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*Guest Editors:* Nyaradzo Shumba  
and Nyasha Ndemo-Masimbarasi

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Box 350  
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Telephone: ++263 8 677 006 136 | +263 779 279 912  
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## JOURNAL PURPOSE

The purpose of the *Ngenani - Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University Journal of Community Engagement and Societal Transformation Review and Advancement*, is to provide a forum for community engagement and outreach.

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Sociologists, demographers, psychologists, development experts, planners, social workers, social engineers and economists, among others whose focus is on community development.

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The journal is a forum for the discussion of ideas, scholarly opinions and case studies of community outreach and engagement. Communities are both defined in terms of people found in a given locale and defined cohorts, like the children, the youth, the elderly and those living with a disability. The strongest view is that getting to know each community or sub-community is a function of their deliberate participation in matters affecting them by the community itself. The journal is produced bi-annually.

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**Manuscript Submission:** Articles submitted to the *Ngenani - Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University Journal of Community Engagement and Societal Transformation* are reviewed using the double-blind peer review system. The author's name(s) must not be included in the main text or running heads and footers.

**A total number of words:** 5000-7000 words and set in 12-point font size width with 1.5 line spacing.

**Language:** British/UK English

**Title:** must capture the gist and scope of the article

**Names of scholars:** beginning with the first name and ending with the surname

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**Abstract:** must be 200 words

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**Body:** Where the scholars are more than three, use *et al.*,

Italicise *et al.*, *ibid.*, words that are not English, not names of people or organisations, etc. When you use several scholars confirming the same point, state the point and bracket them in one bracket and ascending order of dates and alphabetically separated by semi-colon e.g. (Falkenmark, 1989, 1990; Reddy, 2002; Dagdeviren and Robertson, 2011; Jacobsen *et al.*, 2012).

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# THE INTERPLAY AMONG THE 'SMALL HOUSE', AFRICAN HERITAGE AND GENDER RIGHTS FOR SOCIETAL DEVELOPMENT

GERRY MHLANGA<sup>1</sup> AND SHEPHERD GUMBO<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

*The family is central to development in all societies. However, changes in the family structures, including the emergence of the 'small house' (SH), have brought uncertainties on this role. This qualitative case study, embedded in Liberal Feminism and Ubuntu Theories thus sought the views of four of each of marriage officers, probation officers, educators, opinion leaders and members in 'SH' relationships about its impact on gender rights and socio-economic development in Zimbabwe through interviews. Participants were selected equitably as argued by gender. Focus Group Discussions were held with 12 university students. Thematic analysis indicates that the SH in its current form is impacting the socio-economic development of Zimbabwe negatively since it is gender blind, does not foster the Ubuntu concept of reverence for the first wife, disregards the rights of females, negatively encroaches into education of children, exposes siblings to possible incest, reduces family unity, promotes jealous among siblings and wives, exposes partners to health problems, leads to estate sharing wrangles and emotional trauma among the partners. The study recommends the classical vision of polygamy to restore trust among partners and for the concerned families to work towards agreed goals. Also, the SH should be discussed openly to encourage society to accept it.*

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Curriculum and Educational Philosophy, Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University, Bindura, Zimbabwe, <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0352-0417>.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Curriculum and Educational Philosophy, Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University, Bindura, Zimbabwe, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1820-0767>.

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## INTRODUCTION

The family provides labour which sustains the economies of every country (Embers *et al.*, 2019; Gwenzi, 2020). Mawere and Mawere (2010) argue that, in Africa, the family institution serves not only as a fountain of primary socialisation, labour and reproduction, but also as the face of identity. One's disposition is linked to one's family. In that regard, family dynamics specific to every unique community must be understood, for modernity has brought variations in the family structure and functions. Changes in the family structure are, therefore, a concern that requires scientific scrutiny since they impact the socioeconomic development of society. One issue which has remained topical throughout history within the family discourses and that impacts societal development is gender roles (Hayes and Law, 2007; Ember *et al.*, 2019). Many authors observe how gender roles vary with communities and with specific types of families (Mawere and Mawere, 2010; Ember *et al.* 2019; Gwenzi, 2020; Lowes, 2020). Recently, a new form of a family structure, named the 'small house' (SH) has gained popularity in Zimbabwe, most particularly in urban set-ups and among the affluent communities (Mutseta, 2020; Muchabaiwa, 2022). The potential of the 'small-housing' practice spreading to every part of the country cannot be under estimated, hence the need to study it to understand its possible impact on the economy and African heritage.

