

## **STREET REMARKS, ADDRESS RIGHTS AND THE URBAN FEMALE: SOCIO-LINGUISTIC POLITICS OF GENDER IN HARARE**

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### **Abstract**

*This article explores and describes the socio-linguistic and cultural features of street remarks that take place between unacquainted people in the streets of Harare. Concern here is the male-to-female remarks. It seems that women receive more, and more vigorous, markers of public passage than men and they are less frequently the originators of such communicative markers. We argue that the markers are purposeful or intentional and that they are motivated by linguistic, socio-cultural and historical gender stereotypes and ideological constructs. The linguistic and communicative characteristics of street remarks, the identities of the addressers and addressees, the women's responses to and the implications of the street remarks are also addressed.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this article is to document and describe the oral communicative features of street remarks that take place in the streets of Harare. A 'street remark', says Gardner (1984, 150) 'is a comment in public taking place between the unacquainted'. In Zimbabwe, as in other societies, those who are evidently different in appearance from their fellow citizens — the fat, the thin, short and tall, the handicapped, the ugly, are often subjected to public remarks. Concern here is the male-to-female remarks. Women tend to receive more, and more vigorous, markers of public passage than men and are less frequently the originators of such markers. The remarks may involve direct confrontation or 'veiled rhetoric in the form of indirection, metaphor, allegory, circumlocution, innuendo and related literary devices' (Yankah, 1998, 26). We demonstrate that most remarks are stereotyped in nature and often refer to female sexuality. Breaches of verbal taboos are common, and as is typical of a modern urban society, men seem to capitalize on anonymity and the absence of institutionalized forms of speech censorship. The notion of 'face' is important to this discussion. Brown and Levinson (1978, 66) succinctly define 'face' as 'everyone's public self-image'.

It is argued that women's general responses to street remarks are determined by their socialization, traditional gender-role constraints, age and to some extent, social class. It seems that street remarks are typical of men in general but the coarseness of the remarks, the persistence and frequency of perpetration and the reaction to female responses depend on the setting of the remark, the age, the social class and status of the man. Men of the middle class and those with some status that is associated with 'gentleman-like' composure are less inclined to coarse and indiscreet remarks and violent reactions when humiliated than those of the working class. In fact, the former are likely to make only ambiguous remarks and in places where they enjoy anonymity. Not every contact, however, between unacquainted people in public has a spoken feature. There is a possibility of communication by extralinguistic and mechanical markers. Gardner (1994), commenting on the occurrence of this phenomenon in Philadelphia, says that:

There may simply be a breach of the customary pattern of gaze; this is making eye contact briefly from a distance, averting the eyes once contact is made, then raising them once more with a middle distance focus to rest on a point slightly to the side of the passerby. The gaze patterns happen when eye contact is not promptly broken or when gaze lingers too long upon some part of the passerby (p. 148).

Apart from these mechanical signals which show that another person is passing, there is a group of physiological signals that are usually considered to occur involuntarily. These also occur regularly when male passes female and again the male is the creator of the marker. We argue that the markers are purposeful or intentional and are motivated by socio-cultural gender stereotypes, attitudes and ideological orientation.

## METHODOLOGY

The data for this article came largely from actual speech recordings of natural communication observed on the streets of Harare. Utterances involving street remarks and the behavioural forms accompanying them were observed mainly at the food cafes, bus and commuter bus termini, construction sites, regulated road junctions, markets and pedestrian malls in the city for eight weeks. Initially, the researcher, while commuting to and from the University, observed interactions that include street remarks. More systematic observations were made when the researcher spent time at the various places, particularly during weekends taking notes and recording instances involving street remarks between unacquainted people. Some of the conversations, altercations and verbal exchanges resulting from the remarks were recorded on tape for closer analysis and comparison of male and female remarks. The observation

method enabled the researcher to gather data on the terms, jokes and other expressions that men use in addressing women directly or indirectly on the street. Some of the terms that women use, especially when responding to street remarks and the other strategies that they use to avoid brawl, such as silence, were obtained from the observations.

