

We don't need puberty rites, period!

Development of Chinamwali manual retrogressive

TODAY I would love to delve into the issue of traditionalists in Chewa and Nsenga land perpetuating a culture that is getting girls out of school to make them wives.

Information reaching me from that side indicates that some people are still confining little girls to their homes after puberty to coach them on how to handle a man in bed.

This is a culture many Zambians in remote areas of the north, south, west, etc., have abandoned. Surprisingly, some of our colleagues in the east are still hooked to the bad old tradition.

In urban areas, puberty rites are unheard of as most people tend to put a premium on the educational empowerment of their daughters, more than anything else.

A recent story from Eastern Province indicates that early marriages and teen pregnancies remain high in Chewa and Nsenga land due to, among other things, the Chinamwali tradition in which girls are initiated into adulthood, mainly in readiness for marriage.

Under the auspices of Plan International, an indaba was held recently in Chipata involving Chewa chiefs from Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique, in a bid to

moderate the Chinamwali initiation ceremony and make it decent enough for young girls.

Mayengo Nyirenda reported that Plan International, an organisation that advocates for children's rights and equality for girls, is developing a manual for Chinamwali in a bid to eliminate the 'bedroom practice' mentorship from the puberty rites for girls.

the former.

To me the initiation of pubertal girls into adulthood is a bad culture, which needs to be banned altogether.

There is no need of rabble-rousing alongi who we know too well cannot be 'tamed'.

If a

better way of advocating for girls' equality in society than developing a 'user-friendly Chinamwali manual'.

They can write the manual and remove the tyola and twerking dances from the initiation syllabus, but they cannot reform the puberty rite altogether.

For those who know it well, Chinamwali is nothing but a premarital training ceremony designed to give adolescent girls an all-rounded aspect of marriage life.

I hope that Plan International will find a better way of expending their resources because doing a Chinamwali manual is a waste of money.

All that a girl needs when she comes of age is a frank talk with her parents or guardians about menstrual hygiene.

Of course, sexual maturity is also a must-have discussion between parents, pubertal girls and adolescent boys, too. Moreover, contrary to the initiation ceremony style, this must not be a one-off conversation.

From time to time, parents must have conversations with their children about menstrual hygiene and sexuality matters, without the involvement of outsiders.

There can be no better counsellors of children on these matters, other than their own kith and kin.

Parents and guardians will consider the best interests of

schoolchildren as they counsel them. On the other hand, alongi are just commercialised marriage counsellors who will corrupt the minds of little girls with tyola dance and other bedroom tips.

Even if a puberty initiation manual was written, I do not think that alongi would care to read it and, let alone, follow what it says.

Moreover, writing an initiation manual for girls is more like endorsing the disinterestedness of parents in conversations to do with sexuality and menstrual hygiene matters of their children.

Who doesn't know that in many homes sex is a taboo subject between parents and their children?

guided sex education that they get from the internet.

This is a culture we are trying to change. We need parents who can openly give their children age-appropriate sex education within their homes.

Parents also need to give menstrual hygiene tips to their own daughters without hiring other people to do it for them.

And one does not need a manual to have these conversations with their adolescent daughters and sons.

Writing a Chinamwali manual will just help parents to abdicate the responsibility of guiding adolescent girls and boys on the realities of life to alongi.

In this day and age when we want all our children to get

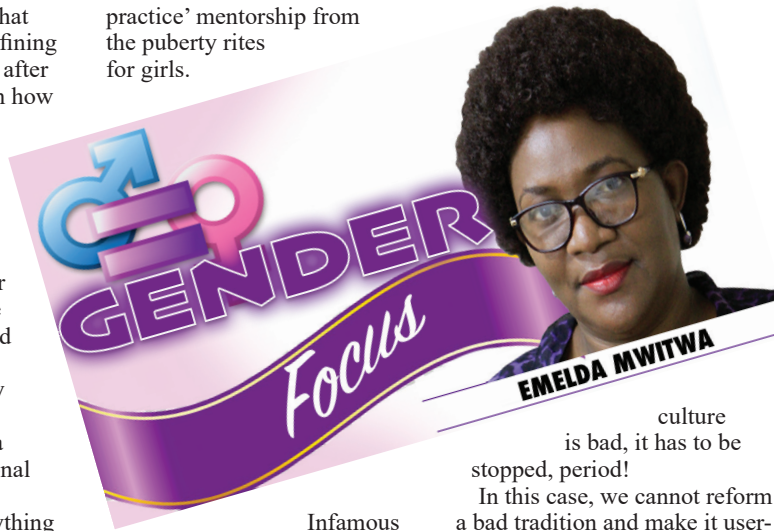
a later stage in life when the children are grown up and about to get married.

