notions of power were deployed and how gender was performed. In this first reading, I also examined how the interviews and focus group discussions' relational processes allowed participants to negotiate, shift, assume, or to challenge the positions of powerlessness and power. Lastly, I reflexively considered the interplay of my own position and role in these relational dynamics.

In the second reading of the transcripts, specific attention was paid to the narratives produced and shared by participants in different interviews – in accordance with narrative analysis. As mentioned earlier, people produce narratives that maybe personal or co-produced through interaction with others (Murray, 2003). Rather than focusing on power, narrative analysis focused on how personhood was presented, as I sought to understand how individuals presented themselves through multiple narratives (during interviews, focus groups, and in the kitchen party) in relation to each other as logical, rational, urban middle class people in Zimbabwe. In my reading of these scripts as sites of narratives and meaning, I also sought to engage with abstract narratives around lay theories of Shona people, for instance around notions of femininities and masculinities, appropriate language and (sexual) behaviour (Chapter 4), and/or what it means to be mature women (Chapter 5 & 6). In keeping with thematic coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), as explained above, my colleagues were invited to read and comment about emergent grounded theories in order to verify whether my thematic abstractions were true to the data from which they arose.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the research approaches and theoretical insights I utilised in conducting this research. These approaches and theoretical insights emphasised that interviews and focus group discussions are not mere tools of tapping information from participants in terms of what they say, but as particular social encounters in which identities are performed relationally. Through illustrative examples of what I encountered during my research, the discussion has raised questions about what counts as data. The discussion argued for the need to also focus on relational dynamics within various interviews, as well as unsolicited data which might emerge outside interview contexts. At the same time, the chapter has demonstrated the

shortcomings of institutional ethics, which, in their minimalist application, only serves to assert ‘formalist principles rather than providing guidance on how to deal with them’ (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002:18). Furthermore, the chapter has highlighted the challenges of utilising a grounded theory research approach when faced with time and financial constraints. The next four chapters focus on a detailed discussion of my research findings. In the tradition of inductive qualitative research, the chapter headings and sub-headings I use are drawn from what my interviewees say and the kind of symbolic connections they make about labia elongation, and how this intertwines with sexuality, gender, age, religion, and culture.

Chapter Four

Women and men ‘talking sexuality’

Introduction

This chapter provides an informative connection between the previous methodological chapter and the next three chapters which focus on the presentation and analysis of the empirical findings. It introduces (rather than explore in detail) some of the key findings, which, in subsequent chapters, might be reported in a way which abstracts these from the research processes. The chapter, then, is as much about methodology as the findings. This might seem unusual considering how methodology – understood as the processes of doing research – tends to be interpreted as instruments for obtaining data. But, as explained earlier in the thesis, I understand the methods I use as social encounters in which processes of gender negotiation, identity construction, and knowledge production take place.

I draw on the arguments of Butler (1990) and Goffman (1959) who suggest that, identities are positions we construct through “performances”, and that how we ‘perform’ and present ourselves depends on the social context and subject positions we assume. Consequently, a key concern in this chapter relates to how women and men in my study presented themselves and “performed” especially in focus group discussions. I aim to show that what they said and how they presented themselves when speaking about sexuality was highly gendered, even though gender was often spoken about by the participants as a fixed and essential attribute which men and women possessed which made women and men fundamentally different.

According to Butler (1990), gender is ‘performative’, although it tends to be viewed and experienced, through habit and repetition, as something “we have” rather than “do” in societies marked by gender polarised and unequal power relations. Goffman on the other hand, argues that the ways people perform and present themselves in various social contexts are strongly influenced by social expectations. However, he does not render people passive dupes who enact predetermined scripts. On the contrary, he highlights their agency, drawing attention, for example, to the ways people validate their performances in conversations through checking others’ ‘verbal assertions’ against their ‘expressive behaviour’ (Goffman, 1959:139). Goffman’s metaphorical construction of the world as a stage provides a basis for my own understanding of interviews and focus groups as social contexts where individuals attempt to act in ways which

provide a favourable impression about themselves to other participants, including the interviewer.

I also take the view that ‘gender is not only *interactional* but also *micropolitical*’ (Brickell, 2003:164), as evidenced in the gendered encounters and performances in the different interviews I conducted in my research. In thinking through the *micropolitical*, and developing an analytic perspective, which focuses on how gender and power operate in different types of interviews in my research, I was influenced by Foucault’s research on social control and regulation and the forms this takes in everyday social encounters between actors in various institutional contexts such as hospitals and prisons (Foucault, 1982). I find his notions of ‘conduct’ and ‘governmentality’ very applicable for analysing interview contexts, although his work was not directed at these particular social contexts. Foucault argues that concepts such as ‘governmentality’, or government, should not only be confined to analysing conventional political structures such as the state. Instead, he proposes that these terms should also encompass ‘the way in which the conduct of individuals or of different groups might be directed’ (Foucault, 1982:790), whereas by *conduct*, he refers to ‘a way of behaving within a more or less open field of [discursive] possibilities’ (*ibid.*:789). He concluded that to ‘govern’ is thus, ‘to structure the possible field of action of others’ (*ibid.*:790).

Foucault’s work raise important questions about the dynamics of power notably in different interview contexts, which may take the form of group censorship or self-regulation and tend to render power relations invisible. In this chapter, I focus on the kinds of norms which were established in the interviews when women and men spoke about sexuality and gender, and the possibilities from these and the consequences of doing so. I reflect, for example, on the ways in which some participants chided others, or censured themselves, for not conforming to normative masculinities and femininities.

Foucault argues that where there are relations of power, there are also *relations of strategy* (Foucault, 1982). *Strategy*, in Foucauldian terms, is ‘the means employed to attain a certain end’, or ‘the way in which one seeks to have the advantages over others’ in confrontational situations (*ibid.*:793). In this chapter, I provide examples of the forms these strategies took in the context of my interviews. For example, participants sometimes reacted to the kinds of questions I posed or themes and issues raised by other participants with silence and laughter, while others denigrated their co-members and / or praised themselves or offered counter-arguments by asking thought-provoking questions on gender and sexuality. These strategies, I argue, were connected with how they negotiated their identities as various kinds of men and women. I highlight the

kinds of identifications participants made and how these emerged and featured in discussions and contestations in the different interview contexts. In conceptualising the interview as a social context characterised by certain kinds of power relations, I ‘put myself in the picture’ (Mayeza, 2014), by reflecting later in the chapter on my experiences of conducting the different kinds of interviews while also engaging with women and men’s reflections on being interviewed.

Women and men speaking about sexuality

This section addresses how women and men who participated in the study talked about sexuality in various interview contexts. It explores what participants constructed as appropriate and inappropriate language use and how they used euphemisms and laughter to express the ease or difficulty with which they spoke generally about sexuality and labia elongation specifically. I also reflect on my experiences of conversing with the different participants in single and mixed sex focus groups, as well as individual interviews.

Speaking only with men

I imagined that talking with men about a topic perceived as a woman’s issue would be a daunting task; therefore, I was quite nervous to conduct this discussion, more so because I was meeting most of them for the first time. But even when some of the men had met for the first time, they bonded quickly; spoke very freely, and audibly. Most times, they rendered me invisible as they posed questions and debated among themselves. My experience was somehow different from Bhebe (2014) who describes the early stages of her interviews with Ndebele men in Zimbabwe on labia elongation as a ‘struggle’ that involved ‘a lot of probing.’

Taurai, my friend and participant, recruited four of the seven participants in the all-male focus group. When he introduced me to fellow participants, first with my full name, then as ‘*Mai Sean*’ (mother of Sean¹⁷), Ras immediately coined me another name – “Dread” because of my dreadlocks. I suggest by (re)naming me “Dread” instead of *Mai Sean*, it may have been his way of shrugging off not only my gender (considering that in Zimbabwe, “Dread” is often used to address men with dreadlocks), but also my ‘mother’ identity which he could have associated with being moralistic. I eagerly embraced this title because I took it as a way of being ‘initiated’ into their group, at least for the duration of the interview.

¹⁷ Sean is my son’s name

I bought us food and drinks for the discussion. When I noticed that the first round of drinks were about to finish, I whispered to Taurai to order more drinks, but he told me that the ‘boyz¹⁸’ had already given him more money to buy drinks. The men’s gesture to contribute towards the drinks could have been motivated by their concern that I, as a female, was acting as their ‘provider’ where in a Zimbabwean context men usually pay the bill when they go out with a woman.

I was within the same age-range of the men, and so it seemed my age was not of concern to them, but it was a concern in the mixed focus group where the men and women there were much younger than me. The men also expressed that my gender encouraged, rather than inhibited their contributions to the discussion. This emerged after I asked them at the end of the discussion whether it bothered them that I was a female facilitator, to which they collectively said ‘not at all, not at all.’ They told me that they felt freer speaking to me as a woman because ‘you want to hear what we experience, because you are not a man,’ adding that the reason why men prefer to open up to women was because a man ‘feels that a woman understands him better, [and] understands his experiences better.’ The perception that girls and women are particularly sympathetic listeners has emerged as a key finding in other interview studies with boys and men (Frosh *et al.*, 2002; Huysamen, 2015).

All the men laughed when one of them said that had I (as a researcher) been male each of them would have tried to present himself ‘as the best’, a view that men in the mixed-group discussion also expressed. Yet, most of them had actually asserted themselves as macho males through speaking about women in ways that rendered them sexually passive. As such, I often felt quite sensitive during these discussions, but developed an affinity towards one of the men, Sam, as he was critical of the other men when they spoke in this way. For instance, as other men were insisting that a man must marry a virgin, Sam said this should not be a concern because most girls lose their virginity before marriage. Before he could finish his argument, other men had rallied against him, drowning him with their own voices, and I found myself repeating ‘but let’s hear his viewpoint, let’s hear his viewpoint!’

It seemed the men enjoyed the interview because when I was concluding the discussion, some remarked ‘when are we going to have another discussion like this?’ In as much as this turned out to be one of my favourite interviews, because of the minimal role I played as a facilitator, there were some uncomfortable moments, for example, when one of them suddenly spoke about my ‘beauty’:

¹⁸ The use of the word ‘Boyz’ is not related to young age, but it is often used to refer to a group of men who know each other.

Taurai: Look at Hellen, since I met her at work in 2004, I have never seen her with make-up, eyeliner, even with trimmed eyelashes, anything. She was like this, until now she is like this, you see. That's who she is and, she is a beauty like that.

Even though Taurai was trying to make a point that some women do not need to apply make-up for them to look beautiful, I felt he was putting me on the spot by objectifying me. Other times the men spoke loudly and explicitly about sex ignoring people nearby like parents and children who had come to spend some family time. Probably, this was because they constructed this venue which they chose (with a bar and a braai place) as a male space in which they could speak about anything and everything. Huysamen (2015), who researched men who “buy sex”, was happy that her male participants often apologised if they used ‘dirty’ language in the interviews. She described this as ‘men’s gentlemanly behaviour’ and perceived it as a ‘sign of respect’ towards her. However, for me, this was drawing unnecessary attention to our discussion from outsiders. I became concerned as to what the people around us would think of me discussing sexual issues with a group of men.

Getting women to talk in single-sex focus groups

Since I am a woman, I imagined it would be easier to converse with women more so than with men. On the contrary, judging from the frequent and long silences and nervous laughter, women seemed uneasy (around me and among themselves), particularly at the beginning of the discussions, and when I posed questions about the significance of labia elongation. Presumably, this was because they were anxious about the topic of discussion. In one of the women’s group discussions, when sexual matters emerged, some of the younger single women seated closer to each other giggled. Because I wanted the women to open up, I found these giggles irritating, as they seemed to deter participation from other women, who now seemed reluctant to speak. I remember at some point asking two of them (Tino and Chiedza) in a jokey manner, to sit apart to avoid the constant giggles. Younger single women often waited for older married women to speak first, for example:, when I asked the women about the relevance of elongated labia, there was a long silence before Chiedza remarked, ‘Paيدا should know,’ presumably because she constructed married and older women as ‘knowers’ of sexual knowledge.

It also appeared that the reason women were not free to express themselves at the beginning was that they wanted to first gauge other women’s responses. For instance, just after introductions, I asked married women in the group to share the kind of advice they received in preparation for marriage. After a long silence, Cynthia spoke first, ‘...*I was not referred to anyone. I didn’t go anywhere, I just got married...*’ Gloria followed, almost whispering, ‘*uhm, I was not told*

anything, I just got married'. When I asked if she had attended kitchen parties, she quickly said 'no', presumably to stop me from questioning her further. When I looked at Shamiso for a response, she too said *'I was not told anything,*' before adding that she learnt *'a lot'* from her sister-in-law, without elaborating. Clearing her throat first, Paida followed suit, only saying *'we were taught a lot'*. Mazvita, who came midway into the discussion, started with *'I have not heard anything'* and *'there is nothing'* when I asked her if she had heard anything negative or positive about labia elongation. It seemed she first wanted to ascertain other women's opinions. This was apparent when I asked her to comment (after giving her a few minutes to settle down) on whether young men found elongated labia valuable. *'Nothing, I am still listening...,'* she begun, before eventually saying her opinion.

In contrast, two men who arrived midway in the all-male discussion, immediately joined the conversation (with one of them even dominating the discussion) by expressing their opinions without trying to establish what other men had said prior to their arrival. In this group of men, while there was a lot of laughter, this facilitated rather than hindered discussion. Interestingly, while men seemed to speak *freely* about sexuality, as I went through the transcripts, I realised that only a few shared personal stories about their (sexual) relationships with their girlfriends or wives. The majority tended to speak about sexuality in relation to women or men in a broad sense. Most women, on the other hand, tended to share personal narratives even in group interview contexts, for example, about how they had elongated their labia, even when I had not asked for this.

Interviewing women in individual interviews

My experiences of interviewing women (both individually and in groups) were quite different depending on the kind of relationships I had established with them. I found it easier to interview my "friends" because our prior relationships necessitated our interviews to resemble informal conversations. As a result, I felt at ease to ask some of them intimate questions particularly regarding their sexual relationships. For example, when some of them pointed out that men enjoy sleeping with women who have elongated labia, I would ask them to elaborate on this by asking; *'so does he [boyfriend/husband] caress them?'*. However, our friendship sometimes became a hindrance in the interview process, especially in cases where they chose to leave some stories or sentences hanging because they might have shared this story with me before, or because they assumed we shared similar experiences. It, therefore, became difficult for me to continue probing such conversations as experienced by a Zimbabwean researcher, Siziba (2013:111) whose study explored the lived experiences of Zimbabwe migrants in South Africa.

He says he was confronted with the following question from one of his participants: ‘You know how it is in South Africa. You are a Zimbabwean are you not?’ As such, because his participants constructed him as another migrant like them, they would often give him general responses without elaborating, for example, ‘The police, ah you know them. You know how they are’ (*ibid.*).

Some interviews proved difficult to conduct and facilitate, particularly with people I did not know. Focus groups were better, in that interaction among members meant I could take time to frame my next question based on what people were saying, and I could rely on the talkative ones to keep the conversations going. This proved difficult in individual interviews, for example, when I spoke to Rudo, she was unexpectedly sexually explicit for someone I had met for the first time. However, I found interviewing her intimidating because her face was at most times expressionless and her emotional tone rarely changed. I found I laughed more as I did not know how else to converse with her in ways that could make her loosen up on her repressed emotions. But, she rarely laughed back, and the few times she laughed, it was short laughter. She spoke very fast, with few pauses, and would sometimes start answering even before I finished my question, which overwhelmed me as I struggled to keep up with her on what question to ask next. I also found most of her comments about male sexuality to be quite uncritical as she tended to infantilise men, and as such, I did not enjoy those parts of the interview. She normally gave very short answers, and at times, she appeared quite dismissive and was not keen to elaborate on things.

While the interview with Rudo proved a challenge because we were unfamiliar with each other, I also encountered difficulties interviewing some of the participants I knew. A case in point was when I interviewed Tino separately. Just before we started the interview, Tino remarked ‘*eish what will I say, it was easier in a group*’, presumably because in the interview, she thought I would put her in a spot. When I assured her that she did not have to worry, she said, ‘let’s hear the questions’ which suggested that she was anxious about the questions that I would ask her. Like Rudo, Tino gave short responses with lots of ‘*I don’t know*’, which sustained our conversation for only 27 minutes, making it the shortest interview I conducted in this study. When I wound up this interview and asked her if she had anything else to add, she emphatically said ‘no that’s all, that’s all, yah’ suggesting that she was glad the interview was over. This was interesting because during the group discussion, she was one of the most vocal. In fact, I sometimes looked at her and Cynthia as my resources to start conversations when others seemed hesitant to speak.

Talking with men and women in the mixed-gender focus group

While men in the all-male focus group constructed themselves as ‘experts’, in the mixed-group, some participants saw me as a figure of authority despite me assuring them, at the outset, that they were the experts and that I was interested in their opinions. My question – what is *matinji*? – was followed by a long silence before one of the women, Sekai hesitantly responded while looking at me that, ‘*in English they are clit-orises isn’t it, are they the ones?*’ Her answer was followed by murmurs of disapproval from men. When I asked them to audibly respond to Sekai’s response, since they seemed to disagree with her, Tendai then looked at me and said ‘*clitoris haa, you, you are a professional you would know*’, before he went on to explain the difference between a clitoris and labia. By calling me a ‘*professional*’, Tendai might have been trying to emphasise our age difference, considering that participants in this group were in the early 20s and I was in my 30s. It is also plausible that he was constructing me either as someone with elongated labia (and more sexual experience), or an expert in this area of study, and able to distinguish a clitoris from elongated labia. Wellings *et al.* (2000:258) who conducted studies about young people’s attitudes about drugs, sex, and HIV found that because of the sensitive nature of these topics, where participants lacked confidence about their comments, they often ‘looked to the moderator to affirm their beliefs.’

Before the discussion, I tried to be chatty with two young men (Tendai and Kuda), who arrived earlier than others, but with little success. They kept giving me short responses and avoiding eye contact, which made me very anxious about how the discussion would turn out. I was relieved when Pius arrived, because even if we had not met before, he was very open and even shared some jokes, which released my anxiety and the tension that was building in the meeting. Men dominated the discussion, but one of the women (Sekai) was equally talkative and sometimes openly challenged men’s viewpoints. The other woman, Merjury, was uncomfortably quiet, giving very short responses in a low voice, but occasionally joining in group laughter. Although she said at the end that she enjoyed being in the mixed-group because had it only been women, she ‘might not have learnt new things’, she appeared nervous throughout, especially when I tried to engage her by directing questions at her. Others also said they enjoyed the mixed-group discussion, although Sekai confessed that she initially had reservations that I might share what we discussed with her mother, even though I explained and assured them of confidentiality, verbally and in the consent forms that they signed.

Although one of the men (Tendai) in the mixed-group initially called me a “professional”, later he and other male participants constructed me as ignorant and inexperienced about what they deemed to be men’s issues (see Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Huysamen, 2015):

... I just want to speak on having the questioner as a female, like what Pius said, of course we would have answered the way we had, but the end result is if I had said anything outside of the truth, a man will tend to chip in, like an older man might say these youngsters are inexperienced, but some who think they know everything might end up saying that no, let me teach you and we will lose the whole essence of the discussion, yah, and going back to the mixed, it’s like, it’s always good to hear both sides, they say there is always three sides to a story, his side-this side, that side and the truth (group laughter), so maybe the truth has not been said, if you understand better, and you know the truth, because we were saying, this and that helps, but yah, there is always the truth, because people have their views, but there is always the truth.
[Tendai]

His last statements about what they were saying in the discussion, vis-à-vis the ‘truth’, resonates with Goffman’s (1959) idea that what people say in social encounters such as interviews, is not a reflection of the ‘truth’, but involves interpretation, persuasion and contestation.

How participants used laughter

Whereas conversations were characterised by pauses and silences; tensions and allegiances developing between different groups – depending on the subject of discussion, and the subject positions women and men were taking – laughter also featured quite significantly in the various interviews. Gronnerod (2004: 33) describes laughter as ‘an interactional resource’ that people use differently. Gronnerod highlights that ‘we usually connect shared laughter to affiliation between people, refusing to laugh to distancing, and laughing at others to contempt’ (*ibid.*: 32). Similarly, Koller (1988) argues that laughter can serve to signal group consensus, to reinforce or undermine stereotypes, to diffuse tension and anxiety, or for social correction. In one of the all-women focus groups where I asked participants to introduce each other, Ruth, while laughing, introduced Chipo as a single woman who ‘has *boyfriends*,’ a comment which resulted in loud group laughter. Ruth’s laughter before telling the group that Chipo had *boyfriends* implied that she was being naughty, and the women’s shared humour while they cast glances at Chipo, was a sign that, for a woman, this was a transgression. I even made a joke out of this by asking other women if any of them were looking for a boyfriend whom she could “borrow” from Chipo, which again resulted in uproarious laughter from the group including myself. When I reflected on my joke much later, I realised how I was also feeding into the stereotype that a woman cannot have multiple boyfriends. In this group, laughter, which featured often early in the discussion,

served to share ‘embarrassment’ and to diffuse their anxieties about discussing sexuality. This was different with men whose laughter, on occasions, seemed to signify that they were revelling in their naughtiness.

Unlike Gronnerod (2004:34) who what stated that people ‘laughed together more often with familiar than the unfamiliar interviewees,’ I tended to laugh and attempted to joke even more with the unfamiliar interviewees to ease tension between us. At the same time, I laughed with those I was familiar with because it would have seemed very awkward had I tried to detach myself as a researcher (yet a friend) by not laughing along with them.

Laughter sometimes ‘allowed participants to retract and save face if some error of information or judgement is felt to have been made’ (Wellings *et al.*, 2000:261). For instance, while those in the mixed-group were telling me about what they expected from their ideal partner’s body, one man remarked that ‘in world where you are surrounded by females, you can’t just approach anyone and *anything*.’ Immediately, with a chuckle, as if sensing that he might have offended the women in the group by referring to some women as *things*, he said, ‘well, *anything*, that sounds wrong so let me say *anyone* for now but you have to like how someone looks’.

In other instances, laughter appeared to be therapeutic as participants tried to deal with rather sad narratives they shared. This was particularly so in one of the women’s group discussions. I had asked the women to reflect on their childhood experiences when they were growing up and experiencing bodily changes, when they began sharing experiences about their first menstrual periods. Tanya, was the second to narrate her experience:

Tanya: [...] I really struggled with how and where I would get pads as a student at a mission school, you wouldn’t even know whether you should buy cotton, or other stuff. Sometimes you don’t have anything and you end up using whatever is there. I don’t know how my father discovered it, but he created stop order accounts where he was now depositing our pocket money, which means we were no longer asking for money, so I was now safe, but I think it took about two to 3 years for that to happen. I remember I faced disaster one time when I went for sports, and I had put a cloth as a pad, and we were asked to run. You know that you are forced to run (laughs) and it fell [**Maidei:** Haaa! (laughter)] and you wonder (others laugh). I was so confused because those were the first days, but because we were many, so people didn’t really know whom it fell from (laughs). My sister was older, but I didn’t even have the guts to approach her to ask what is happening, what do I do, you know (laughs)

Shuvai: Aaa shame. As for me, we were lucky because some of the girls were already menstruating, so we would discuss as girls. But I was in grade 7. My mother never discussed anything with me [...] but there was this woman, our neighbour whom I regarded as my granny, she is the one who taught me how to wear a bra, and other things. So she is the one who acted like an aunt, so she is the one whom I told about

what was happening to me, that's how I got cotton wool. The problem was on using it, it would always shift from position (laughing), I don't know how it would shift (Group laughs)

Tanya: You would wonder how best to wear it so that it stays in position

Tanya's narrative was predominantly punctuated by her own laughter as she recalled the embarrassing and confusing incident when her soiled cotton wool fell. Despite this laughter, Shuvai recognised that this was a sad experience, and thus started by saying "shame" to Tanya. Their shared laughter signified how they all related with these experiences like how to put cotton wool, or pad on a panty so that it stayed in position, and Tanya affirmed this in her last comment.

Questions that pushed participants to the boundaries

In this section, I reflect upon some of the questions I (and other participants) posed in the course of the interviews, which encouraged others to reflect on normative and taken-for-granted assumptions, which inform the usually taken-for-granted ways in which young women and men construct and experience their lives. These type of questions are characteristic of particular kinds of "participatory interviews", in which interviewees, and how they construct and categorize themselves, become themes and topics for reflexive discussion (Pattman & Bhana, 2016). Such questions arose when particular participants were speaking about their experiences as mothers or girlfriends or fathers or boyfriends, and were often posed in response to the contradictory demands these identifications, notably for women, seemed to produce.

For example, Rudo, a mother of two daughters, kept insisting in my interview with her that girls should be introduced to labia elongation when they are still young, saying, 'we need to catch them young before they know because at least you would have done something she will appreciate the whole of her life.' However, when I asked her if she had already talked to her daughters about this, she said she had not:

Rudo: I have not started. I want to take them.

HV: Take them where, to who?

Rudo: To the grandmother so that she can teach them there.

HV: Why don't you do it yourself?

Rudo: Myself, I am embarrassed, I can't do it, yes, but I want them to go there.

HV: Why would you feel embarrassed when you have done it?

Rudo: Yes I did it but not to a point where I will be comfortable to take her through the process, no. I would rather look for a friend who will teach them, I personally can't do it (2) I would rather look for another person to do it.

HV: Because people say that at times you don't have relatives, maybe you no longer have grandmothers or aunts, then your mother is embarrassed to talk about it, so how will the child know about it?

Rudo: I don't think that I am embarrassed or that I will be embarrassed, but I don't think that I am comfortable to discuss with her these kind of issues, that's why I said that if I don't find someone else, I will be left with no option, I can personally do it, it's just that it find it proper for the grandmother to take her through the process since she doesn't have any aunt, I will take her to the grandmother, she will teach her I know, because she once said I should bring my daughter when she is still young, yes, which means she is capable of doing it.

What prompted me to ask her the question 'why would you feel embarrassed when you have done it?' was because I found it ironic that she was very sexually explicit in her speech, all the time glorifying labia elongation, yet she felt uncomfortable to talk to her daughters about it. While this question somehow pushed her out of her comfort zone, it did not lead her to clearly say why this was so. Only when I made her think of a scenario, where there are no grandmothers and aunts, did she articulate her anxieties. The scenario I put forward created considerable discomfort for her from which she sought relief by emphasising the grandmother's willingness to "teach" her daughter. What this response illustrates was the depth of the discomfort and embarrassment she, as a mother, would feel teaching her daughter about labia elongation, which she framed but was not at all apparent from her very explicit and emotive account about the importance of "catching girls young" and introducing them to labia elongation.

In the discussion I conducted only with men, one man appeared quite critical about labia elongation and at one point remarked that it was an unnecessary practice because 'God created us perfect.' Immediately, as I elaborate in Chapter 6, other men opposed him by asking him, 'why do you go to the gym, if you were created perfect?', which made him reflect on his initial response in which he took religious discourses for granted, but also on taken-for-granted discourses about the celebratory power and dominance of men. The example of men going to the gym to work on their bodies celebrates and naturalises stereotypes of masculinity associated with physical and mental strength, and resonates with Connell's (1999) understanding of hegemonic masculinities and the cultural and social processes through which these are practiced and produced. Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity can never be attained, because there is always a disjuncture between the real and the ideal. This was articulated by the men in my study who constructed the male body, in their 'gym narrative', not as 'perfect' in its own 'God' given state but as an incomplete project towards masculine power signified by physical fitness and muscularity on which men needed to constantly work.

Appropriate and inappropriate language and forms of censure in group interviews

In comparing and analysing the different interviews, I was particularly interested in how my participants spoke about sexuality, and the choice of language they used to refer to specific themes, including sexual practices and sexual organs. This provided insights into the ways they constructed these, whether they associated these with taboos, and if so, how they responded to these in the context of an interview about sexuality. I take language as an important medium through which people position themselves, present themselves, construct their identities, negotiate relationships, rather than simply a medium for describing their realities (Weedon, 1987). How women and men spoke about sexuality emerged as a significant theme through which they forged their individual and group identities. When I introduced the topic of elongated labia, it was usually followed by moments of silence, embarrassing stares, or faces looking down, whether I was talking to men only, women, or both.

However, this was more pronounced with women participants. Some women felt the term '*matinji*', which I was using to refer to elongated labia, was vulgar. Shuvai mentioned that 'normally they are called *zvidhori* (dolls) if we are on [a] radio [programme]'. When I asked her about the term she uses if she is not presenting on radio, she only managed to say 'aaah', implying that her discomfort with the term *matinji* had more to do with her personal values, rather than work ethics. This became explicit when I interviewed her separately where she kept saying *zvidhori*, while another woman preferred *nzeve* [ears], or simply *kudhonza* (pulling). This forced me to change and adopt their preferred terms in both interviews. When I asked whether elongated labia was something embarrassing to talk about, it emerged that the issue was about how it was discussed in 'public' spaces, particularly by women. In one of the group discussions with women, Mary suggested that women preferred these other names 'so that men will not know what you are talking about ... to avoid saying vulgar words in public, [and] to make it better.' Here, 'public' implied men. Interestingly, many of these "dignified" names emerged only in the interviews I had with women, rather than with men who seemed to prefer the term most women constructed as 'vulgar'. The conversation below clearly shows that women's concerns about using words considered explicit in front of men, or in public, is an attempt to affirm their feminine identities as good and respectable women:

=**Mary:** It's the same as saying penis, it's very difficult for someone to say penis, but if you say dick it appears as if you are not talking about anything special

Shuvai: Yah, because even to your own husband it's not easy to say those words

Mary: You might say them if you are covering your head with a blanket (Group laughs). You can say eish, your penis is sweet, with your face covered, but saying it

while facing him, it's very difficult. But if your lights are switched off, when you can't clearly see each other you can say, babe touch this, caress my *matinji*, he-e babe your penis is sweet, babe why are your *matinji* this swollen, babe your testicles are big (**Miranda** laughs and looks down and **Maidei** covers her mouth in shock), those words are said when you are having sex and when it's dark (**Shuvai** laughs), in a dark environment, when it's dark. You feel very comfortable talking about anything when the lights are switched off, but then when the lights are on you will be forced because you feel embarrassed, no matter how long you have been together, but you will be forced to avoid some words

HV: Miranda, I saw you laughing a lot, do you agree with Mary?

Mary: I am not embarrassed to talk about these things, sorry

HV: Noo, actually everyone should be very free to express what is on their mind

Miranda: Aaah there are times when you can say those words, and other times when you cannot. It depends with the mood, what is your partner's mood? If you want to make them laugh, you can just say it, you know, the words, it depends with the mood and the situation

Mary's comment that women can only say explicit sexual words with their heads or faces 'covered' or in darkness, drew laughter from the rest of the women (to show they agreed with this), implying that it is taboo, 'naughty' and shameful for women to say that. Miranda looked down laughing, while Maidei covered her mouth supposedly in shame over Mary's explicitness, as if to refrain her from continuing with her 'undignified' language. Wellings *et al.* (2000: 262) note that 'participants might pre-empt anticipated disapproval of their preferred opinions with an apology or disclaimer.' Having realised the discomfort her explicit speech had caused for other women, Mary sarcastically apologised for not feeling 'embarrassed to talk about these things.' Yet, to some extent she was, because while she had been speaking in Shona, she suddenly switched to English when she said 'penis' and 'dick' and instead of the vernacular *mboro* which is generally regarded as a profanity. In conversation, sex-related English terms are often used in place of local terms which may be regarded as too explicit (Thetela, 2002).

When I asked Miranda why she was laughing, she explained how women's ability to say 'those words' was dependent upon the 'partner's (not her) mood' and 'if you want them to laugh', in ways which presented sexual explicit language as a male domain in which women have to seek approval to "enter". Miranda avoided explicitly mentioning the sexual words, only saying, '...you can just say *it, you know, the words...*' Equally, Maidei, in a separate interview, when she was speaking about how she had heard about labia elongation, mentioned that her ex-boyfriend, taught her to say some of 'those words, [because] I used to be embarrassed.' Yet by not mentioning 'those words' explicitly, it suggested she was still very much embarrassed to say them. When we were driving home with Tanya after the discussion, Tanya remarked that 'Mary is something!' in reference to her explicitness, and she wondered how 'interesting' it would have

been had Rudo (also very explicit) also turned up for the group discussion. In most women's view, it seemed Mary was displaying 'undesirable' versions of femininity by using "inappropriate" language. In the other group discussion with women, one woman was clearly embarrassed to say *matinji* and 'penis', and instead said, while laughing uncontrollably, '... *those things* [elongated labia] help to grip *the wee, the thing*' before settling for '*nhengo yake*' (his part)'.

The use of euphemisms and the gendered differences in these

Euphemistic and metaphorical language therefore featured significantly in most interviews, as some participants sought to avoid being too blatant about sexuality. This was exemplified by the various metaphorical names they gave to elongated labia (*matinji*) either to describe their physical appearance – 'number elevens', *nzeve* (ears), 'extended family', *mabhaibheri* (bibles), *makongo* – or their purpose – *maketeni* (curtains), *zvidhori* (dolls), 'daddy's toys', and *madhoiri* (doillies).

When I asked married women in the second all-women group to reflect on the teachings they received in preparation for marriage, Paida explained that she was taught about respecting her husband and his relatives, and about sex, and '*playing* in the bedroom'. When I asked her to elaborate on what she meant by '*playing*', she sighed, laughed, before saying, 'aayaaa' to indicate that I was putting her on the spot by asking her to be explicit. After a short pause, she then said:

When you are in the bedroom with your husband, when having sex with your husband, *you must not be like a log*, you must help him.

In the following chapter, I elaborate on how some women used euphemisms and metaphors especially to describe and denigrate those without elongated labia. One woman, for example, asked '*muti usina matavi unokwirika sei?* (how does one climb a tree without branches?) Another likened a woman without elongated labia to '*imba isina mukova*' (a house without a door). These metaphorical and euphemistic expressions were to emphasise that a woman who has not undergone elongation is sexually "incomplete" (see Chapter 7).

