

Some Reflections on Politeness Strategies among Shona Speaking Couples of Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT Gender equality has been a topical issue internationally with many organizations advocating equality between males and females as crucial for development but, ironically, cases of gender-based violence are on the rise in African societies. Based on the hypothesis that mis-communication is one of the major causes of gender-based violence, this paper explores politeness strategies used by Shona speaking couples. The conflict resolution strategies employed include the use of proverbs, modal verbs, enclitics, tag questions, totems, hedges, silence and the inclusive pronunciation. The researchers seek to demonstrate culture-specific polite strategies that have the potential to curtail aggression between interactional parties, especially how they enhance smooth communication, obviate crisis and disruption and maintain social equilibrium and friendly relations. This paper underscores the importance of communication and recourse to traditional linguistic practices, as strategies for reducing cases of domestic violence involving spouses.

INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe, since the attainment of political independence from white minority rule in 1980, significant progress has been made towards providing the legislative, planning and implementation frameworks for gender equality in many areas except that of the family. The family has been characterized by conflict, violence and insecurity which in some ways stifle socio-cultural development. Gender-based violence and specifically, domestic violence which involves spouses has been a thorn in the flesh with statistics rising every day. The gender equality discourse has recently taken the toll globally with many international and local organizations calling for the need to ensure that women are protected and not discriminated against. Since 1980, significant progress has been made towards promoting awareness in the areas of Gender in Governance, Education and Training, Productive Resources and Employment, Gender in Health and HIV and AIDS as well as Gender, Environment and Climate Change in Zimbabwe. This progress has, however, not been complemented by peaceful progress in the family domain given the staggering figures on divorce and domestic violence. It is, therefore, crucial to examine why this is happening despite measures that have

been put in place and to find ways to ensure a smooth transformation of the lives of women in post-independent Zimbabwe.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are two-fold: firstly, to expand the debate on the causes of domestic violence and identify culturally inappropriate language use in conflict situations as one of the main causes. Secondly, to demonstrate through examples drawn from existing studies on hedging strategies in Shona (Gotosa 2010; Chivero 2012; Mhlanga 2012) that there are politeness strategies within the Shona culture that can be relied on by females in cross-gender interactions to reduce incidences of violence. The politeness strategies are examined using analytical tools from Politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) and *Africana Womanist* (Hudson-Weems 2009) theories.

Background on Gender and Domestic Violence

Policies and frameworks have been developed and put in place to ensure and foster peace and equality in the family domain. Statistics on cases of gender-based violence seen particularly in acts of domestic violence involving spouses

es (The Human Rights Bulletin of Zimbabwe 2011) continue to soar. Statistics from the Zimbabwe National Statistics office show that between 2012 and the first quarter of 2014, approximately 1100 women and girls were victims of domestic violence. Additional statistics from the High Court of Zimbabwe show that the country recorded an average of 96 divorces monthly in 2012. In addition, statistics from the Msasa Project reveal that thousands of women were offered counselling services in the year 2009, on issues related to domestic violence. The Christian Counselling Centre reports that the centre attends to about 25 couples seeking counselling services around domestic violence every week. Academic studies by Tom and Musingafi (2013) and Maruta (2011), among others, corroborate findings from these reports. All these figures are startling despite intervention measures that have been put in place by the Zimbabwean government and concerned organisations.

In line with global commitments, the Zimbabwean government set up a series of legislative and policy reforms and programmes against domestic violence, abuse and rape which include the enactment of the Criminal Law Act (2006), Domestic Violence Act (2007) and the Anti-Domestic Violence Council to enforce this law. Mechanisms were also put in place to effectively implement the Sexual Offences Act of 2001. The annual 16 Days of Activism against Gender Based Violence and other campaigns were also set up. The provisions in the 2013 Constitution also uphold the commitment to deal with domestic violence. Chapter 4 of the 2013 New Constitution of Zimbabwe, Part 2, Sections 51, 52 and 53 provide for the right to dignity, personal security and freedom from inhuman and degrading treatment and all forms of violence. Protective strategies available from relevant government departments include contacting the police, obtaining restraining order or seeking refuge at a domestic violence shelter (Maruta 2011).