The observation method was supplemented by face-to-face interviews. Informants were picked from neighbours, colleagues, and career women whose work requires them to wear pants, housewives, women activists, university students and adolescents. Factors such as age, social status and social class were considered in sampling in order to establish the motivation of street remarks, their characteristics and the nature and diversity of responses involved. It is from both observations and interviews that we established that men are invariably the initiators of street remarks.

### THE CONTEXTUAL FOUNDATION OF STREET REMARKS

Brown (1980, 125) defines a stereotype as 'a category that singles out an individual as sharing assumed characteristics on the basis of his group membership'. Stereotyping usually implies some type of attitude towards an individual or individuals in question. Brown (1980, 127) asserts that,

Attitudes, like all aspects of cognition and the affect in human beings, develop early in childhood and are the result of parents' and peers' attitudes, and interacting affective factors in the human experience. These attitudes form part of one's perception of self, of others and of the culture in which one is living.

The fact that men are often the originators of street remarks suggests that these markers are derived from a culture that venerates male superordinacy and female subordination. In Shona society, men are commonly stereotyped as fierce animals whose maleness is visibly imposing, for example *bhuru* (bull), *jongwe* (cock), *shumba* (lion), and so on. The macho attributes are celebrated by society through such figurative expressions as; *bhuru rinoonekwa nemavanga aro* (lit. a bull is seen by its scars) and *musha haukukuridze machongwe maviri* (lit. a home cannot have two cocks crowing at the same time). There are no equivalent comparisons for women. That gap is likely to be due to the assumption that 'fierceness and superordinacy presence are not feminine attributes' (Mukama, 1995, 379). This observation is supported by the fact that all other attributes associated with offensiveness and invincibility are all ascribed to men. Women who are identified with these characteristics are labeled manly. Being condemned to that bottom position, it is expected that women will not attempt to rise to claim fair play in verbal provocation embedded in street remarks.

Women's public life is greatly different from that of men because of the manner in which the former are treated in public by the latter. On the streets, men generally subject women to evaluative commentary. Common commentary has to do with women's appearance. Street remarks often accuse women of inferior looks, improper attire, inappropriate action and moral defects, among others. A middle-aged woman wearing a blouse that exposes her stomach, dubbed '*guvhu out*' (one that exposes the navel) in Shona slang and a pair of tight jeans, enters a road-side café and two men exchange a joke meant to pour ridicule on her by speaking loud enough for the woman to over-hear their conversation. In doing so, they constitute the latter as the subject of the discourse without having to confront her directly: '*Unoziva chikundyu here shamwari? Chinogara muviri uri pachena chichizviadhivhetaiza.*' (Do you know a type of cricket-like beetle my friend? It is bare as if to advertise its body). The woman decodes the joke and simply frowns at them as she walks out. Sometimes women who are caught out of role are reprimanded directly for it by looks and comments. The singular, non-honorific pronoun of address and abusive terms are used as terms of address in such instances, despite the age and social status of the woman in question.

Disembarking from a bus from the University, the researcher sees a young woman wearing a mini-skirt crossing a street next to the commuter bus terminus and a group of bus touts shout, '*Hure! Iwe mira!*' (Prostitute! You stop!). On another street a mother crosses a street during the evening rush hour leaving a child behind on crossing the street, and one driver peeps through the window and shouts, '*Iwe unopenga here? Ndewako here mwana iyeye? Vakadzi munodeiko mutown nguwa ino?*' (You! Are you out of your mind? Is that your child? What do you women want in town at this time of the day anyway?). In both instances the women rush away quietly. The use of the word *hure* (prostitute) and the second person pronoun together indicate the speaker's intention to offend or embarrass the addressee. The remarks reveal stereotyped views about urban women. The myth of prostitution and that of African authenticity in both colonial and post-independence Africa was (is) aimed at perpetuating the control of women. As Obbo (1981) observes:

Women are viewed as the upholders of traditional ways of life and they often find themselves as scapegoats for society's confusion and conflict over what the contemporary role of women should be, and for the dilemmas produced by adjusting to rapid social change (p. 11).