Nevertheless, euphemisms also characterised men's talk, although most of the time, they were quite explicit. In the mixed discussion, while participants were discussing how they knew about labia elongation, Pius said it was because he watched porn videos. Unexpectedly, he started talking about masturbation, remarking that '99% of the guys masturbate' and that men *only*

masturbate ‘after seeing something that *awakens the dead*’ an expression for an erection, which drew loud laughter from the group. In the men’s group, Masimba, who seemed very much against labia elongation, exclaimed that ‘*murume chaanoda ipoto. Poto, ine mibato kana isina, poto ipoto!*’ (what a man wants is a pot. A pot, with or without handles, a pot remains a pot!). In this instance, *poto* (pot) seems to signify a vagina, distinguished by having elongated labia (handles) or not. In that same group discussion, when men were debating about the importance of dating and marrying virgins, one man, probably reflecting on his past girlfriends, said ‘*ndakaiwana yakarohwa poto kudhara*’ (I found the pot already beaten), implying he found the girl already a non-virgin. These expressions are not surprising because, according to Shire (1994), Shona people have always used metaphorical language in discussing sexual matters to signify adult talk, thus excluding ‘children’ who are perceived as unable to decode such expressions. Tamale (2005:12) points out, ‘African sexuality is usually mediated through metaphors and symbols.’ While these metaphors and symbols require further unpacking, it is not within the scope of this study to do so in detail because of space limitations.

My own concerns about the sexual explicitness in some interviews

One of my anxieties before I started my fieldwork was whether women and men would openly talk about labia elongation. Hence, I was looking out for sexual explicitness as one of the indicators that participants were *free* to discuss sexuality. Yet, I realised during interviews that I also had reservations when some participants spoke explicitly about sex, especially those with whom I was unfamiliar, for example, when one woman preferred calling elongated labia *magamhamboro* (penis-catchers). This took me out of my comfort zone. Gune & Manuel (2011: 39) who, in their studies of urban young people’s sexuality in Mozambique, argue that researchers are not ‘culturally free,’ report having similar feelings. According to these authors, Gune ‘*refused* to accept some words which when uttered invoked a strange reaction in him, [which] even today he does not feel comfortable writing about them’ (*ibid.*). My own dilemma was also how to transcribe what my participants had said, without sounding pornographic, or ‘going against academic writing standards’ (Gune & Manuel, 2011:40). But, then again, who was I to sanitise their responses when one of my aims was to keep as close to the data as possible, where my participants’ negotiation of sexuality language emerged as one of the key findings. For instance, in the male discussion, some men spoke of *kukwira mukadzi* (*fucking* a woman), while others spoke about *kurara nemukadzi* (*sleeping* with a woman). Although both expressions refer to having sex with a woman, it was tempting to write the latter in both instances, because I found the former expression quite demeaning of women, but that would not

have done justice in pointing out the level of explicitness in these expressions, and the sexual objectification of women. Unlike Manuel, whose supervisor advised her ‘not to write in a way that creates sexual arousal,’ (Gune & Manue, 2011:40), I was not concerned about the possibility of my supervisors censoring my transcriptions. Both were non-Zimbabwean white men, unfamiliar with the Shona language, which made it easier for me to read out, and write these explicit terms in vernacular. I might have grappled with this had my supervisors been Shona and women as I was likely to re-phrase the terms for fear of being censored.

How men and women talked about the same and the opposite sex

Men speaking about homophobia in a mixed-group interview

In all interviews, both men and women took heterosexuality for granted. As such, homosexuality was never mentioned, except in the mixed-group, where men explicitly distanced themselves from it. This emerged after I asked Tendai and Kuda whether, as brothers, they used to discuss about the bodily changes they experienced during puberty. In the following excerpt, they expressed their uneasiness to expose their bodies to other men including their own brothers and instead talked about (their generation) being homophobic:

Tendai: Our generation is more homophobic, I think. You find that even when we were growing up and were still at primary school it never used to bother us to shower together before swimming or even looking at each other, in terms of the *men bush* (pubic hair), but you know that was then. We knew some changes were bound to happen as we grew up but haa discussing it, and even now changing in the same room with guys is difficult, because of another issue that we are not covering. So even as brothers you find that talking about those issues, it just looks, it just seems funny [...]

Kuda: Yah, it’s very uncomfortable talking about it [...]

Pius: I am not a brother to them, but [...] even changing in the same room, bathing in the same room, haa we don’t do that. And this, that issue of being homophobic as mentioned by Tendai, mos guys don’t feel comfortable. That’s why you find, a male hug is less than 2 seconds, so that is how things are in our generation. You find our fathers would walk around holding hands, but us we can’t! I can’t touch his hand (laughter from others).

HV: Because, why?

Pius: Because, thing is, now, homosexuality is now something that is exploding. We don’t want to be associated with that, us being raised to be straight and that is what limits us to have discussions even as brothers.

While these young men spoke about being homophobic in ways which seem to celebrate their heterosexual masculinities, their narratives also point to their anxieties of being unable to do things like hugging, holding hands, taking a bath together, or changing in the same room, for

fear of being called ‘gay’. In the Zimbabwean context, this was particularly problematic, as I discussed in Chapter 2, given the proliferation of homophobic discourses that associate homosexual desire with the West and African cultural violation (Pattman, 2001; McFadden, 2003). Whereas these men implicitly raised concerns about how homophobic discourses indirectly constrained the way they related with other males, Taurai, (in the all-male group) narrated his childhood experiences when he visited rural areas where it was common for boys to show each other’s private parts:

Taurai: Eer, some of us when we grew up it was like, like in my case we grew up learning in Harare but we would go to the rural areas during the holidays. So all my spending time was in the rural areas as I grew up. As we grew up, we would, because we, you would be very excited as a boy if you grew a beard, I am now growing a beard, or you start getting hairy on your private parts, and armpits, so people will be saying hee I am growing! I am growing! So we used to have this system when we go to herd cattle that’s when we would show each other’s bodies as a group of boys, look at me I now have this, I am like soo, something like that. That’s what we used to do. Then we got to a point where we would say eer, we want to see whether you will be able to have kids when you grow up. So, at times we would engage in masturbation [laughs], we would masturbate then ejaculate in water. So if the sperms sink down then we would say that haa you are a man. If they don’t sink down you would be advised to your grandfather to be given some medicine [laughs].

Men in this group did not make a problem of being naked and masturbating in each other’s presence, which they constructed as the norm, and a rural and “traditional” way of “male bonding” as opposed to desire for and with other males. Similar to Taurai’s account, Shire (1994: 155) wrote about a number of games they engaged in as groups of Shona boys to learn about their bodies and sexualities. One was to ‘piss as high in the sky as we could, without it falling back down on us’, while the other involved ‘freeing’ the foreskin from the penis using ‘a thorn and a bull’s hair.’ He, however, emphasised that it was considered ‘deviant’ for boys beyond the ages of 8 or 9 to continue taking part in such games. Shire claims that issues of homosexuality were never talked about in his childhood, and his first encounter with *ngochani* (homosexuals) was at a mission school, ‘where boys who did not have school fees would stay with priests,’ presumably where they would exchange sexual favours for school fees. Because of this, Shire ‘thought of it then as something which was connected with Christianity,’ and implicitly modernity (*ibid.*) It is, therefore, unsurprising that men in the mixed-group, who positioned themselves as ‘urban’ with no rural backgrounds, seemed very invested in asserting their heterosexual identities, more so in the presence of women.

Men talking about women and “wife material”

Men constantly objectified women when they spoke about them. In the mixed-group discussion, I posed a question about whether there were particular bodily features that they looked for in their ideal girlfriends. I asked this particular question in anticipation that men might mention elongated labia as one of those features. However, in response, Pius, pointing at the two women in the group (Sekai and Merjury), said:

As a guy, unlike them who are approached and I am the one that approaches and chases, with me being the hunter, so there has to be something that attracts me.

By calling himself, and consequently other men, as ‘the hunter’, Pius constructed women as men’s prey. He, like other men in the group, praised women who are ‘well endowed’ with wide hips, big breasts, and big buttocks, while they denigrated slim women, saying their backsides were as flat as a ‘wall’. I imagined how Merjury might have felt since she was also slim, but she just smiled without saying anything.

When I posed the same question in the all-male group, the men also expressed their preference for light-skinned women, and virgins, although there was another category of women that they mentioned – “wife material”:

Masimba: But what I have personally observed is that when choosing a woman to marry, it’s not about her beauty or her body. You are also considering whether she has the potential to be promiscuous (**Taurai** interjects: wife material), is she wife material? You might meet a very beautiful girl, but you start thinking that if you are to marry her, there may be problems. (**Tadiwa:** Can you marry Miss Zimbabwe?). That would be a big problem. So what you want is wife material, someone whom you can leave at home without having to worry that another man can take her

HV: How do you describe or define wife material?

Masimba: There are there, there’s wife material and you can see that she is wife material

Sam: What these girls do is, before marriage, she will be acting like wife material

HV: Yes, but I want to understand what you mean by wife material

Sam: She is a good person, she listens, yes. When you say you don’t have money, she understands that my boyfriend is broke for sure. Marry her and she becomes something else

Masimba: She is not too demanding, my hair needs to be made, she wants a lot of things

Ras: Yes, she is not a material girl

Sam: But some pretend to be like that (**Ras:** Yah yah yah)

The men’s collective description of “wife material” as a woman who is not promiscuous, submissive, not materially demanding, and not strikingly beautiful reinforced gender normative

constructions of wives as subservient and asexual. In contrast, Tadiwa, for example, said although some wives might become promiscuous – which in essence disqualified them from being *wife material* – as far as he was concerned it was him ‘who might hide my phone at home if I decide to be a bit mischievous’. He downplayed the gravity of men’s promiscuity by referring to it only as ‘mischief’, a term that even some women used to suggest it was in men’s nature to have multiple sexual partners. Interestingly, in the above excerpt, men seemed to categorise women differently by presenting sexually attractive women as objects of male sexual desire, while wives were constructed in non-sexualised ways. This is apparent in how Masimba and Taurai seemed to emphasise that a wife must be the one whose beauty or bodily figure should not be emphasised as to attract other men’s sexual desires, besides that of her husband.

Although “wife material” was a category that was explicitly stated only in the men’s group, men in the mixed-group also alluded to this. They complained about young women who ‘go out’ to music shows or parties at night, by calling them ‘too wild’. Pius, for example, wanted a woman who is ‘submissive, who can cook and clean’ and can take good care of him. On the other hand, Kuda is interested in finding a Christian girl, implicitly suggesting that Christian women have good morals, are submissive, and not ‘wild’. Interestingly, none of the participants questioned his double standards when he constructed himself as a Christian yet indicated he was still ‘experimenting’ sexually with different girls. This failure by the young men and women to question this affirmed that it is the “norm” for women (not men) to be morally upright. In the mixed-group discussion, Sekai appeared to challenge men’s views against “outgoing” women when she talked about how she ‘used to party’. She laughed after saying this, adding that she ‘never really cared’. Yet, by saying this, she implicitly concurred with men in the group that partying for young women is a sign of “immaturity” and waywardness. This became clearer when she described how she was ‘closing up now on those things’ she used to do like partying and wearing ‘tops revealing my cleavage’.

Women talking about men

A commonly occurring theme in women’s group discussions is how men were infantilised and constructed as problems. When discussing their relations with men as husbands, fathers and boyfriends, women frequently constructed men as selfish, irresponsible, promiscuous, and oppressive. For example, when women spoke about men’s propensity to cheat, they described them as ‘kids’ who are not easily satisfied with what they have. In contrast, women presented themselves as selfless, mature, and responsible. The conversation below, while not talking about men’s sexual behaviour, demonstrates how women were naturalising these stereotypes. I had

asked married women in the all-women group whether they had considered where their husbands came from, when Shuvai (married to a Karanga man) started complaining about ‘Masvingo¹⁹ men’:

Shuvai: Aaah, they talk too much. They have these small things which are irritating. The way they want to be respected, they want this male, father status, even a small boy wants to be accorded that status

Tanya (laughs): I thought all men do that

Shuvai: Aaah, a small boy? Noo!

HV: Okay, so had you known, where would you rather have been married?

Shuvai: Uhhh I don’t know, maybe to someone without a rural home

Tanya: How do you know that the others are better? (laughs)

Shuvai: I would have loved one who doesn’t have rural ties (laughs)

Maidei: He may also be a problem

Shuvai: One with no rural ties? (laughs) They just want to follow these unnecessary traditions...

While Shuvai tried to construct men as different based on their ethnicity and rural/urban background, other women suggested that men were all the same. She started by emotionally presenting ‘Masvingo men’ and boys as particularly problematic (compared to the rest of men in general) for demanding ‘respect’ and ‘status’ from women, prompting Tanya to laugh saying, ‘I thought all men do that.’ Shuvai then changed her choice of words and now suggested that only ‘small boys’ were the problem, suggesting it was natural for older men to demand respect. When she mentioned that she would have preferred a husband without a rural home, she implied that those men without “rural ties” were much better because they were not “traditional”. Tanya’s question about how sure Shuvai was that a man without rural ties would be any different, and Maidei’s comment that ‘he may also be a problem,’ showed how these women were challenging Shuvai’s stereotyping of “traditional” men. Ironically, in doing this, they were equally stereotypical because they positioned all men as domineering, and implicitly, women as submissive in ways that normalised these gendered identities – a theme also raised by one woman in the mixed-group.

Women talking about “husband material”

When I asked women in individual interviews and in the mixed and all-women focus groups to speak about the kind of boyfriends or husbands they were looking for, they tended to downplay men’s physical attractiveness. A few said they preferred ‘God-fearing’ men, presumably because they were emphasising their Christian identities. The majority echoed they wanted a man with ‘a stable and sound income.’ When I asked Tino, in a separate interview, whether she imagined

¹⁹ Masvingo is a province in Zimbabwe which is associated with Karanga speaking people.

dating a man from a different ethnicity as hers, she said that dating Ndebele man was ‘a mismatch’. When I asked her to elaborate, she complained that Ndebele guys expected ‘that a girl is the one who should fork out money for the guy’, thus presenting them as stingy, and economically dependent on women, which for Tino was an anomaly. Equally, Cynthia, in another interview, mentioned that among other attributes (tall, funny, caring, loving, faithful), she wanted a ‘rich’ man, and laughed after saying this, suggesting she very much wanted this. As the following excerpt (drawn from one all-women discussion) illustrates, particularly Tanya’s question, it was clear that most women constructed men as economic providers, and were linking romantic love and feelings with financial stability and care.

Miranda: I heard that *vanaMhofu*²⁰ (men of the buffalo totem) they are lovermen, I don’t know how far true it is.

Mary: But am told they are stingy.

Miranda: They say they can love you so much that you can forget your name (group laughs)

Mary: They are just romantic but moneywise, they are stingy, too stingy!

Tanya: So how do you love someone without giving them money?

Mary: You know some people believe that loving someone is more important than money, money later, love first, some people believe that.

Women talking about women

As I have already indicated in earlier sections of this chapter, women not only differentiated themselves from men, but from other women as well. Since most of the women wanted to present themselves as ‘good’ and ‘respectful’ by displaying dominant versions of femininity, they tended to Other those who transgressed this. In Chapter 2, I engaged with how Africa is constructed as the Other in colonial and postcolonial discourses. It is important to point out that critical feminist writers influenced by versions of social constructionism and postcolonial theories use the term Other as a projection. Mohanty (1988), for example, engages with this when she criticises how dominant western feminist discourses project an image of an “oppressed” Third world woman as Other against that of the Western “independent” woman. Even in the so-called Third world countries, Mohanty invites our analyses to pay attention to how ‘middle-class, urban African and Asian scholars producing scholarship on or about their rural or working-class sisters which assumes their own middle-class culture as the norm, and codifies peasant and working-class histories and cultures as Other’ (Mohanty, 1988: 62; see also Sofola, 1998). In Chapter 7, I will focus my analysis on how women without elongated labia were constructed by those who have as the Other.

²⁰ Most men in Zimbabwe prefer to be addressed with their totems in informal settings.

In the interview I had with Rudo, she constructed herself and other married women as selfless for putting their husbands' sexual interests first. She was vividly angry about young girls who have sexual affairs with married men in return for material favours, and repeatedly called them 'prostitutes', 'evil', and 'worst witches'. Similarly, in one of the all women focus group discussions, participants took moralistic positions against sex workers and married women who have extra-marital affairs, whose behaviour they considered disgraceful and 'stupid'. Interestingly, they were much less critical of men even though they presented them as promiscuous, as I will elaborate in Chapters 5 and 6. It seemed their critique of women whom they constructed as Other was tied up with investments in defining themselves, in contrast, as moral women. They attributed what they viewed as men's promiscuity to essential masculine attributes, as if men were defined in terms of a promiscuous sexual drive, and women through their romanticised relation with one man.

This theme resonates with Wendy Hollway's findings in a United Kingdom (UK) based research on young men and women students' narratives of sexual relations. The findings indicated that men were constantly positioned as the subjects of a "sex drive discourse" which naturalised their alleged 'promiscuity' and women as subjects of a 'have/hold' discourse which idealised and romanticised heterosexual monogamy (Hollway, 1989). In this discursive context in the focus group discussions with women, it was not men but other women constructed as Other, who were rendered immoral or "incomplete" and from whom these women sought to distance themselves. How this affected the ways they presented themselves in the different kinds of interviews I conducted, and how they spoke about sexual pleasure in relation to gender are important themes on which I will elaborate further in future chapters.

When labia length was a concern for women

When I asked women how long elongated labia should be, many would not elaborate on what they considered to be the *normal* length. They just stressed that it should not be 'too long'. The few that explicitly stated the length said the elongated labia should be the 'size of a matchstick', or the length of the index finger. Although it were the women who raised this theme, it appeared they were hesitant to disclose what they individually thought to be the 'normal' length of elongated labia, as demonstrated in the following exchange:

Shamiso: It is said that, er [when] they are pulled, but they should not be pulled for extended periods because if you pull for a long time and they become very long, it is said that they can kill a child, I don't know how far true that is, I don't understand, but

they say if you pull for a long time they kill a child, even nurses start questioning because they would have become too long

Tino: But how come others say it actually helps when one is giving birth?

Shamiso: When they are the normal size, but when they are too long, ah ah

Tino: What length do you consider to be too long?

Shamiso: Uhmm

HV: When they say normal size, give us an example or show us from here to where

Paida: Uhmm once they are too long it becomes a problem (3) they bring a lot of feelings (**Tino:** Alright). That is why they don't recommend young girls to pull them beyond the normal size, not too long

HV: What is normal size? Let's try demonstrating using fingers, when they say normal size, which finger size for example do you mean? Or do they have to be longer than all the fingers?

Paida: Hmm, haaa, fingers, let's see, (2) if we say this one (holding the middle finger) they will be too long but (**Tino:** They will be long), (3) haa normal is this one (holding the thumb)

Shamiso: Yaa, that is normal, if they are like this, it's too much [holding second finger from the little finger)

By '*let's see, if we say this one*', instead of 'me' or 'I' and pausing before finally settling on the thumb as representing the 'normal' size of elongated labia, I suggest that Paida was indirectly trying to fish out other women's opinions about this before she could give a straight answer. Interestingly, it was only after Paida pinpointed the finger which to her, represented the 'normal' length that Shamiso finally found confidence to respond to Tino's initial question, but only by endorsing Paida's answer. It is also interesting how sexual 'feelings' derived from having elongated labia, presumably signifying (female) sexual pleasure is portrayed by Paida as a problem, and specifically for young girls. As I shall elaborate in Chapter 6, these concerns and anxieties maybe framed by popular discourses that stigmatise women (not men) who are deemed overly sexual or as deriving too much pleasure from sex.

When I posed the same question (about how long the length of labia should be) to Ruva who underwent elongation, she was quite dismissive when she said that '*it was never said.*' In trying to probe further, I rephrased my question:

HV: At what stage did you decide to stop, or you are still pulling?

Ruva: I stopped, I just said since they [elongated labia] could now be held by a hand, and could feel that there are there then I said eh there are now there, it can now be held like this (pressing the fingertips of the thumb and index fingers together while laughing).

HV: Because some were saying that the normal size is the size of the thumb.

Ruva: I think I have also heard that, but I once heard, or maybe it was now a joke.

HV: What did you hear?

Ruva: Ummm (2) I think it was now a joke, is it a joke or it's the truth. Heard that some [women] were urinating, [and] people saw them dangling, does that happen?

HV: I don't know.

Ruva: (Laughs loudly) or maybe they are now lies.

HV: But I know, I used to see others like that.

Ruva: Traditional people right? I think it's those old traditional women.

In this conversation, Ruva, unsure of how I would respond, and possibly assuming that we both had pulled and shared the same opinion of 'normal' length of labia, started by dismissing what she was going to say as a 'joke'. Her question to me about whether some women have such long labia that they 'dangle', was in some way trying to fish out for my opinion, and because I did not answer her explicitly, she settled for 'they are now lies'. When I mentioned that I had seen women like that, she was still determined to find out about the kind of women, by asking me if these were "traditional" [rural and old] women. Whereas Paida constructed very long labia as a problem for young girls, other women, like Ruva, seemed to be suggesting that they are also a problem for adult women, as demonstrated by the image she evokes of a woman who "dangles" them while she urinates, an image which evoked much laughter. Here I noticed that as a young woman, Ruva distanced herself from this image by associating very long labia with 'old traditional women'. In some instances, my female participants associated long labia with rural women, or with women from certain local minority ethnic groups. There was also a view that very long labia are repulsive, produced lots of 'water' with a foul smell, and negatively affects childbirth. As such, only a few of the participants (both women and men) positively thought of very long labia as sexually attractive. Therefore, what these women constructed as 'normal size' *produces norms* in a pejorative rather than a purely descriptive sense. They were sensitive to the processes of what was regarded as normal in the discussion, and were careful to check this out with me and other participants.

Women's experiences of focus groups and individual interviews

Some days after the focus group I asked six women whom I interviewed separately to tell me about how they experienced the focus group and individual interviews. My interest in pursuing this links in with the issues I raised in the methodology chapter in which I argued that interviews and focus groups are ethnographic encounters which can either facilitate or constrain what participants can say. Frosh *et al.* (2002) who conducted both focus groups and individual interviews with young boys in the UK, for example, found that their participants preferred the individual interviews because they had no pressure to conform to normative masculinities, as

was the case when they were in groups. Similarly, the majority of women in my study who participated in both focus groups and interviews said they enjoyed the latter. Miranda said although she ‘enjoyed the [group] discussion’, she said she preferred the individual interview more because it allowed her to ‘reflect on some issues on a personal note,’ unlike in the group where ‘there is a certain ideology [others must follow]’ and people would often speak simultaneously. When I asked her whether it bothered her that we knew each other, she said no. Instead, she pointed out that she was comfortable with my questions because they were not ‘intimate’:

Miranda: [...] the questions were not like those intimate questions, that’s it, like to be asked about how you sleep with your husband, and how do you feel, so what-what, those I think I wouldn’t have been comfortable to answer, but your questions were (3) they were human (laughs) yes, they are...even if you ask other people, it’s not something that is, I don’t know if you are getting me, but I was comfortable, to be honest.

HV: What if it was a male interviewer with the same questions?

Miranda: Uhm I don’t think I would have been comfortable.

Miranda’s comment was interesting because I had actually asked her intimate questions, for example, when I asked her that ‘*saka wakatoita zvekumuratidza kuti anobata sei matinji ako?*’ (so, did you have to show him (husband) how to caress your elongated labia?) However, I avoided such questions with women I did not know personally, who might have found them uncomfortable. It appeared what made Miranda answer these questions with ease, was that it had less to do with my gender, but more to do with the nature of our friendship. And it seemed she was enjoying the conversation, because when I thought I had exhausted all my questions, and thanked her for her time, she remarked ‘are we done already?’, indicating that the interview had ended too soon for her, despite us having spoken for almost an hour. I then asked her if she wanted to add something, and she spoke some more, prompting me to ask further questions before finally concluding the interview, some minutes later.

When it comes to focus groups, it has been observed that in focus groups, some members tend to ‘censor’ their behaviours and opinions to avoid transgressing ‘perceived group norm’ (Wellings *et al.*, 2000:264). This was exemplified in my study by women who did not undergo labia elongation, who were presented by other participants as “incomplete” women. Some of these women, during group interviews, concealed that they had not undergone labia elongation while they also found it dangerous to respond to derogatory comments made about them (see Chapter 7). Tanya expressed her fears of being judged and pressured to speak by other group members.

The following conversation which ensued towards the end of the focus group, when I asked them for their concluding remarks, demonstrates this. This was particularly obvious in the way Mary kept insisting that Tanya shared about her sexual experiences with her husband regarding labia elongation:

Mary: *Mai Mfundisi* (the pastor's wife) has not said anything (**Tanya:** But I have been speaking), but you have not concluded, we have said our opinions, so let us hear yours.

Tanya: I think I don't have anything new to say per se. What I can say is, I think it's, while it is yah, I think it's important to some extent but I think it should not be forced. Let one do it with understanding. As a pastor's wife, and what you want to hear, I haven't got to that understanding that I can confidently stand up telling my girls that do this, I, I haven't got to that understanding

Mary: It seems I am the only one who has talked about the importance of these things, isn't it Hellen? *Mai Mfundisi* you didn't tell us (**Tanya** laughs then Maidei joins in), for me that is what I saw, that is their significance, you didn't tell us (**Tanya** laughs), all of you about the importance of these things (**Maidei** laughing: Miranda you also have them, speak) (**Miranda:** They grip), isn't it Hellen? (**Miranda:** It's the same with what you said, they grip) It's only me who talked about the importance of these things, the rest of you just laughed (**Miranda:** Everything Mary said) (**Tanya:** That they grip because) Are you saying you are married to my husband? (I laugh) That's what my husband wanted, but what does your husband say? (**Miranda** speaking in a low voice: That is it, for you to enjoy) But even a person without *matinji* also enjoys, tell me, a person without *matinji* enjoys too, so what is the purpose of *matinji*?

Tanya's laughter was an indication that she was not prepared to respond to Mary who kept insisting that she 'has not said anything.' This is in line with Gronnerod (2004:39) who argues that 'laughter softens refusal,' and my own laughter was an attempt to 'restore and maintain rapport despite [these] interactive clashes'. More importantly, however, is that Tanya's laughter instead of a verbal response was a strategy to hide that she had no personal labial sexual experience to share, since she personally did not undergo labia elongation.

Conclusion

This chapter, framed around the single-sex, mixed-group focus groups, and individual discussions about sexuality, has dealt with processes of research and knowledge production by providing detailed accounts of what people said about labia elongation and sexuality more generally. In developing an analysis of these, this chapter focused on processes of interaction, emotions expressed as well as what participants said and their reflections of being interviewed. In addition, I focused on how issues were introduced and emerged in the course of the interviews, who spoke more and who spoke less, and how women and men spoke about the same and the opposite sex in the different interview contexts. I found that these processes were not

only highly gendered, but also linked with power and that these were manifested differently in particular gendered interactions in different kinds of interviews.

What emerged in this chapter are the gendered forms of group censorship and self-expression, which were going on in the different interviews. I provided examples of what participants constructed as appropriate and inappropriate language and the use of euphemisms and the gendered differences in these. I demonstrated, too, how women who used explicit sexual language attracted condemnation from other women, while for men, it seemed talking ‘dirty’ was just one of the many ways of exhibiting their masculinities. The next chapter explores how women and men learn about the cultural practice of labia elongation. It particularly focuses on how this practice is spoken about as a particular component of “traditional” sex education which allocates different but gendered roles and positions and expectations for older and younger women, mothers, aunts and girls. This is then connected with other unofficial, non-school, and non-conventional forms of sex education that young people rely on to understand practices such as labia elongation in contemporary Zimbabwe.

Chapter Five

Learning about labia elongation: My participants' experiences of this mediated by age and gender

Introduction

One of the questions that I sought to answer by embarking on this research was what and how do young women and young men in contemporary Zimbabwe learn about practices such as labia elongation, and this chapter addresses this. In addressing this, however, I do not focus exclusively on labia elongation, but situate it within broader sexuality education practices that my participants cited. I opt not to use the term 'sex education', because it gives the impression that it is limited to providing explicit instructions about sex. Since the chapter is not simply about the processes of learning 'how to pull' one's labia, but also interested in the kinds of implicit or explicit messages conveyed through the gendered forms talking about labia elongation took, I settle for sexuality education, which is much broader in its conceptualisation. This is informed by the broad definition of sexuality, which is not limited to the sexual act, but extends to other issues such as:

...desire, the erotic, emotions, sensuality, fantasy, intimacy, commitment, power, relationship, negotiation, exploration, exploitation, expression, trust, personhood, belonging, identity, pleasure ... obligation, transaction, dependence ... resistance, abuse, masculine entitlement, feminine propriety, respectability, spirituality, custom and ritual. (Nyanzi 2011:48).

This chapter raises two key arguments. Firstly, that teachings about labia elongation predominantly take hierarchical forms, while they produce gender polarities, both in terms of the (explicit and implicit) messages conveyed and the very spaces this takes place. I address this by focusing on descriptions of the process of labia elongation by my female participants, and the reasons given to girls by female adult figures or older girls to pull their labia. I demonstrate how labia elongation emerges as an embarrassing topic not only for my participants, but also between mothers and daughters (or between fathers and daughters), such that it is either avoided or is taught in very non-sexual ways. I show how this sparks debate while posing dilemmas to my female participants as (current or future) mothers about the kind of sexuality education they want for their daughters, which may be influenced by their own experiences. I also focus, for instance, on 'sex academies' and kitchen parties as examples of significant feminised spaces in which women's sexuality education takes place, exploring how women (and men) positioned

themselves in relation to these, as well as the concerns they raised about these forms of sexuality education. Secondly, the chapter seeks to demonstrate that how my participants symbolically constructed conventional forms of sexuality education (for example through uncles or aunts) and contemporary ones (such as kitchen parties or “self-help” resources such as Google²¹ proved significant in how they negotiated between constructing themselves (or being constructed) as traditional and/or modern subjects.

The ‘hidden curriculum’ of labia elongation: Being separated from boys and learning about and practicing labia elongation with other girls

Hidden curriculum is a concept used by educationalists to conceptualise and research what children learn at school, which is not officially prescribed in the official subject curriculum, but which is implicitly communicated through the ways teaching and learning, play and work are organised. Researchers in the field of gender and education have found this a particularly useful concept which they have deployed to conceptualise the gendered experiences of schooling. According to Pattman & Kehily (2005), what children learn about the significance of gender manifests through everyday taken for granted processes such as informal or formal gender segregation in school sports, or different kinds of dress regulations for boys and girls. Appropriating this concept to my own research, this section focuses on how women, as young girls, learnt about and practiced labia elongation with other girls, and what this implicitly said about their sexuality and gendered expectations. Female participants who had undergone labia elongation at an early age learnt that being girls was not enough to be female (Minh-ha, 1989; Arnfred, 2011), and that becoming women involved hard and painful work on their bodies. It entailed sacrifice about giving pleasure to future husbands and it meant, to their elders, that they would become “complete women” (see Chapters 6 and 7). These women stated that they were taught this, but in an abstract sense, that they were not sure what all this meant for them.

Most female participants and some men described labia elongation as a process in which girls were taken to participate before onset of their first menstrual period. This is consistent with findings by other scholars (Khau, 2009; Larsen, 2010; Pérez *et al.* 2014), although they added that it was also possible for girls to engage in this when they were older (see Francois *et al.* 2012). Of the 20 women who participated in the study, 12 revealed they had undergone labia elongation while six “revealed”²² they had not. It was not clear whether or not the remaining two

²¹ Google is one of the internet search engines.

²² I am putting “revealed” in quotes because not all clearly stated (especially in focus groups) that they did not pull their labia as I discuss in the chapter on “incomplete” and “complete” women. For some it only became clear that

participated in elongation, since I did not get the chance to interview them separately to verify their labial status. For the women in the study who elongated their labia, most indicated they started the process when they were still in primary school before their first menstruation, except for two women who said they elongated when they were already in secondary school. In providing a rationale for elongation prior to menstruation, consistent with Bagnol & Mariano (2011) and Bhebhe's (2014) findings, some women who had undergone elongation said that the elongated labia might shrink due to menstruation. They claimed if one waited until menstruation began, the blood would 'shrink', 'burn', or 'pull back' the elongated labia, thus slowing their growth. Yet, one woman who started pulling a year after menarche claimed hers did not shrink, while another said it was unnecessary to continue pulling after each menstrual period because it was *'natural that the time you go on your period they [labia] appear smaller, but after your period they go back to normal'*. Another woman told me that her mother instructed her to pull during menstrual periods because that is when the inner labia *'will be soft'*.

According to the participants, pulling when one was older was discouraged because not only does the process become 'more painful', but it requires more 'effort' for the inner labia to grow faster. Among those who underwent elongation when they were still young girls, most indicated that they pulled consistently very early in the morning before sunrise. A few of these participants said they repeated the process in the evening before bed, or even in the afternoon as they believed more regular pulling, elongated their labia more quickly.

While Khau (2009) and Bagnol & Mariano (2011) suggested that girls pulled each other's labia, none of the women in my study reported mutual elongation, although some indicated that they pulled their own labia in the company of their friends or sisters, while others did it individually and privately. Two cases were mentioned in the interviews of husbands who asked and assisted their wives to pull. But, for those who pulled when they were young, there was explicit specification that this was a girls-only activity. As girls, they conducted pulling sessions in different places. Shamiso, who explained that *'you would not just do it [pulling] anytime or any place'*, indicated that she had done it at the river, where, together with other girls they would *'sit in the water for some time'* as they elongated. Chenai, who elongated with her sisters, said that they did it *'outside the [rural] homestead'*, while Rudo said they would do it *'in a room as long as there were no boys'*. Some said they did the process at friends' houses or in the shower or while taking a bath. Some women reported that they underwent inspection from their

they did not pull their labia when I interviewed them in separate interviews while for others I made conclusions based on the subtle comments they made in focus group discussions.

grandmothers or aunts, to see if they had pulled their labia to the expected length. That these pulling sessions occurred outside the site of boys produces particular feminine subjectivities through the hidden curriculum in which the processes of teaching and learning about labia elongation took place as a girls-only practice.