The types of violence often cited are sexual, physical, emotional, psychological and socio-economic, as well as denial of access to needs and requirements (Maruta 2011). These types of violence are assumed to be all directed to women by men because of the latter's biological make-up and gender roles. Silence, the cultural setup of patriarchy, economic dependency of women on men, a weak and unprotective policy frame-

work, cultural, religious or ideological permissiveness and bias that condones gender-based violence, poor reporting and redress mechanisms for victims; are cited in the elaboration of causes of domestic violence involving spouses (The Human Rights Bulletin of Zimbabwe 2011; Maruta 2011).

The argument raised in this paper, however, is that issues often cited as causes of domestic violence are not enough. Instead, conflict or misunderstanding which often precedes violent acts which is communicated through language may be the real cause in most cases. Language use in conflicts or misunderstanding is a crucial determinant of how the conflict or misunderstanding is resolved. This means that language use by either part may either cause or prevent violence. Due to the fact that men are genetically physically stronger than women, the latter are usually the most affected, regardless of the fact that the man may have provoked the violent acts (Tom and Musingafi 2013; Maruta 2011).

Previous Studies on Women's Language

This paper argues that the strategic use of polite linguistic resources can be used to curb the rising cases of gender-based violence and specifically domestic violence which involves spouses. This argument is proffered despite the abundance of literature that identifies polite language as women's language which disadvantages them. Lakoff (1975), for example, through the Deficiency theory, claims that women use different linguistic strategies from men in the form of tag questions, hedges and question intonation with statement syntax, to express uncertainty. Lakoff's claims are corroborated by Zano (2007) who studied gender-based differences in the use of directives in the Shona language of Zimbabwe. He observed that men give commands; strong directives especially to their wives. Women, on the other hand, give directives in the form of suggestions, requests and tag questions. The behaviour of women is interpreted as some form of deviation, showing women to be overly polite, hesitant and lacking in self-confidence. As a result, they are 'systematically denied access to power, on the grounds that they [women] are not capable of holding it as demonstrated by their linguistic behaviour' (Lakoff 1975: 7). Similarly, Uchida (1992), using analytical insights from the Dominance theory,

interprets discourse patterns in women and men as a reflection of women's subordination to men within the context of patriarchy. Thus women are seen as using language which is powerless and deficient. This perception has led to the thinking that women should change the way they speak and 'speak like men' for them to be effective (Uchida 1992: 550).

Chivero (2012), in a study of discourse in parliament, finds that females speak like men in several parliamentary exchanges. This observation is significant for this study because the researchers maintain the hypothesis that due to the whole-sale embrace of the concept of gender and equality, women may adopt linguistic resources believed to be authoritative and assertive in the workplace, for use in the home setting which often results in conflict. Not all studies on women's language, however, regard women's use of polite strategies such as hedges, tag questions, silence, modal verbs etc. as deficient. Uchida (1992: 2) and Sunderland (2008), for example, criticize Lakoff's regard of women's speech as deficient and ineffective as not being based on a truly neutral standard, but from the male norm and hence not applicable to all situations.

Gotosa (2010) examines the use of tag questions by Shona male and female speakers and notes that they not only signify lack of authority but are multifunctional, serving as facilitative, confrontational, manipulative and confirmation strategies as well depending on the situation. Other scholars have identified linguistic differences between male and female use of language and regard the differences to be a result of cultural variations, due to socialisation (Maltz and Borker 1982). This approach emphasizes the idea that women and men are socialized into different socio-linguistic sub-cultures, and so the differences in the linguistic strategies they use should be interpreted as reflecting and maintaining gender specific sub-cultures. So if women use polite resources and men do not, it means men have a different way of communicating that enables them to achieve their own goals. Women and men thus 'learn to do different things with words in conversation' (Uchida 1992: 548). This suggests that men and women's linguistic strategies are different but equally effectiveness.