Society believes that as bearers of culture, women should be protected, with or without their consent, from the corrupting influences of Western culture such as wigs, cosmetics, short dresses and pants. People tend to,

judge women especially by the way they dress, and can be heard expressing sentiments that imply an assumed association between sex-work and certain type of clothes. Mini-skirts, tight jeans, wearing a wig or 'too much' make-up; and being on the street without being accompanied by a 'decent-looking' male, all add up to being a sex-worker in the view of the most conventionally minded people. Flamboyant, non-conventional dress is also often used to defend the rapist where a young woman is accused of having 'asked for it'; having been in the wrong place at the wrong time; having tempted the man (MacFadden, 1992, 173).

In the late 1960s and the early 1970s, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda controlled immorality by regulating female attire. Mini-skirts were defined in Uganda, in 1971 as 'clothing injurious to the public morale' (Obbo, 1981, 11) and were banned. In Zimbabwe, as Chitauro *et al* (1994) have explicitly demonstrated, a factor that relates to the 'prostitute' image is the historic joint attempt by the Rhodesian government and the African men to control African women and to exclude them from the urban space. A point that came frequently in our discussions with 'liberated' women was connected with notions of danger and power. As career and professional women, they suggested a kind of power. They were perceived as dangerous and that is why men feared and wished to control them. They are perceived as 'dangerous' in that they might influence other women to follow their lifestyle, as they were presumed to be single or divorced.

In all African societies, child-bearing is highly valued. Once the woman gets a child, the child's name becomes her name so that her identity is totally subsumed under the child. A Shona mother would be addressed as *Amai Vimbai* (Mother of Vimbai), for instance. Variations to that version will be terms like *Mai mwana* (Mother of child), *Mai Tombi* (Mother of girl child), *Mai Bhoyi* (Mother of boy child), *Ambuya* (Mother-in-law) or *Mai Matuwinzi* if she has twins or triplets. All these are supposed to be a sign of respect for the woman as a mother. Once a woman neglects that child from whom she derives respect, she is perceived as debased, hence deserving public humiliation of the kind cited above.

Some of the street remarks concerning women's appearances pertain to the concept of beauty. At a shopping mall along Second Street the researcher hears a man passing by calling some fat young woman loitering at the mall, '*Hesi Madhuve!*' (Hello *Madhuve!*) The woman does not respond and the man continues, '*Mafehfehle!*' (The fat one!) Another slim, tall woman wearing a track-suit passes two men and she overhears one of them say, '*Waiona here hwemisi iyo?*' (Have you seen that worm?). The construction of womanhood in terms of sexuality and attractiveness is associated with the woman's physical appearance. As McFadden

(1992, 172) rightly observes, 'Size has always been a factor and numerous African novels applaud the contours and sensuality of a large, well-formed African female form.' In Shona poetry and song, the woman's body is talked about 'in very powerful language of love, and sometimes lust and possessiveness' (Chitauro, 1995, 44). The objectification of women using nouns of classes 5 and 7, with the syntactic features [+big] and [+short, +fat], but never those of class 21, with feature [+very big], is common in Shona poetry as well as in oral discourse. This shows that the African people, men especially, admire large but not so large female forms and seem to deride model forms that are derived from White stereotypes of beauty and perfection. Remarks such as those cited above, therefore reflect the crude cartooning that women are subjected to on the street and also reveals the objectification of women in Shona culture.

It is not only the unattractive, sloppy women who receive public remarks; the pretty and well-groomed ones too. The remarks are made by all classes of men, individually or in groups; sometimes they are spoken jokingly, sometimes with vehemence. These patterns of behaviour could be better understood by examining the gender-role prescriptions of men and women in African society (See Chimhundu, 1987; and Gaidzanwa, 1985). In Shona culture, men have a built-in license to accost women and it is the women's prerogative to comply or to resist. When this happens in public, rejection is inevitable. Just as women are unlikely to respond in a hostile way, they are unlikely to respond positively. Verbal innuendoes, including street remarks are regarded as part of the organic male communicative devices. Most of the men interviewed in Harare do not seem to realize that street remarks are offensive to women, although they may not always be so. Many women, especially those with raised consciousness, find male street remarks offensive and intrusive.