On the subject of how they pulled their labia, I asked whether they used any herbs to aid the pulling process, some female participants said they elongated ‘naturally’ with nothing but (cold) water and fingers, while others mentioned ground ‘seeds’, peanut oil, some ‘black oil’, or Vaseline which would be smeared on the labia minora either to ease pain or to quicken the pulling results. Despite these ‘benefits’ attributed to using herbs, in hindsight and from their position now as older and educated women, they expressed concern that these may be detrimental to women’s health as they might cause cancer. Some shared stories of their friends who have experienced severe itchiness after using herbs.

While it appeared that pulling using hands was the usual way of elongating one’s labia, there were claims that some women used pegs to clip or thread to tie the labia minora when they were still ‘too small to hold using fingers’. They described these procedures as ‘very painful’. Other participants mentioned that other women elongate their labia through ‘smoking’ unspecified herbs, or ‘smoking’ elephant dung to yield ‘quicker’ results. They claimed that with this ‘smoking’ method, as a woman ‘coughs’ and ‘sneezes’, her labia minora will get ‘longer and longer’. However, my participants associated this smocking method with Shangaan women and women of Malawian and Mozambican origin, and said it resulted in very long labia, sometimes so long that they have to be ‘twisted, folded and inserted inside’ the vaginal orifice.

When I asked women (including those who did not elongate their labia) about how they knew about labia elongation, only seven said they first heard about it from older female family members (sisters, aunts and grandmothers). The rest (especially those who elongated) said they learnt from their friends and older girls in school toilets and dormitories before undergoing it. Of these, two women indicated that even after first hearing about labia pulling from friends, they only started the pulling process after consulting their mothers.

It appeared that labia elongation was not something women expected to be taught in formal lessons by teachers at school. Ironically, this emerged from Chido, the only woman who claimed she and other girls in her class learnt about this practice from female teachers at primary school. The following conversation ensued after I asked her about how she learnt about labia elongation before undergoing it.

Chido: When we went to Mwenezi. In Mwenezi now, they start teaching about it in schools.

HV: Is it?

Chido: Yes, there was a time you would be grouped as girls and you would be taught by schoolteachers, yes, they will be teaching you that you must pull, when you are still young, primary level because it's their culture, so they teach kids from when they are vvery young. That's how we got to know [...] when you are on your period you are not supposed to do it [pull], so all those things are taught at school.

[...]

HV: Eer, and what else were the teachers saying, what were they telling you, how much were they telling you?

Chido: When we were still at primary, they would say that a girl should not just be like a hole, men want something to play with when you grow up and get married, (1) you are not supposed to be just a hole. They would sometimes demonstrate by drawing, maybe what made them do that is that people in Mwenezi delay going to school...age, so from...until secondary level, I was the youngest, yes, they delay going to school such that most of them might even get married even when they are still in primary, they don't value education, so they teach these things, yes. They would say that you should not just have a hole, you must pull, there are two things that you must pull down there so that your husband will find something to play with when you are what...[married].

This extract emphasises an observation I made earlier in this section, that lessons on pulling are gendered. At this particular rural school in Mwenezi²³, these lessons are initiated by female schoolteachers and directed only at girls. It seems as though how Chido constructs this form of sexuality education, targeted at 'very young' girls and oriented to marriage, as incompatible with schooling. Presumably, this is because education or schooling for girls is understood as opening up opportunities for them beyond marriage. In addition, she repeatedly emphasised that these lessons about labia elongation occurred when they were still 'young' girls and at 'primary' school. This also suggests that she constructed herself and other girls at the time as non-sexual beings who supposedly should not have been exposed to marriage-oriented type of education. In Chapter 1, I wrote about how I experienced similar feelings when my grandmother wanted me to pull my labia when I was in primary school. In trying to reconcile and provide a rationale for this, she concluded that these labia elongation lessons at this particular school were only possible because of the cultural context in which the Shangaan dominated. Chido's statements that 'they [Shangaan] teach these things' to young girls because 'it's their culture' shows how she associates this kind of education with getting married early, which she also associates with not valuing education. I pick up on this theme later in the chapter when I discuss "sex academies" as other sites through which girls learn about labia and other sexual matters.

²³ Mwenezi is a small district located in Southern parts of Zimbabwe.

What women were told or not told when they were girls undergoing labia elongation

I have already stated to how labia elongation was presented to girls as a kind of project to work on to fulfil a future role as wives by providing sexual pleasure for future husbands. Yet, Chido's childhood experience, described in the above excerpt, stands in sharp contrast with the reasons given to other women in the study who also underwent labia elongation as young girls. Reflecting on how they underwent the process of elongation, women said their "teachers" (mothers, grandmothers, aunts) kept them in the dark about the 'real' reasons why they had to pull their labia. Instead, while preparing these girls as future wives, labia elongation "teachers" were careful not to engage with the girls as sexual beings to the point of fabricating reasons why they should engage in this cultural practice as summarised in the following extracts drawn from different interviews I had with women (see also Bhebe, 2014).

Aaah, she said her mother had told her to do it so that she becomes clever. (**Tino**, women group 2)

...they didn't tell us their importance, but they just used to say that they are doing it for our future, just that. They never said anything about when we get married what what, aah-aah. They just said they were doing it for our future, you must do it, you must have them. (**Shamiso**, women group 2)

Yes we were told through fear...you would be told that you will humiliate us when you get married, so for us to really understand by then, it was difficult because they will be speaking to you in riddles... (**Chenai**, interview)

I was told that if you don't pull, cotton [wool] will drop, so they were saying those things grip the cotton, that is what I grew up knowing. (**Miranda**, women group 1)

... remember the time that you start pulling most girls will be in primary, they will not tell you that, you are just told it's for women, other times you are told that if you don't pull you won't be able to have a baby, when the time comes for you to have a baby and those things are there, the child dies [...] some will tell you that if you don't pull, you will not get married. (**Shuvai**, interview)

She would just say do it or else you will not be allowed to board the bus, so because we loved to board the bus, we would just do it. (**Rudo**, interview)

These extracts seem to suggest that these women were critical of their mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and peers for keeping the truth away from them about the actual reasons for pulling when they were young girls. Interestingly, when I asked women whether and how they will tell their daughters about labia elongation, only a few, notably those who did not undergo labia elongation, for example Maidei, felt it was 'a bit unfair to get kids to pull before they know why they are doing it'. Those who had elongated said they were not likely to tell their daughters the same reasons they themselves were told as young girls, which were silent about sexual benefits of this practice. Paida said she had told her daughters to pull so that they would not be

‘embarrassed’ when they bathed with other girls when they go for at church gatherings. Miranda preferred to repeat the same explanations she had been told as a young girl herself as retold in this excerpt.

Miranda: [...] So your children, if you want them to pull, well, tell them, but when you tell them, then say that “cotton will drop, don’t tell them the real reason (**Tanya** laughs), because they experiment, once they know the real reason. Once she knows the real reason she might start looking for a boyfriend to experiment with. So it helped me because I was too wayward. Had I been told the real reason, aaah (**Mary:** You would have put them to use)

HV: So you would rather lie to them?

Miranda: Yes, it’s best that way.

Drawing from Miranda’s excerpt and others I cited above, labia elongation, because the purpose or rationale of this practice is not disclosed to the young girls, they are presented as non-sexual beings. Miranda’s response here implies that keeping daughters in the dark has more to do with mothers wanting to police their daughters’ sexuality, although in many accounts it showed that mothers were embarrassed to talk about this topic with their daughters, as I elaborate in the following section.

Labia elongation and sexuality: an embarrassing topic for women to discuss with their mothers and daughters and even in the interview groups.

I have already mentioned that very few of the women who underwent labia elongation had heard about it from their mothers. They suggested it was uncomfortable for mothers to talk to them not only about labia elongation, but also menstruation and their sexuality in general. For example, they narrated how they learnt about menstruation, and their mothers did not feature in those narratives. With regards to elongation, Mary remarked that, ‘some of us were unlucky because of our age, our parents could not openly discuss these issues, they could send some people to talk to us...’. This reply to my question may indicate that she is blaming her parents for feeling embarrassed to talk about this with her. Yet, previously she had said she was not comfortable talking to her mother about menstrual issues. Mary’s sister, Shuvai, also stated in the focus group about how her mother had sent her to her paternal grandmother to begin the labia elongation process. Upon her return, with a little bottle containing a mixture of oil and herbs, her mother had asked her about the contents.

I told her that granny had given me to aid me in pulling, and she [mother] asked to pull what? And I said I don’t know, down there.

Shuvai laughed embarrassingly after saying this, and Mary interjected saying it was ‘embarrassing to be asked such questions’, presumably by mothers. Another woman in this group, Miranda also spoke about feeling uncomfortable in a separate interview. She was explaining about having heard about labia elongation for the first time from a fellow school girl when she was Grade 6. When I asked her if she had told anyone from her family about what this girl had told her, she said no:

Miranda: No [...] my mum I never told her at all. I never even told her or ask her, or discuss with her, really.

HV: And she has never discussed that issue with you up to today?

Miranda: She never, she never. There is one time when I was bathing last year, and she saw them, and she exclaimed Miranda! Miranda! Miranda! I didn’t even comment.

HV: What did she say?

Miranda: She said what is that? You pulled like that? Some of us we never, they are just small (laughs), so that’s the only conversation we had (short laughter).

HV: So when she was saying that how did you feel?

Miranda: Ha-a nothing, I just said mum please.

It appears Miranda’s last remark to her mother was to seal off the conversation of labia elongation from continuing, and it also demonstrates her discomfort of discussing this with her mother. There was one woman, Tino, who constructed her relationship with her mother as open, such that they could discuss ‘*anything and everything*’. She said she told her mother about her first menstrual period first before her sisters. When I asked her about whom she felt comfortable discussing intimate issues with, she mentioned her sisters and her mother:

Tino: [...] we grew up as girls only, so she brought up in such a way that you would feel so free to talk to her about anything, so we didn’t have those awkward moments when we would say mum is coming so let’s change the subject or what.

HV: What are some of the things that you talked about with your mum?

Tino: Like mum I have been kissed, yes, to actually say mum today I was kissed, like in other families you won’t even go there, or even say that I now have a boyfriend, but with her ha-a you can say anything and everything.

HV: Ok, so you could say mum I was kissed, how about mum I had sex with my boyfriend?

Tino: (3) Probably if I had done it, I don’t know if I was going to tell her (laughs), I don’t know if I would tell her (laughs again)

Even though she said that she and her sisters had no ‘awkward moments’ with their mother because they could talk about ‘*anything and everything*’ including boyfriends, it appeared, however, that sex was not part of this. As such, this mother-daughter relationship had boundaries

particularly concerning sex. My question on whether she could tell her mother that she had sex, for example, was initially met with a pause, indicating that she was being reflective, before repeating that ‘I don’t know if I would tell her’, and laughing while saying this, to suggest that she was uncomfortable discussing such a topic with the mother. Even when she was still a child and was told by an elder girl at school that she had to pull her labia if she wanted to be ‘clever’, she told her mother about this incident. Interestingly, while Tino’s mother later taught her daughter how to pull her labia when she was in Grade 7 (the last grade in primary school), she also told Tino that having elongated labia would make her ‘clever’, just like the girl at school had said.

On the one hand, it appeared that one of the reasons around mothers’ anxiety about discussing sexuality matters with their children was the presumption of ‘sexual innocence’ usually projected on children, especially girls (Pattman & Chege, 2003). This theme seemed quite significant, for instance, when some women constructed the current generation of [girl] ‘kids’ as ‘too wayward’ for engaging in sexual relations quite early. When Miranda shared a story about a woman who overheard her two high school daughters telling each other about their sexual experiences with their boyfriends, Mary exclaimed ‘can you imagine!’, while Tanya remarked, ‘you might even collapse and die after hearing that’ to suggest that this was abnormal for these “young” girls to be engaging with such sexual practices. Sekai, who in the mixed focus group, claimed that she was ‘free’ to talk about her love relationships with her mother, also raised this theme.

[...] our mothers, if I may say, will be aware that Sekai is dating so and so. We just open to that, but not go deep sexually, because as mothers they don’t want to know that their kids are either [sexually] active or, they have this mentality where they want to pretend like you are not doing it, but at the end of the day they know but they don’t want to accept that no this is what you’re doing.

On the other hand, mothers’ reluctance to have such discussions with their daughters was because this responsibility of advising girls about sexuality is usually ascribed to aunts and grandmothers, because it is considered a taboo and disrespectful for a mother to discuss sexual issues with her daughter (Mwenda, 2006; Villa & Grassivaro, 2006). The conversation below illustrates this, after I asked Rudo whether she had already introduced her 8-year-old and 2-year-old daughters to the process of labia elongation.

Rudo: I have not started. I want to take them.

HV: Take them where, to who?

Rudo: To the grandmother so that she can teach them there.

HV: Why don't you do it yourself?

Rudo: Myself, I am embarrassed, I can't do it, yes, but I want them to go there.

HV: Why would you feel embarrassed when you have done it?

Rudo: Yes I did it but not to a point where I will be comfortable to take her through the process, no. I would rather look for a friend who will teach them, I personally can't do it (2) I would rather look for another person to do it. [...]

HV: Because people say that at times you don't have relatives, maybe you no longer have grandmothers or aunts, then your mother is embarrassed to talk about it, so how will the child know about it?

Rudo: I don't think that I am embarrassed or that I will be embarrassed, but I don't think that I am comfortable to discuss with her these kind of issues, that's why I said that if I don't find someone else, I will be left with no option, I can personally do it, it's just that it find it proper for the grandmother to take her through the process since she doesn't have any aunt, I will take her to the grandmother, she will teach her I know, because she once said I should bring my daughter when she is still young, yes, which means she is capable of doing it.

I found Rudo's comments strange because throughout the conversation she highly praised the process of labia elongation, and had earlier said that '*we need to catch them [girls] young before they know because at least you would have done something that she will appreciate the whole of her life*'. Nevertheless, the fact that she cannot contemplate teaching her daughter about this does not diminish the significance she attaches to this for her daughter but on the contrary accentuates it. But, it is so uncomfortable for her as a mother to teach her this that she fails to articulate clearly the embarrassment she feels. Her embarrassment could stem from a sense that her identification as a mother entails distancing herself from sexuality in her relation to her daughter (Lesch & Anthony, 2007). At the same time, she is invested in the practice of labia elongation, which she experienced as a girl through which she learnt about preparing herself sexually for the future, while learning to keep this a secret from boys and not mentioning what went on with her mother.

In one of the two women-only focus groups, one unmarried woman's suggestion that teaching about labia elongation to young girls should be the responsibility of the aunts was criticised because most members of the group felt that present-day "modern" aunts are neglecting their responsibilities of instructing their nieces on sexual matters. Aunts were mocked for 'just know[ing] the way to town to do their nails and eyelashes'. As a result, most women in this group, especially those who had undergone elongation expressed that mothers should now take it upon themselves to discuss about labia elongation and other sexual issues with their daughters. This is evident in the lengthy and emotive conversation below in which Chiedza and Cynthia

(who both have not undergone elongation) were heavily criticised by other women for saying they would rather have their daughters learn about labia elongation from ‘somewhere’ than personally telling them:

Cynthia: I don’t think mine I will tell her because what will I be telling her [about labia elongation]? I personally, I won’t tell my daughter. When she goes out into the world and she does it out of peer pressure, that’s up to her. I won’t tell her because I don’t know about these things, so I would rather not. But when one is grown up, you’ve got a decision to make. If you meet people at work and they tell you to go and do it, if you like it, go and do it.

Shamiso: Ummm, are you saying if your child is told at school to, let’s say if she is told to sleep around, you are okay with it (Others laugh), that is what you mean?

Cynthia: What I am saying, on this issue. On this issue it’s not the same as saying prostitution is bad, prostitution is bad we all know that, so I will tell my daughter that it’s bad (**Tino:** How about telling her [about elongation] then she makes her own decision?) Tell her what? I have not seen it [elongated labia]

Tino: The same way you were told

Cynthia: By friends?

=**Chipo:** The same way we are discussing here because today’s kids, mothers don’t make time to be with their children. So even when a mother discovers that her daughter has a boyfriend, she pretends as if nothing is happening instead of sitting down with your daughter and telling her that I know you now have a boyfriend, you must not do this and that. So nowadays kids teach themselves a lot of things, they go touching-touching with girls or boys because the mother didn’t bother telling them anything because they are afraid of how they will tell their kids. (**Chiedza:** But even if your mother tells you that you should not let a boy touch you, will that stop you?). But she would have done her part, (**Tino:** She has done her part), she has done her duty, if you go and do it, it’s now up to you (**Chiedza:** This a very sensitive story we are talking about here)

=**Mazvita** (speaking angrily with a raised voice, and shifting towards the edge of her seat): No! (**Chipo:** It’s not) There’s nothing sensitive here! Sex must, the child must know sex from the mother and the father. Let me tell you. Don’t trust anyone with your child (**Tino:** Yeah, you are right!) do you understand me? Don’t trust, your children are very precious, we don’t want to lie to each other ladies. You, you are the parent (**Chiedza:** What if she pulls them and they become too long?). Your child is someone who is very close to you. If you like *matinji* teach her and tell her that this is the right size. My child I want you to do this, let a child get counsel from the mother (**Tino:** Yah!), not wait for the aunt to tell her because tomorrow you will say aunt didn’t advise my daughter well. Know your role as a mother. You must be assertive to your kids!

Chiedza: So are we all in agreement that *matinji* are very good?

Mazvita: No (**Chipo:** No) (**Tino:** No, we didn’t say that) it depends on you. We don’t want to tell you that it’s bad or it’s good, but it’s up to you.

Chiedza: I am saying, isn’t I said I would rather, I would love that on this issue, let the daughter delay in coming a bit, and let me have sons first coz I don’t know where to start because I don’t know, I don’t know where to start, because right now I don’t

know, is it good or bad? You heard all of our suggestions here. Mazvita, you were asked that do you know any positive or negative side of-of the clitoris and what did you say? You said, you don't know (**Mazvita**: Yah, that's the truth). So that is the state I am in right now. I cannot go and tell my child that don't pull because of this this, pull because of that that, I don't know, I am 50-50, so how do I tell her?

Tino: Noo, you said you won't tell her, that is the point we are criticising, that she will learn about it from somewhere (**Chiedza**: I said I don't understand these things) it's better you tell her then she makes her own decision. (**Chiedza**: Once I understand, that is when I will tell her that there are such things, whether you would like to do it or not) (**Chipo**: But by the time you become a mother Chiedza you will be having a better understanding...

Chiedza's remark that labia elongation 'is a very sensitive' issue that might be difficult for a mother to discuss with her daughter, aroused emotionally charged responses from most women, but especially from Mazvita. More importantly, this discussions provides insights on different ways the women identify as mothers (or future mothers) and position themselves in relation to their daughters in terms of how they engage or do not engage in discussions about labia elongation, in particular, and sexuality more generally. It was interesting to observe how the conversation moved from not talking to daughters about labia elongation to not talking to them generally about sexuality. It also appears as if talking to daughters about sexuality is about setting moral standards from which, as a girl, if left to her own devices may fall into promiscuous relationships. So, both proponents and opponents of talking about sexuality with their daughters speak in ways which present girls' sexuality as potentially problematic. Firstly, in the sense that girls may become promiscuous without interventions from mothers who are constructed as moral guardians as I discussed in Chapter 2. And secondly, in the sense that sexuality proves too embarrassing a topic to even talk about with their daughters, for example, when Chiedza remarked that she is not prepared to discuss about labia elongation with her future daughter because it 'is a very sensitive' issue.

The reference to *nowadays* by Chipo when she said, 'nowadays kids teach themselves a lot of things [...] because the mother didn't bother telling them anything because they are afraid of how they will tell their kids' suggests Cynthia is old fashioned and out of touch by not engaging with sexuality with her daughter. Furthermore, Mazvita's authoritative comments that, 'know your role as a mother,' directed at Chiedza and Cynthia and Chipo's remark, 'by the time you become a mother Chiedza, you will be having a better understanding' constructed Chiedza and Cynthia as naïve and irresponsible future mothers. More importantly is that these comments demonstrate power dynamics and hierarchies that were being produced in this emotive exchange, in which sexuality education was taking place between the women themselves in the context of the interview. Mazvita spoke to younger women from a position of authority and

experience as one of the oldest women in the group, a wife, and a mother. There were also hierarchies between women without elongated labia and those who had undergone the practice who constructed themselves as wiser and more knowledgeable about sexual matters.

Women’s descriptions and experiences of ‘sex academies’ and the place of labia elongation in these

In this section, I focus on what my participants constructed as ‘sex academies’ where young girls (and sometimes older women) are said to be taught explicitly about sexuality including about labia elongation. Rudo introduced this concept when I interviewed her when she was comparing how women and girls used to learn about sexuality in the past and in the present.

....There are now academies these days that people pay for to get various teachings and trainings such as *chikapa* (the movements a woman makes during sex). In the past, the aunts would teach these things, but nowadays you just go alone, it’s now like a school where if you feel like going to get training on how to handle a man sexually, you just go...you make these [sexual] movements for him, you lick him like this, it [penis] wants to be bitten, when it gets in it wants to be gripped, it wants to be released, it wants to be squeezed, you know,

These academies are of a commercial nature because interested women and girls pay for services rendered. But, I am also using the term “sex academies” to refer to what my participants also constructed as these cultural (sexual) initiation schools for young girls belonging either to particular local ethnic groups such as Shangaan, Tonga, Remba, or migrant communities from Malawi (notably the Chewa) and Mozambique. Interestingly, women told me in different interviews, that commercial sex academies, which are said to be common in Harare’s high-density suburbs like Mbare and Mufakose, are normally run by old women of Mozambican and Malawian origins who presumably had undergone “free”²⁴ “cultural” initiation as a rite of passage as I will elaborate below. Women raised the issue of sex academies to contrast the kind of sexuality education they received about labia elongation as young girls, which ironically was non-sexual, with the kind of education young girls are taught at these academies, which they claimed was very sexual. They cited *chinamwari* (practiced usually by the Chewa of Malawian descent) and *koomba* (practiced by the Remba and Shangaan) as examples of these “sex academies”, in which lessons normally last a month, and are conducted during school holidays. Although both practices are shrouded in secrecy, they are said to be about preparing young girls

²⁴ I say “freely” because though the ‘teachers’ of these sex initiation rites do not ask for payment for their services, according to Thabethe (2008), some parents may offer gifts to these initiators after their children have completed the rites. One of my participants also said that girls could offer stacks of firewood to initiators after undergoing these rites.

for marriage by training them about labia elongation and sexual skills to satisfy their future husbands as described in literature (Thabethe, 2008; Biri, 2011; Mugabe & Maposa, 2013; Rwafa, 2016) and by some of my participants when I asked them about what happens at these initiation “schools”.

[The girls are] also about pulling, and how to sleep with your husband, they are trained all [sex] styles so most of the times when they are being trained, bricks may be put on them [by older women]... on the chest or on the stomach to train you to raise and move your waist and so on. They do these dances at night, normally they do them at midnight...they will be doing dances that are sexual only. The songs they will be singing and everything, it will all be about sex-sex. (**Chido**, interview)

[T]he Remba [girls] also do this pulling [of labia] for the man to play with them [elongated labia] ... then they also teach how to perform in bed, that is what they are taught, but since we didn't go, those who will be telling us don't explain in detail or demonstrate, they don't get to demonstrate, yes that you will be doing this and that on the bed what-what. And when you are being taught, I am told there will be needles beneath them [the girls] so that you don't dare to touch the ground, they say you will be lifting your body like so (demonstrating raising her waist) with another woman lying on top of you, being taught how to do those things, yes... I am told a big woman, heavy one will...the one who will be training comes on top of you and you will be...I don't know how you will be lying down, then needles will be down there, needles or thorns... (**Ruva**, interview)

Shuvai, who revealed to me in the individual interview, that she herself had participated in *chinamwari*, confirmed these descriptions. She, however, said she said she went for *chinamwari* when she was much older and about to get married, where she was physically inspected if she had elongated labia and taught ‘everything [about] sexual bedroom dances, how to do what, *chikapa*²⁵ and they put broken bottles [underneath], everything for the waist to, to get used.’

Earlier in the chapter I wrote about how Chido perceived the lessons that she received from her school teachers about labia elongation (as a young primary school girl) as being incompatible with education. In Chapter 2, I engaged with Ifi Amadiume's work focusing on African sexualities, particularly on female sexual pleasure. Amadiume (2006) appears to celebrate the explicitness of sexuality education in some African rural societies by women and directed at women and girls, which may involve the use of ‘clay objects’ to practically demonstrate the sexual act. Yet, in the above excerpts, it shows that Chido and Ruva are both critical of this type of explicit sexuality education, especially when directed at young girls. Chido makes this apparent when she stresses that what girls are taught at these initiation “schools”²⁶ is ‘about sex-

²⁵ A woman's technique of moving her waist during sex supposedly to make it more enjoyable for the man

²⁶ This time Chido is not making references to formal education schools but rather “cultural” ones organised by particular communities, which usually occur during school holidays.

sex'. Similarly, when Ruva was explaining why as a Remba she had not participated in *koomba* like other girls from her community, she emphasised that her father 'didn't want [them to participate] saying that the problem with the Remba is that they don't value education'. She also added that:

Once she [a girl] attends *koomba*, she gets married ... they soon get married those ones, even before they finish Form 4 ah, plus that is what my father used to despise, that is what he was afraid for his kids that if I make them do these *koomba* things, then they what, get married, so better what, they leave it and concentrate on school, yes, because they will just get married

A number of African scholars have also voiced their concern about the practices of *koomba* and *chinamwari*, which they argue indirectly contribute to early marriages and school dropout by girls (Thabethe, 2008; Mugabe & Maposa, 2013; Rwafa, 2016). That these sex academies only cater for women, and not men, reinforces 'biological' discourses of sexual difference, in which women, as sexual objects, need constant reconfiguration for male sexual gratification.

Women's and my own experience of kitchen parties and discussions about labia elongation

So far, I have discussed what, where, and how young girls learn about labia elongation, and have engaged with my female participants' childhood experiences of undergoing this process. In this section, I focus on kitchen parties, which female participants cited as some of the spaces in which women as adults might learn about sexual matters including labia elongation if they have not yet undergone the process. I attended two of my female participants' kitchen parties a year prior to this study, and another during the course of study which I will describe in detail later in the section. I will also engage with my participants' reflections about their own kitchen parties, particularly what they learnt and experienced from them. As I stated in the introduction chapter, at the kitchen party that motivated this study, teachings about labia elongation were so that married women could be able to satisfy their husbands sexually, so that they would find no reason to leave them for other women. This seemed a huge concern for many women, which I will elaborate on in the next chapter when I address how participants constructed labia elongation in relation to men's promiscuity.

Kitchen parties are celebratory urban parties organised for women who are about to wed, and normally take place a week or two before the white wedding. For Geisler (2004:96), a kitchen party is 'a new sanitised, urban version of girls' initiation' introduced by middle-class urban women 'to avoid the dangers of initiation ceremonies becoming too traditional'. Therefore, in contrast to *chinamwari* and *koomba*, which I discussed in the previous section, and which are

constructed as “cultural” practices (that impart knowledge about labia elongation and sexuality), kitchen parties are viewed as modern, and are associated with middle-class urban dwellers. They are seen as exclusively feminised urban initiation rites marking the transition from being a single to a married woman (Rasing, 2002). Understandably, because these are occasions at which the brides-to-be (and indirectly single women attendees) receive counsel about maintaining the home and marriage from “respectable” older married women who are constructed as wiser because they have more marital experience.

Geisler (2004) who writes about kitchen parties in Zambia, claims that the presence of single women at such events is sometimes considered “improper” and ‘untraditional’. Interestingly, at Miranda’s kitchen party, I was asked to speak on behalf of her friends even though I was not married. According to Geisler (2004:97), some married women feel that single women have ‘destroyed the sense of moral direction of these parties’ because they supposedly only come to ‘get drunk and engage in confrontations and showdowns with wives of their married boyfriends out of frustration resulting from desperation for marriage’. In fact, in almost all kitchen parties that I have attended, the bride-to-be is normally told to cut ties with her unmarried friends (both male and female) because there is “nothing” she will benefit from these associations. Instead, she is advised to start associating with married women, who will not misguide her.

Although kitchen parties in Zimbabwe and other African countries have become synonymous with teaching sexual matters as some women participants and I observed, some writers seem to claim this was not the main reason behind their origin. According to Rasing (2002), the emphasis was on buying and giving gifts of kitchen utensils and gadgets for the bride-to-be, which she would use to start her home, so the very term “kitchen” party was to emphasise female domesticity. Since attending or hosting a kitchen party carries financial obligations (through buying a gift or paying “fines” for refusing to dance or not dressing according to the expectations of the organisers), it is no wonder kitchen parties are a privilege of middle-class urban women. In the Zambian context (as also seems true of Zimbabwe) kitchen parties and white weddings are ways in which women express themselves ‘as belonging to a modern middle-class or working class’ (Rasing, 2002: 237).

Sexuality education and labia elongation at kitchen parties: where and how does the church fit in?

Christianity is quite a significant source of identification for most Zimbabweans as I pointed out in Chapter 2. It is common for female members of the church to which the bride-to-be is a

member to host the kitchen party. They might even invite a female pastor or a pastor's wife to give a speech during the party proceedings. When my female participants recounted events at their own kitchen parties, Tanya, whose party was organised by women in her church, said she was 'fortunate enough to be taught by women who feared God but who had careers, [and] who were good mothers'. Since she was marrying a pastor, she said she was taught 'how to balance the work of God, to balance being a mother, being a wife, [and] even to handle yourself in the bedroom'. Her kitchen party "teachers" taught her that she was 'supposed to enjoy sex' because it was God's 'covenant' and 'the only special thing between a wife and a husband'. In this case, sex was constructed as a privilege of married people.

Since I reflected on my own experience of the kitchen party, which I write about in Chapter 1, where the issue of labia elongation featured and motivated this study, I asked Tanya if anyone mentioned this issue at her party:

Nobody even mentioned it (laughs) at the kitchen tea [party]? Noo (laughs), no one ever said that, maybe they said it and I missed it or what, but no one ever told me that at the kitchen tea. I think churches don't, I think churches don't, most churches are silent about such things (2) though they know that it's important or that men like it, or that some women in church actually already have them, but I, they do it outside the church, hmmm (1) I personally haven't seen any church where they talk about it except recently.

When I asked her why she thought most churches do not teach about this practice, she said it was because they believe that it is 'done in the name of tradition [therefore] it's not holy-like'. Interestingly, Tanya told me that her husband had 'actually mentioned it [labia elongation] in one of the ladies' meetings that it's important for a woman to have those things [elongated labia]'. That her husband spoke about this, 'aroused', according to Tanya, 'a lot of interest among the ladies from our church, whom I realised, most of them, actually already had them [had their labia elongated] and actually think they are very important.' This 'interest' was no doubt aroused by the fact that they were receiving sexual advice from a man whereas 'traditionally' this has been given by other women. This ties in with Mate's (2002) research findings about the relative freedom some Zimbabwean male pastors seemed to exercise with their women congregants when teaching them about sexuality. Contributing to these women's interest and delight, it seemed, was that here was a pastor, a religious figure, endorsing a "traditional" practice often constructed as ungodly in dominant Christian discourses as I alluded to in Chapter 2. In Chapter 6, I will pick up on this issue of whether labia elongation could be justified on religious grounds since it generated debates among participants.

For now I wish to return to the responses other women gave me on whether religious leaders from their respective churches teach about labia elongation, specifically at kitchen parties, or in other church-organised meetings. Miranda who wed in 2013 said:

It depends, I think it depends on the kind of church that you go to, but at ours, it's not something that is talked about [...] and also our kitchen party are not for, they are not for people to tell each other about (sex) styles that today, today, you know... people are being taught how to be in harmony spiritually and also physically, that you should do what makes both of you happy, don't copy other people, just do your thing, and to be, to be a joyful person all the time.

Indeed, at her kitchen party which I attended, none of the speakers mentioned anything explicitly sexual. When I interviewed another woman, Chenai, she also said Pentecostal churches 'don't normally teach' about labia elongation and sexuality especially in public events such as kitchen parties. She explained that because sexuality and labia elongation were 'intimate [and] private things', only those women who were about to get married and those already married were taught about these 'individually with those specialised ... in private'. When I asked why she thought this was the case, she responded:

[...] they are afraid that the girls [unmarried] will become wayward, at least if you are ready to go into the house [marriage] that's when you are taught, but before they separate us, married women on their own, that's when we talk about our real issues as women, we go even deep-deep (smiling), not when girls are present...then women talk about all that, they don't do that.

HV: Why will they be saying that the girls will become wayward? Do *matinji* cause one to be wayward?

Chenai: Haaa mainly they just want to separate that you are still immature for this because they know that girls and boys these days experiment before they marry each other. They become curious and want to try what is being said, then it causes them to become promiscuous when they are still young.

Chenai in some ways felt privileged that as a married woman, she was privy to intimate sexual discussions at church where 'women' (married) were supposedly separated from 'girls' (unmarried). She also appeared to reinforce the way religious discourses construct sex as a privilege of married women. In cases where young women were taught about labia elongation by religious figures, as with aunts and mothers, it was often in a non-sexual way. This was despite the fact that they were already adults. An interesting example is that of Ruva, who once attended a single-women meeting at their church when she was 26-years-old. She told me about one female church elder who told them that having elongated labia would help them to urinate in a 'smart' way without splashing urine all over the toilet seat. When I asked her whether they had responded to this elder, she said, while laughing 'isn't they will be teaching us, so people will

just be quiet listening, just quiet without responding ... obvious questions and answers will be there among the people there that ha-a this is a lie.’ Several researches in Africa have similarly concluded that young women can act “ignorant” of sexuality issues in front of prospective suitors, teachers, or parents who construct themselves as ‘knowers’ of sexual knowledge (Pattman and Chege, 2003; Harrison 2008).