Scholars such as Fraiser (1990), Holmes (1995), Eelen (2001) and Watts (2007) have approached the issue of gender differentiated lin-

guistic features from a politeness angle and view differences as resulting from differences in the exercise of politeness. They argue that in comparison to male speakers, females are more likely to express positive politeness and to use mitigating strategies in order to avoid or weaken threats to an interlocutor's face (Brown and Levinson 1987). Holmes (1995: 3) is of the opinion that men may not use politeness strategies more because of their tendency to orient towards the 'referential' functions of language (conveying information, facts or content). But, women may use language to show politeness as they are more concerned with the affective rather than the referential aspect of utterances (the use of language to convey feelings and reflect social relationships). Besides, polite behaviour displayed through language should not just be judged as a weakness, until it fails to achieve the speaker's goals but face saving (Fraiser 1990), mitigating strategies (Eelen 2000) and strategic conflict avoidance strategies (Watts 2007).

Yet, other scholars have called for sensitivity to context when analysing language and gender issues. One such scholar is Hudson-Weems (2009) who named and defined the *Africana Womanist* perspective. *Africana Womanism* is an Afro-centric theory with eighteen descriptors which include family centred, self-namer, self-definer, genuine sisterhood, adaptable, respectable, authentic, respectful to elders, spiritual, ambitious, nurturing, mothering, whole, flexible role player, male compatible and strong. The fundamental foundation for this theory is in the African traditional philosophy and values. It is not completely divorced from some of the earlier theories discussed above. Just like the politeness and cultural difference approaches, *Africana Womanism* appreciates the existence of gender differences, but views them positively as emanating from cultural up-bringing. *Africana Womanism* actually contradicts the assumptions of Deficient and Dominance approaches which seem to suggest that women are somehow disadvantaged, in that they have to use ineffective language and language that reflects their inferiority.

The current paper argues that women may not need to change communication styles in the home, but utilise them as a way of resolving conflicts. Culture may determine who uses what strategy and that has nothing to do with the value of the polite linguistic strategies. The ques-

tion of effectiveness should be related to the specific context of interaction and the goals of interlocutors. This implies that if one uses polite strategies without provoking violence and achieves what one wants then that strategy is effective, and if one uses strong language which is authoritative and is beaten, threaten or abused then that strategy is ineffective.

Power is sometimes not in the language but in what is achieved through the language. Thus, motivated by a desire to challenge the claims made by scholars who adopt the Dominance and Deficient approaches, this study utilises the Cultural/Difference and Politeness approaches. This, as well as Africana Womanist theories to demonstrate that women in Zimbabwe and specifically in the Shona culture can utilise tentative, polite linguistic resources in the Shona language to communicate with their husbands without provoking domestic violence. The following sections present a discussion of the findings of this study.

FINDINGS

This section presents a discussion of data. It analyses the use of tag questions, enclitics, modal verbs and address terms in conversations.

Tag Questions

Tagging is the practice of appending a fragment of a question in the sentence final position which grants an interrogative interpretation to its otherwise non-interrogative host. In Shona, *nhaika?* or *handitika?* (is that so) are tag questions which can be appended to a declarative and imperative clause respectively, turning them into suggestions that semantically function to confirm whether or not the addressee agrees with the speaker. The practice of tagging has been categorised as indexing gender and particularly femaleness (Lakoff 1975). Because the tag seems to diminish the force and confidence implied in the original declarative or imperative, tagged constructions have been regarded as weak and ineffective ways of communication; reflecting powerlessness, passivity and inferiority of women who use them. This paper, however, argues that these constructions can be used to forestall opposition, embed criticism and solicit information without offending the interlocutor in spousal discourse. Below are some ex-

tractions of tag constructions drawn from Gotosa (2010).

(1) Wife to Husband

Maita zvakanaka mukauya nemari Baba vaChipo. Totonotenga zvinhu zvekumusika, handitika? (You did well in bringing the money Chipo's father, we can now go and buy goods for the market, **is that so?**) (Gotosa 2010: 48).