Some women do not always seem to take offense at male-to-female street remarks. They believe that some street remarks are innocuously intended and flattering. Similar findings are reported by Gardner (1984, 151) in her study on the Black community in Pennsylvania. She observes that street remarks 'are the rewards due to the woman who fulfils her female role requirements or they are the playful patter of the men she passes'.

The whistle or hissing sound is an extra-linguistic form of street address or remark that is quite common in both rural and urban Zimbabwean communities. There were mixed responses to the question, 'Do you like to be whistled to?' depending on age, social class and social status. Most of the married women and professional women who the researcher talked to say that they are generally offended and embarrassed by the whistling behaviour. These responses were confirmed by many women's reactions that the researcher observed on the streets. The most

common reaction to whistling was inattention. But many of the teenage girls that were interviewed are rather indifferent to it. It seems that whistling is not uniquely Zimbabwean. Goffman (1963,144-145) analyzed the positive possibilities of street remarks and whistles in Western communities. He writes:

In some Western communities there is the practice whereby a male communicates regard for attractiveness of a passing female with whom she is unacquainted by whistling at her or greeting her with some other expressive sign. What follows is up to her. She can elect to act as if no relevant communication has occurred. Or she can elect to turn and ratify the comment by a friendly or hostile comment, in either case creating a momentary face engagement. (Apparently the more impersonally appreciative the whistle, that is, the more it can be construed not as a pickup, the more accepting the girl will be of it.) But in addition, she may visibly smile (so that the whistler knows that the message has been appreciatively received), and at the same time look straight ahead so as not to allow for the collapse of the separateness and the formation of an engagement. This latter tack represents in effect, the collusion of both individuals against the rules of communication — an unratified breach of communication barriers. The breach is a slight one, however, since the person whistled to has been on the move away from the whistle and will soon be out of the range of engagement.

Goffman's analysis is moralistic and seems to place the responsibility for the breach on the woman. In Shona society the man is invariably the first mover. The women's responses are not as simplistic as Goffman observes of Western communities. They depend on a number of variables, including the setting of the communication. In addition, as our data show, these patterns of remarks are not necessarily motivated by the woman's appearance.

Many men can state street remarks so as to neutralize offense. A young woman crossing a street in Harare hears a male voice call out, '*Iwe!*' (You!) from behind her; she says nothing but the man calls again, '*Iwe!*' The speaker catches up with her at last, and says plaintively, '*Uri kuramba kucheuka hako, but wakachena wena.*' (You have decided not to turn, but you are certainly well dressed). Again a woman walks down a street in a high-density suburb in Harare. A middle-aged man approaches her and looks at her appreciatively: '*Ambuya hindava kunakaso? Murume wenyu anombokuudzai here kuti makanaka?*' (Lady, do you realize how beautiful you are? Does your husband often tell you that you are beautiful?). The woman simply smiles as she walks by. In both these cases the men have included 'self-serving mitigating devices' (Hung and Bradac, 1993, 92) or 'redressive strategies' (Brown and Levinson, 1978, 74) that defuse the possibility of offense of the remark. Mitigating devices

have been discussed extensively in (Fraser, 1980) and Brown and Levinson's (1978; 1987) work on politeness. Hung and Bradac (1993, 93) define mitigation as 'an attempt at reducing the harshness or hostility of the force of a speech act'. In the first case, the man, although persistent, used a sincere tone and in the second case, the man addressed the woman by using a term of respect, *ambuya* (lit., mother-in-law), and incorporated reference to the woman's husband.