Yet other women, whose kitchen parties were organised by their respective churches, reported that although labia elongation was *never* spoken about at these events, they had indeed been shown different sex styles and how to ‘take care’ of their husbands sexually by not ‘denying’ them sex. However, in the kitchen party I attended, which I hinted on earlier in this section and in Chapter 3, labia elongation was spoken about, although more time was accorded to demonstrating different sex styles. This kitchen party was rather different in all others that I have attended. Firstly, it seemed to have arranged as an after-thought. I say this because while kitchen parties usually happen before the wedding, this occurred a week or two after the wedding. Secondly, the venue of the kitchen party was in a church²⁷, instead of at the house of the bride’s friend, for example. Probably, this was because the bride was being welcomed into this church (where her husband was a member), and therefore did not have friends yet to offer their houses as venues for this party. The bride and her friend, were asked to sit on a blanket, facing the rest of the women who had attended the party.

Speaker, after speaker came to the podium to advise the bride about how to be a good wife and how to take care of her husband. Interestingly, my friend Tanya, who is also the pastor’s wife did not give any ‘sex-talk’, but instead left it to her Vice Chairwoman of their women’s fellowship group to teach *mwana* (child) about how to spice up her sexual life with the husband. The woman (whom I was informed is of Malawian origin) began by telling other women that ‘our father’, meaning the pastor, had asked them (as older women) to teach younger women about labia elongation and its benefits. She also encouraged other women who had not done it to do it. She explained that elongated labia would help to clip ‘*nhengo yababa*’ (daddy’s part), implying penis, stopping it from constantly slipping out of the vagina. She added that ‘these things’ made sex pleasurable for the husband. She reminded them that a woman’s vagina should not be like that of a girl, and therefore elongated labia brought that difference. So, in this context elongating one’s labia was very explicitly constructed as signifying an older female, presumably one who was deemed sexual. She ended the topic by offering her services to show those who wanted to do it, about how to do it, and this was done in private.

²⁷ This was the same building they used for church services on Sunday, but the party took place on Saturday

Next, she moved from the podium and sat on the blanket next to the bride where she drew her own skirt upward to reveal a pair of short black tights which she appeared to have worn specifically for a clear demonstration of sex styles. Firstly, reminding women that a man does not want to sleep with a ‘log’, she lay down facing upwards, lifted her waist, and started gyrating her waist, simulating sex with an invisible man. This was much to the embarrassment of the bride who kept looking down, but much to the delight of women in the crowd who cheered, clapped, and laughed loudly, while those seated in the back rows stood to watch more closely. The cheers and laughter, I suggest, are connected with subversion; the subversive idea and experience of women deriving pleasure from sex, even though it may be cast in the light of providing men with pleasure. This produces both laughter between women and embarrassment for the bride who is the centre of attention.

Now lying on her side, the “teacher” demonstrated another style which she said allowed *baba kupinda nepaside* (husband to enter [the vagina] sideways). She finished with what she called ‘backstage’ style, which is popularly known as doggy-style, where she knelt, making rhythmic waist movement to match those by the ‘invisible man’ behind her. Not to be outdone, a visiting woman, from the bride’s previous church, also went to the front, clutching a “baby” (folded cloth) in one of her arms and demonstrated how a woman can have sex while breastfeeding, because ‘*baba havangafe nenzara nekuti mwana ari kuchema*’ (husband cannot be starved [of sex] because the baby is crying).

The events at this kitchen party really were quite different to the desexualised mechanistic forms of sexuality education for girls – and according to my participants’ childhood narratives. Though both forms of sexuality education are cast in the light of providing pleasure for future husbands (one in the immediate future and the other in the distant future), sexuality was notably absent to that directed at young girls. It is also interesting that by ‘teaching’ brides-to-be about different sexual styles (or labia elongation) at kitchen parties, there is an assumption that they are yet to be sexual, which is tied to Christian discourses which emphasises chastity before marriage (Delius & Glaser, 2002). Women in one of the group discussions, however, raised the limitations of these assumptions. The comments below were prompted by Mary’s remarks that Tanya, as a pastor’s wife, must teach single girls in her church about labia elongation:

Miranda: [...] some of them are already having sex with boys...

=**Shuvai:** They are already sexually active

Miranda: they are already sleeping with their boyfriends and yet they are telling you they are still virgins

=**Tanya:** Maybe they already have them [elongated labia] (laughs)).

Miranda: Yes, so you might tell her that she should pull yet she already is in a sexual relationship, and there is nothing down there, the guy is satisfied, then she pulls, then she is confronted where she got it from.

Concerns some women raised about kitchen parties

Two women (Shuvai and Cynthia) raised concerns about the nature of the advice given at these kitchen parties when I spoke to them in individual interviews. Shuvai (who has undergone elongation) seemed critical of kitchen parties because of their over-emphasis on sexual matters:

Besides the issue of pulling [labia] what-what, most issues [at kitchen parties] are around how you are supposed to take care of your husband, your behaviour towards your husband especially in the bedroom, that is what they consider to be very important because each time they meet, those issues, their issues are always bedroom related.

When I asked her whether she considers discussions about sexuality at kitchen parties as a problem, she suggested it was:

[...] what I tend to disagree with is that these people who are giving you advice are married people, they are already in marriage isn't it...they are telling you to do what they are doing for their own husbands. What pleases their husband is what they want you to do to your own husband, of which it's something that I feel is not right [...] Yourself, do you know whether your boyfriend likes that? Yet you are already shown how to have sex what-what, but what if your husband doesn't like it? What if he doesn't like the style that they are showing you?

Shuvai's criticism of kitchen parties was not only because she perceived the advice as prescriptive, but also hierarchical. This is evident in the ways she is also critical of married women who usually act as "teachers" and construct themselves as experts of sexual and marriage matters as I already discussed earlier. Most importantly, however, her concern is about problems this sexual advice might pose for women with their husbands if they put into practice what they are taught at these kitchen parties. While Shuvai criticised the sexual teachings that go on at some kitchen parties, interestingly she did not seem critical of *chinamwari* (in which she herself had been trained about how to have sex just before she got married). Ironically, she indicated that her sexual "experience" was a source of concern for her husband who wanted to know why and how she seemed very sexually experienced, and I elaborate on this in the next chapter.

Cynthia's concerns on the other hand, were not only about kitchen parties' fixation with sexual issues and male sexual pleasure, but also about the overemphasis on female subordination. She complained that all 'we are taught at kitchen parties is about prepare for your husband'. When I

asked her whether women at kitchen parties also talk about how men can also please their women sexually, she emphasised that these were women-only events:

No, people don't talk about it ... at kitchen parties isn't it's all about the woman. It's like you, when you're being told it's you who has a big responsibility to satisfy your man. I don't know who also teaches men because for us we are just told that satisfy your man, you don't say no to sex, make him enjoy and stuff. I think it's just generally about women, I don't know about the men because really they, they have bachelor parties where they will be drinking and braaing and they don't even invite pastors whatever (laughs) but us we have these kitchen parties, we invite our pastors and whatever and then they will just be enjoying and then the next thing yah, married and then it's you who was told that you are supposed to satisfy this guy [sexually].

Here Cynthia's account demonstrates the intersections of sexuality with gender and religion in how she constructs kitchen parties and bachelor parties as oppositional. The invitation of (female) pastors (as moralistic figures) to kitchen parties and not to bachelors' parties 'where they [men] will be drinking [beer] and braaing' and 'just enjoying', signify how morality is often imputed to women, while men can revel in their naughtiness in bachelor parties. Later in the interview, Cynthia indicated that she had lost interest in attending kitchen parties and I asked her whether it was because of labia elongation teachings that sometimes happen at these occasions. I imagined she would say yes considering that she herself did not undergo elongation, but she said no:

Not because of *matinji* (elongated labia, but because of that (2) talk of, that you are now going to get married, you came from your house going to this other family, so what do you think you are going to do there, it's about sex. Marriage is a lot more. Maybe if we got, maybe if we are told yes you need to satisfy your husband, give him sex, don't starve him and stuff, and then also tell me that you are going to have children, you are going to have money issues, you are going to have this, so yah, balance your work, balance your, be good at keeping time, things like that you need to get organised a bit, yah. Not just to, it's like you feel as if you are going into this (2) and this man is on a pedestal and I'm just going to satisfy this dude, I just need to, to make his life perfect, so yah, that's to a certain extend not good coz we also need to be empowered coz in marriage you meet a lot of different things coz it's not like when you are married, its permanent. You might be married to an abusive man, how do I deal with that? So if I'm not told and people are just saying to me at a kitchen party or at church divorce is no option then I meet this guy and he beats me up or he is abusive, then divorce is not an option, so I think kitchen parties should also look at things like that like you should seek help when things are not working, yah.

In this account, Cynthia seemed equally critical of kitchen parties for reducing women to objects of men's sexual desires by teaching women that they are going into marriage just for 'sex'. She constructed kitchen parties as essentially disempowering by teaching about things that reinforce rather than challenge women subordination and violence against women. Yet, by still expecting

to be told that ‘yes you need to satisfy your husband, give him sex, don’t starve him and stuff’, Cynthia also implicitly reinforced women’s sexual subordination of which she ironically appeared critical. Some Zimbabwean scholars argue that the emphasis on teaching girls and women more about their sexuality than boys and men is entrenched in patriarchal discourses in which ‘blame is always put on women when their spouses seek for sexual gratification outside marriage or in circumstances when the man is promiscuous’ (Machingura & Nyakuhwa, 2015:95). But here, Cynthia and Shuvai both criticise gender power relations through emphasising women’s pleasure and the neglect of this in dominant discourses and discursive practices (for example kitchen parties) relating to sexuality. I will discuss this theme further in the next chapter.

Men learning about sexuality (and labia elongation) from and with other males

In the introduction to this study and this chapter, I argued that the inclusion of men in my study is because of the dominant construction of labia elongation, as a practice girls and women, do more for men than for themselves. Therefore, part of my interest was to explore how men learn and speak about labia elongation from their positions as men and fathers. Before I explore men’s responses to this, I begin the section by focusing on how women in my study think men know about labia elongation. I have demonstrated that labia elongation is a practice that involves both separating girls from boys and entrusting girls to keep what goes on a secret from boys. This secret continues to be held, according to some of the women in my study, from adult males and even from their husbands, because as I discussed in Chapter 4, sexuality was again an embarrassing topic to discuss even between wives and husbands. There was a widely held assumption among most women, including those who have not undergone elongation that men know about labia elongation and its significance to sexuality from other men, either at bars, Christian men’s fellowship groups, or at work. This shows the significance of labia elongation as a practice which produces gender subjectivities and polarities, a theme I further develop in this chapter.

For now, I turn my focus to men’s reflections about how they learn about sexuality in general, and labia elongation in particular, from when they were young boys, and how this compares with women’s experiences which I have so far analysed in previous sections. Just like women who indicated that it was ‘embarrassing’ for mothers and daughters to discuss sexuality issues including labia elongation, some men in the all-male group suggested it was more comfortable opening up to uncles, grandfathers, or male friends about sexuality than to fathers or mothers. Speaking about their rural childhood experiences, some narrated how as a group of boys, they

would masturbate and ejaculate into the river. According to Taurai, ‘if the sperms sink down then we would say that haa you are a man! [And] if they don’t sink you would be advised to go to your uncle to be given some medicine [...] to make you [sexually] strong’. This group masturbation that young boys engaged in was, according to Biri (2011:167), ‘one of the cultural practices that was meant to test fertility and virility’ before they got married. In some ways, this emphasised the centrality of procreation in sexual relations among the Shona (*ibid.*). When I asked men in this group why young boys were referred to an uncle, if they had a sexuality related problem, than to their father or mothers, I got the following responses:

Taurai: [...] our mothers knew that if you have a problem eer, maybe with your private parts, they would refer you to your uncle, go and talk to your grandfather or uncle. They would never refer you to a clinic or anywhere else. Your uncle would just mix some herbs, then you drink, and you become alright. But when it came to fathers, some of the guys would say, you find that some of our friends’ fathers would come to us asking what is happening to one of our friends. Some would manage to open up to their fathers saying this is what I am experiencing but as for me the issue of opening up to your father, or brothers, aah, for me it was very difficult but to my friends [laughs] it was normal

HV: Why did you find it difficult to approach your father?

Albert: Haa it was impossible to approach your father, it was very difficult, your father would actually hear some of the things through other people like your uncle. If you encountered challenges like you have a problem troubling you, the easiest people to approach you’re your uncles. Whatever problem you had, you could take it to your uncles. If the problem proved to be too difficult for the uncles, that is only when they might tell your father, who might find other ways of helping you, but still he would do this through the uncles. An uncle or grandfather were easily approachable, you could speak about deep-deep issues than with your father. Opening up to your father was just like opening up to your mother, and you can’t tell her anything concerning your private parts, but you could easily discuss with your uncles. So I agree with what he [Taurai] is saying.

Men in this group (notably those in their 30s) frequently mentioned *dare* as a male meeting space at a rural homestead, at which they, as young boys learnt about sexual matters from older men such as grandfathers and uncles. Biri (2011:168) defines *dare* as an informal ‘all male discussion’ court place where men speak issues ‘kept secret from women’. Here men ‘exchanged experiences and learnt about making love and pleasing women’, and gained ‘knowledge about aphrodisiacs to strengthen the spine’ (Shire, 1994:151). Shire, who also attended *dare* as a young Shona boy, claims that even young boys were allowed to listen to these conversations as long as they did not spread this information. Boys and men, who shared *dare* discussions, were either excluded from these meetings, or mocked for gossiping, an attribute men associated with women. However, even when boys and men could all attend *dare*, Shire (1994: 151) asserts that sometimes, language laced with metaphors was used to “exclude” young boys and ‘younger,

single men' from overly sexual conversations. Girls, on the other hand, as I demonstrated earlier in the chapter, were rarely exposed to sex-related messages by their aunts or grandmothers, unless they were just about to get married.

Tadiwa and Taurai, both explained that although they were educated in urban schools, there was an expectation from their rural relatives that they visit their respective rural homes during school holidays. It is during these times that they would meet with their uncles at the *dare*, and according to Tadiwa, missing such meetings 'was like a crime'. Here their uncles advised about a number of issues including the kind of women to marry.

Tadiwa: The main issue that the uncles used to emphasise when they sat down with their grandchildren was that you must not marry *maburi* (holes)

HV: What do you mean by *maburi*?

Taurai: Those who are no longer virgins

Tadiwa: We will not allow you to marry a woman with her own children. They would say if you can't find a proper woman, we can find you a proper wife.

From Tadiwa's description, much emphasis on advice directed at boys was placed on not marrying those women who have lost their virginity, referred to as 'holes', as if dehumanised and rendered simply as objects for men. This advice directed at boys and single men is in contrast with that given to girls about labia elongation (and sexuality in general) concerning future marriage partners. For example, while labia elongation was a practice oriented towards the future and concerned with pleasing the husband, no moral evaluation was made of future husbands in terms of whether they had sex or not. We see then how gender power relations are produced in these double standards operating in these two forms of sexuality education.

Whereas some men I interviewed spoke about their uncles' role as sexual and marriage advisors, and *dare* as a platform for this, they (like most women about their aunts), often spoke of them in the past tense, in terms of what they 'used to' do, and what used to happen. This seemed to present uncles and *matare* [men's forums] as no longer as significant in imparting knowledge about sexual matters (including labia elongation) to young men. This emerged in the following conversation in which men were debating about the significance of labia elongation, a practice Masimba appeared to criticise:

Masimba: Alright, do we have one here who can say his father told him that when you get married, your wife [Obert chuckles] must have these *matinji*?

Taurai: That has now changed because men's forums no longer exist

Masimba: But did your father ever mention it?

Taurai: Men's family forums no longer exist

Masimba: But your father is there

Tadiwa: Haa noo, wait, our culture...

Taurai: The uncles would tell them

Masimba: But the uncles are still there

Obert: They are now members of Apostolic sects

Taurai: Now you don't even look for them [elongated labia], maybe because as we grew or are growing up, our uncles don't tell us to marry a woman who has them (**Tadiwa:** Yah, yah, yah). It's no longer there, so now you take whatever you get [...] In the past it was a must for a woman to have them, that a complete woman must have them because that was the norm then.

HV: So what has changed now?

Taurai: Yes, things have changed because these kids grow up as "*Salads*" that we all know. No uncle to advise them, others are told your uncle is a witch, so don't talk to him. If he marries, he marries like that. If you ask him, he doesn't even know about *matinji*. But for some of us who have a rural background, we know about these things, so it's up to me to look for one who has got them or one who doesn't, it's my own choice.

I wish to raise three points from this extract. The first being that Masimba's question directed at other men in the group on whether they had personally been told about labia elongation by their fathers is dismissed because of what 'our culture' says: that fathers need to distance themselves from teaching their sons about sexuality since this is a responsibility often assumed by uncles or grandfathers. And, as I addressed earlier, women made similar arguments in explaining why mothers and daughters are embarrassed to discuss about labia elongation and other sexuality issues such as menstruation and why aunts take up those roles. What is more interesting about the above conversation is that it provides an illustrative example of how "culture" is deified and animated as if it is a powerful human being (Pattman, 2001), which in this case supposedly assigns roles about who should or should not teach sons or daughters about sexuality. I reviewed in Chapter 2, how proclamations about what 'culture says' are often invoked to produce a sense of a shared identity linked with notions of an idealised past and what is authentically "African" (Pattman, 2001). In the above extract, Tadiwa invokes 'our culture' against Masimba to silence him for questioning roles pertaining to gender and sexuality, which have been normalised through discourses on culture. Interestingly, as I will elaborate on in the next section, Masimba was one of the men in this group who was quite dismissive of some men's suggestions that fathers can speak with their wives and indirectly influence their daughters to pull their labia.

In one of the previous sections, I provided extracts of women who criticised their aunts for neglecting their role of teaching girls about labia elongation. Here, we also see that these men seem critical of uncles for not teaching boys about labia elongation as something they should

expect to see on their future wives. Nonetheless, I am particularly interested in Obert's insinuation that uncles are now neglecting their "traditional" responsibilities because they have become 'members of apostolic sects'²⁸. By mentioning Apostolic sects, I argue he is invoking Christianity. Precisely because as I demonstrated in Chapter 2, colonial discourses framed Christianity as a version of modernity and constructed in opposition to tradition. Therefore, by mentioning that uncles are now church members in some way implies that uncles are now so urbanised that they are not interested in "cultural" roles, and Obert seemed concerned about this. What is ironic however, is that while Obert is constructing Apostolic sects in opposition to Shona "tradition", some of these Apostolic sects, whose members account for 20% of the Christian population in Zimbabwe, practice and encourage polygamy, which is constructed as a "cultural" practice frowned upon by mainstream Christian churches (Machingura, 2011; see also Schmidt, 1990; Oyewumi, 1997; Mate, 2002). In addition, some of the Apostolic sects, such as the Johane Marange and Johane Masowe subject girls to 'virginity examination' (Machingura, 2011:195), which is usually promoted as a "cultural" practice by some traditional leaders in Zimbabwe (Wadesango *et al.*, 2011) and other Southern African countries (see Kaarsholm, 2006). Yet, this conflation of some African practices or values with Christian values, for example in emphasising female purity, is rather a recent development in postcolonial societies, as scholars like Pattman (2001) argue.

The third point of analysis I want to turn to from the above extract pertains to Taurai's invocations of "witches" and *Salads*, which I previously argued that both are about constructing the Other. In his ethnographical study of the life of urban mine workers in Zambia, Ferguson (1999) indicated that some of his participants constantly spoke about their fear of being bewitched by their rural relatives and neighbours, which stopped them from returning to their rural homes after retirement. In trying to analyse why these mine workers invoked witchcraft, Ferguson suggested that partly this was to demonstrate 'the social antagonisms that vex rural-urban kin relations' (Ferguson, 1999:118). I will extend Ferguson's analysis to Taurai's similar suggestions that young urban men are not in contact with their rural uncles because they are 'witches'. But, rather than seeing this simply as depicting 'social antagonisms' between rural and urban relations, I propose that witchcraft is (in the above extract) used discursively to construct rural people as irrational and "traditional". This is logical if we are to consider that witchcraft has for a long time been constructed (in colonial and contemporary discourses) not

²⁸ Apostolic sects or *Mapostori* form part of African Initiated Churches in Zimbabwe which attract significant membership

only as ‘anti-Christian’ but an irrational practice that has no basis for legal prosecution as Ferguson (1999) points out.

I also want to address Taurai’s comment that only “*Salads*” (men) would not know about labia elongation, while men like him ‘who have a rural background ... know about these things’. I introduced the term “*Salads*” in Chapter 2 and explained how it is used as a derogatory term that describes those young urban dwellers who are seen as too “Westernised” and ignorant of “culture” because they do not visit their parents’ rural homes. Similar to what Taurai, and other participants called *Salads*, is what Shire (1994: 152) termed *mabhonirokesheni* (born in locations), a term communicating ‘a negation of cultural authenticity’, used by rural men to describe men born in urban areas. ‘Inauthenticity is condemned as a loss of origins’ (Minh-ha, 1989:89). In Chapter 2, I wrote about how these discourses of cultural authenticity are invoked to counter cultural imperialism as articulated in Fanon’s (1990) work. These constructions of rural people as custodians of tradition and culture seems to be linked to common assumptions about rural areas as characterised by ‘tighter social control’ and more family cohesion which consequently result in these communities expected to ‘exhibit more conforming behaviours’ (Khau, 2012: 62).

While Shire describes the Othering of urban-born males by rural men, interestingly the above excerpt, illustrates the Othering of particular urban men by other urban men. We see *Salads*, or what Ferguson (1999:83) called the ‘properly urbanised’ being constructed ‘as morally and socially inferior by more “traditional” town dwellers, in whose eyes they appeared as confused Africans who have lost their roots’. In this context, by mentioning *Salads*, as something he was not, Taurai, was constructing rural-tied and urban versions of masculinity as respectively marked by cultural sexual wisdom and sexual ignorance. Yet, this seemed to be challenged implicitly by Ras, another man in that group, whom despite being mocked that he was ‘born and bred in Harare’, appeared quite knowledgeable about the “cultural” practice of labia elongation, even highly praising it.

I have so far concentrated my analysis to the all-male group and the forms of sexuality education the men in this group raised and their position in relation to these. I want to discuss briefly about what emerged from men in the mixed-group, highlighting the connections and disconnections with what men in the all-male group raised. I need to state that all the three men (two of whom were brothers) in the mixed focus group might fit into what Ferguson (1999) termed ‘properly urbanised’ or what Taurai termed “*Salads*” which I described above. They were all born and grew up in Harare, something they seemed to be proud of. In fact, when I asked them about their

ethnic affiliation, they seemed to embrace their urban identities when they proudly called themselves ‘Harareans’ because they stayed in Harare all their lives. Unlike in the all-male group in which uncles were mentioned frequently as “teachers” of sexuality education for young boys, in this group they were mentioned only once after my direct question about whether they learnt about sexuality or labia elongation from any of their family members.

[...] the way we grew up, like the case in my family, we are not really, we are not really that close as in our relatives, we are not really that close, like you can do your own thing, so we never really had uncles or people who would tell us those things. (Kuda).

Here it seems Kuda, by saying ‘you can do your own thing’, he was critical of sexuality education imparted by uncles which may take hierarchical forms. Instead, the men in this group presented sexuality education as something they acquired by themselves through browsing the Internet. In the section stated below, I explore the positions participants (both men and women) take in relation to this form of sexuality education.

Publicising a ‘private’ issue: labia elongation in the context of Google and social media

Men in the mixed-group, who were all in their early to mid-20s, presented Google as a useful site for learning about labia elongation and sexuality. Unlike men in the other group who expected to learn about sexuality from other men, those in the mixed-group preferred to be their ‘own consultants’ because they did not want another man to ‘take credit’ for teaching them about this. Accordingly, Google was their ‘own’ way and ‘next best source’ for finding information about sexuality, and how to ‘handle’ a woman. As Tendai explained, Google allows them to see the graphic images of the pulled labia, which is not possible if they are only told about it in abstract ways:

...I think if we speak for our generation, one insecurity on every man is that you don’t know anything when you meet, when you have a girlfriend one-on-one, you don’t know where the clitoris is, you don’t know where the G-spot is and all that. So its best you know by closely looking at a diagram because in Science it’s just generalised, vagina, but there are more intricate details but we never learn about that at school unless you doing medicine. So I think you start by hearing people saying something has to be pulled. So there are names that are thrown around, and through curiosity you want to know what it looks like, but instead of asking your brother, you now look for the next best source which gives you at least with a diagram because your brother will not parade his girlfriend’s vagina for you to see (group laughter). If you go to Google you see what they look like. I think some...we started, before we saw it on a real girl, or you might see it but you don’t know the name but when you see it in real life you now join and compete the dots from what you learnt on Google, I don’t know about others [...] Google has helped us, thank God for Google

These men are portraying themselves as more modern than older men, in the sense that they do not have to learn about sexuality through ‘traditional practices’ by consulting uncles. Hence, they speak glowingly about Google, which they associated with modernity and a different kind of learning – gaining factual knowledge through one’s own individual initiative. Interestingly, while men in this group presented Google as an exclusive resource of sexuality education for them as young men, some women who had not undergone labia elongation also turned to Google for information about this practice. As I will discuss in detail in the next chapter, women who displayed ignorance about labia elongation were often mocked by other women who have undergone the practice. Maidei, who is another woman without elongated labia, indicated that she got to know more about labia elongation when she was much older after she ‘bumped’ into one article on the Internet. She also spoke about women’s Facebook groups²⁹:

Okay, aaaah, like I said I discovered uhmm an article on the internet and then you have these groups (2) the Facebook, Face-book groups, you have the, I think you know the different types of groups that are there on Facebook for women where people discuss everything, all issues you know, so then people want to experiment and aaah, so I guess the social network platforms which are now there these days, information moves fast and yah, people know. Even during our times when we were growing up there was no Facebook, it was word of mouth, but right now, with the different social network platforms, even your kid whom you don’t want to know, you would be surprised that they know and even, you know, even pulls [labia] (laughs) without your knowledge. So yah coz you don’t have control over the flow of information of the social networks so people have access to information on such things.

Whereas Google was predominantly constructed positively, it seemed Maidei was partly critical of it. On the one hand, like other women and men, she praised the Internet and social media (for example, Facebook), not only for making sexual content easily available, but also for facilitating free discussions about sexuality among women. At the same time, she was concerned that such platforms had no ‘control over the flow of [sexual] information’, and neither could they censor this information especially for ‘kids’, an issue frequently raised by pro-censorship feminists and women in general (Attwood, 2005; Watson & Smith, 2012).

Even though men in the mixed-group discussion and two women without elongated labia resorted to the internet for information about it, it seemed for other women (both with and without elongated labia), that this could not possibly be shown in a public site like Google. This emerged in one of the all-women groups after I asked if they would tell their daughters about labia elongation.

²⁹ These women Facebook groups are “closed” to men. In order to join these groups, you send a request, which is vetted by originators of the group before you are accepted as a member.

Cynthia: I don't think mine I will tell her because what will I be telling her? Because I am also in the dark. If I google, there is nothing on Google

Chipo: There is nothing on Google

Chiedza: How will you even start googling, using which words?

Tino: Ha-a you will find it

Cynthia: So I have nothing to tell her, I tried googling but couldn't find anything.

I argue that Cynthia and Chipo's comments that 'there is nothing on Google' do not suggest that they had even attempted to search for this information. Chiedza's question, '*how will you even start googling, using which words*' coupled by Cynthia and Chipo's remarks implied that elongated labia was such a private issue that it was not only unimaginable, but also inappropriate for such information to be available on Google.

Men naturalising themselves as sexual beings

Earlier in the chapter, I explored what women constructed as sex academies such as *chinamwari*, where girls and women are trained about sex and marriage. Men in the all-male group discussion also spoke about *chinamwari*, although some in critical ways. When Taurai was explaining to other men about how some girls and women go to *chinamwari* to train how to have sex, Masimba interjected and said:

Masimba: But guys, the thing is guys, there are things that nature designed. There is no one who is taught to have sex whether *chinamwari* or not, those are lies

Sam: It's all lies

Masimba: Those [sexual] things Taurai nobody teaches you, even an animal is not given directions that this is where to fuck, its nature

Taurai: Yes

Masimba: For every man, its nature. Have you ever heard of anyone who wants to be shown how a person is fucked? (group laughter) Is that possible?

Tadiwa: It would become newspaper headlines

Masimba: Those things were designed to happen naturally, so what you are now doing is from your head, it's useless. At the end of the day, these things don't matter because these things, nature designed it. No matter what you might want to do, or whatever style you do, it's nature

Taurai: Masimba, I will agree with you

At first Masimba seems to be talking about both men and women as 'naturally' sexual, but it became explicit that he was referring specifically to men when he said 'for *every man*, it's nature.' Underlying this exchange are assumptions that men are naturally sexual beings whereas girls and women have to learn to relate sexually to boys and men through various "cultural" activities such as labia elongation and *chinamwari*. Further, this conversation also suggests that

any kind of sexuality education, whether through advice from relatives or the Internet (glorified by men in the mixed-group) is a waste of time. Ironically, this is the same group of men who praised uncles and peers as important sex advisors for young boys.

A taboo for fathers to teach daughters about sexuality

Although Shire (1994) wrote about receiving advice on contraception and sex as a young Shona boy from his paternal aunt, I have already demonstrated in virtually all my interviews that the onus to teach girls and boys about sexuality education is put on women (aunts and sometimes mothers) and men (uncles) respectively. When it emerged that some men in the all-men discussion praised the practice of labia elongation, I posed a question that I had often posed to my female participants – *If you have a daughter, would you recommend that she elongates her labia?*

Tadiwa: Aaaaaah, haa I would not because I am not the one who will have sex with her. So what I can teach her is to go to school to get an education, sex life we have already said it's nature, so I can't talk about it. I can't even imagine myself telling my wife to teach our daughter about that, I would not. I will wait for her to make that choice. I can offer her advice that don't sleep with many men, don't have sex before marriage (everyone laughs)

Ras: You are supposed to tell your wife to encourage your daughter to start pulling. The pulling process starts when she starts to menstruate. When you are pulling her, she doesn't know why you are doing it because her brain at that time cannot comprehend what is happening, and the purpose of those things

Taurai: [...] coming to the point that will I allow my daughter to elongate her labia that now depends on the understanding that my wife and I have regarding this things. As you are aware, when people get married lets say in the rural areas, the husband likes them, the wife has them, and the wife knows that the husband likes them. Influence comes from parents like I said, so they can influence their daughter to have them. But if the husband doesn't like them, the wife will make no effort to encourage her daughter to do it.

Masimba: The issue is no father can tell the wife to start pulling their daughter's labia, noo. It's not the father's duty, it's the mother's duty. If the mother grew up in that way, she will tell her daughter to do it, the father doesn't get in the picture. Same same with me, I would never divulge to my daughter what my father and uncles tell me. What men discuss at a men's forum remains there, women discuss their own issues, as per our custom. This issue of pulling, it's the mother who makes those decisions, no father can wake up one day asking his wife if their daughter is pulling, there is nothing like that. That is my belief that a normal father will not involve himself in those issues. It is the mother who decides if it is necessary for her daughter to do it depending on how she also grew up. If she grew up pulling them, she will teach her daughter without the father's knowledge.

Ras: Do you know that learning never ends? Learning never ends. On this issue I might tell, maybe my wife might not be aware about this practice because maybe she doesn't have *matinji* [laughs]

Masimba: There is no father who would encourage his daughter to do that [elongate labia], because it's not easy for a father to encourage his daughter that when you get fucked, this is how you should be fucked [group laughter] it's not normal, (**Obert:** It's unheard of) it's taboo! As I am, to start thinking that my daughter should have *matinji* to be properly fucked, would that be normal (**Ras:** Of course there is no father who wants her daughter to be fucked, but it's normal) from a normal father, why would I think of that? Why would I think of such silly things when I am normal? A normal man would never say that (**Obert:** He will never)

HV: But this one (pointing at Ras) is saying there is nothing wrong with that.

Masimba: This one talks about what he reads in books, [it's] fiction (**Ras:** Its not fiction! It's not fiction!) what he is saying is fiction, but if you have a son, you can advise him once he has a girlfriend and thinks about having sex with her, use a condom. I might say that, because I know the consequences like pregnancy, and the girl might elope to him and so on.

Tadiwa's initial exclamation 'Aaaaaah, haa' and Masimba's counter questions 'why would I think of that? Why would I think of such silly things when I am normal?' suggested that I had asked a ridiculous question. Interestingly, Tadiwa interprets the very question as positioning himself as one who has sex with her as opposed to a father. Therefore as a father, he cannot even contemplate having these kind of conversations with his daughter. It appeared unimaginable for these men that fathers can offer sexuality education to their daughters, arguing it was a 'taboo' and 'unheard of', which Masimba justified by invoking Shona 'custom'. Furthermore, Masimba's expressions of 'a normal man', 'a normal father', 'our custom' denote what Weedon (1987:77) termed 'common-sense knowledge', a discourse whose 'power come from its claim to be natural, obvious and therefore true'. Weedon adds that expressions such as these are only 'supposed truths' whose aim is to 'put social pressure on individuals to accept them' through emphasis on their 'obviousness'.

What also emerged in this conversation is the policing of daughters' sexuality, and not that of sons. Tadiwa, for example, taking a rather moralistic stance, suggested that if he were to advise his daughter about sexuality, he would tell her not to 'sleep with many men', and not to 'have sex before marriage.' This was in sharp contrast with the sex advice offered to boys, as suggested by Masimba, that they can have as much sex before marriage as they wanted, as long as they 'use a condom' to avoid impregnating the girls, and marrying them as a result of this.