(2) Wife to husband

Dai makandiisira imwe mari muaccount Baba vaGamu mungadai musina kuzobirwa yese, handitiwo? (If you had deposited some of the money into my account Gamu's father, it wouldn't have been all stolen, **right?**) (Gotosa 2010: 47).

(3) Wife to husband

And nhasi makadhinikana Baba vaChiedza. Hamusi kutomboda zvekutaura. Hungwe akakubhowai nezuro handitika? (Today you are bored Chiedza's father. You don't even want to talk. Hungwe disappointed you a lot yesterday, **is that so?**) (Gotosa 2010: 53).

In (1) the wife wanted the money that the husband had brought to be used to buy goods for selling at the market, and so avoided an outright instruction to the husband which would have reduced the chances of her getting what she wanted. As a result, she began by appreciating the fact that the husband had brought the money home: *matoita zvakanaka mauya nemari* (you did well in bringing money) and then proceeded to plan what the money should be used for *totonotenga zvinhu zvekumusika* (we can now go and buy goods for the market) and then makes it appear like the decision should come from the husband *handitika?* (is that so?). To tell the husband out rightly what the money should be used for as meant by the imperative: *totonotenga zvinhu zvekumusika* (we can now go and buy goods for the market), is to impose upon him who has earned the money thereby denying him the freedom of choice. Maruta (2011) identifies denial of access to needs and requirements as a form of domestic violence. Instead of quarrelling with the husband, demanding needs and requirements, the woman can make the command

a suggestion. The tag, which transforms the instruction into a polite suggestion, persuades the husband to comply.

In (2) and (3) the tag serves to soften criticism of the husband. The wife is criticizing or actually accusing or censoring the husband for keeping all the money. The use of the tag, however, changes the direct criticism into something like a suggestion that may be if the husband had not kept all the money some of it would not have been stolen. This way, the tag softens the attack and is likely to disarm the husband hence preventing him from retaliating or defending himself. According to Gotosa (2010), the toned down criticism weakens the hearer who normally is forced to agree with the speaker.

Tag questions thus become soft weapons for women to manoeuvre through the repressive situation (cultural constraints) and achieve their goals. By so doing, a correction is assured through the utterance as well as good relations. For politeness reasons, one has to exercise restraint especially in situations such as the above where, if a direct attack is used, it embarrasses the listener (the husband) and may result in a tense atmosphere. Leech (1983) notes that the use of tag questions is meant to establish and maintain comity. Comity is the ability of participants in a social interaction to engage in an atmosphere of relative harmony. Even though stereotypical thinking would associate the use of polite resources such as tags with women. Gotosa (2010) and Mhlanga (2012) have observed tag questions being used by males in positions of authority for purposes of maintaining harmony with their subordinates. Tag questions, since they are polite forms, may not be authoritative language in terms of locution, but they are authoritative in an embedded way since they are a means of subtly attacking the interlocutor.

Use of Enclitics e.g. -wo and -ka

The enclitics -ka and -wo are normally used when speakers want their hearers to know that they (the speakers) have so much confidence that the hearers will agree with them. The use of these enclitics results in the hearers finding it difficult to do anything else but comply. According to Gotosa (2010), speakers often use these forms to persuade hearers to agree with them. The enclitics -wo and -ka that have been added to the interjectives *handiti* and *nhai* (is that so)

in examples (1), (2) and (3) make the statements more of pleas meant to force agreement. These enclitics go a long way in softening imperatives and commands and preventing a violent response.

Modal Verbs

According to Mhlanga (2012), modal verbs function as hedges in Shona; serving multiple functions which include toning down imperatives and commands. Mhlanga cites *pamwe* (maybe), and *tinogona*, (we can) as verbs that can be used to avoid the face threatening act of commanding or openly directing someone to do something. Women may use these devices not because they are subordinates, but because they are useful strategies that can also even be used by males to make strong statements tentative. Mhlanga (2012), for example, found out that these strategies are often used by male nurses to ensure compliance from patients.

