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## CHAPTER 4: THE PROBLEM OF SEX

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

The research undertaken gives rise to several questions about sexuality. Although the parents and church are very clear about their expectations about the sexual behaviour of young women, most young women do exactly the opposite. The young women are aware of the dangers of engaging in sexual relationships outside marriage, they know how their parents feel and what the church prescribes, yet their behaviour does not reflect these values. Why do they ignore the counsel of their parents and pastors? Why do they commence and then continue with risky behaviour, where having sex can indeed result in terrible suffering and ultimately in premature death? Why do they ostensibly trust their partners, but live with nagging doubts about the commitment of their partners in their relationships? Is their sexual education sufficient for them to be able to make responsible choices? Is the fear of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases enough to bring about a change in behaviour? Is their participation in sex truly free and celebratory, or is it a romanticised involvement in male power play, authority and dominance? Are existent Christian sexual ethics adequate and sufficient to give them a moral grounding to cope with contemporary choices, issues and problems?

Questions like these oblige me to explore the context in which sexuality takes place generally and in particular in the context of Africa. This chapter will endeavour to look at the traditional and current, predominant Christian and societal views on sexuality, to answer some of the questions above and to explore and augment a Christian feminist ethic of accountability and integrity.

### 4.2 THE PROBLEM OF SEX

#### 4.2.1 SEXUALITY AND PATRIARCHY

Patriarchy denotes the manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women and children in the family and the augmentation of male dominance

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over women in society in general (Lerner 1986: 239). This ideology limits women in their decision-making about sexuality, loving and labouring, centralising the socially constructed idea of motherhood as an ideal. Patriarchy suppresses the potential power of women, with the result that the actual power of men is enhanced. Patriarchy has as its consequence the hierarchical relationships between men and women and reflects the solidarity between men so as to dominate women. Otive Igbuzor ([www.dawodu.com](http://www.dawodu.com)) describes the three-fold advantages of patriarchy as receiving personal service work from women, in not having to do housework and rearing children, in having unrestricted access to women's bodies for sex and in feeling and being powerful. Patriarchy reduces sex to physicality and procreation, as the control of female sexuality is a critical element in the perpetuation of patriarchy.

Gerda Lerner (1986) traces the creation of patriarchy, which took place over the past millennia. With the development of patriarchy came the commodification and control of female sexuality and procreativity. She contends that women's subordination was institutionalised in the earliest law code; thereafter it was enforced by the full power of the state. Men used a variety of means to obtain the co-operation of women, including force, economic dependency and the artificially created division of women into respectable and non-respectable.

Lerner further shows that the system of patriarchy could not be sustained without the collaboration of women. The support of women in the functioning of patriarchy was secured by a variety of means:

*gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to women of knowledge of their history; the dividing of women, one from the other, by defining "respectability" and "deviance" according to women's sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women.*

Gerda Lerner (1986: 217)

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Women internalised the idea of their own inferiority and lived their lives under the confines and restrictions of patriarchy. The male was seen as the norm and the female as deviant; “the male as whole and powerful, the female as unfinished, mutilated, and lacking autonomy” (*Ibid*: 220). Patriarchy thus relegated sexuality to a domain of restriction, repression and even danger for women.

The true essence of patriarchy becomes manifest in sexual relations (Gittens in Kemp and Squires 1997: 346). Male dominance is sexual (MacKinnon in Kemp and Squires 1997: 351), defined by men and forced on women. Sexual access is legitimised by heterosexual relations and various means such as control, coercion and force are used by men to ensure sexual access to women. Sexual access within marriage as well as in sexual relationships is an assumed right and a manifestation of relational power. Sexuality is mostly defined in masculine terms and virility, conquest, power and domination are recurrent ideas in heterosexual relationships. Male dominance appears to exist cross-culturally and universally. The contexts of cultures define the extent of male dominance, which in turn eroticises and defines male and female identities and sexual pleasure in that context. This perspective of male supremacy means that male sexual desire is “never satisfied once and for all, while male force is romanticized, even sacralized, potentiated and naturalized, by being submerged into sex itself” (*Ibid*: 354).

#### **4.2.2 AN OVERVIEW OF WOMEN’S SEXUALITY IN CHRISTIANITY**

Lisa Isherwood (1998: 19) indicates that it is very problematical to try and indicate the influence of patriarchy on Christianity and vice versa, but there is a definite interplay visible: “What we are able to say is that our culture holds patriarchal views of the body and our church reflects all these negative traits. Christianity and patriarchy are highly compatible bed-fellows.” It follows therefore that any study of sexuality in Christianity will focus on the patriarchal interplay present in society. Michel Foucault has shown distinctly that sexuality is formed by society. Sex can therefore not be separated from society and culture. The social construction of women’s bodies serves as a powerful tool for control and dominance. The social construction of bodies was facilitated by the views of the church fathers about

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sexuality which became a resounding discourse that influenced societies through centuries up to the present. Voices proclaiming a healthy sexuality were constantly drowned by the pervasiveness of the discourse that sex is defiling, perverse and animalistic. According to Carter Heyward, “we who are Christian are heirs to a body-despising, women-fearing, sexually repressive religious tradition” (in Nelson and Longfellow 1994: 16).