The above excerpt also provides a classic example of constructing young people (and young girls especially) as lacking agency and therefore needing adults (or fathers through the mediation

of their wives) to tell their daughters what to do in relation to sexuality. This is exemplified by Ras who insists that a mother should pull their daughter's labia when she is still young because 'she doesn't know why you are doing it' and that 'her brain at that time *cannot comprehend* what is happening, and the purpose of those things'.

Conclusion

The chapter focused on the multiple sites and forms of sexuality education through which women and men in my study learnt about labia elongation in particular, and sexuality in general. Labia elongation seems to produce gendered identifications for girls, which they learn implicitly through the ways it is organised, and what they are told and not told. For example, learning to identify with other girls and not with boys, learning to associate this with the future, learning to sacrifice for this future as future wives, and learning to keep this a secret especially from boys. In their role as mothers, most women participants seemed to project 'sexual innocence' on to their daughters and were particularly concerned about their daughters being exposed to forms of sexuality education which engaged explicitly with sexuality. Few of the women could imagine teaching their daughters about labia elongation and none would reveal the sexual reasons associated with this, for this would be perceived embarrassing for them and as undermining of their relationship with their daughters. Concerns about forms of sexuality education turning their daughters into sexual beings informed criticisms which some of the women levelled against female initiation practices such as *chinamwari* and *koomba*, which they associated with particular women in Zimbabwe, whom they constructed as traditional and uneducated. They argued that the nature of sexuality education imparted in these cultural initiation schools was overly sexual.

Labia elongation, or rather knowledge of this as a "cultural" practice, emerged as a significant source of male identification for some of my male participants who drew on this to differentiate themselves from other young urban men whom they accused of not being in contact with their rural relations (especially uncles). This was as if, by not relying on rural uncles as sources of sexuality education, they had lost their cultural roots. Such men, contrasted with urban men who still had close ties with their rural roots and with "traditional" practices, were named *Salads*, a term with connotations of Westernisation and superficiality. As discussed in Chapter 2, such processes of identity construction invoking rural or cultural rootedness are about performing what are constructed, in contrast to, "authentic" African identities (Minh-ha, 1989, Ferguson, 1999; Pattman, 2001; Spronk, 2009) or in this case Shona cultural identities (Shire, 1994).

In contrast, some of the younger male participants in my study spoke glowingly about Google as their ‘next best source’ for learning about such practices. In speaking about Google in this way, it was clear these men were making symbolic and implicit, but positive associations between Google and modernity. Not only did Google symbolise modernity for these men as the epitome of new computer technology, but it facilitated independent rather than communal forms of learning linked with “traditional” and “cultural” practices. This of course connects with notions of the autonomous individual emphasised in liberal discourses of the modern subject. In other words, as alluded to in Chapter 2, not having communal ties, or discarding practices deemed traditional, from the liberal perspective, implies one has progressed to being “more modern” (Clark, 2006). Paradoxically, presenting Google as an important modern resource to learn about a practice framed as cultural, foregrounds the entanglement of modernity and tradition in contemporary Zimbabwe. This is further elaborated in the following chapter which pays attention to the symbolic constructions of labia elongation as a “cultural” practice by engaging with the meanings my participants attached to this practice, the kind of discourses they invoke about gender and sexuality, and how these are intertwined with their projections of particular identities.

Chapter Six

Constructions of labia elongation in relation to appropriations of culture, gender and sexuality

Introduction

A key concern in this chapter is the common description of labia elongation as a “cultural practice”, and the meanings my participants attach to this. As already argued in this thesis, I take “culture” and “tradition” not as descriptive, but as discursive categories which my participants use to construct labia elongation in ways which link with processes of identity construction. The overarching question this chapter seeks to address is: how does labia elongation get constructed as a cultural practice and with what values does it become associated? I draw on critical feminist literature, which I reviewed in Chapter 2, to explore and analyse the narrative accounts in this chapter. I addressed how this feminist body of knowledge raises questions about how notions of tradition, culture, and modernity are invoked in theory and in everyday social practices to produce certain kinds of power relations and gendered subjectivities. Part of the analytic interest in this chapter, therefore, is to identify discourses that inform participants’ narratives on labia elongation and how they position themselves in relation to these. By doing so, I want to demonstrate that the symbolic meanings that urban middle class Shona women and men attach to this practice are fluid and contradictory because they are located and negotiated within a myriad of discourses.

The first part of the chapter addresses how participants frame labia elongation in relation to discourses on ethnicity, culture and tradition, race, and religion. It explores how and when participants invoke these discourses and the different positions they take, not only in constructing labia elongation as a particular practice, but also in how they use these in constructing their multiple identities, for example as Shona wives and husbands, Christians, and modern young women and men. The chapter draws comparisons between labia elongation and male circumcision, which were relationally constructed by my participants as marital sacrifices, and how these were drawn to demonstrate the gendered power relationships in heterosexual marital relationships. The final part of the chapter explores the gendered constructions of female and male sexual pleasure, male promiscuity and connections participants made between this and the practice of labia elongation. It aims to demonstrate how the male-sex drive discourse is naturalised to justify male promiscuity and the need for women to ‘please’ their men sexually.

Participants' conflicting constructions of labia elongation in relation to ethnicity, culture and tradition

Part of my interest in this research was to explore whether and how participants constructed the practice of labia elongation in relation to culture, tradition, and ethnicity. Therefore, this section is not so much about whether labia elongation is essentially a cultural or traditional practice but on how participants deploy notions of ethnicity, tradition and culture. In other words, when and how do they invoke these discursive categories and why? In my review of literature on these categories in Chapter 2, I engaged with a critique of the conventional constructions of ethnic groups as corresponding with distinct cultures. I demonstrated that in postcolonial Africa, culture and ethnicity are contested discursive categories even though in particular instances they continue to be used in essentialist ways (i.e. fixed, homogenous, shared practices and meanings). Whichever way these categories are invoked, they operate as sources of identification and dis-identification, as I will illustrate below. Here, I focus, firstly on how participants identify or present themselves, and the associations they make between ethnicity, culture and labia elongation. Secondly, I engage with how they defined and deployed “culture” in constructing labia elongation as a “cultural” practice.

***“We don’t have that in our culture” – “It’s there in our culture”*: Opposing opinions about Shona ethnicity, culture and labia elongation**

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 in contemporary Zimbabwe. I also wanted to explore whether they associated the practice of labia elongation with their own, and/or other ethnicities. This, for me, was important considering the concerns my research topic and focus generated in informal discussions with some of my Zimbabwean middle-class friends. As I highlighted in Chapter 2, some questioned whether labia elongation was even a Shona practice. Others, who constructed labia elongation as a practice for rural and old women, questioned why I was researching young urban middle-class women. But, first I want to write briefly about how my participants identified ethnically, because as I mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, ‘the Shona’ as an ethnic group is a colonial construct comprising a cluster of many sub-ethnic groups (i.e. Zezuru, Manyika, Ndau, Karanga, Korekore, Remba). Many participants preferred to identify with their sub-ethnic groups, while a few wanted to identify as a Shona. It seems that those who preferred to identify broadly as Shona were concerned that the specific sub-ethnic groups in which they belong, are a source of ridicule. Chenai (from the Karanga ethnic group), for example, said she preferred to be called Shona

because publicly identifying as Karanga made her feel ‘insulted’, ‘humiliated’, and ‘backward’. It was only after I asked her whether she associated labia elongation with a particular ethnic groups that she revealed the source of her concerns:

Zezuru people are the ones at the forefront of embracing western ways such that they don’t teach their children such things [labia elongation], they will actually be laughing that the Karanga whatever, the Ndau, the Tshangani are very backward people, whatever...

It seems the reason Chenai feels ‘humiliated’ is because she believes that engaging in labia elongation is constructed by other ethnic groups as a sign of ‘backwardness’ and therefore carries negative connotations. Likewise, another woman, Ruva from the Remba ethnic group, was not keen to affiliate with this group because they did not ‘value education’ and were too much into ‘cultural things’, such as practicing labia elongation. I argue that part of why she took this position was also because she identified herself as a Christian, hence affiliating herself with an ethnicity she constructed as “cultural” or “traditional” would conflict with her Christian beliefs and urban middle-class identities. She made this apparent when she said ‘our versions [about “cultural” practices such as labia elongation] differ from those by people in the rural areas who have no clue about what the bible says’. Yet, when I asked her what motivated her to elongate despite her attempts to dissociate herself from this ‘Remba cultural practice’, she said she did it ‘for the sake of being girls.’ Nonetheless, Chenai and Ruva’s accounts corroborate arguments raised in Chapter 2, that ethnic identifications are fluid, and how people may celebrate or downplay these is contextual (Eidheim, 1969; Boonzaier & Spiegel, 2008; Robins, 2008) and linked with performing particular identities.

Despite displaying knowledge about labia elongation, participants (including those who had undergone labia elongation) disagreed about whether labia elongation was a Shona practice. There were those who said labia elongation was a Shona cultural practice even though they noted that not all Shona women undergo the process. One man in the mixed-group discussion accused young urban Shona women who did not elongate their labia 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 (Pattman, 2001). 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*.’ Among those “disappearing” sexual cultural practices, she mentioned women wearing erotic

beads on their waists and the use of *chinu*, which she claimed were distinct Zezuru practices.

According to Rudo:

Chinu is like a small gourd that you are given when you are getting married. It contains stuff like cooking oil so, its job is...after sex you must massage one another with the contents, you must apply the oil so that it [penis] stays shiny, but most men these days don't find it important, it's the same with those beads that we used to tie on our waists. People don't like them anymore because they associate them with witchcraft and what-what because of churches ...

Ironically, while she was advocating for women's adherence to traditional cultural practices such as labia elongation, she, as a Christian woman, confessed she threw away her own *chinu* that her aunts gave her on her wedding day because she 'felt as if it was something connected with witchcraft.' What is more significant in Rudo's narrative is how she is using culture in taken for granted, essentialist ways, as something fixed and enduring.

Then there were those participants who said the labia elongation was 'foreign' to the Shona. They argued that those 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. As stated in the previous chapter during discussions about "sex academies", there was a strong tendency by my participants to distance themselves from these ethnic groups they constructed as "traditional" and "cultural". Yet they were very vague and uncertain, firstly, about why they perceived other ethnicities to be "traditional" or "cultural", and secondly, about why they, in certain contexts, regarded labia elongation as "cultural" as illustrated in this response:

'I wouldn't know really if there are ethnic groups who make it eh, tradition or culture that you know, maybe they have to inspect the girls to see if they have the, eh, I don't know if, I don't know if that's there.' [Maidei]

'Is it still culture?' – Women debating labia elongation as a cultural practice

In Chapter 2, I posed a question about when and how a particular practice is constructed as cultural. I reflected on my previous study I conducted with urban men and women in Zimbabwe (Venganai, 2012). In that study, I explored their perceptions and constructions of male circumcision, and whether it was a practice men wanted for themselves, or women for their male partners. The majority of Shona men generally expressed negative attitudes towards this practice because, for them, undergoing circumcision meant associating with "circumcising" ethnic groups such as the Shangaan whom they perceived as "traditional". In this section, I engage with how participants positioned labia elongation in relation to their understandings of "culture". I

have already shown in my previous chapters that culture was a term that participants often used in our conversations. When I asked some of them to define what the term meant for me, some said it was ‘our way of life, the rules we give ourselves, the roles we give ourselves pertaining to a boy, a girl, [about] how they should handle themselves.’ Others said it was ‘norms and values, set by our grandfathers and grandmothers’ or ‘those things passed down generations’. But, when I asked them whether they constructed labia elongation as a cultural practice according to the cultural definitions they provided, this generated debate in one of the focus groups with women:

Tino: I think in this day and age we cannot classify them as such because when we started this discussion, they were some who were saying that they didn’t know about that practice while they were growing up, until maybe they went to school. So you are now adopting a norm from another area and bring it to your own area which originally did not have that practice, so I don’t think that we can say it’s culture, is it still culture? I don’t know what word we can use instead, but because a person will be borrowing, or maybe we can say that it is culture yes, but it will be, a person will be adopting a culture from another society, and not what is originally theirs, I don’t know.

Mazvita: I think, the way I see it, it’s culture. But we say culture is dynamic, isn’t it? People change, it’s just one component of culture that people are phasing out as people while learning other new things, [...] because these days we, we are living in a diverse world in which we are borrowing this and that from other cultures, so you find it gets diluted (3) [but] it depends on your family and the community that you come from...

While the women started with taken for granted notions of culture as something homogenous, fixed, and definitive of a particular group of people, my question on whether they saw labia elongation as part of Shona “culture” made them reflect on their initial responses. It suddenly emerged that they did not share a common viewpoint, and neither were they confident of how to define this practice, which raises the contentious nature of culture and ‘cultural practices’ as analytic categories in contemporary times. The following extract by Maidei emphasises this and contradicts researchers (Williams, 1969; Dionisio & Viviani, 2015) who suggest that the so-called traditional practices like labia elongation are losing relevance to “modern” women.

Okay, we discussed in that focus group and that’s when I realised ooh actually the... even the *Salads*, the people you think he-e they don’t do this [pull their labia] they are actually the ones who are, who are, who are experimenting doing these things, so I think it’s now a common practice (2) that people are doing it [...] I think people are integrating tradition with westernisation because I, I have noticed there is this eer, black consciousness, thus, that’s-that’s, that’s popping out of people nowadays, you know, about being proud of being black, African hair, this African hairstyles, you know. People seem to have this consciousness of eer, who they are, but not-not knowing eer, (4) it’s-it’s rather a bit selective you know, what they want to take and what they don’t want to take, so I am not really sure about this *matinji* thing, but for some people that I’ve seen talking about it, they aren’t people that you think [will say]

okay this is something that should be done, the people who are so traditionalistic, it's even, you know (2) the "Salads", who also...because I think people choose what's convenient to them, yah, that's what they choose, but not necessarily saying they are discarding, discarding everything about you know, our past tradition and culture. [Maidei].

This extract is about categories of persons constructed as opposition, yet doing things in common, hence her tone of surprise. Maidei mentions *Salads*, who are constructed as too modernised as discussed in Chapter 2 and 6. As she puts it, '[“modern”] people choose what's convenient to them', by 'integrating [...] tradition with westernisation'. Maidei's account of culture implies that it is not fixed and all determining, at least not for people who identify as modern, whom she suggests can pick and mix in relation to culture. Furthermore, her response, in which she gives examples of things associated with Black and African consciousness, resonates with Spronk's (2009:506) conclusion that 'images and rhetoric of Africanness are invoked and used ... because of the widespread notion of loss of culture.' It appears the idea of a kind of homogeneity in relation to “Africanness” and African values carries such an appeal even to middle-class black young people, who in other contexts distance themselves from ethnic groups constructed as too cultural. Nevertheless, what the empirical data in this section highlights are complex and multiple positions that my participants took up in relation to understandings and practices they construct as cultural and traditional.

'If you don't have, so how can one be called a woman? – Women and men's construction of labia elongation in relation to feminine identity and attractiveness

This section provides a background to the next chapter, which explores how labia elongation was symbolically constructed as signifying a woman's “completeness” and the ways in which those constructed as “incomplete” responded to this in different interviews. Researchers of female initiation rites in Africa have argued that these practices, and the accompanying discourses, are 'about the creation of women' (Arnfred, 2011: 45), which produces particular versions of femininity (Bagnol & Mariano, 2011). Labia elongation in my study 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 as I will address in detail in the next chapter. Mary, who was among those who glorified the practice emphasised that a woman with elongated labia was 'a woman among women' and that 'her [facial] ugliness doesn't matter'. Another woman also suggested men were drawn to women with elongated labia rather than those with facial beauty.

You are shocked and ask why a person [man] leaves a very beautiful wife and opts for a very ugly girlfriend and you wonder what could have caused that, and some say ho-ho-ho that one has everything, she is loaded [Shuvai]

Here, Shuvai is again emphasising notions of a “complete woman” by suggesting she has *everything*, hence the expression ‘*she is loaded* [with elongated labia]. Nonetheless, not all women with elongated labia were publicly proud of it. Chenai whom I only interviewed individually, 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 explained:

Some are even ashamed to openly say that I have them. Like now if I had to bath in the presence of others, if they are long, the current generation they don’t know them so they will be laughing wondering what it is...we saw her with a string [elongated labia] down there (laughs) ...

The mention of elongated labia as resembling a string, and the laughter this may generate from other women shows that she 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 elongation, which she claims is as source of ridicule associated with “backwardness”. Her construction of labia elongation as symbolising backwardness was, therefore, at odds with how other “modern” women constructed elongated labia as a source of attractiveness, ‘completeness’ and pride. Similarly, other women and men argued that elongated labia were unattractive, partly because of the ‘protruding flesh’ and ‘folds’ which might produce a foul smell ‘when not thoroughly washed.’

But, while some women were of the opinion that having elongated labia enhanced their sexual attractiveness, most men had a different view. One man said ‘it’s not about how she is down there [on her vagina]’. He even asked other men in the group if ‘there [was] anyone who actually says let me look down there to see what is there or you just use your hands to feel?’ It appeared men were attracted more to other female features like big buttocks, big breasts, and fair complexion than to labia elongation. In the mixed-group discussion, when I asked them about what bodily features they expected on their sexual partner, Kuda expressed his sexual desire, as a ‘typical African man’ for ‘well endowed,’ women:

Typical, typical African man. I will speak on my behalf. I am a typical African man and I grew up knowing that African men are into, into women who are well endowed, that’s basically (HV: endowed with what?). They have big breasts and you know, very bright (laughs) (Pius laughing: A very bright future behind) bright future behind

(laughs, then group laughter) them. So basically as ... African men I would say most men would go for women who are well endowed

A woman with ‘a very bright future behind’ is one endowed with big buttocks. What is particularly significant in this extract is the way Kuda is using the category of ‘*typical* African men’, and simultaneously constructing himself as one of them. It is an illustration of what I argued in Chapter 2, that when people invoke such discursive categories accentuating “Africanness”, it is usually to construct and enact particular identifications, which give a sense of shared interests while emphasising notions of authenticity. Again, in this case, it is in relation to gender and sexuality.

‘Even whites do it’ – racialisation and de-racialisation of labia elongation

As demonstrated in the last section, participants significantly presented elongated labia as a marker of feminine identity regardless of ethnicity. What I had not anticipated, however, is that they would speak about race. In fact, I did not have a question that was race-related in my interview guide, yet this emerged differently from women as one of the significant themes in the study. Most took for granted that labia elongation is a ‘black’ women’s practice. Responding to my question about whether they as participants associated labia elongation with particular cultural groups, Chenai said:

I think it’s for like cultures of the Shona, I don’t know whether whites also do it, I don’t know, but for me I don’t know, I don’t think whites do it (laughs).

Chenai’s laughter following her response indicates she could not imagine that white women might be involved or interested in such a practice. However, in one of the female group discussions, another woman, Mary, claimed that ‘even whites’ knew about and also elongated their labia. She introduced this issue of race in the conversation reproduced below when I wanted to find out from the group whether labia elongation was a Shona practice.

Mary: What do you mean Shona?

HV: To say that it’s only Shona women who pull their labia, what’s your take?

Miranda: Where did it originate from?

Mary: But some white women also pull

HV: Some say it’s also done in other ethnic groups, what do you think?

Tanya: Ummm, This is the first time that I am hearing that whites do it too (**Shuvai:** It’s passed down generations)

Mary: I have two of my [white] friends, I have actually seen that they have them

HV: From where did they say they got them?

Mary: Aah they just said they also pull, saying you think we don’t know, we also know

Miranda: Who told them about it?

Mary: I don't know. They said it's not about black people only

Towards the end of the group discussion, Mary reiterated that labia elongation is now practised 'everywhere' and 'no longer about black people' and posed a rhetorical question, 'if white ladies do it, and why can't we?' When I asked another woman (Rudo), in an interview, if she associated labia elongation with specific ethnic groups, she gave an emphatic no:

Not at all! It is not about this or that group because if even a white man goes after a black person because of that... *dinji* [elongated labium] is very important, it's sought after. If it was for sale, it would be valued at several thousands, if it could be sold (laughs), I would be having a lot of money by now, I might even be owning 100 million.

Unlike Mary who praised labia elongation because *white women* do it, Rudo glorified it because *white men* go after women with elongated labia. The Foucauldian analytical approach I am using, which I summarised in Chapter 3, focuses not only in what participants are saying, but also what they are *not* saying (Alba-Juez, 2009). In other words, the listener, or in this example, the researcher, also must pay attention to the implicit meanings of the participants' responses. In this case, by invoking (white) race, both women presented labia elongation as generally a female sexual practice that transcends racial boundaries. More significantly is the implicit suggestion that because some white women are presumably elongating their labia and that white men are supposedly interested in women who have pulled their labia, the practice has therefore received a seal of approval. This is if we consider how these women are constructing "whiteness" as signifying modernity, superior status/class, and power, which I elaborate in this section, but also highlighted in Chapter 2 when I engaged with the work of Fanon (1986), Salusbury & Foster (2004), and Guess (2006). In that chapter, I addressed how these racial comparisons can be traced to the colonial era where 'African cultures and sexualities were framed as different, less urbane and inferior to those of the West,' (Tamale, 2011:19).

Whereas Frosh *et al.* (2002:147) concluded that 'racialised differences are taken up in many ways to inform and generate a highly variegated structure of identity,' Rudo and Mary appeared to collapse these racialised sexual hierarchies by emphasising commonalities between white and black people. Their invocations of whiteness, I argue, serve to construct labia elongation as a practice of value and of higher status, and thus "modern". Furthermore, just like Western genital modification practices that fall under the contested label of 'female cosmetic surgery' (Whitcomb, 2011), some participants framed elongated labia as just another social (and cosmetic) practice and/or product of consumer culture for any woman (even white) who wants to do it, or any man (including white) who wants to "taste" it. This also links with my discussions

about commercial sex academies in the previous chapter, where any woman can pay for lessons on how to elongate her labia or how to improve her sexual performance.

This construction of white people as embodying superior quality and status was also apparent when women were speaking about the kinds of boyfriends and husbands with whom they hoped to have relationships. Ruva told me that when she was growing up, she wanted to be married to a white man because she assumed ‘that [because] he is white, so he is from an upper class, class, thinking everything will become rosy.’ Cynthia also stressed that among a long list of the attributes she looked for in a boyfriend (tall, rich, learned, handsome, funny, caring, loving, faithful, very faithful, loyal), ‘white [was] a preference’.

Invoking religion to justify or critique labia elongation

Religious, and specifically biblical discourses, were frequently cited by different participants to justify often quite different and contrary positions they took regarding labia elongation. As I partly demonstrated in the previous chapter, there was no consensus about whether Christian churches teach (or should teach) about labia elongation, and whether the practice is against Christian practices because of its usual association with “culture” and tradition. In Chapter 2, I discussed what Coly (2015:18) views as the ‘interplay between modernity and religion’, which has roots in the colonial era, and how Christianity operated as ‘one idioms of colonial modernity’. For Coly, ‘the modern and civilised body is a religious (Christianised) body’ (*ibid.*). In light of these observations, my participants’ invocations of religion could be linked to their affirmations of their Christian (as most identified as Christians) and middle-class identities.

In this section, I focus on arguments and counter arguments which emerged in interviews with women and with men, that labia elongation interfered with the natural order of things. This was a concern which was often framed in religious terms, although, in contrast, counter arguments were not only secular but also in ‘individualistic’ terms, rendering people’s bodies as projects on which to “work” and “improve on” 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. Such self-improvement discourses and practices seem to resonate with key features of modernity, as defined by writers such Anthony Giddens, yet, ironically were used to justify a “traditional” or “cultural” practice which was how labia elongation was often presented and understood in the interviews. This, I suggest, points to the complexity of the meanings my participants, who are middle-class, educated and urban black

young women and men in Harare, attach to labia elongation and the particular significance this holds for them in different contexts.

‘Why do you go to the gym – if you were created perfect?’: Interviews with men

In the passage below, the idea of a ‘Creator’ is raised by Masimba in the men’s group to construct labia elongation as something which undermines the authority and expertise he projects on to ‘*the*’ Creator. This followed an argument between Masimba and Ras, provoked by a question about whether labia elongation ought to be promoted, with Ras claiming that women ‘must have’ elongated labia and Masimba saying that they must not. An analogy is drawn by Taurai, and supported by Ras, between labia elongation and going to the gym to build muscle or getting circumcised, as if the latter were constructed as male versions of “working” one’s nature in relation to one’s body.

Masimba: Personally the way I see it is that, nature, if a person was created normal, there is nothing to add or subtract

Ras: Were you born circumcised? (**Taurai** laughs)

Masimba: Aah what I am saying is (**Taurai** laughs) whoever

Ras: Let’s talk guys, is there a man who is born circumcised? (**Masimba:** No, wait, wait let me finish.) So why are they encouraging circumcision?

Masimba: Aah I, my, my, where I disagree with you guys is, I am saying that the Creator when he created humankind, he created something that is perfect, a human being, and you can’t add or subtract anything from it. When a human was created, it was perfect, but we (**Taurai:** We are adding on), it’s now our own thinking, we think differently. We are thinking that what we are doing has a benefit or whatever

Taurai (interjecting): Masimba, Masimba, why do you go to gym? Why do you go to the gym?

Masimba: What?

Taurai: Why do you go to the gym?

Ras: If you were created perfectly?

Masimba: To change my appearance

Taurai: Why do you want to change what God created as perfect?

Obert: Noo going to the gym is not to go and change, it’s to...

=**Taurai & Ras:** You change, you change !

Masimba: (chuckles) Yes, I change, but the change ...

=**Obert:** It’s for healthy reasons

Masimba: I just enjoy going to the gym, it’s a hobby [others laugh]

Sam: I personally feel that natural things taste good just as they are. I will just give you an example. In the past we never used to have these powdered soups like Royco³⁰, isn’t it? We would just cook out meat and we put salt. It tasted good. People now want to put spices, but natural is the best, so people should just be as God created them.

Taurai: Nothing is added, herbs or anything when pulling *matinji*, it’s the same with you, you just lift weights and your muscle grows.

³⁰ Royco is a type of soup powder people sprinkle usually in meat dishes to give them more flavour

It was interesting how Ras and Taurai equated pulling labia with building muscles (by going to the gym) and male circumcision (which I will focus on later in the chapter), presenting them both as positive modern bodily (and gendered) modifications. Going to the gym in this case is not only presented as a male activity, but is situated around versions of middle-class masculinities, constructed around discourses of self-improvement (Kehily & Pattman, 2006; Bhana, 2008; Farrimond, 2011). Implicitly, this signifies modern appropriation of labia elongation which ironically is constructed in hegemonic discourses as a cultural practice linked with tradition. Mwenda (2006) who wrote in support of labia elongation has also referred to this analogy between women elongating their labia and men going to the gym. He even posed the question: ‘is this [labia elongation] not simply aesthetic art to please her husband in the same way a man might work out at the gym to build up his muscle?’ (Mwenda, 2006:349). The limitation of Mwenda’s analysis is that he is oblivious to the gendered power relations implied in his question; that the man is building up his muscles for his own self-image and not for the wife, while the woman is said to elongate her labia first and foremost for her husband’s pleasure as my findings demonstrate.

In the above extract, Sam also seemed to support Masimba by positively framing the sexual act with a woman without elongated labia, equating it to eating ‘natural’ food (i.e. food without salt and spice). Nevertheless, Sam later contradicted his earlier comment that ‘people should just be as God created them’. This was after Masimba revived his argument that labia elongation altered God’s ‘perfect’ creation:

Masimba: [...] when a human was created, he/she was created complete, there is no need to add or subtracting, there is no need. It’s different with something that is made by a human being like a car and others which cannot breathe, those you can always change

=**Ras:** For me, I have never been in (Bible) scripture and so on

=**Sam:** Masimba, now I disagree with you. Nowadays women treat and style their hair, so are you saying there is no need for women to make their hair? Should they just get it cut?

I suggest that Sam’s shifting arguments demonstrates how people change positions in the focus group discussions, which may cause them to reflect, as in this case, on taken-for-granted assumptions they make. This is connected to arguments I raised in the introductory and methodological chapters about the need to focus on the research contexts and to treat group discussions as particular ethnographic encounters in which meanings are co-constructed and negotiated (Charmaz, 2006; Pattman, 2010). What is also significant in the above passage is Masimba’s description of women who have not undergone labia elongation as “complete”. In

contrast, however, most participants constructed women without elongated labia as “incomplete”, while those women who underwent the practice were constructed as “complete”. This will be the focus of the next chapter.

Trimming your eyebrows and labia elongation: interviews with women

In the above section, we see men’s implicit modern appropriation of labia elongation. Similarly, as illustrated in the exchange shown below, some women brought in religion through the analogies of applying make-up and trimming eyebrows to justify the practice of labia elongation.

HV: Okay, but even in those churches, how does the church take it? Is it [labia elongation] something that is easily taught in church, or does it go hand in hand with Bible teachings? Because it is one issue that some people were discussing, some saying that they won’t do it, why must I pull them because God created me without, if He wanted me to have them, He would have created me like that. Other say that these things might be there in the Bible, but they are hidden. I don’t know, how do you take it?

Chido: [...] the issue is, it’s not all about that God created me without them (3), if it was like that, people would not be applying those Black Opal³¹, people would not be trimming their eyebrows because you were not created... God created you with all those eyebrows, so why are you removing them, but 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 you were created naked.

Like most men’s accounts in this section, Chido constructed labia elongation in terms of its aesthetic value (Bagnol & Mariano, 2011), just like applying make-up, or wearing clothes, supposedly to improve from where God left off. I will further develop this theme later in the next section when I address how women and men talked about elongated labia in relation to female sexual attractiveness. What is more striking here, however, is that the analogies Chido uses (of trimming eyebrows and applying Black Opal) as signifiers of middle-class femininity in stark contrast to the gym and muscle building analogies which made such a powerful impact in the men’s group discussion.

Religious appropriations of labia elongation and understandings of husband - wife relations

Although there is one woman who said that (rural) women who undergo labia elongation had ‘no clue about what the bible says’, two women even quoted the Bible to support labia elongation, but noted that, unlike male circumcision, labia elongation is not mentioned in the Bible. That this

³¹ a range of make-up products for black women

practice is not explicitly stated in the Bible could be the reason behind some churches' silences around it, especially those who follow the doctrine that 'we speak where the Bible speak and become silent where the Bible is silent' (Machingura and Nyakuhwa, 2015:94). Here, I want to draw attention to the excerpts below, taken from separate interviews I had with Tanya and Chido, who are both married women. Although they voiced their opinions with traces of doubt, they both argued that labia elongation was in line with biblical teachings.

I'm not so sure if it is satanic or if it is godly (laughing) about why church people don't talk about it. But I guess, I guess it's because what, that it is not mentioned in the Bible, because in the Bible you don't hear it explicitly. You hear of gir-girls that they are, they were prepared to...like in the book of Esther that they [women] took like a year preparing to go and parade themselves before the King and you wouldn't really know that for that year what exactly will they be preparing. You go, you might be tempted to think that maybe they were being inspected of all those things like *matinji* but it's not written (2) so you wouldn't really know whether it is so acceptable, is it biblical? But since it's things, I think some things, why, why I think it wouldn't be sinful to do it, is Bible, Bible respects the fact that as a wife you should do (1) just like the-the husband is commanded to love his wife, the woman is commanded to respect and submit to the husband (2) so if the husband thinks that *matinji* he wants them on his wife, the wife can go out of their way to have them. So I guess (4) it's not out of line. [Tanya]

Er, what happens in churches is that they say that one thing that you must value most if you are a married woman, you must value your husband. So what your husbands wants, that's what you what, that's what you do (2) meaning that it is not a [biblical] teaching that is done openly that do so-so-so and do this because maybe another man doesn't like it... [Chido]

Earlier I illustrated how religion was raised to critique labia elongation around discourses of individualist self-improvement and agency. Yet in this context, labia elongation justified, through religious discourses around husband-wife relationships, which as these two women show, are characterised by unequal power relations. As Machingura and Nyakuhwa (2015:95) argue, 'in some cases the Bible is unfortunately evoked to support the superiority of men and the subordination of women'. They cite how the Bible, for example, is selectively cited by some male church leaders to keep women away from occupying pastoral and other top positions in church. What we see in Chido and Tanya's narratives, however, is how women (and not men) themselves employ biblical discourses on female submission³², 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*. This also demonstrates the reification and deification of the Bible as a powerful person, the same way "culture" was personified by

³² Based on biblical verses of Ephesians 5:22 and Colossians 3:18

participants in relation to gender and sexuality as I demonstrated in the previous chapter. Both “culture” and the Bible are used by my participants to emphasise and justify female submission, and are a clear illustration of what Pattman (2001) theorises as the alignment of discourses of tradition and Christianity, in postcolonial countries like Zimbabwe. This is in contrast to colonial discourses which constructed the two as oppositional as I suggested in Chapter 2. In the previous chapter, I also demonstrated how “cultural” discourses on sexuality education for young girls and women are also framed around male sexual pleasure and female sexual submission (see Kambarami, 2006).

The last point I wish to make in this section pertains to the support and justification of “traditional” practices such as labia elongation and female circumcision specifically by my participants, and African women more generally. Bagnol & Mariano (2011:26), drawing from Tamale’s work, have argued that this demonstrates ‘women’s silent struggles against colonialism and postcolonial forces including religion, which aimed at imposing a “modern” view on sexual behaviour’. Yet, Chido and Tanya’s accounts in this and the previous section, in my view, do not imply ‘struggles’ against religion and modernity. Rather there is an affirmation of both, summoned to signify modern rather than “traditional” appropriations of labia elongation, and to accentuate their middle-class femininities.