Inclusive Pronoun ti- (we)

The woman in example (1) strategically uses the pronoun *to-* in *totonotenga* (we have to go and buy) as a persuasive strategy. It does not necessarily mean they are going to buy together. According to Chivero (2012: 174), the 'we' pronoun can be used to emphasize unity in dealing with issues and stresses the need for doing things together. If a woman emphasizes the fact that as husband and wife they should work together it helps to coerce the partner into agreeing. The principal function of the directive 'we' is to get others to perform an action that is in the speaker's own interest. The wife can tell the husband to buy or tell the husband that she is going to buy what she wants but, like Venar (1994) observes, that does not show value for harmonious relationships as demanded by our culture and may result in conflict which may lead to violence.

Avoiding Direct Reference

According to Chivero (2012), using a proper name is the most explicit way of addressing, or referring to a person in a very direct way which often contributes to competitiveness and hence conflict, especially between spouses where the male regards himself as the head. A wife can

refer to her husband by the first name as in 'John' with different effects. However, in the context of conflict, the use of the first name may have negative implications in different cultural contexts. Direct reference can also be in the form of the pronoun *iwe* 'you'. Chivero (2012) further notes that such direct reference in a competitive environment implies confrontation and challenge. Direct reference and hence confrontation as shown in the following example invites violence regardless of whether said by male to male or female to male.

(4) *Wife to Husband*

Unoswera uchipedzera mari mumahure ako zvako uchikanganwa kuti une **umwe munhu** anoda kudya. Haunyari! (You waste all the money on your prostitutes forgetting that you have someone (= 'me') who needs food. You are not even ashamed of yourself!) (Makoni and Mashiri 2003: 30).

The impact of the above statement can best be understood if compared to example (2) where a wife is also complaining about careless spending of money but in an embedded manner. The wife directly attacks the man for wasting money. This manner of speaking usually culminates into fights of which if the wife is not physically stronger, she can end up reporting as a 'victim' of domestic violence at the police station. Instead of this direct address, there are options as discussed below.

Totems

Among the Shona people, totems can be used in addressing male counterparts to pacify and coerce them into doing what one wants. According to Hodza (1979), a totem is an animal name that a clan takes up expressing certain values or virtues which they are often proud of. It is within the Shona traditional culture that women often lured their partners through *nhetembo dzekurumbidza* (praise poetry) in which they used *mitupo* (totems) and *zvidawo* (honorific names) to calm down the men when angry and as persuasive strategies. Contrary to the often painted picture that only females used these, even men would employ *mitupo* and *zvidawo* to praise and lure their female folk, for example, in *nduri dzerudo* (courtship poetry). These resources help one to achieve intended goals peacefully.

Use of Child's Name

Among the Shona, it is sometimes useful to address a spouse using the child's name '*Baba vaChipo* (Chipo's father)', *Baba vaGamu* (*Gamu's father*) and *Baba vaChiedza* as in example (1), (2) and (3). During arguments, it can be useful to refer to what brings interactants together. The use of a child's name is meant to emphasize the bond that is between the couple which is their child *Chipo* and the need to work together as a family. This contrasts with the use of a personal name and direct pronoun *iwe* (you). According to Makoni and Mashiri (2003), the motivation behind the use of polite linguistic devices in communication is frequently used to exert some influence over the hearers' behaviour, in a non-confrontational and respectful manner. This avoids violence and renders 'protective policies' not necessary. Cultural consciousness should guide the manner in which people behave.

Avoiding Competitive Language

Taking language at face value, women may regard themselves as a 'muted group' on account of the linguistic styles that they should use in a patriarchal society and hence want to compete with men in using language through confrontational language such as commands and interruptions. This, however, does not always work. Chivero (2012), for example, shows how females in parliament break cultural rules for language use like the use of interruptions and breaking taboos on what to say in public to defy men's dominance and to silence them in the competitive arena. The following is a typical example taken from Chivero (2012: 190).