Street remarks can take the form of asymmetrical teasing. This usually happens when a lone woman passes by a group of men and finds herself in a momentarily peculiar physical position, as when the slit of her dress is blown by the wind, she trips or slips. A woman walks past a group of fruit vendors and her skirt is blown up by the wind exposing her underwear. She tries to keep it down and she hears one of the vendors shouting, '*Siya zvakadarol! Rega tinyatsoona Africa yose.*' (Leave us to see the whole of Africa). The rest of the group laughs. In this case the remark takes the form of sexual slang. The word 'Africa', in this context, is used euphemistically to refer to the female genitalia. Initially positive and neutral words like 'Africa' acquire negative (and often sexual) connotations through semantic derogation. This language transformation 'occurs more frequently for words referring to women than men' (Schulz, 1975). According to Johnson, (1977, cited in Grossman, 1997, 110), the transformation results from men's tendency to view women as sexual objects and to control women's sexuality.

Zimbabwe's patriarchal culture also produces a preponderance of pejorative terms to describe women. In fact, the terms are ephemeral, elusive and epitomize the city culture. It is not uncommon to hear men, particularly the younger generation, addressing younger women as '*chick*', '*hwaga*' (from whore), '*chibhurari*', and '*bhebhi*' (lit. baby) on the street. '*Chick*' infantilizes women and reduces them to animal status. '*Hwaga*' and '*chibhurari*' suggest sexual promiscuity and '*bhebhi*' alludes to child-like attributes such as sweetness and tenderness and, when intended as a compliment, focuses only on a woman's physical attractiveness. Terms such as *ambuya* (lady) that appear to be polite are sometimes used euphemistically by men to make covertly insulting references to women. The preponderance of sexual and derogatory slang aimed at women suggests that women in our society continue to be defined by their sexuality. Following the Sapir-Whorfian hypothesis that language is an important determinant of people's cognitions and behaviours (Lucy, 1992), the use of derogatory sexual slang reflects the existing socio-cultural biases against women and may lead both sexes to view women more negatively.

Street remarks also involve men motorists-to-male motorists, male-to-female motorists and motorists-to-pedestrians. Goffman (1981, 108)

says that, 'drivers of buses, taxis and private cars can shout unflattering judgements of other motorists and pedestrians when they have passed out of range'. However, the researcher observed that the motorists and pedestrians shouted at more frequently in the streets of Harare are women. Remarks to female motorists such as '*Iwe buda muroad mhani kana usingagoni kudhiravha!*' (You get off the road if you cannot drive properly!) '*Unoda kutitisa ngozi here iwe? Zvevakadzi vakomana!*' (Do you want to cause an accident? Women behave quite strangely?) and many others are common on the streets of Harare, particularly during rush hour. Male bus and commuter bus drivers who consider the following of road rules religiously as frivolous make most of the remarks. The negative attitudes towards women drivers reflected in the insulting remarks derive from the general belief by many people, both male and female, that women are not assertive, muscular and expeditious enough to be drivers. These attributes are culturally associated with male aggression. Throughout childhood, aggression is strongly disapproved of in girls. Furthermore, in the colonial era there were very few socially approved public roles for women in the urban areas, and driving was not one of them. Driving was a symbol of freedom and audacity. In fact, as Mhlabi recalls,

If you allowed your wife to drive, everyone, including your wife's parents, would blame you for urging her into promiscuity and exposing her to danger. The women themselves were not eager to do that sort of thing either (Interview, 1999).

The remarks against female drivers result from some such perceptions internalized even by the women themselves. Although there are numerous individual women drivers in post-independence Zimbabwe, those that drive public transport are still quite few. Those women who have crossed the stereotypical boundary often receive remarks like, '*Uyu murume chaiye*' (This one is just as good as a man).

### CHARACTERISTICS OF STREET REMARKS

Noting some attributes of male-female street remarks makes it possible to understand why women generally construe these remarks negatively and why most men interpret them positively. Gardner (1984, 154) stresses that street remarks make women feel like objects and that 'receiving the remarks constitute a landmark experience in their coming of age; that having male remarks may be the most memorable feature of some period or place in their lives.' In Shona culture, street remarks symbolize a rite of passage for young women from puberty to adolescence. This transition affects the young women's strategies of responding to and countering the

street remarks. It seems that, at adolescence, women are less constrained by cultural role expectations than at adult stage.