The nature of premarital counselling is such that a mother or father cannot delve into certain details with their daughters and sons. At that stage, one needs friends or trained marriage counsellors to help them.

To the contrary, it is unnecessary to get other people to give your own little girl who has come of age a talk on menstrual hygiene and sexual maturity issues.

Certainly, a Chinamwali manual will relegate this responsibility to alongi.

Unless the manual is being written for parents, it will just perpetuate the culture



EMELDA MWITWA

culture is bad, it has to be stopped, period!

In this case, we cannot reform a bad tradition and make it user-friendly to initiation candidates because alongi have over the years proved that they will not budge over puberty rituals.

Whether or not a manual is written for them, alongi will still give little girls bedroom tips and confuse them.

Sex education is the whole essence of Chinamwali; therefore, hard-core traditionalists will not do away with it even if Plan International writes a manual for them.

In short, I feel Plan International should find a

Parents also need to give menstrual hygiene tips to their own daughters without hiring other people to do it for them.

Children would rather consult their peers or teachers (with the introduction of comprehensive sexuality education in schools) than talk to their own parents about it.

Moreover, many children are misled by their peers, while others are corrupted by the non-

education, I do not think that they need alongi or non-relatives to talk to them on issues to do with sexual maturity.

This should be done at home by people who hold the children's best interest at heart. Alongi should come in at

of families abdicating the responsibility of parenting to other people.

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Reducing HIV infection among women Mwila's target



NATASHA Mwila.

MWAKA LENGALENGA
Lusaka

NATASHA Mwila is an HIV prevention advocate who is determined to promote HIV prevention options for adolescent girls and young women.

Ms Mwila, a 2022 AIDS Vaccine Advocacy Coalition (AVAC) fellow and currently working as a communications officer with Network of People Living with HIV (NZP+), says it is discouraging that women have limited HIV prevention methods compared to their male counterparts.

"Men have various methods of prevention of HIV/AIDS such as condoms, male circumcision, to name a few, but these methods are designed for men.

"Although the condom offers 100 percent protection, women cannot freely walk around with or produce them as they will be viewed as promiscuous," she said.

Ms Mwila said although in recent years pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) has been introduced, women have to take it 21 days prior to engaging in unprotected intercourse.

However, it only takes seven days after taking PrEP before men can engage in

sexual intercourse and they will be protected.

PrEP is medicine which HIV-negative people can take to protect themselves against HIV infection.

Ms Mwila advocates the approval of a newly-introduced method of HIV



prevention for women called dapivirine vaginal ring (DPV-VR) aimed at protecting women from contracting the virus.

The DPV ring is made of silicone, and is inserted inside the vagina for a period of 28

As an AVAC fellow, she is currently working on a project to ensure that she advocates the approval of the DPV ring in Zambia, and that it is eventually made available to girls and young women in communities.

days, after which it is replaced with a new one.

"The ring is a female-initiated method that works by releasing the antiretroviral drug into the vagina slowly

over 28 days," she said.

Ms Mwila said although the DPV ring is being used in some African countries, it is yet to be approved in Zambia.

She believes that despite the ring only offering 50 percent protection compared to other

methods such as PrEP, women do not have any other options for

prevention.

As an AVAC fellow, she is currently working on a project to ensure that she advocates the approval of the DPV ring in Zambia, and that it is eventually made available to girls and young women in communities.

Ms Mwila said she has noticed gaps in HIV/AIDS awareness and she has been able to go into communities to talk to young women on various prevention methods.

From 2021 to 2022, she got a grant from AVAC that is given to fellows to implement a project of their choice.

It was at this time when she decided to pursue a PhD in infectious diseases.

The fellowship runs for 18 months.

Ms Mwila decided to target young women as they are at a high risk of contracting HIV due to their

vulnerabilities.

"When I came across the DVR, I thought this is what we need to reduce HIV infection among adolescent girls and young women," she said.

"Sometimes we think that because we are exposed to information on HIV, we tend to think everybody else has that information as well, but this is not the case.

Ms Mwila said so far, the network has mentored 80 influential people from various communities on HIV prevention in Livingstone and Lusaka.

She said NZP+ has engaged 40 peer educators and health care workers in Livingstone and Kitwe to help sensitise communities on different methods of HIV prevention.

Ms Mwila has a Bachelor's degree in economics, marketing and psychology that she acquired in India.

She later went on to obtain a master's in analytical epidemiology at the University of Zambia.

After her master's programme, she was attached to the Clinton Health Access Initiative where they did some tests around COVID-19 and HIV.

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