(5) *Male*

Let me say the word forced virginity is not the proper word... there are certain communities where virginity testing is known. We cannot sit here now and say it is forced because we no longer qualify for virginity testing [A female parliamentarian interrupts: *I do not want to be a virgin. It is very painful experience! Who wants to be a virgin?*]

According to Chivero (2012), the male speaker wanted to comment that virginity testing cannot be regarded as violence when the people in those communities were content with the practice. Chivero points out that the interruption by

the female speaker is considered outrageous and not expected of women. As a result, the woman loses face. Such behaviour often leads to violent responses from male counterparts.

Use of Proverbs

The use of proverbs which many scholars claim often appeals to members of the culture can be an effective conflict resolution strategy. Shona proverbs such as *mhosva haitongwi nedemo* (a case is not solved by an axe) (Mandova and Chingombe 2013: 106) can be employed to pacify angry husbands instead of fuelling the anger through confrontational language. To be able to prevent irrational behaviour is to be in control of the situation and not to be disempowered. That a woman should use a veiled way to attack even her husband as in (3) is proper in the context of Shona culture where violent language is despised. Contrary to Tom and Musingafi's (2013) claims that men are allowed to beat women, amicable ways of solving conflict are much appraised in the Shona culture where raw displays of power are very much despised (Gelfand, 1999). According to Uchida (1992), females are actually socialized to criticize others in acceptable ways.

DISCUSSION

Even though Chitau (2002) notes that women in the Shona culture are generally expected to play a submissive role, this submissiveness should not always be negatively interpreted. One does not always have to be dominant in order to be heard. Some people may think that to challenge the power of men who are said to be causing domestic violence, women should, 'identify and transform rules which govern women's behaviour and which brought patriarchal order into existence' (Spender 1980: 89). Women in the Shona culture, however, do not need to change the cultural rules. They have linguistic devices at their disposal, such as tags which can be used to soften attacks or criticisms as well as force the males into compliance. By using the polite linguistic resources, the woman still maintains her position within the gender hierarchy, showing respect for the man yet attacking or criticizing him at the same time while still retaining male companionship.

In example (3), the woman behaves like a man, and yet in Shona people should have *nyadzi*

(shame) and avoid talking about of sexual matters explicitly in public. Besides, interrupting males is a violation of one of the virtues of ideal womanhood which requires women to abstain from dominating men in speech. Thus a woman can lose respect through acting like men and yet, according to Hudson-Weems (2009: 69), women do not need to be irrational and aggressive in order to be heard or achieve intended goals. They do not need 'a separate space to nourish their individual needs and goals' (Hudson-Weems 2009: 69) as seen by many women who opt for divorce than marriage, but to strategically utilize linguistic choices available to them for conflict resolution. Communicative competency should make one realize that direct verbalization of sensitive or taboo issues can unleash violence. What the male speaker said may not be acceptable but that does not justify display of *kushaya unhu* (lack of morals).

According to Chivero (2012), due to cultural considerations women are expected to use language in a manner that reflects *unhu* (good behaviour). It would, therefore, be unexpected of a woman to out rightly attack others especially her spouse in public. Through tagging, women play the dual role of behaving submissively according to the demands of their culture and still communicate their goals in order to fulfil their responsibility as mothers. As Hudson-Weems (2009: 69) observed, the woman considers the responsibility that she has for the family as paramount and so 'she creates a private space for herself' in the midst of 'congestion'. Uchida (1992) claims that women's talk is derided and trivialized by men, in the Shona society as shown in this data, women actually earn themselves respect and power through appropriate use of language in ways that display *unhu* (good behavior). According to Eckert and McConell-Ginet (2003: 92), 'the force of an utterance is not manifest in the utterance itself, but in the ways in which it is received and interpreted' and 'on what people do with it in subsequent interactions. Power is fluid and enacted within discourse not in the semantic value of words chosen.'