While most women are perplexed by street remarks, men generally construe them as playfulness, flattery and motivated by women's provocative behaviour. One University of Zimbabwe male student related an incident where he 'playfully' commented to a female student at the campus commuter bus terminus referring to her hair as resembling that of a White person but the female student remained quiet. When he repeated the remark, the latter broke into a song to reinforce her disregard of the comment. The male student, like his counterparts who were present at the interview, reported that he felt provoked by the lady's response.

Some men believe that street remarks can have a corrective value. Some of the examples cited by men are those involving African women who wear tights and hot pants. Culturally women are open persons and are always accessible. The stereotype of women as accessible persons is underlined in proverbial expressions such as: '*Mukadzi muzhanje wepanzira apfuura anotanhwo*', translatable as: (A woman is like a *muzhanje* tree, any man who passes by can help himself). Women in public are therefore obliged to show that they can be approached by any male but they can only be won by some male.

Remarks are either direct or indirect. Indirect street remarks are rather ambiguous making it quite disconcerting for women. Men who make indirect remarks are usually in pairs or in groups. Some comments refer to or make props or actual or elaborated characteristics of the woman. One woman reported that on one occasion while crossing a street in the Kopje area she heard male taxi drivers talking in loud voices about the round and good looking legs they saw; another saw three men gazing at her and heard one of them comment: '*Apa chero zvikanzi iripo ndinosva ndafa zvangu ndakaguta.*' (If this one has it (AIDS) I would prefer to have sex with her and die contented). The effect of introducing topics taboo in polite conversation in public conversation is to embarrass the woman who over-hears them. The woman is expected to remain quiet and disinterested because she is only an over-hearer and not a ratified speaker in the conversation. In traditional culture, ignoring male coarseness is a gender-role requirement. Situations-based control on women's speech, particularly within the public domain, appears to be widespread.

In Zimbabwe as in several other African societies, one of the virtues of ideal womanhood is abstinence from dominating men in speaking within the public domain. In some African societies, unlike Zimbabwe, as Yankah (1998, 17) observed, women wear various types of lip plates, not only as decoration, but also as instruments of speech inhibition of certain situations. An attempt by a woman to reply to a public remark would,

therefore be a violation of her feminine role and would expose her to open criticism and sometimes to heavier insults, especially when the remarks involve sexual matters, which they almost always do.

Some street remarks are often evaluative in a positive way. Middle class or professional men who often use subtle strategies to avoid altercations and consequent embarrassing moments often make such remarks. These remarks are generally interpreted as compliments. In most cases, however, public comments to the unacquainted are ambivalent. A colleague reported that, in a banking hall in First Street, one man said to her, '*Sisi makachena chaizvo*' (Sister you have a nice attire). When she remained quiet the man repeated the same compliment. But when the woman responded with, '*Mazvita zvenyu*' (Thank you), the man hung around repeating the same remarks in different ways and then followed her, perhaps attempting to establish an acquaintance. Many women perceive such situations as potentially violent. If a woman ignores repeated evaluations of a man, he might embarrass her by making contemptuous remarks in public. Most women say that they only welcome evaluation remarks as genuinely complimentary if they are made by well dressed and attractive men of their own social class.

Some evaluation remarks are negative in the sense that they are judgemental and sometimes moralistic. The researcher observed a young woman with a child crossing a street at a pedestrian crossing and heard a man behind her saying, '*Mwana uyo anotsikwa ambuya. Muri kutadza kumubata zvakanaka here?*' (That child will be run over by a car lady. Can't you hold her properly?). Another woman ran to catch a bus and the bus conductor said, '*Musamhanye ambuya. Munodonha mukanyara.*' (Do not run lady. You might fall down and be embarrassed). Some of these remarks debase women by regarding them as irresponsible, irrational and vulnerable.