Mutseta (2020) studied the nature of the 'small house' phenomenon in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe, focusing on how individuals involved in this arrangement perceived their social categorisation and how they coped with other competing duties and societal expectations. In Mutseta's (*ibid.*) study, the participants reported mixed experiences, including societal exclusion and emotional hardships for some, while others glorified it.

Muchabaiwa (2018) reveals that gender dynamics of the 'small house' phenomenon in Zimbabwe leads to some complications in families, such as violation of children's rights and domestic violence, among others. A lot could be learnt about the 'small house' system from most of these studies which delve into its prevalence and impact on family relations and experiences of the individuals involved. Principally, the current study sought to answer the following key question: How does the 'small housing' impact gender rights, family cohesion and overall societal development? The *Ubuntu* and Liberal Feminism Theories are used to guide and shed more light on the inter-play among the stated concepts.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Liberal Feminist Theory and the *Ubuntu* Theory guides the study. Liberal feminism is a theory by women which attempts to negotiate for equality between men and women through a legislative framework (Chitiga, 2008), positing that the inequality between men and women been brought about by patriarchy can be reversed if there is a legislative agenda that calls for equality between the two sexes. The 'small house' gender rights nexus can be better understood if one looks at it from a gender equality perspective. One key question one would ask is, what could be the status of gender rights within 'small-housing' if both sexes had the same marital and familial rights? Besides, liberal feminism feeding into the gender rights 'small house' debate, there is need to consider the humanness of the marriage system from the African perspective, hence the incorporation of the *Ubuntu* Theory. Principally, *Ubuntu* as a theory holds that one is human because of one's quality of relationship with other human beings (Mawere and Mawere, 2010). The relationship among people defines itself in the context of abiding by life guidelines which characterise some societies. While the 'small house' accords females some freedom and independence as advocated by liberal feminism,



there is always the need to evaluate the practice from the African perspective of males and females in conjugal relationships.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The current study investigates the interplay among 'small-housing', gender rights and societal development in the Zimbabwean town of Bindura.

Muchabaiwa (2018, 2022) defines 'small-housing' as a secretive and quasi-polygamous long-term romantic relationship between an officially married man and a woman other than one's official wife. It is regarded as secretive because the first wife is not told about it and is not supposed to know about it. In several situations, even the parents of the 'small house' or young wife are in the dark about their daughter's romantic relationship with this other man (Gwenzi, 2020). Marriage rituals which normally define the African identity such as introducing the wife or the husband to family members and the payment of the bride's wealth (*lobola*) are never done. The other type of 'small-housing' is that the man can officially introduce himself to the family of the new wife and pays *lobola* but still maintains the secrecy about this new marriage to the established wife (Lowes, 2020). As argued by Lowes (2020), the two wives are thus not known to each other although, in most cases, the second wife knows about the man's first wife. The man carefully arranges such that the former easily avoids the latter. To ensure that the wives do not clash, they normally reside in different cities or locations, hence are regarded as branches.