In (3) the woman uses a tag as a strategy to solicit information and to provoke conversation. Fishman (1983) says that conversations between the sexes sometimes fail, not because of anything inherent in the way women talk, but because men may not respond. So, women may end up asking questions to try to get men to

talk. Tom and Musingafi (2013) cite lack of interpersonal communication especially regarding household income as causing problems within families. It is in such cases that tag questions can be used to extract information. A question by its nature gives a superiority status to the speaker because it demands that the hearer respond. The woman does not need to use a declarative or an imperative but can use 'skilful strategies' (Fishman 1983) that ensure that she gets what she wants. Recognizing the effect of using questions, Fishman (1983) concludes that women ask questions because of their effectiveness not because of their (women) personality weaknesses.

Women may not have access to linguistic strategies that allow them to be competitive, confrontational and adversarial but that does not mean that the strategies they use are inadequate and deficient. The power of language is in its ability to achieve the speakers' goals. Uchida (1992) rightly observes that if women's speech is conceptualized in terms of form its impact is missed. Analyses of impact need not separate form and function. Women should utilize their communicative competence in order to know when to speak, when not to, and what to talk about, with whom, where, when and in what manner. The tag is a strategy used by the speaker to drive the point being made home.

The position accorded to women in Shona culture is encapsulated in proverbs as well. *Hakuna musha unoita machongwe maviri* (there is no home with two cocks) and *musha mukadzi* (a home is incomplete without a woman). The two proverbs seem contradictory yet they are not. The husband should be the only head of the family but the wife is responsible for making decisions that the male as the head implements. That through the use of the so-called 'tentative' language women still make most of the decisions within their families is something that has been acknowledged by scholars who have written about the Shona community. Rukuni (2007: 54), for example, notes that 'even though the husband is generally perceived to be the head of the household in most Shona families, this is not an executive role.' The husband does not always dictate or even make most decisions. If a decision has to be made, the most audible voice is that of the wife. It is the wife's responsibility to ensure the welfare of her family and thus she learns to be resourceful; making a

way out of no way (in the patriarchal society and in intricate relationships) creating ways to realize her goals and objectives in life. According to Chabata and Mashiri (2012), once the decision is made by the mother of the house, the father as the nominal head of the family is expected to uphold it and communicate it outside the family if there is need. These observations show that although women may have less power vis-a-vis men in society, this does not always affect interaction between individuals; the different linguistic choices made available to them can be used to achieve the same goals. Consequently, male/female compatibility is ensured.

Thus the woman proves to be a flexible role player (Hudson-Weems 2009). She is sensitive to cultural demands which make her get respect from the hearers of different statuses within the family but at the same time ensuring that she gets what she wants. Similar studies exist in Shona where the female as a mother is seen as significant in ensuring family stability. After analysing the pragmatic import and sociocultural meanings of Shona proverbs, Chabata and Mashiri (2012) conclude that the role of unifying the family and ensuring that there is family cohesiveness lies with the mother. If the mother feels that she has the right to use language as a man and yet she is physically weak, then she will be inviting problems for herself. Thus the woman espouses principles of harmony and order within the family. To out rightly scold one's husband has dire consequences as reflected in the saying: *kuparira muviri maronda* (to do something which brings wounds to the body).

CONCLUSION

If the linguistic resources available in society are viewed within the context of the supremacy of African philosophy of *unhu* (good behaviour), and the significance attached to mothers (females), then they are creative and resourceful ways of ensuring family stability. They allow for stylised communication that is refined to avoid crisis and to avoid open confrontation thereby enabling women to strategically achieve their goals in peace and harmony, despite constraints posed by their socio-cultural position within the gender hierarchy and the biological superiority of men. At the end, good character is a solid weapon against various anti-social behaviours.

While the Shona society is patriarchal it is not homogenous. Patriarchal values are not embraced by everyone the same way. Shona culture possesses much that is worth retaining and preserving. The politeness strategies discussed above are some of the values and sensibilities of the Shona society which, in our view, are worth retaining. Gender has a very specific role to play in our society and so, there is no need for women to scoff at the concept of being a woman, wife and a mother. Women are powerful in their femininity. A good woman knows how to wield her power without challenging the male domain.

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