It seems that almost every woman who passes down a street alone, particularly on the periphery of the Central Business District, is open to remarks. Even those accompanied by a man, a child or those who are pregnant are not exclusively free from remarks. A rather ugly woman accompanied by a handsome man passes a group of construction workers and one of the workers, looking at them shouts, '*Zviyu hazvidondani vakomana!*' (Good spouses seldom marry each other). Another young woman standing at a robot crossing with a child on her back hears a man standing besides her say, '*Mwana wenyu here uyu sisi? Akanaka samai vake.*' (Is this your child, sister? She is as beautiful as her mother.)

Street remarks can be meant to test the woman's self-control. Such kind of remarks are attention-getters. Traditionally prescribed female role behavior forbids women to speak to male strangers and to respond to whistles or verbal remarks. Yet in reality there are many circumstances which require the women to break the frame. The stranger may be in

need of help, may be sounding an alarm or the woman might have dropped something. Whether they respond or not they are still likely to find that they are the butts of a street remark.

Faced with varied situations involving street remarks women say they react in various ways. One strategy is to act as if nothing is happening. The researcher confirmed such a reaction at a bus terminus where one man used a smoking gesture for provocation. The woman remained silent. On further provocation, she avoided confrontation by moving to another position. Many women reported that they try to avoid the street or place where a particular remark occurred or activities that intrigue remarks such as loitering, running and cycling. The researcher observed that when some women are walking alone, they wear dark glasses. Many professional women reported that they avoid wearing either too 'provocative' or too casual dress, and usually walk in a business-like way. Another way of diffusing the possibility of remarks that women adopt, particularly when passing a group of working men is to greet them or to pretend to ask for help or directions. In most cases the woman is treated politely because she has placed the men in a position of power and declared herself helpless and subordinate.

Some street boys reported that women who answer back angrily to men who make street remarks, either walking alone or in a group, often become victims of heavier abuse. Some working class women, particularly those under thirty and adolescents in general, are less constrained by cultural role expectations. They answer back using their own derogatory and/or slang terms used by men to demonstrate that they are equally invincible and they are not worried about status or being 'lady-like'. In fact, their counter-remarks can be more offensive than those made by men. The researcher has, on several occasions, heard some working class women using as counter-remarks such extremely insulting and obscene terms as '*musatanyoko*' (one who has sexual intercourse with his mother) and '*zimbwa*' (a big dog), particularly in the streets of Mbare and Mufakose — high density suburbs in Harare. But, it is likely that either men or women in other contexts also use these words. Some women go to the extent of picking up fights with the men. These observations conform to the results obtained by De Klerk (1992), based on South African data and that by Risch (1987), based on North American data. Both studies have demonstrated that 'females do use derogatory language and appear to be doing so in increasing numbers' (De Klerk, 1992, 278). Most women in our society have been silent victims of street verbal abuse because they 'internalized the patriarchal ideology which defines them as subordinate to men' (McFadden, 1992, 157). Retaliation is not considered feminine behaviour.

Retaliation can lead to verbal altercations and then these may result in physical wrangle. The type of socialization that women generally receive traditionally does not encourage or equip them for violence and aggression. If the remark is sexually humiliating, traditionally, women are not expected to utter such remarks either in private or in public. In Shona culture, as in other cultures throughout the world, the strongest linguistic taboos apply to words associated with sex. Studies in the psychology of language define taboo or dirty words by their affectation, the reactions aroused by the word, instead of the word's denotative meaning (Paivio and Begg, 1981, cited in Risch, 1987, 354). Compliance with verbal taboo is part of the ethnography of communication. But, women certainly have a lexical set for referring in an overtly derogatory manner but 'such a set of terms would be considered to be taboo, and perhaps such language behaviour in women is merely too "unladylike" to mention' (Risch, 1987, 354). Women are generally perceived as being more status conscious than men are and are thought to be restricted to more 'standard' forms of speech. 'Non-standard forms of speech are considered to be associated with masculinity and toughness' (Trudgill, 1974, 191).