Mutseta (2020) points out that, generally, the SH is largely characterised by stigma in Zimbabwean society since it is believed that the practice is motivated by men's search for sexual desire while for women, it is for social status and economic survival. Women who engage in 'small-housing' relationships are deemed to be lazy, promiscuous and disrespectful to the family institution as it is known

in the African context (Muchabaiwa, 2022), and all these perceptions about the practice need to be examined on how they impact gender rights and socio-economic development of Zimbabwe. Ember *et al.* (2019) argue that marriage is commonly defined as a socially approved sexual and economic union, presumed to be more or less permanent and entails rights and obligations between the married couple and any children they might have. In the context of the current discourse, therefore, the relationship that involves the first wife is regarded as marriage and is the 'main house', while the socially unapproved union is the 'small house.' While some regard 'small-housing' as a contemporary type of polygamy, others view it as pure adultery due to its secretive nature, thus drawing parallels between the 'new marriage system' and gender rights advocacy, hence a possible source of family divisions and societal underdevelopment (Muchabaiwa, 2018, 2022; Gwenzi, 2020;).

Some studies attribute the growth of the SH phenomenon to the emergence of feminism (Ember *et al.*, 2019; Mutseta, 2020). It is opined that as more and more females sought equal status with males, they gradually disengage from feminine-defined roles such as being solely housewives and start to seek employment opportunities in the public sphere. Muchabaiwa (2017) states that most of the women in employment become single mothers with enough resources to sustain their families without seeking financial assistance from men. However, the physiological desire for sex cannot be offset by financial independence, hence the emergence of the SH. So, in the 'small-housing' system, the women enjoy some partial freedom from men because in some cases, the bride's wealth has not been paid and the man has little exclusive authority to control the woman. Currently, in Zimbabwe, nothing has been recorded about married women having SHs, so one can rightly say the system is not gender-neutral (Mutseta, 2020).

In summary, one can observe how an SH denotes one's sexual relationship, other than one's matrimonial partner. Also to note is that the term 'small house' emanates from the fact that it is a romantic union that comes after another or after other marital unions and, for Zimbabweans, it usually involves a relationship between a man and a woman younger than the man's first wife (Mutseta, 2016).

The complexity of 'small-housing' has been magnified by the contemporary Zimbabwean marriage system infrastructure. The country could be said to have acknowledged the 'small-housing' concept through the 2022 Marriages Act Chapter 5:17. Mawere and Mawere (2010) cite four main types of marital unions that apply in Zimbabwe, namely traditional customary marriage, religious marriage, civil marriage and mutual consent union/cohabitation. Before the Marriage Act 5:17, all these marriage systems were characterised by the payment of *lobola* and it was believed that the *lobola* made the relationship between the concerned families stronger because it affirms that the marrying partners did it not entirely for their own sake, but on behalf of their families (Muchabaiwa, 2022). However, under the current Marriages Act, the payment of bride's wealth is optional and this could be one of the major drivers of the SH relationships since couples can cohabit without formalising the union. Under the traditional marriage system, a man can marry multiple wives while the other types require monogamy and, in all cases, everything is done openly. Of all these marriage systems, therefore, none is close to the SH relationship which is secretive. The SH relationship system could fall under civil partnerships as provided in section 41 of the Marriages Act 5:17 detailed as;

- (1) A relationship between a man and a woman who –
  - (a) are both over the age of eighteen years; and
  - (b) have lived together without legally being married to each other; and

- (c) *are not within the degrees of affinity or consanguinity as provided in section 7; and*
- (d) *having regard to all the circumstances of their relationship, have a relationship as a couple living together on a genuine domestic basis.*

There is public debate on whether Chapter 5.17 has brought relief to the rights of people in the SH situation or those in the 'main house'. The extent to which the system advances gender rights and helps promote socio-economic development in Zimbabwe is thus the thrust of the current study.

During the pre-modern era, family size was the symbol of affluence in Zimbabwe (Gwenzi, 2020). Big families were revered for they were able to produce more food since economic activities largely involved farming and hunting and depended on labour provided by family members (Mutseta, 2020). Also, large families were able to fight and dispossess other families' territories. Family size was thus characterised by large herds of livestock and vast tracks of land. A man who wanted to yield a lot of power and influence, had to have many wives and continuously marry since the livestock could help him pay *lobola* (Ember *et al.*, 2021).