Comparing labia elongation with male circumcision as sacrifices

In this section, I address Viviani’s (2015:21) insightful proposition that ‘the symbolic meanings associated to the genitalia and their modifications ... appear to be a sort of sacrifice’. Viviani, who conducted research on genital modification practices such as labia elongation and male circumcision in South Africa, reflected that the notion of sacrifice ‘is connected to the idea of exchange’ (*ibid.*). In the context of my study, female participants portrayed labia elongation as a marital sacrifice that women undergo, expecting their husbands to be faithful in return, as I shall address later in the chapter.

Most women (in individual and group interviews) described labia pulling as ‘very painful,’ which had discouraged some women (as young girls) from continuing with the process. Those women forced to elongate when older sometimes were said to resort to painful methods of elongation like clipping the labia with pegs to fast track the process. Mary, who resumed pulling when she was already married, presumably because her husband wanted longer labia, claimed she used ice-blocks to ease the pain and swelling. For women, it appeared this pain was a necessary female sacrifice to be endured, not for their own sake, but that of their male sexual

partners. Therefore, women who believe this practice as key for them to maintain their marriages, generate a strong investment in this process of elongating their labia (see Mwenda, 2006; Pérez *et al.*, 2014).

In thinking about and connecting this with the next chapter, this understanding of labia elongation as a form of painful sexuality education may help to account for the antipathy expressed by women who had undergone labia elongation towards those who had not. The stories told about the pain of pulling are not retold in order to critique the practice of labia elongation. Rather, their criticisms of women who have not undergone these cultural practices might stem from a sense that they have not been through the pain and sacrifice they have experienced and therefore are not “complete” women.

Nonetheless, women were not willing to sacrifice just for any man, other than a ‘husband.’ As one unmarried woman, Maidei, summed it up, a man ‘can’t go and command his girlfriend out there that you should pull those things, she will say get away, who are you? But [when] you are the woman in the house you end up just doing what he [husband] wants.’ By ‘woman in the house’, she implied married women. The following extract captures both how women constructed labia elongation as a female sacrifice and how they positioned themselves as sacrificial wives who *naturally* put their husbands’ interests, ahead of theirs.

[...] generally we are the ones who sacrifice for men. Our nature accepts that we have to be under them, that we do...that we try to please them, than for them to please us [...] we are the ones trying to impress them so that they are not promiscuous, so it is us who have to pull *matinji* even if it means half of it tears away and I am left with the other half for him to be happy, I will pull until it reaches there, I don’t know, so that he is happy, just that, so he can inserts his penis, that is the issue, isn’t it? **[Rudo]**

Rudo was responding to my question about whether men also go to sex academies (described in Chapter 5) to get ‘training’ on how to please their women. Rudo’s answer seems to confirm arguments that women are less preoccupied with their sexual satisfaction, but derive more pleasure when they are providing pleasure for their men (Maushart, 2001). Yet, such a conclusion constructs women as voluntarily altruistic, thereby obscuring the subordination of women’s sexual pleasure to men’s sexual demands. Here, Rudo implicitly constructs heterosexual relationships as *inevitably* highly gendered and oppressive of women. Invoking discourses of the ‘perfect vagina’ (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001: 263), one woman (Mary) explained that the reason some women made their labia very long was so that they can twist and insert them into their vagina. This, she said, would make the vagina ‘tighter’ because ‘a man likes a

tight pussy'. When other women pointed out to Mary that this could make sex painful for the woman, she said 'you will feel pain yes, but you will be pleasing your husband'.

Nevertheless, many women expressed frustration that men are not considerate of women's sexual demands and needs. In the conversation transcribed below, Shuvai, clearly emotional, told me that she tried without success to get her husband to circumcise, because she believed it would improve her own sexual enjoyment:

Shuvai: Of what use are those "dolls"?

HV: Huh?

Shuvai: (Speaking emotionally) Of what use are those "dolls", ha-a it's irritating, who benefits? I am the one who prepares these dolls for someone else to enjoy, aah, if it was for my own enjoyment it would have been better. What do men have? What thing does he have, what has he also prepared for me so that I also enjoy?

HV: Maybe they get circumcised?

Shuvai: Aaah he didn't, he said am I impotent? I tried my best to talk to him nicely but he insisted that he was not impotent...why should I get circumcised at my age?...Then I said I am discovering the advantages of circumcision and he said it didn't matter. I realised I was not going to win, aah, he said I won't get circumcised, why should I get circumcised, for what?

This passage clearly illustrates how female and male sexuality are constructed relationally and in quite oppositional ways. Shuvai's response that elongated labia is for male sexual enjoyment serves to emphasise how female sexuality is dominantly represented in terms of giving pleasure to men, but most importantly to husbands, as I illustrated too in this and the previous chapter. On the other hand, male sexuality, as depicted by Shuvai's husband's reaction, is not constructed in relation to giving pleasure to women. Rather, it is constructed around notions of virility which Biri (2011) argues is characteristic of the Shona's version of masculinities. This connects with the practice of group masturbation that rural young boys engaged in to test their fertility, which I referred to in Chapter 5.

The issue of male circumcision first emerged in the male group discussion, when some men presented it as an irreversible bodily practice that men do sometimes for cultural, religious, and hygienic reasons. Men associated a circumcised with better hygiene, while a vagina with elongated labia was presented as a source of dirt. Of more significance is how men attempted to portray male circumcision as a male sacrifice for women. This was stated in the mixed-group discussion when one of the female participants (Sekai) expressed concern that men do not circumcise yet they expected women to undergo labia pulling. In response, Kuda said he was 'more than glad to go get circumcised' if the woman asks. Pius expressed similar sentiments:

One thing I know is that in any relationship, whether relationship or marriage, it's a two-way street. The same way you can't tell a woman that your hair looks bad when you have not given her money to get her hair fixed. It's the same thing. If she's gonna have to go through that sacrifice [of elongation], as much as you may not want to get circumcised because maybe she, the fact that she has reached that age without [elongated labia], it shows that maybe she didn't want them, you are forced to circumcise, because it's rather selfish to expect her to do that, and when she asks you to circumcise you say no, so it's a two-way street.

These men seem to project themselves (and other men) as equally altruistic by implying they were prepared to circumcise upon the request of their girlfriends or wives. In a way, the men in this mixed-group appeared to construct love relationships and marriages as egalitarian and based on mutuality and negotiation. Their position might have been part of their quest to present themselves positively to women in the group, including myself. Nevertheless, in different interviews, many women disagreed with this, arguing that Shona men undergo circumcision out of 'their own choice' and not because they were yielding to their women's requests. Sekai boldly remarked in the mixed-group that the present generation of men (presumably including the men in the group) were 'selfish when it comes to pleasing women' and that 'most of them they are out to please themselves.' Immediately, Pius, unconsciously backtracked from the selfless picture of men he initially painted, and began speaking about 'the downside to male circumcision.' He claimed male circumcision might result in other men failing to get an erection, while others might experience less penis sensitivity caused by the hardening of the foreskin, which could result in them taking longer to orgasm. While speaking about this, he suddenly pronounced that 'for most men, sex is the first round, second round is for the woman'. This statement drew support from other men in the group to suggest that they were not as selfless as they had initially positioned themselves.

'A person cannot continue touching your breasts everyday' - Labia elongation and sexual pleasure

As reported in similar studies (Mano, 2004; Tamale, 2006; Bagnol & Mariano, 2008; Bhebe, 2014), the association of labia elongation with sexual pleasure was a common theme in participants' narratives. My participants, women in particular, generally presented elongated labia as enhancing male sexual pleasure. Most men in my study, however, felt there was no difference in terms of sexual experience between sleeping with a woman with or without elongated labia because 'for men', sex was all 'in the mind.' This is consistent with findings from a study by Pérez *et al.* (2014), on urban Zimbabwean men's knowledge about labia elongation. They downplayed the significance of elongated labia to male sexual pleasure with

some arguing that sleeping with virgins or using ‘sex enhancing medicines and herbs,’ resulted in better sexual experience. Nevertheless, those who ‘vouched’ for them argued that penetrating a vagina with elongated labia created an indescribable pleasurable sensation for men. One of the men who expressed preference for women with elongated labia claimed he would ‘run out of ideas’ if he had to perform oral sex on a woman who had not pulled her labia.

In this section, however, I am more interested in the different ways women spoke about labia elongation in relation to men’s and their own sexual pleasure. Some women explained that the reason elongated labia are called ‘daddy’s toys’ or *zvidhori* (dolls), was because ‘men play with them’ during foreplay, and during intercourse, they helped in ‘caressing’ and ‘gripping’ the penis, while stopping it from ‘coming out.’ Another woman even used the analogy between women and cooked chicken to emphasise the significance women gave to elongated labia in enhancing male sexual pleasure:

[T]he degrees of [male sexual] pleasure will be different, you might be thinking that today I enjoyed Nandos³³ before you have tested [Chicken] Slicer, then you realise that Slicer is even better.’

The names Slicer and Nandos here symbolise women with and without elongated labia, respectively. What was striking is how most women spoke about labia elongation in ways that gave prominence to men’s pleasure rather than their own. As one woman put it, ‘when a woman pulls, she pulls with a purpose that I want my man to enjoy...’ This accentuation of male sexual pleasure rather than female sexual pleasure by women is connected with them performing particular versions of femininities constructed around making sexual sacrifices as wives.

Usually when women spoke about female sexual pleasure, they were responding to my question about whether they benefitted from this practice. That is when others would say ‘both of you enjoy’ adding that elongated labia are ‘sensitive’:

Yes, being sensitive, they are sensitive in that you see that during the foreplay, when he plays with you touching you, even if you didn’t feel like it, there are times when you will be telling him that I don’t want, but if he keeps touching you there you end up opening your legs without being forced (laughs), so I think that’s how it works that whether you want or not, they are sensitive, yah I can say that they are sensitive because you realise that you are, you are ready, you are now wet, yet initially you were saying you don’t feel like having sex. (**Shuvai**, married woman)

³³ Nandos and Chicken Slicer are popular fast-food outlets in Zimbabwe that mainly sell roast and fried chicken respectively

Other women with elongated labia, in different interviews, drew parallels between the level of sexual arousal women supposedly experienced 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 constructed labia as enhancing female sexual pleasure, they ironically posed this as a problem. During a discussion about how long elongated labia should be, Paida said ‘it becomes a problem’ when pulled labia becomes ‘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.’ In this regards, Paida implied that only young girls needed to be discouraged from exploring their sexual feelings until older, presumably after marriage.

Yet, in another woman’s account, it was apparent that sexuality education discourses emphasising female sexual suppression, while they are initially directed at young girls were meant to regulate how they should express their sexuality as married women. Attempts to control the female sex drive have been reported in other studies in Southern Africa of so called ‘cultural practices’ aimed at preparing girls physically and psychologically for marriage. For example, Remba women are said to ‘milk the clitoris of the little girl ... to prevent the girl as an adult woman from wanting excessive sex’ (Mwenda, 2006:349). Among the Basotho women, Khau (2009: 34) also claims that labia elongation is conducted in order ‘to reduce girls’ sexual excitability’ since it ‘forced the clitoris to retract into the labial folds’, even if this claim is not necessarily substantiated empirically. It appears Khau associates female sexual arousal with clitoral stimulation, contrary to my study findings and findings by Bagnol & Mariano (2011) which suggested that much more significance was attached by women to labial stimulation as regards their own sexual pleasure.

However, in my study it was difficult to establish the extent to which elongated labia (in relation to the clitoris, for example) enhanced a woman’s sexual experience considering that the 12 women who participated in the study and had elongated their labia, underwent the process when they were very young girls before their sexual debut. Nevertheless, not all women who underwent elongation associated labia elongation with their own pleasure, or even that of their men. For example, in one conversation, Ruva, claimed that her husband ‘plays with them here and there’ because ‘he is the one who gets excitement from them’, while she felt they were ‘of no use’ for her because she did not ‘feel anything’ when he touched them. However, when I asked another woman if her husband also played with her labia, she said her husband ‘doesn’t

care [and] he doesn't even have the time to play with them.' What is clear in many women's narratives in my study, is how even among married heterosexual couples, men's sexual desire/pleasure is highly esteemed, while that of women is given subordinate status (Tamale, 2011; Nyanzi, 2011) even by the women themselves.

In fact, it emerged that sexual pleasure and promiscuity become dangerous when it comes to women. This was supported by stories narrated by some participants. Sekai, for example, shared a story of a married woman whose labia were 'cut' by her husband after she became promiscuous. According to some women in my study, very long labia stimulate and increase women's sexual urge so much that they might become promiscuous (see also Pérez *et al.*, 2014). In the lengthy extract below, we see women positioning themselves differently to gendered sexuality discourses after Maidei questioned whether and how women benefit from undergoing elongation since all she has heard is that the practice is about 'pleasing the man':

Maidei: My question is, cause most of the people I spoke with, it's about pleasing the man, pleasing the man, are you yourself enjoying? If it stimulates me I will go and do it tonight but if it doesn't stimulate me too, coz sex, it takes two to enjoy but if it is just about pleasing a man, and I don't get enjoyment out of it...

=**Mary:** Alright, let me tell you the reason why. When, when two people are having sex (**Maidei:** Aha?), you should both enjoy (**Maidei:** Umm) but I want you to know two things, two different things. You will enjoy, but the first person you must please first is your husband. Why I am saying your husband, it's because if he is not satisfied (2) with you, he can go out there (**Shuvai:** And what if I am not satisfied with him, what happens?), but, no, let me, wait, let me tell you (**Shuvai:** Eer?) but you can say what you are saying, but what she is saying, she doesn't mean it. Why I am saying so, you can't compete [for sexual satisfaction] in the home. You can say that what's gonna happen if I also am not satisfied, but to be honest with you, you cannot go out to bitch around (**Shuvai:** Aaa why not?) because you are not satisfied, but a man can go anytime and she, he can even do it with your own sister, he can even do it with your best friend, he can even do it with your mother, you understand?

Maidei: Is this only about the issue of *matinji*?

Mary: No, not the issue of *matinji*, I am saying, I am not saying...

=**Tanya:** The point she [Mary] is making, maybe it's culture which says if a woman is caught cheating, she is sent packing (**Mary:** and she goes to her parents' home) Your husband will have girlfriends, 100, and you stay there.

Mary: That's why I am saying your [sexual] pleasure, you should be pleased, of course you are satisfied, you should enjoy, but the one you should please on this thing is your husband, and believe me you are not yet married. When you are married, you will tell me, you will do anything for that guy

On the one hand, Maidei and Shuvai are resisting normative discourses about female sexuality, by showing interest in their own sexual pleasure. On the other hand, the conversation

accentuates the inequalities in heterosexual marital relations, which Mary naturalises by reiterating that the *first* person a wife *must* please sexually is her *husband* and that wives *cannot* compete with men for sexual satisfaction. At the same time, we witness the invocation and reification of culture by Tanya in justifying the male sex drive discourse, while at the same time implicitly critical of it. In the context of marriage, sacrificing one's sexual enjoyment is thus presented here as a prerequisite for becoming a good wife. This is evident in how Mary reacts to Maidei's "preoccupation" with her own sexual enjoyment implied in her very question. Mary's cautionary statement to Maidei (a single woman) that she 'will do *anything*' for her husband once she gets married suggests Maidei was displaying naivety and characteristics of an undignified woman.

These findings are unsurprising considering the observations which I wrote about in the introductory chapter that dominant discourses on female sexuality emphasise the dangers of sex (for girls) at the expense of female sexual desire (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Harrison, 2008). Moreover, as Rubin (1984:150) articulates, within dominant Christian discourses, sex is constructed as 'inherently sinful' and only redeemable 'if performed within marriage for procreative purposes and if the pleasurable aspects are not enjoyed too much,' especially by women as the narratives in my study demonstrate. Mate (2002:558) claims there are some Zimbabwean Pentecostal church women leaders who teach other women congregants that 'for married women, chronic insatiateness is a sign of [demonic] possession.' These narratives could explain why some of my female participants were initially seemingly silent about the association of labia elongation with their own sexual pleasure.

Constructions of labia elongation in relation to male promiscuity and good wives

Many women seemed concerned with 'pleasing their men' sexually as the previous section has demonstrated, and their support of labia elongation was tied to assumptions that this would curb men's promiscuity. In this section, I draw on feminist literature on the relational construction of men and women's sexuality in patriarchal cultures. According to Hollway (1989), men and women are respectively subjects of 'male sexual drive' and 'have/hold' discourses which I introduced in Chapter 4. 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. However, divisions and conflicts emerged between women over their presumed abilities to hold on to their husbands, and the pleasure they are able to provide for them.

Conflicts between women about labia elongation and sex drive - Interviews with women only

Speaking about the purpose of labia elongation, many 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 is 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, your husband will leave you for those who have them'. However, my follow-up question on whether having elongated labia would automatically stop a husband from having extramarital affairs, made her reflect on their initial responses, as demonstrated in the following excerpt:

Noo, it doesn't mean that he won't stray, even if he is promiscuous, he will come back (2) it's different when he goes to stay with someone who has them, he would have gone for good, that's what we mean. If he leaves his first wife going for a second wife, that's different, than if he still remains with a wife who has them, even if he cheats, but comes back, that is not straying. All men are mischievous, where can you tie him. Men in this country generally like polygamous relationships because even if you do this and that...nothing. I think we can say that just 1% of them don't have *small houses*³⁴ (girlfriends), they will be having these affairs but always coming back, but when he starts frequenting the girlfriend's place, then there is a problem, because if he is still trying to hide it away from you, which means he is respecting you and he doesn't want to part with what you have. [Rudo].

Rudo struggled to defend her position of placing very high significance on elongated labia as some sort of a magnet to attract and keep men, resigning to the statement 'all men are mischievous, where can you tie him?' Nevertheless, the extract demonstrates constructions of men in relation to sexuality which naturalise men as sexually 'mischievous'. This position was common in other participants' narratives. For example, in one of the women's group discussions, a woman mentioned that some of her married female friends had 'boyfriends'. The women took highly moralistic positions (as Christian virtuous women) in condemning such women who engaged in extra-marital affairs. They noted that even if it was 'real' that some women also cheated, or 'go out [at night]' like men, it was nevertheless 'stupid'. In chapter 2, I referred to Pattman's (2001) study focusing on male student teachers at a certain Zimbabwean college in which they were critical of women who go to nightclubs for 'prostituting' themselves and for violating "culture". Yet in the above account, women (rather than men) voiced this.

³⁴ "Small houses" is a term used in Zimbabwe to refer to girlfriends of married men. By implication, wives of these men said to constitute Big houses, presumably to designate seniority this relationship and the man's commitment to this.

I want to return and elaborate on the connections women were making between labia elongation and male promiscuity. The conversation below about whether labia elongation encourages husbands to remain faithful to their wives, drawn from one of the group discussions with women only, is structured around men's desire and the different positions which women take in relation to these arguments.

Mary: You will be lucky if he [husband] bothers you [to pull], he might leave you to look for another woman who has them. Mine I used to give him [sex], and he was always "burping" me so much that everywhere he was, he was "burping" my pussy [with elongated labia]

=**Miranda:** I, really, I don't think it's about *matinji* coz recently we had a class when this issue was discussed and then uhmm, the teacher, she is now 63, she was like "if you have them, fine, if you don't have so be it. I am now 63 I don't have, but I am still happily married" (**Shuvai:** Does she have kids?). Yes she has kids, she has kids. So really it's not about *matinji*, it's about your heart-to-heart, the way you relate, you hear me? Coz someone can just accept that you don't have, another can also accept that you have them, although I have not seen them before, but I am enjoying them. Or another one can just find it looking like a shaved head but he still enjoys, he might have left one who has them for one who doesn't, but he is still enjoying, so it has to do with the mentality, (**Tanya:** Yeah, mentality) and how you relate with one another, (**Tanya:** mentality yeah) how you relate. That's the issue, because you might pull them until they reach the knees (**Shuvai:** And he still leaves you) (**Tanya:** You are left alone).

Mary appears to be boasting about being a good wife by revelling in telling stories about how appreciative her husband was with her (long) elongated labia so much that he was *always* 'burping' her 'pussy'. 'Burping pussy' is an analogy Mary evokes here as a sign of sexual satisfaction on the part of her husband. Before she spoke about this, Mary also narrated a story about a man (Cuthbert) who nagged his wife to pull after seeing pictures of her (Mary's) vagina with elongated labia on his wife's phone. Mary explained that she sent pictures of her vagina through Whatsapp because her friend had no clue about which parts of the labia to pull. Mary claims that after seeing the pictures, Cuthbert told his wife that 'I want to go to that person who sent a picture of her pussy [with elongated labia] on your phone'. However, Tanya and Miranda in the conversation above appear critical of Mary for boasting, and feel undermined as wives and respond by mocking her both implicitly in this group and explicitly in other individual interviews as I will show below. Their statements in the above conversation that 'you might pull them until they reach the knees' and 'he still leaves you' seem very much directed at Mary. I make this proposition because quite early in the discussion, she told us that she separated with her husband after she 'got tired of competing' for his attention with her mother-in-law. It seems the women here were making connections with Mary's earlier narrative and were reminding her,

though implicitly, that although she pulled her labia to extraordinary length (as she stated earlier in this group), her marriage still failed.

Interestingly, while Mary seemingly blamed her mother-in-law for the breakdown in her marriage, she told the group that she now watched ‘a lot of porn’ to ‘learn more about why a man has extra-marital affairs’. She said this after some women praised her for exhibiting much knowledge about sexual issues. Yet, her concern and desire to learn ‘why *a man* (and not *men*) has extra-marital affairs’ could imply that her marriage broke down because her husband cheated on her, even though she possessed elongated labia.

I also want to elaborate on the point I made above about other women’s implicit opposition (in the group) to Mary’s suggestions that labia elongation is key to women stopping their men from being promiscuous. As was demonstrated in the passage above, the women did not mention Mary’s name in the group even though they were critical of her boasting about her elongated labia. This, I argue, is linked to issues I raised in Chapters 3 and 4 about how focus groups can either facilitate or constrain, not only what participants say, but how they say it. Researchers that have employed both focus groups and individual interviews, for example, Frosh *et al.* (2002) argue that people present themselves differently in these particular research encounters. Unlike focus groups, interviews generally allow participants to voice their personal opinions and an in-depth elaboration of this (Morgan, 1997; Brannen & Pattman, 2005). As exemplified in the excerpts below, Tanya and Shuvai were explicitly critical of Mary’s arguments when I engaged with them in individual interviews.

[...] when you look at it, those who are left by their husbands, they even have very long ones [labia], very long “dolls” that they pulled. Some of those who are left by their husbands, they are the experts of sex styles, [...yet] they are the ones who are left, (speaking emotionally with a raised voice) so why does he leave you when you are such an expert at having sex, why does he leave you when you have pulled? [**Shuvai**].

I suggest that Shuvai could not openly mock Mary in the group nor mention her name in the individual interview because they are biological sisters and may have been concerned with how she was presenting her sister to me. Yet, her references to ‘*those who are left by husbands*’ even when they have ‘very long *dolls*’ were connected with what Mary had said in the focus group. Tanya’s comment, and the examples she gave, was however in relation to Mary, even without mentioning her name.

I don’t agree with the fact that you are supposed to have [elongated labia] them to keep your marriage, I don’t think that’s solely...it might play a part yes, but I don’t think that’s the sole thing that a person is told that marriage can only stand if you have

matinji. No! There are many other things that come which makes a marriage stand. I don't agree with that, and even then *we* proved it to her in the discussion that, that is not the reason that makes one stay in a marriage, and she even said it so herself. There was someone who was so adamant that we must have them and then *we* told her that, she even said it herself that yah it's not, she personally admitted that it's not those things which makes a man stay in marriage, because look at me, even though I, I have them I would do everything to please my husband sexually but it didn't work out ...[Tanya].

Tanya repeatedly used 'we' to demonstrate what she perceived to be other women's opinion about Mary's remarks that women with no *matinji* will be left by their husbands. Tanya positions herself as someone who had been authoritative in the group discussion, by emphasising that 'we proved it to her' and 'we told her'. Ironically, in that group conversation, to which Tanya is making reference, other women who also underwent elongation (Miranda and Shuvai), were the ones who raised concern over Mary's over-glorification of labia elongation. Tanya, on the other hand, was much quieter. Presumably, this was because of Mary's constructions of women without elongated labia as "incomplete", which I will address in more detail in the subsequent chapter. For now, I focus on how male participants constructed labia elongation in relation to male promiscuity.

'What a man just wants is a pot' - Discussion with men only

Like women, some men suggested that women with elongated labia offered them better sexual experiences. Tadiwa, one of the men who constructed labia elongation as a 'foreign' practice to the Shona culture, said that he heard that when a man (married to a woman without elongated labia) and has sexual intercourse with 'these foreign women' with pulled labia, he 'will be gone for good'. When I asked him to specify what he meant by 'foreign' women, he mentioned women of Malawi origin, with whom most men associated this practice. What I hope to illustrate in this section, however, is how men were revelling in the male sexual drive discourse, which I described earlier. The conversation below ensued in response to some men's assertions that labia elongation enhances male sexual pleasure.

Masimba: But let me interject you and say, even when a man marries a woman with *matinji*, that same man we see him cheating, if he sees any woman passing by, with big buttocks, he still wants to have those women

Taurai: Nooooo, *matinji* don't make a man to be less promiscuous

Masimba: No, I want to show that, so that alone shows that they are of no importance, they are useless! [Tadiwa, Obert & Sam laugh]. (Taurai & Ras: No). So at the end of the day, what a man just wants is a "pot" (Taurai: No!). A pot, with handles or without, a pot remains a pot [group laughter]

Taurai: No, he may stray. Wait and listen. She might have them, isn't it? Maybe the size she has is not the size he wants (Others speaking at the same time: No! No, no! Wait. Wrong). One might say I don't like what she has. (**Others speaking at same time:** No, besides...)

Tadiwa (interjects): Just admit that men are lustful! (**Sam:** Yes, lust)

Obert: Men are never satisfied (others speaking inaudible things loudly)

Taurai: It doesn't mean that when a woman is said to be complete, the man stops chasing after other women

Taurai tries to justify men's promiscuity by apportioning blame to women for not having the right size their men supposedly want. But, Masimba challenges this position that men's sexual fulfilment is centred on elongated labia in his euphemistic remarks that *what a man just wants is a "pot" ... a pot (vagina) with handles (elongated labia) or without, a pot remains a pot*. The group laughter that followed this remark, together with Tadiwa and Obert's respective comments that *just admit that men are lustful*, and *men are never satisfied* clearly shows how men are seemingly naturalising their sex drive, and presenting this as a very significant way of constructing their masculinities. Poststructuralist writers (Butler, 1990; Connell, 1999; Pattman, 2010), whose work I engaged with in Chapter 2 and 3, argue that versions of masculinities are usually constructed in relation to particular versions of femininities. This is exemplified in the following story, which Taurai narrated to other men when they were discussing about the importance of marrying virgins, which I will elaborate on later in the chapter.

Taurai: (speaking emotionally in a high voice) You know, there was commotion in a *kombi* (commuter omnibus) (**Masimba** laughs) one time after one male passenger said that if you discover that your wife has slept with four men in a year, she is faithful (group laughter), can you imagine? (**Masimba:** In a kombi?) Yes, public transport! He said, she is faithful, because if she is not faithful, she will sleep with all kinds of men, maybe four per month, you see, and people got angry with him, saying how can you say something like that!? You know these late night kombis, why do you say that, if that is what your wife does that doesn't mean ours also do that! Then he said "I am single, I don't have a wife (group laughter), but I sleep with married women" (more laughter), so you see how his statements really affected those who were married (**Sam:** That obviously affects them). (Laughing) By the time we got to Budiro³⁵, people were now very angry (group laughter) (**Masimba:** Obviously they will get angry). Maybe some even got home and beat up their wives, you never know.

This passage provides insights into how these men are constructing gendered power relationships inherent in patriarchal and male sex drive discourses. The loud group laughter evoked by Taurai's narration of this man in a kombi suggesting that a wife who has slept with four men in a year is 'faithful' might have served to dismiss this as unimaginable. The men in

³⁵ Budiro is one of the high density suburbs in Harare

the group quickly identified with the angry responses by men in the *kombi*, in reaction to this man's supposedly outrageous claim. While they spoke about the angry men in the *kombi* in the third person as 'those', 'they', or 'them' as a different category, their emotional tone in echoing that 'obviously affects them,' and 'obviously they will get angry' suggested they were also quite affected and angered by the man in the narrative. Whereas in the other excerpt, men were endorsing and celebrating 'natural' male sexual drive; here they are evidently critical of women who might 'imitate' this. This is apparent in Taurai's last statement that suggests that women may be punished even for imagined infidelity. Obert later asked other men why is it that 'if a woman is caught cheating she is told to go away, but for men it's kind of legal?' I contend that this question was not prompted by genuine concerns for women who are punished for promiscuity. Rather, it was conveniently asked because of my presence as a woman. My propositions follow feminist qualitative researchers who argue that the researcher's gender may affect what participants say (Williams & Heikes, 1993; Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Huysamen, 2015). My assumptions seemed to confirm this finding in the way Obert quickly joined the rest of the group in laughter after other men responded that they cannot be rebuked for promiscuity because it was in their 'nature'.

Men wanting virgins and not women with elongated labia

Apart from religion and race, the issue of virginity emerged as part of the themes I had not anticipated, but seemed quite significant to male participants, particularly in the men-only focus group. They returned to the issue several times during the course of the discussion even though I initially tried to divert them from discussing this issue (instead of labia elongation), because I considered it a digression. Nonetheless, as I alluded to in the methodological chapter, my study is inductive and follows some characteristics of grounded theory approach, which include paying close attention to themes participants put on the agenda themselves (Charmaz, 2003). Hence, in my analysis, I was compelled to focus on the (sometimes-implicit) connections men were making in the ways they spoke about virginity and labia elongation. The issue of virginity was introduced by men when I asked them (though for some this was in hindsight) about the kind of physical (sexual) features they expected to see on the women they wanted to marry. I expected them to say elongated labia, but instead, Masimba who spoke first, said what he considered important was 'whether she has slept with another man', which drew laughter from the group. While this group laughter might imply that men took Masimba's response as a joke, the passage below shows that this was an issue other men took seriously, therefore their laughter instead signified consensus (Koller, 1988; Gronnerod, 2004).

Sam: I would just want to make a comment on what you have said. In this day and age where will you find a girl who has not slept with another man? Yes, you might find her, maybe during your time you would find them, as for us we are in a tight space [group laughter]

Obert: But while we are at that, then we ask you this question, how do you feel personally once you are married. You have married that one who has slept with other men, your thoughts, in your mind how do you feel, especially (**Sam:** No) when you have not broken someone's virginity?

Tadiwa (interjecting): Yah, that's where I wanted to ask that (**Ras:** It affects) why are you so unlucky? [Other group members laugh]

Obert (speaking excitedly in a higher pitched voice): We are saying once you marry her, when you think about it, wont it affect you?

Sam: It might affect me

Ras: It definitely affects to the extent of affecting even marriage

(Speaking excitedly at the same time) **Obert:** You see (**Taurai & Tadiwa:** Yes), you start wondering whether this woman has not been to Tipperary

In this extract, virginity was presented as a kind of moral obligation to girls. Moreover, the mentioning of Tipperary (a Harare nightclub famous for sex workers) by Obert implied that a girl who lost her virginity before marriage was prostituting herself. 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 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) (**Masimba:** Exactly! Exactly), you are the reference point, you see.

Earlier, I wrote about how some women framed labia elongation as a way through which they can *hold on* to their men. I argued that this demonstrates what Hollway (1989) describes as "have/hold" discourse, which she associates with women. Yet, the men's accounts, as stated above, suggests that while they predominantly portray themselves as subjects of male sex drive discourse, they too are appropriating the have/hold discourse, (if we consider their expressed anxieties around marrying non-virgins). In other words, it is by marrying virgins, rather than women with elongated labia that men feel they can *hold on* to their women.

The consensus men exhibited when they spoke about virgins showed their investments in a woman's virginity rather than her labia status. For example, when I asked about connections men were making between sexual pleasure and labia elongation, there were disagreements. Some equated it with male sexual pleasure while others did not. Among those who did not associate this practice with enhancement of male pleasure was Tendai, who participated in the mixed focus group. He drew parallels between labia elongation and virginity claiming to speak from 'personal experience'. He argued there was no difference in terms of sexual experience

when a man sleeps with women with or without elongated labia. Only when having sex with a virgin was the sexual sensation ‘strikingly different’, he claimed.

Conclusion

The chapter has explored the multiple ways in which participants constructed labia elongation in relation to gender, sexuality, tradition and culture, and how they positioned themselves to these discursive constructions. It demonstrated how labia elongation is a practice through which gender (sexual) relations of power, gender subjectivities and identities are articulated. Whereas many women in my study framed this practice as a source of ‘empowerment and pride’ for women because it improved their social and sexual status in men’s eyes as also noted by Mwenda (2006: 350), part of their accounts demonstrated that even with elongated labia, married women lack the power to control their husband’s sexuality. Men were constructed as naturally promiscuous, while women (as good wives) were defined in relation to (sexual) sacrifices they make in order to hold on to their men. Of significance is how many participants took these gendered constructions for granted and reaffirmed them.

The narratives by participants served to highlight relational ‘processes of identity construction’ (Pattman, 2015:83). Elongated labia, could on the one hand, signify a “good” woman when done to please her husband, but on the other hand represent a “bad” woman if done with the intention of fulfilling her own sexual desire and pleasure. At the same time, labia elongation connotes superior status in some contexts, while it denotes inferiority and backwardness in others. I have provided examples of how some of my female urban middle-class participants, who despite having undergone labia elongation themselves, tried to distance themselves from particular groups of women who also engage in this practice, because they constructed them as “traditional”.

What the chapter also raises is the issue of participants’ agency, firstly, in that most of the themes addressed in the chapter emerged from the participants themselves. As I discussed in the methodological chapter, paying attention to what participants put on the agenda in interviews is in line with participatory research, which emphasises that participants are experts at constructing their own social realities. The second point relates to how, through framing labia elongation in particular ways, participants negotiated their identities in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. It has been argued 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 ‘a staking of identities’ (Pattman, 2001:235) against an array of possible femininities and masculinities.