The type of speech event in street remarks depends on whether there is one man, two men or a group of men involved. Chances of a fight ensuing between the man who says the remark and the woman who retaliates, or the latter being assaulted are greater if there is one man involved. The man's hostility is aroused by the fear of rejection and public humiliation. If two or more men are involved the woman's counterstrike is diffused by laughter from the men.

## CONCLUSION

We have demonstrated that male-to-female remarks are several types of speech act that occur in the streets of Harare. The remarks take many forms depending on whether there is one male or two or more males or a group involved. The characteristics of the remarks have been examined. We have argued that the nature of the speech act, the men's dominant and offensive role and the women's general responses are determined by and reflect the gender and cultural stereotypes that are inculcated during the process of socialization. Women are generally regarded as 'open persons' and their appearance as a ready resource for public comment. Most of the remarks focus on the women's attire, stature and behaviour or presupposed behaviour. Depending on the social class of the male speaker, the setting, the perceived personality of the addressee and the addressee's response, the remark range from general teasing to coarse verbal taboos.

This study has indicated that men can be categorized according to the types of street remarks that they make, their persistence and the frequency of perpetration and their reaction to female responses. About four categories can be adduced from this study. The first category is that of working class men, who include commuter touts and public transport drivers; those that work at public sites; vendors, etc. These often make derogatory, sarcastic and insulting remarks, depending on whether they are in groups or individuals. The second group is that of street teenagers. Street teenagers normally live in groups. They are generally indiscriminate in their verbal attack and like those in the first category, inclined towards slang and sex taboos. The other category is that of students. These are rather polite and complimentary when individuals, but rowdy and coarse when in groups. The last category is that of middle-class or professional men whose status is associated with 'gentleman-like' poise. These are less disposed to crude and indiscreet remarks and violent reaction when an altercation occurs. They tend to make ambiguous remarks that are often interpreted as genuinely complimentary by women of their class. However, most women feel that, although the immediate impact of street remarks differ with each category of males, the values embedded in the remarks, the stereotypes perpetuated and the overall gender implications are negative and undesirable. The cultural gender relationship of man as subject and woman as object gives the former address rights towards the latter. Sometimes remarks, accompanied by involuntary mechanical signals are motivated by gender stereotypes and men's tendency of regarding women as objects of amusement and 'beasts of prey'.

It was mentioned in the introduction that women who try to cope with changing realities by asserting their sexual and social choices and identities are regarded as a 'problem' by men, and a betrayal of traditions, often confused with women's roles. Cultural distinctiveness has become more closely identified with the arena of gender relations and the appropriate conduct of women. Women's conduct is perceived as crucial to the constitution of identity because 'women are considered the guardians and symbols of cultural particularism' (UNESCO, 1995, 114) and mediators between the past and the present. They must be protected from Western influence while men see themselves as mediators between the present and the future. African women are, therefore caught between two opposing forces: between a practical pressure to change, and a moral pressure not to do so. This is part of the motivation for street remarks by men on women. Remarks are used as a form of direct social control. They have moral overtones. Those women who are perceived as resisting the traditional gender roles and challenging the *status quo* are considered as deserving public embarrassment. Remarks are therefore

used to change non-conformist behaviour through ridicule, reprimand, or even more direct physical attack. Breaching of verbal taboos by using sex-related insults is often a deliberate way, by men, to de-face 'deviant' women. Women who retaliate by also using insults, perhaps, do it in an attempt to protect their self-image or simply out of anguish of public embarrassment.

Most women are disturbed by street remarks because such utterances unduly evoke human emotions and often stir altercation. This is based on the presumed potency of the spoken word. Zimbabwean women often suffer quietly the consequences of street remarks, some of them quite violent, debasing and abusive. Because of their occurrence between the unacquainted, the unpredictability of the consequences ensuing from the interaction and their abusive nature or potential, street remarks could be classified as a form of verbal abuse and a breach of civil inattention.

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