Modernisation has reshaped the family structure (*ibid.*). It would seem that the notion of labour migration is a contributing factor to the emergence of 'outside wives' or SHs as observed in South Africa during the apartheid era, when black families were not allowed to settle in urban areas (Hayase and Law, 2007). Similarly in Zimbabwe, Hatorri *et al.* (2008) observe that the patterns of migrant labour had a tremendous influence on the institution of marriage where men engaged in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships at their workplaces. Muchabaiwa (2022) believes that the visibility of females in the public sphere increased the 'small-housing' phenomenon. It

would seem like the economic independence of females birthed some power and influence in women within the families and that, to some extent, neutralised males' dominance over women. Men could therefore, not willy-nilly marry more wives. Spousal conflicts increased as married and economically stable women had more say on conjugal rights. Rather than bringing more wives into the home, men began to establish secretive relationships, thus the birth of the current 'small-housing' relationship system (Mutseta 2018).

Mutseta (2020) asserts that the young wives (SHs) often establish their own homes that are wholly resourced by the husband or can have a rented apartment away from the glimpse of the first wife. This is mostly done to ensure that the first wife or the other wives are not aware of the level of commitment that the husband has to the SH to reduce tension among or between the wives (Gwenzi, 2020). It seems the secretive nature of the SH relationship gives some women some autonomy yet others' rights are deprived, hence the need to critically investigate it to establish its impact on overall economic development in Zimbabwe.

In an archetypal Zimbabwean society, males continue to dominate and exercise greater influence in the public sphere and even serving as heads of families (*ibid.*). On the other hand, females are expected to perform the expressive roles of providing love and affection to males. Muchabaiwa (2022) notes that even those women with the opportunity to work and hold influential positions in the public sphere, tend to assume subordinate role in the home if they are married, due to the entrenched belief system in Zimbabwe that accords men potentate authority over women. While the 'small-housing' system altered the family structure in some way and the process was expected to influence positive changes towards the realisation of gender rights, little is noticeable to that expectation. Literature shows that deep African practices and belief systems, such as *lobola* constitute some

reasons for subjecting females to subordinate status within the family setup (Gwenzi, 2020; Amber *et al.*, 2021; Mavisa and Carasco, 2023). These revelations indicate that liberal feminism's call for gender balance still faces challenges entrenched in African heritage hence societal re-socialisation on gender is required.

Studies carried out in various countries indicate that the 'small-housing' system presents unprecedented implications for the welfare of children born in such environments (Hayes and Law, 2007; OECD, 2017; Lowes, 2020). While in the traditional polygamous marriage system the first wife yields a lot of power over the other wives and is responsible for sharing family resources, in the SH relationship system, the first wife and her children are often deprived of the rights to the father's resources because they are largely controlled by the last wife, who is usually the youngest (Muchabaiwa, 2022). Children of the first wife's education provisions are usually compromised since the children of the youngest wife are pampered and sent to better schools (Cano *et al.*, 2016).

The gleaned literature shows that the SH relationship system is prevalent among urbanites and the more affluent sections of Zimbabwean society. Some scholars hail it for attempting to address gender inequalities within the families, while others blame it for undermining African heritage. Negative impact on child welfare, gender roles, respect for the first wife and education were also cited. These ramifications may influence the SH's overall impact on gender rights and economic development, hence a topical issue to investigate.

## **STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

The study embraces the qualitative research approach, wholly drawing from the interpretive paradigm. The interpretive paradigm presents the view that subjects interpret phenomena as they see them or as argued by how they are experiencing them, hence the subjective nature

of reality (Cropley, 2021). The role of the researcher in a study informed by interpretivism is to consider the views of the participants as they are presented and try to deduce meanings from the standpoint of the participants. Under the principles of the interpretive paradigm, the study engaged participants who had experiences of SH relationships, and key informants, hence the collective case study design is adopted. The purposive sampling technique was used to come up with 28 participants, namely four marriage officers, four educators, four opinion leaders, four probation officers and 12 university students. Creswell and Creswell (2018) highlight the suitability of purposive sampling in qualitative research by commending that in purposive sampling, the researcher goes about soliciting consent for participation from an individual who has adequate knowledge or information about the phenomenon at hand. In addition, the snowball sampling technique, a technique for selecting secretive participants (Cropley, 2021), was employed to draw a sample of four participants, two males and two females, all involved in 'small-housing'. The research and the participants entered into a contract where consent, statement of confidentiality and privacy were sought and agreed upon respectively before participation in the study.