We witness, for example, how participants were constructing labia elongation as a cultural practice but in ways which did 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 were emphasising discourses of self-improvement to critique dominant Christian discourses which may construct labia elongation as cultural, and therefore “unchristian” for going against nature. The positions they took, I argue, were in many ways a demonstration of how significant this practice is in their lives even though they identify as Christians. Furthermore, participants’ efforts to construct labia elongation as a social and gendered practice that transcends ethnic and racial boundaries, the women (and men) were affirming their “modern” ‘middle-class’ identities. Young women in Mozambique are said to consider labia elongation as “out of fashion” (Pérez *et al.*, 2015), yet in the context of my findings, the practice appears to be very much still in fashion considering the way young women in my study linked it with race (whiteness), class, and modernity. This chapter is a classic demonstration of the entanglement of modernity and tradition in people’s everyday lives, rather than a distinct separation of the two as often projected in dominant discourse (Ferguson, 1999; Garuba, 2003).

Paradoxically, by sometimes evoking culture, they were distancing themselves from those they constructed as *Salads*, whom at times were seen as abandoning (Shona) culture as discussed in previous chapters. It seemed my middle-class participants were attracted to notions of cultural authenticity and struggled to present themselves as people who have not been engulfed by westernisation (Pattman, 2001; Spronk, 2009). From the symbolic constructions of labia elongation by my participants, the practice emerged as a source of identification and dis-identification as well as a dimension of power and inequality. The next chapter explores this further, by exploring the power dynamics between women who underwent labia elongation and those who did not, and how the latter were ridiculed for being “incomplete” women, negotiated around this.

Chapter Seven

“Complete” and “Incomplete” Women

Introduction

In this chapter, I draw from postcolonial feminist theoretical insights previously discussed in Chapter 2, about how particular people are looked upon as the inferior Other. I alluded to how hegemonic western discourses, since colonialism, frame Africans and their sexualities as inferior and backwards. Within Africa, I also reviewed feminist literature critiquing educated urban African women for predominantly constructing their rural counterparts as “illiterate”, powerless, backward, and inferior (Sofola, 1998; Amadiume, 2006). I extend this analysis, by focusing on how women who have not undergone labia elongation were constructed in my study as the Other. Starting from a poststructuralist and postcolonial premise that processes of Othering are produced in language or through discourse, the first part of the chapter seeks to demonstrate that ‘not every female is a real woman’ (Minh-ha, 1989:97) by exploring how women who had not undergone labia elongation were presented and spoken about, and how this theme emerged. I build up on ideas I introduced in previous chapters by focusing first on how some participants (notably women) in both focus groups and individual interviews, by using euphemistic language, produced particular women as “incomplete”.

While previous studies on labia elongation have also found out that women without elongated labia are ridiculed, insulted, and ostracised (Khau, 2009; Larsen, 2010; Bagnol & Mariano, 2011; Bhebe, 2014; Pérez *et al.*, 2015), less attention has been paid to exploring how these particular women deal with this. In a study on labia elongation among Rwandese women, Larsen (2010:819) for instance noted that some women ‘expressed feelings despair that they had not been able to elongate’, although she did not explore this further. I pick up on this in the second part of the chapter by exploring how women who have not undergone elongation respond to their constructions as “incomplete”. In addressing this, my analysis borders on two issues.

Previous chapters engaged more with the group interviews and focused on what participants said and how they interacted with each other in these as sources of data. This chapter, however, is more concerned with how women who had not undergone labia elongation dealt with being stigmatised, and the kinds of issues and concerns this raised for them in both individual and focus group interviews. In Chapter 3, I indicated that part of my analytical focus is paying

attention to the different subject positions that my participants took in different interview contexts. More importantly, I also tried to understand why and how they did this.

According to Foucault (1988:22), ‘there are different forms of self’ which are staged depending on context. Following this argument, I aim to show that how people present themselves in focus groups might be different from that which happens in a more “personal” in-depth interview. Specifically, I focus on the issues women without elongated labia revealed and how they presented themselves in ways which commonly differed in the different types of interviews. Inspired by other researchers who have used both focus groups and individual interviews to research “sensitive” topics, this chapter aims to illustrate that the dynamics of the group and individual interviews make certain utterances possible or not possible. I draw from Goffman (1963:93) who argues that stigmatised people, might in the presence of those constructed as ‘normal’, attempt to conceal their stigmatised identity if this is ‘nicely invisible’ to others. Since I am interested in how participants presented themselves in the different interview contexts, I will only focus on – Tanya, Cynthia, and Maidei – three of the women who did not undergo elongation (because they participated in both individual and focus groups). As I will illustrate, they were much quieter about the criticisms made in focus groups about women who had not undergone labia elongation.

Because Goffman’s (1963) insights are more productive in analysing what happens in group contexts, in which those who are denigrated try to conform to groups’ normative expectations, I also employ Butler’s (1997) ideas in analysing how women without elongated labia presented themselves in individual interviews. Like Goffman, Butler noted how people whose sexuality deviates from normalised heterosexuality are given ‘an injurious name’, a negative label meant to demean, degrade, and repress them. Yet, Butler further argues that while stigmatised people might conform to or internalise these labels, there are also possibilities that they might actually resist and counter these negative labels. This is connected to Foucauldian arguments that power is not only repressive, but also productive, in that it may provoke a counter reaction from the very people the power is supposed to constrain (Foucault, 1978; Mills, 2003). I demonstrate this argument when I focus on how “incomplete women” explicitly reacted to negative comments about women without elongated labia, particularly when they were in individual interviews. I conclude the chapter by exploring one of the “incomplete” women’s shifting positions on labia elongation. I focus on the contradictory positions she takes in relation to labia elongation – sometimes framing it negatively, and other times positively. This is to illustrate theoretical

arguments I raised in the first two chapters of this thesis, that identities and subjectivities are multiple and complex, and are in constant reconfiguration.

How “incomplete” and “complete” women were produced in the various interviews

The expression “incomplete women” was only explicitly mentioned by one participant. However, my choice to use “incomplete” women as an analytical category emanates from how other participants were generally constructing and associating labia elongation with notions of completeness. As illustrated in the previous two chapters, labia elongation was presented as a process that girls and women have to do in order to be *complete*, to get married, and to give pleasure to husbands. This issue often arose when I asked participants about the importance of elongated labia for both women and men, and stated below are some of the responses this question generated:

...in the past if you got married and it was discovered that you don't have them, you would be returned to your parents' home. It's not like you are ill-mannered, but something is missing. The woman, the child you gave us is incomplete, so you would not go into marriage without those things... that was the norm then (**Taurai**, married man - male focus group)

Some guys they want them [elongated labia] it's because um when they were growing up they were told that for a woman to be a complete woman, she should have [them] (**Sekai**, single woman without elongated labia - mixed-group)

For some it's something that they are very proud of and for them...for a girl to be called complete, she must have pulled and so on, if you don't have others will be laughing at you, so some are forced to do it because of friends or because they are mocked ... (**Shuvai**, married woman with elongated labia - individual interview)

Arnfred (2011:45) who studied female initiation rites (including labia elongation) in Mozambique argues that, even if introduced to young girls, such rites ‘are about the creation of women’ in that particular socio-cultural context. In the above extracts, elongated labia are projected as a signifier of what a “complete” woman is. Inversely and implicitly, these responses show how women without elongated labia are constructed as “incomplete”. In other words, as I discussed in the previous chapter, failing to engage in this bodily practice, which participants constructed as a (marital) sacrifice, carries connotations of lacking, and not being a proper woman. The significance of labia elongation, therefore, lies in producing versions of femininity, as exemplified in the above extracts. The category of “incomplete” women becomes associated with particular but different categories of womanhood. Taurai, for example seems to provide a “traditional” perspective of this practice, by presenting elongated labia as a ticket to marriage, and a symbol of a “complete” wife, thus emphasising and limiting the application of the concept

to the marriage context. Yet, by speaking about the requirement of extended labia as something that *used to* be important ‘in the past’, Taurai might imply that in contemporary times, a woman’s marital preparedness and completeness is not entirely defined by the presence of elongated labia. At the same time, it seems Taurai is also emphasising the continued significance of ‘the past’ constructed along the lines of ‘tradition’ as a category which demands respect and deference in “modern” times, and invoked as a normative guide for women’s sexual behaviour, as I argued in Chapter 2.

Whereas in Taurai’s response, notions of “complete” and “incomplete” women are constructed in relation heterosexual marital relations, and the role that elongated labia play in these, Shuvai seems to take a different focus by staging a semiotic moment of gender difference and signification. Her answer, ‘if you don’t have [elongated labia] *others* [girls] will be laughing at you’, draws attention to what it means to be a(n) (in)complete woman, specifically in relation to other women, and not in relation to men as marital partners. As pointed out in the last chapter, many women presented labia elongation as central to defining feminine identity. They stressed that having elongated labia makes one ‘*a woman among women*’, thereby rendering those without elongated labia as misfits or ‘unfit players in the game of being a woman’ (Khau, 2009:35-36).

Ironically, while “complete” was predominantly associated with women who have pulled their labia, two men in the male focus group, used “complete” to actually refer to women without elongated labia. They argued that women were created naturally *complete* therefore there was no need for them to enhance their genitalia by pulling their labia. As I addressed in Chapter 6, these two men invoked religious discourses in challenging other men in the same group discussion who inferred that women without stretched labia were *incomplete*. For the purposes of this chapter, I am, however, particularly interested in the way the gendered categories of “complete” and “incomplete” women were defined by the presence and absence of elongated labia respectively in relation to other sets of hierarchies, for example marital status, sexual attractiveness, and capacity to provide male sexual pleasure. This follows Yanagisako & Delaney’s (1995) findings who call us to examine critically the boundaries between gender and other categories of differences.

How women without elongated labia were symbolically constructed as “incomplete” and inferior

Whereas Pérez *et al.* (2015) found that men denigrated women without elongated labia, in my study, it was mainly women, and very few men, who mocked those who had not elongated their labia. I must stress that I am not generalising about all women who underwent elongation. In fact, a few women who indicated they had elongated labia even openly criticised those that constructed those without as inferior. Nonetheless, for most of the women who participated in the study, stretched labia minora ‘*are things that girls are supposed to pull*’ for one to be considered a “complete” woman. One woman stressed that elongated labia is ‘*a thing that makes a person to be called a woman*’ before asking rhetorically ‘*if you don’t have [elongated labia], so how can one be called a woman?*’ By implication, one who lacks stretched labia was associated with a pre-pubescent girl who is not ready for sexual activity. This was made apparent in an interview I had with Miranda, in which she said ‘without *matinji* you are like a baby’ and explained that women undergo this process to distinguish themselves from girls, presumably in relation to sexual preparedness. It is important to note that ‘baby’ here is being used symbolically to denote sexual immaturity and unpreparedness, which most female participants seemed to associate with women who have not undergone elongation.

Women who underwent labia elongation and those who did not were ranked differently in terms of women’s (sexual) attractiveness and status. In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how Mary for instance 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, Mary suggests it is ‘disrespectful’ to be compared with women without *matinji*, 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, even your guilty conscience it will tell you that why are you disrespecting this woman by going to someone who doesn’t have. Her ugliness doesn’t matter, it’s her heart that is more important. So why leave this one going to someone who doesn’t have.

In this passage, Mary illuminates the “differences” between these two categories of women, by constructing those who have not pulled as inferior. Her construction of herself as a better woman by virtue of having undergone labia elongation is made explicit in the opening three words ‘*it*

pleases him', structured around presumed male pleasure. Other women raised a similar logic when they, in separate interviews, told me that:

[...] men don't like just entering an open hole. It's almost like a house without a door, would you want to sleep in such a house? (I laugh) That's how it is (laughs). Would you want to sleep in a house without a door? (**Rudo**, interview).

It [elongated labia] helps in that the man just doesn't fall in when he is inserting, it must not be as if he is entering a bucket of water (Group laughs). He must first knock and those things make sure that entry is not very easy so that when he is thrusting he doesn't feel as if he is thrusting a bucket. (**Paida**, Female focus group)

...a girl should not just be like a hole, men want something to play with when you grow up and get married, you are not supposed to be just a hole... you should not just have a hole, you must pull. (**Chido**, interview).

These excerpts demonstrate the power of specific metaphors which link into constructs of good women and wives as guarantors of domestic fulfilment. In this context the 'open door', 'open hole', and 'bucket' could be taken as connecting ideas of "incomplete women", who are constructed as lacking, and thus sexually unattractive. Again, this is structured around male desire which perhaps makes this a very explicit metaphorical construction of sex (with a woman who has not had labia elongation) possible to convey within the group. Paida likened the vagina of a woman without elongated labia to a 'bucket' or 'a bucket of water' whose "opening" is presumably too wide for a man to enjoy penetration. She even appears sympathetic to those men whose women have no elongated labia for just 'falling in' their vaginas during sexual intercourse. In an African context, where women engage in various vaginal practices, – like inserting herbs and pieces of cloth, or pulling labia – with the belief that men prefer dry and tight sex (Bagnol & Mariano, 2011), these comments are unsurprising.

What seems more significant in these comments, though, is that they are not so much a critique of the sexual objectification of women (as in western feminist critiques of patriarchal constructions of sexuality), but of particular women's presumed failure to turn their vagina from a passive receptacle into an active instrument to enhance men's pleasure. For example, some women also constructed those without elongated labia as 'cold'. They claimed labia warmed the man's penis because they act as a door that traps warmth that men *need* during intercourse. 'After the [sexual] act they [elongated labia] help to reduce the vagina opening because everything that has a door can be closed ... those who have them are warmer than those who don't have,' one woman explained. In Lesotho, Khau (2009: 33) also reports that some Basotho men, in reference to elongated labia, might complain that their wives' 'blankets are too small.' This brought shame to women who did not elongate to expected lengths, because it implied 'one

is not hot enough to sexually pleasure one's husband' (*ibid.*). What I have illustrated so far is that women who did not undergo labia elongation were presented in many narratives as inferior, and were associated with derogatory euphemistic labels such as 'open holes', 'houses without a door' in order to emphasise their 'incompleteness'.

Women's presentations of themselves as complete/incomplete in individual interviews and focus groups

I now shift my focus to exploring how my female participants who did not undergo elongation presented themselves and reacted in light of these unfavourable constructions. In this section, I draw on the methodological literature discussed in Chapter 3, which I also highlight in Chapter 4, in order to demonstrate the merits and demerits of individual interviews and focus groups by focusing on how "incomplete" women presented themselves in both contexts. Focus groups are generally credited for providing a context in which to get wide opinions on the subject matter (Smithson, 2008), democratise research relationships (Pattman, 2015), and observe how meanings are constructed relationally (Gergen & Gergen, 2007). Interviews, on the other hand, are said to enable researchers to explore participants' personal opinions (Morgan, 1997), which might be censored in focus groups (Wellings *et al.*, 2000).

Researchers who have conducted studies using both interviews and focus groups argue that the two are particular research encounters, which call for different and particular ways of 'performing' oneself. Frosh *et al.* (2002) whose study with 11-14 year old boys in London, for example, found that often boys presented themselves quite differently in interviews and focus groups. In focus groups, boys generally tended to live up to idealised hegemonic masculinities (by acting tough and denigrating girls), whereas in individual interviews they displayed the 'softer' versions of masculinities. Asked to reflect about how they experienced both research encounters, some boys expressed preference for individual interviews and in which they said they felt more "real" as they could express their personal opinions without fear of being judged (Frosh *et al.*, 2002).

For my analysis in this section, I also draw from Goffman's (1963) work, which focused on how individuals constructed as 'abnormal' deal with stigma when they interact with other people constructed as 'normal'. Goffman's (1963) study focused on how people with physical disabilities, homosexuals, and ex-mental health patients managed such stigmatisation. Drawing from his examples, homosexuals can conceal their sexuality, and ex-mental patients can hide their previous condition, the same way women might conceal their labial status to other women,

as was the case in my study. According to Goffman (1963:15), a stigma is produced through categorising particular people seen as having ‘an undesired differentness’ from what is perceived as the norm within specific societal contexts. Goffman’s interest was in understanding how the stigmatised person presented themselves in what he termed *mixed contacts*, which he described as ‘moments when stigmatised and normal are ... in one another’s immediate physical presence, whether in a conversation-like encounter or in the pre co-presence of an unfocused gathering’ (*ibid.*:23). During these ‘mixed contacts’, the one who belongs to the stigmatised group is confronted with a dilemma of whether to reveal or conceal the identity which carries the social stigma. More often than not, as Goffman discovered, stigmatised individuals employ a strategy of ‘passing’, in which they intentionally strive to give the impression that they belong to the group of those constructing themselves as ‘normal’. In a xenophobic context, for example, this might involve speaking the language of the ‘locals’ by migrants when they are in volatile spaces as Siziba (2013) reveals. However, Goffman notes that ‘passing’, while strategic, constrains what one belonging to the stigmatised group can say or do because:

[They] cannot take action against ‘offensive’ remarks made by members of the category he is passing into against the category he is passing out of – especially when he finds it dangerous to refrain from joining into this vilification. (Goffman, 1963:109).

To emphasise this, Goffman provides examples of homosexuals who try to ‘pass’ as heterosexual in the presence of their families; or homosexuals who find themselves laughing at homophobic jokes when they are in the company of heterosexuals. Goffman’s analytical framework is useful in the context of my research where women who have not undergone labia elongation emerged as a minority and stigmatised category. They were pitted against women with elongated labia who were constructed as embodying “completeness”. Indeed, they tried to pass as “complete” women when they were in the focus group context, while they were more open about their identities and feelings in individual interviews. It is also worth mentioning that, despite not engaging in labia pulling myself, in other interviews female participants who underwent labia elongation themselves ‘passed’ me as one of them. In one of the one-on-one interviews, one woman was explaining why the process of pulling should commence before menstruation, when she remarked that, ‘if *you* have noticed, they [elongated labia] shrink when you go for your period’. In other words, she assumed I would know about what happens to labia during menstruation because she constructed me as part of those women who had undergone this process. In Chapter 3, I wrote about how I position myself in relation to feminist researchers who encourage researchers to divulge personal information to interviewees in order to increase

rapport (Oakley, 1981; Reinhartz, 1983; Hesse-Biber, 2007). I explained that my choice not to disclose my labial status to my participants beforehand was strategic because I was curious about how they constructed me, and whether or not they would ask me about this. Nonetheless, only in two individual conversations was I asked about whether I had also undergone labia pulling, and I freely divulged this to Chenai, who underwent labia elongation and Tanya, who did not.

My interest in this section is, however, to provide an account of the different ways “incomplete” women (as the stigmatised Other) presented themselves in both focus groups and interviews. I focus only on three of the women who did not undergo labia elongation (Tanya, Maidei, Cynthia) because they all participated in both focus group discussions and individual interviews, and therefore may provide classic examples of how one could present themselves in the different research encounters. In particular, the focus is on what they, as “incomplete” women, would say (or would not say) in these research contexts about sexuality in general and labia elongation more specifically. Furthermore, I explore how they positioned themselves, in relation to categories of “complete” and “incomplete” women, in the different interview contexts. In other words, I also pay attention to the differences, continuances, and discontinuities in the way these women spoke about this in different interviews.

Earlier in the chapter, I pointed out that derogatory comments made by some of the women in the focus groups against the women who did not have elongated labia. Though these were directed at women in general rather than specific women participants in the focus group, this, I argue later, made it difficult for women like Tanya and Cynthia who felt particularly troubled by these criticisms to ‘come out’. Only Maidei disclosed in the focus group that she did not undergo labia elongation, while the other two only divulged this when I spoke to them individually. When other participants made derogatory remarks about women without *matinji*, none of these “incomplete” women openly challenged these comments in the group context. When I say they did not *openly challenge*, I do not suggest that these three women never attempted to counter the negative stereotyping of women without elongated labia when they were still in the presence of other group members. Rather, I argue and illustrate that the ways in which “incomplete” women responded to this in the group context were more sympathetic to “complete” women, without sounding too supportive of them. This is in marked contrast to the individual interviews where they were much more explicitly critical of women who, in the group, had denigrated women who had undergone labia elongation. But first, I want to demonstrate how Tanya and Cynthia in particular positioned themselves implicitly in focus groups, which they made explicit in interviews. Similar to Goffman’s (1963) observations, both women strategically “excluded”

themselves from the category of “incomplete” women in the way they responded to some questions within group contexts. For instance, they tended to use ‘disidentifiers’ (Goffman, 1963:115) such as *‘they’* instead of *‘I’* in order to *‘pass’* as “complete women”. This was particularly apparent in how they responded to my question (which I posed both in focus groups and interviews) about why some women chose not to pull their labia.

I was keen to understand why Maidei, Tanya, and Cynthia chose not to go through the process of pulling against the background of demeaning comments about women like them. The following are extracts from Cynthia’s responses when I put this question respectively to the group in which she participated and to her in the individual interview:

Then *there are others* who also say, I heard this from other people, I didn’t hear it from my family members. If it was of importance, probably my grandmother would have told me, or my mother would have told me. But now it’s friends and workmates who tell you, you don’t know, maybe it’s something practiced only in their ethnic group and not in yours, which is why you did not hear about it when you were growing up.
[Cynthia in focus group]

[...] *personally for me*, the first problem that I had was the seeds, and the itchiness, why am I putting stuff there (chuckle). So that was my first problem, and then my second problem I was like a-aah, these people they are just people that I have just met, they are not like my family or anything so why should I do what they are telling me. So I just decided not to, yah. **[Cynthia in individual interview]**

In the first response, which she gave in the group, Cynthia begins with a disclaimer that what she is going to say is not about herself, but rather about ‘others.’ By saying, *‘others say’* instead of *‘I did not elongate because of...’*, she dis-identifies with “incomplete women” by giving the group the impression that she herself had undergone elongation. In both instances, she emphasises that family influence (or lack thereof) explains why some women have not undergone elongation. Yet, it is only in the interview that it becomes obvious that she was talking about her own experience in the group, by packaging her answer as if she was talking about other women quite different from her.

Although Tanya and Cynthia did not participate in the same focus group, Tanya, as exemplified by the following exchange, also employed the strategy of passing as a woman who had pulled her labia. This was after I also asked the group in which she participated, why some women choose to forego labia elongation:

Miranda: Like how you grew up.

Mary: People are just lazy

Tanya laughing: They can’t be bothered

Mary: I think they are lazy.

'They can't be bothered' instead of *'I can't be bothered'* is an expression Tanya might have purposefully used to distance herself from women who have not undergone elongation, considering the way Mary was openly critical of such women in this group discussion. It is not surprising therefore, that Tanya did not reveal whether she had undergone elongation, consequently leaving other women in the group guessing her labial status. Nonetheless, Tanya's laughter preceding her response shows that she was being sarcastic, and served as an implicit way of countering Mary's assertions that women without extended labia are 'lazy'. Thus, without being blatantly critical in the group, Tanya downplayed the significance "complete" women attach to labia elongation in how they define themselves as superior. Interviews, however, became safe spaces in which Tanya, Cynthia, and Maidei openly reacted to demeaning comments about women without elongated labia.

"Incomplete" women reacting to (negative) comments about women without elongated labia

What I have illustrated in the above section, using Cynthia and Tanya's examples, is that the women belonging to a stigmatised group, when their 'differentness is not immediately apparent' (Goffman, 1963:57), will employ various strategies as an attempt to distance themselves from this group, if they meet with those who construct themselves as 'normal'. This ensures that they do not attract what Butler (1997:2) terms 'an injurious name', which is meant to reduce them to positions of inferiority. Yet, one who demeans the Other, also 'runs the risk of inaugurating a subject in speech who comes to use language to counter the offensive call' (Butler, 1997:2). What Butler seems to suggest here, is that a negative label (such as "incomplete" women), while intended to marginalise those to which the label is attached, may instead be resisted. In other words, it does not always follow that a stigmatised person will internalise the stigma. I want to demonstrate this argument by focusing on how Cynthia, Tanya, and Maidei challenged derogatory comments made about women without elongated labia. I explored this issue with them specifically in individual interviews, since they had not voiced any criticism about this in the group interviews. In the previous chapter, I wrote about how many women constructed labia elongation as enhancing female sexual attractiveness. They emphasised that a vagina without elongated labia was 'not decorated', and likened it to a 'house without a door'. However, Tanya and Maidei challenged this in individual interviews by emphasising predominantly what they considered as demerits of this practice. On reasons why she had not pulled her labia, Maidei, for

instance identified the pain in pulling, as well as its lack, to her, of aesthetic attraction. With facial expressions showing disgust, she said ‘a vagina should look appetising’, presumably one without elongated labia. She referred to elongated labia as ‘funny dangling things’ and said ‘the sight of them doesn’t go well with me’, although acknowledging with humour that men might get turned on by this. Like Maidei, Tanya also presented elongated labia as unappealing because ‘they start dangling’. In addition, she suggested that they might compromise a woman’s genital hygiene by producing and retaining excessive fluids with a foul smell, and thus were a ‘source of dirt’. Below, I provide interviews excerpts, in which Tanya, Maidei, and Cynthia were specifically responding to their construction as “incomplete” women for not having undergone labia elongation.

‘It doesn’t bother me’ – Tanya reacting to being constructed as “incomplete”

First, I begin with the following exchange I had with Tanya in which she describes how she copes as a woman constructed as “incomplete”.

HV: I just want you to comment on this issue that a woman without *matinji* is an "incomplete" or "inferior" woman. I think it came out in that focus group, and am sure in some of your conversations with other people. Does this bother you when other people say this considering that you don’t have?

Tanya: When people say a woman without *matinji* is incomplete it doesn’t bother me exactly but I see them as uncivilised (1) not open minded, or judgemental (2) coz personally I think it’s ok if they have them but not to think that i am inferior because I don’t have (2) I just view us as two different women and it doesn’t mean one is better than the other it jus means we are different, not a measuring stick of superiority or inferiority.

HV: So even those negative labels don’t bother you?

Tanya: I just view it as a difference in opinion and the way different people view issues (3) I don’t get offended but I tell them I think differently from how they think, coz some of the reasons they cite as to why women must have them, for example keeping a husband (1) to me don’t hold water coz there are some with them but without husbands or divorced. So in my opinion it’s a whole lot of issues that keeps marriages, that could be minus or plus *matinji*.

HV: Do you openly say you don’t have [*matinji*], if asked by others? If yes, why? If no, why?

Tanya: I first have to read between the lines to see if they are judgemental or not to people without. If they are, I might not reveal to them that I don’t have (2) not because I am ashamed but because I don’t want anyone to judge me for the choice that I made in not having them (1) but if they are open minded people I tell them openly that I don’t have.

In this excerpt, Tanya attempts to appear indifferent towards those who ridicule women who have not pulled their labia, by minimising any differences between women with or without elongated labia. A closer look at the complexity of the emotions she is expressing here, one can observe that on one hand, Tanya is presenting the position of those who associate not having labia elongation with incomplete women as ‘*just*’ ‘*a difference of opinion*’, and on the other hand, demonising their opinions as ‘*uncivilised*’. Clearly, it seems she is troubled by this as a woman who has not undergone labia elongation, and perhaps as a coping strategy seeks to minimise the effect of this on her. She exemplified this in the focus group by concealing her labial status to other women. In the individual interview, Tanya alluded to the informal conversations she has had with her female workmates about labia elongation. She mentioned that others, including herself I presume, were ‘embarrassed’ to reveal that they did not pull, but would in the presence of other women pretend and say they ‘pulled a bit’. When I asked her why this was so, she said:

[I]t has to do with being a woman, to be a complete woman, you must have them, so, so if you don't have, some may say can I openly say that I don't have? It's difficult (5) it's not easy to say that I don't have because people might have a party on you (2) they will even start telling you where you can go to get them sorted (laughs), and it's something that is like private you know, it's (1) when you have decided to have them you would rather go and inquire from those people who don't know you, not to tell people who are close to you that you don't have, they will start laughing at you saying where were you when we were doing it (2) so I guess for someone to open up in public...maybe some were even pretending that they have them yet they don't, you never really know

In this passage, Tanya expressed her anxieties and feelings of shame and inadequacy experienced by women like herself who have not undergone elongation. The passage also raises issues about the power these associations of being a good woman with labia elongation carry. It also illustrates how it seems easier to be more explicit about whether you have undergone labia elongation, with people you do not know rather than close friends who will spread the word around and laugh at you for not having had it.

‘No man has ever said that to me’

With Maidei, her reactions to unfavourable constructions of women without elongated labia emerged when I asked her about her reflections and experiences of participating in both group and individual interviews. In her response illustrated in the extract shown below, instead of dwelling more on her positive experiences, she suddenly drifted to how some women in the group spoke negatively about women without *matinji* like herself.

Maidei: It was great learning people's experiences [...but] to some extent yah, some of the contributions made you think that so a man enjoys more with a woman with *matinji*, but I still feel that sex is not all about *matinji*, you may have them, but it doesn't end there. From my experience, it's in the brain and communication with your partner, I don't feel any less adequate or feel at one point I may have failed to enjoy because I don't have *matinji*, I've my own soft spots where I know that once I am caressed or kissed there I am finished (laughs loudly)

HV: So it doesn't bother you to be called an "incomplete" woman

Maidei: No. No man has ever said that to me (short laughter) unless if they are embarrassed to say. Maybe we would get worried if boyfriend says it, maybe I would get worried, but I've never come across a guy like that.

Maidei seems less troubled by the criticisms of being incomplete from other women than Tanya who starts to internalise this view of herself. It seems Maidei's concern is less on the labels themselves, but more on who is passing the derogatory comments about women like her. She is very explicit about emphasising the importance of sex being pleasurable for her as a woman, and she achieves this through speaking about her own soft spots and not for her male partner. She is not concerned with women's views about labia elongation and becoming "complete" because this does not focus enough on women's (heterosexual pleasure). As I have already discussed in this thesis, while most female participants were preoccupied with how this practice enhances male sexual enjoyment, Maidei was one of the very few who questioned the significance of elongated labia in enhancing female sexual pleasure. For raising this in the group discussion, Maidei was criticised and told that male sexual pleasure comes first.

Cynthia criticising other women's version of "complete" women in individual interviews

Whereas Maidei was dismissive of the notion of "complete" women, which undermines female sexual pleasure, Cynthia criticised the image of 'completeness' only defined by the presence of elongated labia, but does not engage with women's financial or economic independence. She raised this in the interview when she mentioned that it is at kitchen parties that women learn that 'a *real woman*' must have elongated labia.

HV: What would you personally consider to be a real woman?

Cynthia: (2) (sighs)

HV: Compared with how they describe a real woman

Cynthia: Besides the anatomy, a-aa I think a real woman should be successful, like in your own right you have to be [financially] successful, in your own right. Like you have what you say this is what I set to achieve, yah tangible things, and then yah, success also goes to your family, like how you, your family, your husband, a real woman you have to love your man, love your kids and the family grows, I think it's all about tangible stuff, things that you have done for yourself, yah, besides the anatomy

By broadening her own conception of a ‘real woman’ to include ‘tangible things’ like financial success, Cynthia 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. I suggested by making an issue of this, Cynthia was also challenging the normative construction of women as sex objects, and thus refusing to be seen as one. Yet, despite her rather negative perception towards the practice, ironically, she did not completely dismiss the symbolic construction of a woman’s anatomy as partly defining what a ‘real’ woman is. Raising these arguments only in the individual (and not group) interview, Cynthia, like Tanya, was possibly trying to avoid a backlash from “complete” women who praised the practice.

“Incomplete” women consulting with their men on whether to pull

Reading into these three women’s accounts using the dominant liberal feminist lens, one is tempted to interpret this as evidence that these women have power and control over their bodies. This is because, from this perspective, the mere idea that these women did not take part in this traditional practice embedded in patriarchal discourses, demonstrates agency and resistance. As hinted in Chapter 2, liberal feminist notions of agency emphasise individual autonomy as the ultimate indicator of empowerment. This capacity to become self-autonomous, also equated with being “modern”, is said to manifest once one goes against the influence of custom, tradition and religion (Clark, 2006), which are constructed as sites of Third world women’s oppression (Mohanty, 1988).

Yet this kind of analysis does not paint the whole picture, and neither does it interrogate the subtle ways in which power works. It assumes individuals can make sense of their lives outside the context in which their social relationships and interactions are embedded. Critics of these liberal notions of female agency, such as Saba Mahmood (2001) argue that agency (or lack thereof) is very complex in its manifestations, and therefore may not be understood through such simplistic lenses.

In my own research, I tried to do justice to the complexity of these issues through interrogating them in interviews and focus groups. I was, as the interviewer, central to the process of co-constructing of the data, through the kinds of relationships I established with the participants and them with me. I did this partly through the ways I steered the conversation through the questions I asked and in relation to issues the participants’ raised.

One of the key interventions I made as interviewer in steering the course of the conversation and introducing topics they had not previously thought about a great deal, was to follow-up with questions that challenged taken for granted assumptions about labia elongation and its significance for them. For instance, in as much as these three women initially presented labia elongation as of little significance in their lives as highlighted earlier, it was only after I asked whether their sexual partners had raised this issue did it emerge that not possessing stretched labia sometimes bothered them. For instance, all three women indicated that they had discussed *matinji* with their partners, at some point in their current or previous relationships. More interestingly, the women themselves, I discovered, initiated this topic in order to elicit their partners' opinion. I show below, how I engaged with illustrative extracts of this from my individual conversations with them.

HV: And, uh, your husband, eer, did he talk about *matinji* when you got married or even before, when you were still boyfriend and girlfriend, is it something that you at one point discussed?

Cynthia: No, we, when we were boyfriend and girlfriend we never talked about that and then when we got married and I was hearing about this a lot, that's when I asked him about it, like (1) do you know there are things like this and this and this and then we talked about it and then I told him that so if I want them then I have to, to pull so that these grow longer and whatever, I think he knew but pretended that, you know. And then he said okay, then, and then he says what if you don't like them (laughs) after you do it, and then I was like yah I don't know (sighs) and then I was like what should we do, should I and then he just said I don't know, coz he was jus like isn't we enjoy what we do so I don't really think (2) it would be necessary, do what you want but there is also a thing about whether, what if we do it and we don't like it, so then I just decided (1) let me just not.