The educators interacted with children from different types of families, including those from SHs, hence had good experiences to share on how the SH system impacted the children's rights to education. Similarly, opinion leaders, probation officers and marriage officers also had adequate information to share on the impact of the SH on gender rights since they also worked with families. Prime data about the interface between the SH and gender rights were obtained from key informants involved in the 'small-housing' practice. The participants of the study were drawn from Bindura, a mining town in Mashonaland Province, Zimbabwe. Bindura was convenient to the researchers since they stayed in the town. Secondly, the researchers had observed through interaction with the Bindura residents that there was a

significant number of families matching SH characteristics, hence were deemed as appropriate to supply the anticipated data. All the participants were interviewed face-to-face. The physical interactive interviews were instrumental in gathering extensive data because they facilitated probing. Besides, two groups of six students each from a university specialising in the Social Work programme, participated in focus group discussions. The university students who were purposively selected were instrumental in the current study because they had a theoretical understanding of marriage systems in the country and were in the prime age where the pool of the SHs largely emanated from. Resultantly, data saturation was achieved after interacting with all the participants.

The thematic analysis technique, as propounded by Vaisimoradi *et al.* (2016), was adopted to analyse the data. The data were recorded verbatim. Thereafter, translations were made before the data were transcribed. The transcribed data were then read several times to understand them. Participants were accorded the opportunity to go through the transcribed data to ensure that nothing given by the participants could be lost. Some related data were identified and manually coded with some colours. Further interrogation of the data resulted in the identification of some themes that related to the concept of the SH, gender rights and socio-economic development. The related themes were then described and explained concerning other studies, and the meaning that the findings communicated.

## **FINDINGS**

The current study was carried out in the mining town of Bindura in Zimbabwe to establish how the SH relationship impacted African heritage, gender rights and socio-economic development. The participants in the study are identified in Table 1.



**Table 1: Research Participants**

<b>Probation Officer 1-4</b>	<b>PR1 -PR4</b>
Marriage Officer 1-4	MO1-MO4
Opinion Leader 1-4	OL1-OL4
Small House 1-4	SH1-SH4
Educators 1-4	E1-E4
Students 1-12	S1-S12

The findings of the current study include reasons for the emergence of the SH relationships, cultural impact, ramifications on education, health issues, gender rights, psychological well-being and economic development.

The participants of the current study identified several reasons for the emergence of the SH relationships. A male in such a relationship shared that:

‘My first wife is diabetic and often does not want to engage in sex on health grounds, so there is nothing I could do, had I not done this, I could have been attempted to hire prostitutes, thereby increasing the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases.’ (SH2)

Probed to justify the choice of the SH relationship ahead of the polygamous system which is acceptable within the Zimbabwean marriage cultural code, SH2 reasoned that:

‘Such a decision could have psychologically worsened the health of my wife.’

The other participant opined that:

‘If you stay in the same household with the man’s other wife/wives as it would be like in a polygamous marriage system, it would increase chances of intra-gender violence, so remaining secretive is the better.’ (SH3).

In the focus group discussions, a participating student had this to say:

‘Small-housing’ ensures that one is independent, unlike in the case of a polygamous setup, where one will be under the control of both the husband and the first wife.’ (S5)

S7 also added;

‘Staying away from the other wives gives you the right to decide and plan how for your children ought to be socialised.’

While some raised what seemed to be progressive reasons for the existence of the SH relationships, others bemoaned the practice and viewed it as,

'An anti-African system that is tolerated by women who are lazy and irresponsible. The women who live in 'small houses' do not want to be responsible spouses and are cheated because they are without a husband in most cases.' (OL3)

'As long as there are only female 'small houses', it shows that the practice is not gender neutral, one would glorify it if females could also have their own 'small houses.' (E2)

Just to demonstrate that the women in SH relationships were treated less significantly, a man in such a situation described his 'small house' thus,

'She is my side chic and important for relieving stressful experiences from my main marriage.' (SH3).

The participants cited some negative cultural ramifications of the SH relationship system that include,

'Since the children will be scattered all over and unknown to each other, there are possibilities that siblings can engage in romantic relationships.' (PR3)

Another participant, MO2, showed concern about the chances of the SH dividing the family thus,

'The secrecy nature of the 'small house' system does not help unite the family, yet family unity is the major symbol of Africanism.'

The importance of unity, which seems to be lacking within the SH relationships is highlighted by Maviza and Carrasco (2023) who describe that family is depicted, practised and experienced through cooperative unions, resource sharing and reciprocal exchanges of care and support, closeness, oneness and morality among members.

The prospects of sexual immorality between married couples were reported to be high as testified by one OL2,

'Cases of infidelity have increased among the families that stay apart from each other in the communities.'

Mawere and Mawere (2010) argue that marriage is a status symbol for most women in Zimbabwe, and one would prefer even a short duration one, than not to ever be married. This social force could be the reason the SH relationship exists.

While 'small-housing' was reported to be thriving in the Zimbabwean town of Bindura, some participants bemoaned its disastrous impact on health. For example, OL2 explained that

Both men and women who engage in 'small-housing' are rarely satisfied, so they continue establishing such types of relationships but now because they consider themselves to be in marriage, they do not use protectives during sexual intercourse and that manifests in a high rate of sexually transmitted diseases in this town.

Even the students who participated in the current study testified that:

'Young girls, especially college students, are taken in as 'small houses' by old men but these men keep on changing the 'small houses' whenever new students enrol, hence high incidences of sexual transmitted diseases.' (S5).

Another student, S11, said that the issue of SHs was a health time bomb because,

'Rich men take advantage of poor girls, so when you are in a relationship with them, they demand unprotected sex and you comply because they pay rentals, buy you clothes and provide food and everything you need.'

The negative health implications of multiple sexual relationships which the 'small-housing' system exposes the families to are bemoaned too by Mutseta (2018) in a study on the *VaPositori* Religious sect in Zimbabwe, where it was reported that HIV&AIDS cases were rampant among the group.

The SH phenomenon has had some negative impact on the education of the children within such a family type. E4 complained that:

'Unlike in the past when you would identify children from polygamous families by their companionship, similar dressing styles among other things, nowadays it is difficult because they are in different classes, it is only the surname that they share.'

Another educator added,

'In some cases, the children do not know that they share the same father, it's us who see it from their birth certificates and unknowingly, when you address them as brothers, that is when you learn that they are strangers to each other.' (E1).

E3 says,

'Our observation is that in most cases, children from the 'small house' have all the school provisions, while those from the main house will be struggling to bring even basic stationery.'

The other observation raised by E2 was that:

'There is too much lack of consistency among the children from quasi-polygamous families in almost everything. Today they are performing well in class and have all the stationery and resources required but such can change abruptly.'

To this, PR3 had this to say,

'Once one is engaged in the practice of 'small housing', one ceases to stop, so it is 'small house' after 'small house' and at times, it strains their financial capacity, leading to some of their children dropping out of school or coming to us at the Social Welfare Department for assistance. When that happens, it even further strains the relationship among families, because the father is known to be well resourced, so people would not want the children to be bailed out.'

Muchabaiwa (2017) also deplores the SH system for poor child socialisation. Since the children fathered by one man live in different locations, they are exposed to different socialisation patterns which unfortunately will result in a family identity crisis in the future.