My earlier question to Cynthia on why she has not elongated, yielded a response – *I just decided not to* – that suggested that it was out of her personal choice. The above excerpt, however, demonstrates that the major reason was that her husband had not asked her to do it and not because she felt strongly against labia elongation. So even when she concludes her response with the statement, '*I just decided let me just not,*' it was her husband who (even though uncertain about the connection between elongated labia and sexual pleasure) made that choice possible. That Cynthia asked for her partner's sentiments about *matinji* only after marriage emphasises the point I raised in the preceding chapter, that labia elongation was predominantly constructed, by my participants, as a marital sacrifice.

Whereas Cynthia raised this with her partner after marriage, Tanya had similar discussions with her partner well before marriage. This emerged when I asked her to reflect on her husband's frequent comments about labia elongation during the time I stayed with them while conducting

my research. I wanted to find out from her, if her husband had previously expressed a desire for elongated labia, or was merely using my research as an excuse to start discussing this issue with her – an ethical concern I also raised in Chapter 3.

Tanya: I think it's not the first time that we have talked about it. You know talking about sexuality issues, these issues come to, come to...there are times you talk about it but...

HV: Previously what was his stance regarding *matinji*?

Tanya: He used to say that men will be saying women with *matinji* “taste” far much better...there is a huge difference what-what-what, and I would just say aaah is it? (laughs).

HV: Didn't you take it as someone who had an interest? At that time did you think he considered it significant or not?

Tanya: Aah I just thought that even if he had an interest, he is the one who made the decision to marry me, I'm sure we even talked about it before we even got married and he knew that I didn't have, so if he made the decision to marry me without, then he shouldn't push me to, to have them.

HV: Who raised the issue before you got married?

Tanya: I don't really remember (raising her voice in agitation), I can't say it was something, a subject, a hot subject that I will easily remember who started that discussion, it could actually have been me...he might have started it but it wasn't such as a hot subject, just something that you talk about it in passing, or that maybe, I don't know, maybe you will be thinking that it's a passing subject, when the person is actually testing you, doing one-two testing (short laughter) to know what are your sentiments and leaves it like that, but this [research] has given him the platform to say haa let's pull, let's do this, let's try it and see what happens. But at the same time he has reservations, he wants to experiment, which makes me have doubts because he sees it more as an experiment, so what do we do if the experiment fails, and those things will be dangling already (laughs)? So, haaa, I don't know, we will see.

From this particular account, Tanya wanted to make it clear that she is not interested in having elongated labia even if her husband insists, because when he married her ‘*he knew that I didn't have [elongated labia], so [...] he shouldn't push me, to have them*’. And because she wanted to present herself to me as an “empowered” woman who will not succumb to this practice, or the demands of her husband. My question about who first introduced the issue between herself and her husband unsurprisingly irritated her, because it put her on the spot by confronting the way she was presenting herself to me. This is why she attempted to trivialise my question – firstly, by feigning ignorance of who started the conversation about labia elongation; secondly, by reluctantly acknowledging that it was her who first raised this issue; and thirdly, by suggesting the issue was of little importance by repeatedly saying that, ‘it wasn't such a *hot* subject.’ Yet, clearly, as Tanya herself and I noted, this was presently a *hot* and not just a ‘passing subject’, at least from her husband's perspective, even in light of his so-called reservations.

In the case of Maidei, who is still single, she openly told me that she was the one who started discussing labia elongation with one of her ex-boyfriends. While my questions about who initiated conversations about labia elongation in their relationships aroused annoyance from Tanya, they made Maidei embarrassingly uncomfortable, judging by her loud laughter and short pauses that preceded, and punctuated, her response:

HV: And like in, some of your previous boyfriends, did they show interest in them or did they even talk about it besides Timothy?

Maidei: Uhmhhh,

HV: Did they try looking for them?

Maidei: (loud laughter) (2) Haa-a, okay I'm trying to think of other relationships, (2) aaah they never, they never said anything. Seems (2), okay (2) a person just got, they just got satisfaction with what's, with what was there, we never discussed about this. I actually am the one who brought up the idea with my ex, my current ex (laughs), I'm the one who actually had to bring it up coz I, he is one person that, that in my okay, sexual life that we discussed so openly about eer issues around sex. So I got so comfortable about talking and asking (1) things around that, so I asked him and he told me his opinion, yah.

We witness here Maidei laughing at her own contradictions. First, she attempted to construct herself as a “complete” woman by emphasising that her sexual partners were satisfied with her sexually even though she does not have elongated labia. Yet, despite her previous boyfriends *never* raising this issue with her, she implicitly acknowledged with humour that the issue bothered her, which is why she was the one to initiate conversations about this with one of them. Reading Maidei, Cynthia, and Tanya's narratives, one gets the feeling that by fishing for opinions from their partners about this issue, these women want their men to provide some kind of affirmation by validating them as “complete” women since they do not have elongated labia. But more importantly, their stories raise the complexities of gender power dynamics in heterosexual relations, which undermine simplistic perspectives on African sexuality which homogenises this and reduces it to binary power relations. While coercion might characterise some heterosexual relationships, this is not the only way African men express, or women experience their sexuality (Amadiume, 2006). For instance, one can observe in the different narratives provided by my female participants how heterosexual married couples discuss and negotiate around their sexual desires and anxieties.

Tanya and her shifting positions on labia elongation

For now, I want to demonstrate arguments I raised in Chapter 1 and 2 that identities and subject positions are never static nor coherent, but are contradictory and in motion, as they are always

(re)constructed in relation to the prevailing social context (Hall, 1996) and multiple social categories in which individuals place themselves (Cahill, 2015). With specific reference to women, poststructuralist feminist writer Chris Weedon (1987:86-87) has noted that:

[M]any women acknowledge the feeling of being a different person in different social situations which call for different qualities and modes of femininity [...] contradictory and precarious but ... can introduce the possibility of political choice between modes of femininity in different situations and between the discourses in which they have their meaning. [Weedon, 1987:86-87]

Reflecting on the personal narratives given by the so-called “incomplete” women, Tanya’s account was the most confusing. As I conversed with her within and outside different interview contexts, her positions regarding labia elongation shifted in contradictory ways. Focusing on these shifting positions Tanya took in relation to this practice, is of importance, as it demonstrates what I pointed out in the introduction chapter, that (female) subjectivities and identities are never fixed nor coherent. In the very early stages of my research, I communicated with her on WhatsApp about my research topic, requesting her to participate in my research. She wrote that the practice was ‘altering God’s creation [and] it’s abuse’. Now, months later after this initial conversation, when I asked her during the interview about why some women were not keen on pulling, she argued that:

[...] *they* [some women] think it is some form of abuse, that why should you pull yourself? Why should you try to be something that you are not? If God wanted these things [labia] to grow long, He would have created them long (laughs), there are some people with those line of thoughts, but then there are, but then every, each one will be trying to justify their decision.

When I reminded her that she herself had also earlier expressed that labia stretching is a form of abuse, she initially rebuffed me:

Tanya: (whispering but looking shocked) Did I say that?

HV: (laughing) Yah, you did

Tanya: Where? (laughing) When was this?

HV: (handing over my phone to her to see the WhatsApp chats) Yes you did

Tanya: (still laughing) Oooh (1) aah you! (2) Yah I guess I can say my mind-set has changed to some extent but not to a very big extent in that I used to view it as-as something that is totally unnecessary, just some trouble that women go through that is not even necessary, but through talking to more people and discovering that aah many women they actually think it’s very important, you tend to buy into some of their ideas, and you start thinking that maybe I, it’s just because, it’s just the way I was brought up which made me think that aah it’s not even necessary.

It was only after I reproduced our WhatsApp chats that she admitted that her ‘mind-set has changed to some extent.’ The contradictory positions Tanya took about labia elongation appear influenced by how she positioned herself in relation to me. In that earlier phone conversation, for example, before telling me that labia elongation was ‘altering God’s creation [and] it’s abuse’, she had asked me ‘are you for or against it?’ When I evaded her question and wrote about something else, she rephrased her question *iwe wakaita here elongation? // have you yourself undergone [labia] elongation?* When I said no, she replied that ‘most of those who think it’s important are uneducated’. I argue that in this instance she was presenting herself (and even me) as educated and empowered women and disassociating us from the practice she constructed as a source of ‘abuse’ and against Christianity. Yet, in the interview, she shifted from her initial position when she said ‘I wouldn’t even mind trying it, but I wouldn’t go to a lot of trouble to do it.’ Even more puzzling, was how in the individual interview she all of a sudden made biblical references to rationalise labia elongation. As highlighted in the previous chapter, she was one of the women who argued that labia elongation, though not stated in the bible, is implicitly biblical if done to please the husband. Even in the focus group discussion, I was surprised when she posed the question, ‘so what do we do? I have girl children, should I tell them to pull?’ The question implied that her perception of labia elongation was shifting to an extent that she was now considering educating her own (and church) daughters about this. I found her question perplexing because I went into the focus group with the impression that Tanya would criticise this practice using the same arguments she gave me in our earlier conversations.

Tanya’s shifting and contradictory narratives proved complex to analyse. But rather than seeing contradictions as a “problem”, they should rather be seen as an affirmation that “the self”, or one’s positionality (in relation to research context and particular discourses) is fluid and in a constant flux (Foucault, 1972; Pattman, 2015). If the self ‘also conveys the notion of identity,’ (Foucault, 1988:25), then Tanya’s accounts clearly emphasises that identities are not intrinsic but relational, produced, and constructed through interaction with others (Elliot, 2005). Her shifting perspectives on labia elongation were, therefore, influenced through interaction with other women, and she admits that because most women construct labia elongation as ‘very important, you tend to buy into some of their ideas.’ This begs the question of whether individual interviews are research context in which an interviewee is free to reveal the “authentic” self as suggested in realist or naturalist approaches to social research.

According to Elliot (2005:18), the naturalist view takes the social world as ‘an external reality available to be observed and described by the researcher.’ In other words, it is assumed that once

the interviewer provides a conducive or ‘private’ environment – by separating a participant from the group, for example – the participant will automatically become their ‘real’ self. Even though I took a social constructionist approach in this research by treating participants’ descriptions of their social world not as an essence, but as something that is constantly being produced through interaction. Nonetheless, I found myself falling into the same trap from which I sought to free myself, precisely by expecting Tanya to maintain a very hard stance against labia elongation as she had done in the initial stages of my research. Nonetheless, I came to realise the importance of taking interviews as sites in which people change and develop allegiances and positions. Moreover, as I discussed earlier, Tanya’s narratives also highlight how participants change their views on what is conceived as being such a potentially sensitive topic by “testing the waters” and in this case checking how others construct labia elongation, but more importantly how the women without elongated labia are constructed in relation to those who have undergone the practice.

Conclusion

Despite my study focusing on women from the same social class, the chapter has shown how during the different interviews, the women themselves were raising differences among themselves, not so much only in relation to the different positions they took about labia elongation, but in relation to their labial statuses. It demonstrated how normative femininity was being defined in the different interview contexts. Specifically, the chapter addressed the Othering that was produced through the very process of talking about labia elongation, where women who have undergone elongation constructed themselves as “complete” and superior, while discursively projecting those without elongated labia as “incomplete” and inferior. While these discourses are about producing hierarchies and performing particular identities, they also have enfolded implications (Povinelli, 2006). This is apparent in the way the women who are constructed as “incomplete” indeed express feelings of being inadequate by seeking their sexual partners’ opinions about labia elongation and whether it is something they wanted for their own sexual relations and for their daughters. What the chapter also exemplified, are the ways women police other women’s sexuality through denigrating the so-called “incomplete” women for failing to “prepare” themselves as providers of male sexual pleasure. This differs slightly from what I raised in Chapter 2, where criticisms directed at African women who supposedly fail to live up to cultural expectations are raised by men (Pattman, 1999; Lewis, 2005; Venganai, 2015), rather than by other women as was evident in this chapter.

What this chapter also raises is not only about *what* can be spoken about in either focus groups or individual interview contexts, but *how* is it spoken about. It was clear that focus group discussions were constraining for some women without elongated labia to reveal their labial status and openly challenge the derogatory comments made about women like them. Reflecting on how these women presented themselves in the different interview contexts, I demonstrated how Cynthia and Tanya, for example, tried to pass as “complete” women in the focus groups, while explicitly critical of those who denigrated them only when I interviewed them separately. Yet in the same interviews, the women also expressed their anxieties of being constructed as “incomplete” by sharing personal narratives about how they have consulted with their boyfriends and husbands on whether to pull their labia. Finally, the chapter offered a critique of theories of identities and subjectivity which were treated as fixed, by focusing on Tanya’s shifting constructions and perceptions of labia elongation. The next chapter summarises the key findings, methodological, and theoretical contributions of this study.

Chapter Eight

Pulling it all together

The main motivation of this study was to address knowledge gaps and to satisfy my own curiosity as a Shona woman about how other urban middle class Shona women (and men) negotiate their identities through talk in relation to the practice of labia elongation. This study attempted to raise pertinent questions about how labia elongation comes to be constructed as a “cultural” practice, associated with values understood as “traditional” and why such a practice holds so much interest and relevance for young adults who identify or are identified as “modern”. Taking an inductive approach, the study interrogated urban middle-class Shona women and men’s understandings and interpretations of labia elongation in Zimbabwe. Labia elongation emerged 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 post-colonial African context. But rather than reproducing the communities of belonging usually associated with cultural practices as reflected in most literature – 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 than the ones more readily recognized or assumed. Through speaking about labia elongation, the middle-class, young, well-educated, urban participants in my study found themselves at crossroads of identifying as both modern and traditional, urban and rural (Ferguson, 1999; Garuba, 2003; Clark, 2006).

The study concludes that African bodies and sexualities, as well as gendered cultural practices, are symbolically constructed in relation to personhood, the nation, Christian religion, tradition, Africanness etc., rather than simply in terms of their ethnicity or geographical location. In many ways my findings resonate with Yanagisako & Delaney (1995:18) who persuasively argue that even though ‘coherence is located within each discourse ... [but] people think and act the intersections of [many] discourses’. It means people draw from various discursive resources in how they give meaning to this practice, in the process revealing the entanglement of multiple identifications as experienced by young urban women and men in the context of contemporary Zimbabwe as a postcolonial society.

As alluded to in Chapter 1 and 2, there is a long tradition within Western analytical scholarly thinking which has set up binaries around tradition, ethnicity and sexuality, to project Africans as the Other by means of these categories. My research questions the essentialist constructions of

certain categories of people as either modern or traditional. In particular, it troubles Western understandings of categories of identification in the African context by demonstrating that in practice, these categories are fluid and can be mobilized by various people for various ends. Multiple identifications emerged in relation to being Shona, Zimbabwean, African, and in relation to sexuality, gender and so forth. Although these categories of culture and tradition, urban and rural were key sources of identifications, they were far from simple binaries. While I acknowledge that this study is not the first to conclude that Western categories do not fit well with the realities in Africa, my contribution to this debate lies in the innovative methodology I took, which I revisit below.

Another argument I make in this thesis is that these identificatory categories are productive rather than descriptive, and produce pejorative differences which they appear only to describe. I realised that some participants constructed themselves as “more traditional” in relation to certain young urban men and women whom they constructed negatively as *Salads*, who were seen as ignorant about labia elongation (Chapters 5 and 6). Similarly, women who did not undergo labia elongation were also demeaned and deemed “incomplete” for foregoing what was considered a “traditional/cultural” practice. These gendered dimensions of power were exhibited between participants themselves, and sometimes in relation to other people outside the context of interviews. For instance, participants tended to portray people from certain local ethnicities (e.g. Shangaan, Venda) and nationalities (e.g. Malawian and Mozambican nationals) as “too traditional” and inferior, which in some ways reflects the marginalisation of these communities in Zimbabwe’s social and political histories.

What also emerges from this thesis is that sexuality is both discursive and material as demonstrated in participants’ construction and experience of labia elongation. While the study draws from Foucault’s ideas about the history of sexuality in Europe (see Foucault, 1978), these discourses have traveled around the world. Although colonists were indeed obsessed with (African) sexuality, and introduced particular discourses that tried to represent Africans as the sexualized Other, sexuality remains a discursive concern and a material practice in postcolonial Africa (Chapter 2). The materiality of these discourses of sexuality and categorisations is well articulated by Butler (1990) who argues that discursive but gendered labels such as femininities and masculinities are not only performed, but are also achieved.

I found that talking about labia elongation is not just an abstract exercise but also constitutes a very embodied material practice through which people come to feel themselves to be modern, to be traditional, or more urban or rural. In fact, one of the surprising findings was that not only did

most of the female participants speak favorably about labia elongation, but they also engaged in the actual practice. It is in that interesting circulation between discourse and the material out of which emerges a critique of sexuality and how ethnicity and sexuality is lived and embodied. I attempted to show that the body is a means and a site of constructing very fluid categories, and most importantly, this emerged from the bottom-up, grounded approach I used, wherein lies part of the innovation and contribution of this study.

Methodological contributions

My study aimed to be inductive and exploratory as advocated in versions of ‘grounded theory’, with the emphasis on obtaining data to inform the theoretical directions that research should take (Charmaz, 2006). Influenced by this approach, my concern was to develop understandings of how my participants theorised or made sense of their social worlds, and to engage with how they constructed labia elongation. This meant developing semi-structured interview approaches which put emphasis on the participants to set the agenda and to pick up on issues which they raised. It also meant engaging with the participants as knowledge producers, exploring how they constructed labia elongation by focusing on the significance this held for them, and meanings they attached to this and the kinds of connections they made between this and issues and concerns they raised about gender, sexuality, childhood, adulthood, modernity and tradition (Pattman & Bhana, 2016). The result was a production of lay theories about how certain young urban Shona women and men think about personhood, how they embody who they are by exploring, for example, issues about completeness and authenticity, despite contestations of these. These interviews were also pedagogic because I was asking questions which made people think carefully about what they were saying and also allowing them to learn from each other.

The contradictory views some Shona women expressed about labia elongation in different interview contexts, and at different stages in the course of the same discussion, might be understood from a perspective which understands interviews as instruments for collecting information from subjects, as evidence of their inconsistency, thereby undermining their ‘reliability’ as subjects. As explained in Chapter 1 and 3, I take these interviews and focus groups as particular social contexts or ethnographic encounters, in which people present themselves and negotiate relations with others through dialogue and emotions they convey. I interpreted these inconsistencies as exemplifying the gendering of sexuality talk and the particular risks this may pose for women and not men.

At the same time, the study took a Foucauldian discursive analytic approach, and a strongly anti-essentialist one at that, in order to emphasize the importance of language in mediating how certain categories are constructed. Yet the thesis slightly departs from Foucault's work in that it focuses on the interview dynamics of what people say, which is why I took long extracts to provide the reader with a sense of the emotions and notions they convey and how they play around with these categories. We witness, for example in Chapter 6, how culture is made and negotiated in relation with other people in the conversations that took place in focus group discussions.

Humour also features significantly and sexuality is animated and instantiated in the way people speak about it (Chapter 4). I argue that experience is always mediated by language, and that sexuality is not spoken about in abstraction but always in connection with other things – like the significance of Google as an important site of sexual knowledge as discussed in Chapter 5. Shona women and men draw their meanings from how sexuality has been framed historically and engage with how this constrains or opens up other avenues of how they construct it themselves, for example in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, and religion.

The influence of a grounded theory approach is reflected not only in my methodology and analysis, but also in the writing and constant re-writing of chapters and I found that the best way of presenting the chapters was to draw on the central orientation of grounded theory. However, as I discovered, one of the challenges of doing grounded theory work is the iterative back and forth movement between data and analysis, which produces many complex interrelations—sometimes agreeing or contradicting, other times developing another theme which does not necessarily connect with the next.

In line with a certain feminist tradition, I reflexively put myself in the picture in terms of my own experiences and encounters. Throughout the thesis I engage with how my own assumptions are questioned in the process of doing this research, for example my associations of cultural practices with rural people. However, being able to identify as a Shona woman with similar characteristics with the very people I was researching allowed for intimate conversations about sexuality, amongst other things, which in other instances turned out to be overtly explicit.

Ethical contributions

From the initial stages of conceptualising this research, I was interested in engaging with current practices of academic research ethics as discussed in Chapter 3. My own encounters with matters

of ethical concern generated a range of questions that may otherwise not receive much attention in literature. What does confidentiality mean in the context of conducting a focus group discussion in the home of a married woman as her husband is seated waiting outside in the car? Would it have been better to postpone this discussion considering the difficulties encountered in getting participants to meet at this particular place and time? If confidentiality was breached, what are these aspects of confidentiality that would otherwise have been protected if the venue totally excluded the husband? Given that the husband was not within hearing distance of the discussions, how did this affect the other participants? How private can a focus group with men in a public venue be, when one cannot bar commercial clients from entering this space? Given that this was the most convenient venue chosen by the participants and big enough to accommodate all of us, as a researcher, there was very limited social engineering I could do in this space to conform to a picture of “more ethical research”.

Furthermore, the ethical research concerns that I encountered highlight the challenges of conducting fieldwork among friends and family where overnight visits are routine in everyday encounters. For example, it was not unusual for me to sleep at some of the women’s houses even when I was not doing research. In what ways does my research practice differ from foreign anthropologists who visited villages and slept in chiefs’ households? How then do “native” researchers conduct fieldwork in their own backyards or among their own people? In my view, there is a need to rethink and question what is meant by confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, and many other concepts considered important for research ethics committees. Rather than provide conclusive answers about how to deal with ethics in the field, perhaps what is more important is that researchers in these societies should constantly be reflexive about ethical dilemmas they encounter since these are never final (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Contribution to African feminist debates about African sexualities and categories of identification

This research is an attempt to contribute to “knowledges from the South” by providing insights into how tradition, ethnicity, female sexual desire, race, and gender in Zimbabwe specifically, and Africa more generally, are understood and lived. I approach the question of how to know about or reflect on these concerns by drawing on postcolonial and feminist poststructuralist perspectives arrived at inductively. The research poses questions about what it means to be a decolonial person in Africa and what it means to be a woman in post-independent Zimbabwe.

Bringing my study findings into conversation with existing feminist literature on African sexualities, reviewed in the first two chapters of this thesis, reveals both contradictions and similarities. Western paradigms of thinking – reflected in narratives by international institutions such as WHO – that interpret female genital modification practices in Africa as harmful, dangerous, and unhealthy are implicitly in question in my study. The limitations of these biomedical interpretations of African sexualities and cultural practices are quite evident in my study in which people rarely spoke about the “dangers” of labia elongation. Instead, we get a sense that for many women, this is an empowering practice, which improves their self-esteem as sexual beings, as Tamale (2008) also reports about Baganda women. However, I depart slightly from Tamale’s conclusions and argue that feelings that derive from notions of being “complete” are contextual, contentious, and contradictory, such that at times they do not entail women’s positive perceptions of themselves. As Chapter 7 illustrates, although women who elongate their labia construct themselves as “complete” in relation to those who do not, and labia elongation as a practice that binds marriages together, they also experience “incompleteness” as they fail to control their men’s infidelity.

Moreover, as the research findings demonstrate, labia elongation is no longer a practice which reflects rural-urban demarcations. Rather, it is constructed significantly just as a practice for women. This raises questions about the Othering of particular categories of women, because how participants defined labia elongation in relation to personhood was not determined by categories of ethnicity, modern-traditional, or rural-urban, even though at times it appeared to be so. In thinking about what this practice serves in urban contemporary Zimbabwe, ideas about womanhood and the sacrifices that come with it are at the centre of women’s (and men’s) concern, as reflected in notions of “completeness” discussed in Chapter 7. Furthermore, the idea of a “normal” vagina as one without elongated labia, which I problematise in the first chapter, is questioned, while having elongated labia is normalised especially by female participants in the different interview contexts.

The thesis also contributes to African feminist postcolonial debates about female sexual desire and pleasure. On the one hand, we have feminists like McFadden (2001, 2003) who argue for more studies that engage with female sexual desire in Africa. They go further to suggest that the invisibility of discussions about female sexual pleasure is tied to ideas about African tradition and culture which constrain such expression. While findings partly confirm this narrative, I also found that Christian discourses were still significant in regulating female sexual expression in contemporary Africa, which is overlooked in most postcolonial feminist literature. Those who

write about the contribution of Christian discourses to a repression of African female sexuality often limit their analysis only to the colonial era. This, I suggest, gives the impression that these discourses are now insignificant in the way African people negotiate their sexualities in postcolonial contexts. Secondly, it implies that Christianity is a homogenous and static discourse that has not evolved in light of the social transformations in these African locales. However, as evidenced by events at the kitchen party organised by one of the Pentecostal churches in Harare discussed in Chapter 5, the elaborate and explicit sexual lessons Christian women gave in many ways contradicts assumptions about postcolonial Christianities and their contribution to issues of black African women's sexuality.

In speaking to the need to contextualise and historicise when and how African female sexualities became repressed (Pereira, 2003), I argue that Christian discourses and their influence should be located in the (colonial) past as well as in the present. This allows us to observe the continuities and discontinuities of particular Christian discourses and their construction of specific traditional practices and African sexualities in general. It also means engaging more with people's agency, in a Foucauldian sense, by focusing on how they redefine or counter the very discourses that seek to regulate them (Weedon, 1987; Butler, 1997) as illustrated by some women and men in this study who invoked Christian discourses to legitimise labia elongation. While female (and male) sexual desire was a significant theme in the study, this was only a part of the broader emic perspective of this practice. Labia elongation is not only about sexual pleasure, but also about gendered and generational power through obedience and submission to adult female and male authority as exemplified in the chapter on sexuality education.

Also emerging from this study is a critique of the idea by some African feminists, such as Patricia McFadden (2001), that formal education makes a difference among women and their attitudes towards customary or cultural practices. While formal education, like Christianity, teaches us not be "cultural" because it is considered uncivilised, educated, urban, middle-class Christian Shona women engaging (or not) in labial pulling are speaking about this practice on their own terms, even though there are contestations among themselves. This study therefore takes seriously ordinary people's ideas about African sexual cultures and customs, and redeems us from Western feminist postcolonial discourses that project us as uncivilised, backward, oversexed, and so forth. Using both the discourse and practice of labia elongation, my main argument is that contemporary Shona women construct, challenge, and contradict local notions of personhood and completeness but at times in ways that are distinct or contrary to how women elsewhere are generally identified in feminist literature. Certainly, this provokes scholarship by

non-African scholars who treat African people as a homogenous people with a homogenous (sexual) culture (Tamale, 2011).

Given my methodological approach, empirically grounded theories, and the ethical reflections offered in this chapter, which draw together all the preceding chapters, I argue strongly that Shona women (and men) are heterogeneous and do not operate with a fixed idea of what constitutes sexuality, custom, tradition, or modernity. Rather, they provide their own explanatory (and highly contested) frameworks through which they define their personhood and construct their identities in relation to labia specifically and sexuality, tradition, custom, and ethnicity more broadly.

Limitations of this study and areas for future research

Methodologically, since I worked with a small sample in order to give an insight of how Shona women (and men) make meaning of labia elongation, in and through their bodies and their identifications as postcolonial subjects, my study findings cannot be generalised to the rest of the Shona population in Zimbabwe. Because the main concern in this study was what (and how) people speak about this practice, rather than a simple description of an unchanging “cultural practice”, future research could explore in detail the relationship between labia elongation and female sexual pleasure for different categories of women, including those who elongated their labia as adults after their first sexual experience. Another comparative study might focus on women and men in rural areas (who are usually constructed as “repositories” of culture) to interrogate how they construct labia elongation or their sexualities, and how they negotiate between different categories of identification which were central to this study. Such studies would thus benefit from my findings and the methodological approaches I took in this study.

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Appendix A List of participants who participated in this study

	Participant Pseudonym	Gender (Age)	Description
1	Shuvai	Female (38)	Married, underwent elongation, participated in interview and focus group 1
2	Chido	Female (26)	Married, underwent elongation, participated in interview only
3	Mary	Female (33)	Divorcee, underwent elongation, only participated in focus group 1
4	Miranda	Female (32)	Married, underwent elongation, participated in interview and focus group 1
5	Tanya	Female (36)	Married, participated in focus group 1 and interview, did not undergo labia elongation
6	Rudo	Female (33)	Married, underwent elongation, participated in interview only
7	Ruva	Female (34)	Married, underwent elongation, participated in interview only
8	Chenai	Female (34)	Married, underwent elongation, participated in interview only
9	Cynthia	Female (27)	Married, participated in focus group 2 and interview, did not undergo labia elongation
10	Maidei	Female (32)	Single, participated in focus group 1 and interview, did not undergo labia elongation
11	Gloria	Female (26)	Married, only participated in focus group 2, did not undergo elongation
12	Shamiso	Female (34)	Married, only participated in focus group 2, underwent elongation
13	Paida	Female (37)	Married, only participated in focus group 2, underwent elongation
14	Tino	Female (27)	Single, only participated in focus group 2 and interview, underwent elongation
15	Ruth	Female (20)	Single, only participated in focus group 2* ³⁶

³⁶ * This indicates that I am uncertain of the participant's labia status

16	Chiedza	Female (21)	Single, only participated in focus group 2, did not undergo elongation
17	Chipo	Female (20)	Single, only participated in focus group 2, underwent elongation
18	Mazvita	Female (36)	Married, only participated in focus group 2, underwent elongation
19	Sekai	Female (25)	Single, only participated in mixed focus group, did not undergo elongation
20	Merjury	Female (24)	Single, only participated in mixed focus group*
21	Pius	Male (27)	Single, only participated in mixed focus group
22	Tendai	Male (25)	Single, only participated in mixed focus group
23	Kuda	Male (21)	Single, only participated in mixed focus group
24	Obert	Male (30)	Single, only participated in male focus group
25	Ras	Male (29)	Single, only participated in male focus group
26	Tadiwa	Male (37)	Married, only participated in male focus group
27	Albert	Male (39)	Married, only participated in male focus group
28	Taurai	Male (30)	Married, only participated in male focus group
29	Masimba	Male (35)	Married, only participated in male focus group
30	Sam	Male (27)	Single, only participated in male focus group

Appendix B Interview aide memoire

NOTE: The following are the sort of topics and questions that were asked to participants in the participatory interviews and focus group discussions. However, I want to emphasise that the questions were not asked in the order they have been listed in this interview guide. I could not determine in advance all the exact questions I should ask since part of this exploratory research's aim was to encourage participants themselves to set the agenda while I as researcher picked up on the issues they raise. This means the direction of questions changed during the course of the research depending on what the participants said.

General self- description Questions

Please tell me a bit about yourself. How old are you? Level of education? What are you currently doing (job/studies etc.)?

Are you married? Are you in a relationship? Do you have kids? Have you stayed in the urban areas all your life?

Ethnicity and culture

Which ethnic group do you belong to?

Is your ethnic background of importance to you?

How would you explain what ethnicity is to someone from another planet who had never experienced ethnicity before?

What it means to belong to a particular ethnic identity and if it makes much difference to them.

What are the differences and similarities between people from different ethnic backgrounds and are any of these striking? If so how?

If married or in a relationship, does your spouse belong to the same ethnic group?

Could you imagine having a boyfriend/girlfriend, spouse/partner from a different ethnic group? If not, why not? If so, why?

Are there practices performed by women/men from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds that you dislike and/or like?

Are there things you admire about women/men from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds? If so, give examples.

Relations with family members and friends

Are there adult men/women in your family who are important in your life? How?

Do you have family members that you are very free to talk to? What kinds of things do you talk about?

When you have personal problems who do you prefer talking to?

Gender and Cultural Practices

Are there specific rituals or practices that you have had to go through (or expected to go through) because you are a woman/man?

How do men and women prepare for marriage for example?

Who gives them advice? About what?

What do people consider to be the ideal male/female body? What are the kind of things that they say are most important?

Perceptions and Attitudes

What comes to your mind when you hear about labia elongation?

Have any of your friends/family members gone through it? What do they think of it?

What stories have you heard (from friends/relatives/other people etc.) about the process of labia elongation? How do they describe the process? Is it conceived as an easy process? Painful?

Are there any positive stories you have heard about it? If yes, what?

Are there negative stories you have heard about labia elongation? If yes, what?

Is it something that you would encourage your peers/friends to do? Why?

(Male participants) Is the topic of labia elongation one that men talk about? If yes, old or young men? What are some of the things they say about it?

(Male participants) How do men describe the ideal body of a woman? Is stretched labia something that men look forward to seeing on their sexual partners' bodies? Why?

Learning and knowledge about labia elongation

Are there other names that you know to describe labia elongation? If yes, please share?

What kind of women engage in labia elongation? At what ages?

How do you know about labia stretching?

From whom did you hear about labia elongation? Is it something you constantly heard about when you were growing up? Was it spoken about in school? At home? Where else?

From what you know or have heard, how would you describe the process of labia elongation?

From where did you receive most knowledge about sexual issues?

Symbolic meanings of labia elongation

In your opinion, do all women stretch their labia?

What do you think are the reasons that encourage some women stretch their labia?

Why do you think other women do not stretch their labia?

How common do you think this practice is?

If you have/had a daughter, would you encourage her to elongate her labia? Why?

Have you ever heard of men (young and/or older) encouraging their sexual partners to stretch their labia? If yes, for what reasons?

Do women encourage one another to stretch their labia? Why?

Age and adulthood

What does it mean to feel like an adult?

When did you start feeling like an adult? What had happened?

Is there a particular person (or people) who taught you about becoming an adult? What were the issues you discussed? At what age/point in time did they introduce these issues to you?

Do you recall when first you came across information about specific practices such as labia elongation? How old were you?

What were your views then regarding the practice(s)?

Have these views changed over the years? How and why?

Female and male enjoyment

Do you think labia elongation is associated with sexual enjoyment? In what ways?

Who do you think benefits from elongated labia? How?