While the Marriages Act Chapter 5:17 was introduced, among other reasons, as a measure to redress challenges relating to the sharing of estate among biological children and spouses of the deceased, its applicability to SH situations remains contested as pointed out by the participants in the current study. OL1 shared the view that:

'The major stumbling block is the secretive nature of the SH and its one-sided nature, while the law is silent about which sex can constitute a 'small house', a man can never be one, it is always the women.'

One man, SH4, quashed the view that men and women in an SH relationship can be at par and said,

'The man is expected to provide everything for the family and, if you are no longer able to provide, you are chunked out, so you can see that we are not equal.'

Another SH added;

If a married woman is engaged in extra-marital relationships, that is adultery, it cannot be regarded as 'small-housing'. 'Small-housing' is secretive but at times, it is publicised and the children born out of the arrangement can be introduced to the other members of the family. Can that apply to the women in extra-marital affairs? (SH3)

While the men in SH situations believe that the marriage system is an unequal as argued by both sexes' same rights, the women felt that it was possible but patriarchy remained a vice.

'It seems the Marriages Act Chapter 5.17 empowers us to claim from our contributions in the family fortunes, but in real terms, it is difficult to implement, even your relatives would discourage it, especially if the bride price was never paid to them.' (SH1).

The SH relationship was described as manipulative because,

Women are lured to accept a secretive relationship and believe that they are loved. It is always the men who dictate the direction of the relationship.' (OL2).

One of the men in an SH relationship had the guts to say;

She accepted the 'small house' arrangement knowing fully well that the relationship was supposed to be private because I had a wife already, so it is only me who initiates communication and, in all cases, it is a phone call, no messages otherwise anything different, the relationship ends abruptly.

While the participants highlighted both positive and negative motivations for the expansion of the SH relationships in Bindura, it was apparent that the system had negative ramifications on the strides made thus far, meant to create a gender-egalitarian society.

Small-housing was blamed for the negative psychological impact on the family members. Due to its secretive nature, the couples are always

suspicious of each other and that eats into their psychological well-being, as one of the students in the focus group discussion narrated;

'The small house is there and most women know that being a small house means more favours and more resources from the man but are ever uneasy because they know that once the man sees a new lady, then they are no longer small but in between or completely rejected.' (S7).

Another student added that:

When you are in a small house, you are not in a stable relationship, so love concoctions are the order of the day. People often visit prophets to get charms that would supposedly divert the man's attention from the other women, but once that proves to be not working, one gets into depressions and that is the reason for many suicide cases related to 'small houses' and love triangles (S11)

SH3 said;

'When a married man approaches you and tells you that you are everything that a man would want in life, you believe and put your trust in him. So, the first thing when he says he wants to marry you, you begin to visualise the weaknesses of his wife but the heavens fall when two years down the line, he starts dating other women again, it is frustrating and the next thing is divorce.'

Other than the negative psychological impact on the spouses, the toll can also be unbearable on the children thus,

'You may blame the teenagers who take up drugs but at times the source of the problem is the family. When the father is wealthy but fails to support the children, the children feel neglected, lose hope in life and end up resorting to drugs.' (OL4).

OL4's observation was also shared by PR2 who testified that:

'Our conversations with some women affected by the 'small house' issues point to the fact that some children react to their fathers' unexplained disappearances by engaging in anti-social behaviours, including drug abuse and sexual immorality.'

Explaining the experiences of the children in the SH marriage system, PR1 said that:

'Children are traumatised by the father's extra-marital activities, particularly when it leads to some constrained child needs provisions and quite often, they react by engaging in early sexuality or early marriage.'

Studies have demonstrated that the family is the agent for primary socialisation, hence influential in shaping a child's character (Cano *et*

*al.*, 2016). Parents should thus be cautious of their conduct, because everything they do in the full view of the children serves as a model.

The combination of the negative impact of ‘small-housing’ on health, education, gender rights and psychological well-being, among others, has had a negative ripple effect on the economic performance of Zimbabwe. One of the participants had this to share;

‘Even the national economy is negatively impacted by ‘small-housing’ because families are not working collaboratively’ (OL3).

E1 also observed that:

The underperformance of the Zimbabwean economy led to the rise of the small house marriage system, since most young men can no longer afford to pay bride price, hence remain unmarried. The young girls then get attracted to the older men who have enough money to meet their life needs.

In a study in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, it was established that despite improvements in the attainment of higher education among women, they still lagged in the economic domain (OECD, 2017). OL2 raised the concern that:

Other than the women involved in the small house relationships working in unison to develop family and ultimately the country at large, they compete in fleecing the man of the available resources and, on the other hand, the man dishes out everything that he has to attract more small houses, so the result is expenditure without savings.

Maviza and Carrasco (2023) in their study conducted in Tsholotsho in Zimbabwe, and in Johannesburg in South Africa, noted that the SH deprived the main house because it led to the man’s attention and resources being diverted to the new living arrangement.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the current study show that the SH is, for some, a legitimate matrimonial relationship similar to the traditional polygamous marriage system, differentiated only by the geographical separation of the wives, while others view it as adultery disguised as marriage. Those who legitimise the SH as a type of marriage cite

Zimbabwe's Marriages Act Chapter 5:17 as confirmatory to their argument in that it acknowledges civil partnerships where couples can stay together, procreate and establish families without societal approval. From this view, 'small-housing' becomes a great leveller in terms of gender rights promotion because the non-payment of *lobola* signals a departure from a commodifying marriage system which was surreptitiously used to bind families in the past (Gwenzi, 2020; Lowes, 2020). While the 'small-housing' was viewed as a giant step towards promoting gender equality, it is revealed from the findings that polyandry was not yet acceptable to Zimbabweans, thus suggesting that patriarchy remains a pervasive force in gender relations. The current study reveals that largely, the SH impacts negatively the education of children, the health of the spouses, the psychological well-being of the family members, gender rights and the cultural identity of Zimbabwe, hence could not be adopted in its current form.

All these negative impacts of the SH depress the potential of the members affected to contribute meaningfully to the socio-economic development of the country. For instance, employees in distress quite often absent themselves from work, thereby negatively impacting productivity. Besides depression at work, conflicting families tend to be violent and when that happens, it is mostly the weaker sex that suffers more (Mavisa and Carrasco, 2023). While the current study produced findings related to what the predecessor researches also got, it is interesting to note that it expands the knowledge gap by illuminating the impact of the SH on both family economics and national economics. The issue of the SH should thus not be taken lightly as it impacts the lives of even those not directly involved in it.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The SH system cannot be adopted as a type of marriage in its current form in Zimbabwe, because it defaces the *Ubuntu* principle of openness to one another due to its secretive nature. The socialisation patterns



exposed to children fathered by one man but of different wives vary, thereby distorting family identity, hence a possible source of family conflict. In fact, rather than promoting gender rights, the system enhances intra-gender violence where the women fight over one man. Thus, it further perpetuates patriarchy, especially in such cases where a spouse is not allowed to initiate mobile communication, thus undermining progress made so far in bridging the gender inequality gap in society. On the grounds of the SH's failure to encourage hard work and propel competition among children in education, one can conclude that it is a vice that impedes socio-economic development. Since the participants alluded to the reality that it is women who are taken in as SHs by men and not vice versa, one can conclude that gender equality is still a dream in Zimbabwe. The current study recommends that the traditional system of polygamy be maintained.

The SH relationships could be modified by making them official so that the secretive nature is done away with and that can be done through a clear legislative amendment to the Marriages Act Chapter 5:17 to include a clause on the SH as a recognised type of marriage. The policy promulgation should be enhanced by advocacy where opinion, government and religious leaders could address communities on the need to embrace 'small-housing' as an acceptable marriage system. Such an initiative could bring the families together and encourage children to interact. Interaction of children will reduce intra-gender violence, reduce jealousy and improve cooperation within the families. Further studies on 'small-housing' could be carried out in the rural communities to get the views of community leadership such as the chiefs who happen to be custodians of the African heritage.

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