#### **4.2.2.1 THE OLD TESTAMENT: WOMEN AS THE PROPERTY OF MEN**

According to the earliest written legal codes, the law defined women’s bodies as male property. The secondary status of women is highlighted in Old Testament texts, where they are listed as male property (Ex 20:17 and Deut 5:21). These laws clearly give ownership to the male and place women under the control of men. A virgin daughter was an economic asset to a father (Deut 20:28-29) owing to patriarchal rights over a daughter’s sexuality. “The treatment of women as property and the exclusion of women from those who may come directly before Yahwe in public religious rituals rest on the unexamined presuppositions of patriarchy assumed to reflect God’s will. Women are objects of the law, not its creators. In these male-defined laws, men and their perspectives on reality are at the centre, women and their perspectives are on the margins” (Clifford 2000: 73).

#### **4.2.2.2 WOMEN’S BRIEF RESPITE: JESUS AND WOMEN**

During his ministry, Jesus encountered women as a marginalised group in society. He broke the social and cultural taboos of the time and accepted the full humanity of both female and male. Jesus had a band of women followers and He gave some of His most important teachings to women. He taught the outcast Samaritan woman in public (Jn 4:1-38), He welcomed the company of women and was friendly with Mary and Martha of Bethany. He healed the woman with a haemorrhage (Mk 5:25-34), exorcised women (Lk 8:32) and healed their children (Mk 7:25-26). Women were courageous witnesses of the crucifixion and Mary Magdalene was the first witness to the empty tomb and to the risen Jesus. The acts and teachings of Jesus concerning women were both liberating and emancipatory, but this state of affairs did not last long.

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#### 4.2.2.3 SEXUALITY AND THE CHURCH FATHERS

Patriarchy came into play again very soon in the Christian movement. The hierarchical model of wives, children and slaves submitting to the rule of the fathers is already apparent in New Testament texts.

Rosemary Radford Ruether (in Isherwood 2000: 37) contends that the teachings of Monatism, Marcionism and Valentinianism held the seeds of emancipation for women, but that the church fathers that shaped the church soon quelled these ideas. The church fathers relegated women to subordination, subjected to the authority of husband and church, “while their sexual and reproductive roles were linked to sin and death” (*Ibid*: 37). Karen McClintock (2001: 42) quotes Reay Tanahill as describing the predominant feeling of the church fathers towards sex: “It was Augustine who epitomized a general feeling among the church fathers that the act of intercourse was fundamentally disgusting ... Arnobius called it filthy and degrading, Methodius unseemly, Jerome unclean, Tertullian shameful, Ambrose defilement”.

The doctrine of Incarnation, already firmly established by the third century, positions the body as central in Christian theology. The coincident hatred of the body is therefore difficult to comprehend. The body became something to be reviled, punished, despised and starved. The body became hated, “because it is sexual, and in a vicious circle this hatred of the body increases the Christian sexual disgust” (Armstrong 1986: 23). The female body was even more repugnant than the male body. Sex was equated with sin, evil and death. Christian sexuality links sin and sex and the Western Fathers of the Church combated sexuality with aggressive and anti-sexual theologies. They saw sex as degrading and disgusting, associated with lust. The dualism of the physical and spiritual also came into play here. Men, as representatives of the spiritual, have to subdue and dominate women, the physical. With every act of intercourse the physical entrapped the spiritual. Women were viewed as insatiable and innate temptresses who subjugated men to lose their rationality, masculinity and spirituality (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 18).

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Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 C.E.) exerted a tremendous influence over the sexual construction of bodies over the last centuries. His theological anthropology is filled with contradictions, eschewed in the notion of a radical dualism polarising spirit and flesh, male and female, and good and evil. Augustine regarded virginity as a higher state than marriage. Marriage is infused with three positive elements, namely progeny, fidelity and sacrament (Ruether in Isherwood: 41), symbolising the union of Christ and church and the sacramental bond of the Christian community. Yet Augustine regarded marital sex with suspicion, regarding it as tainted with concupiscence and bordering on sinfulness (Cahill 1985: 114). Engaging in the marital sexual act for the purposes of reproduction and fidelity, is a sin that will be forgiven, but “any sexual act, even in marriage, undertaken only for pleasure, impeding procreation, is wholly sinful and equivalent to fornication” (Ruether 1998: 76).

#### **4.2.2.4 THE MIDDLE AGES**

The negative views of sexuality as expounded by the church fathers continued during the Middle Ages. The spread of Christianity also encouraged the expansion of misogyny and the hatred of the sexual. During the Middle Ages prohibitions and taboos came into being. Sex was regulated and controlled, as it “stood outside the idea of Christian holiness and the Christian life” (Armstrong 1986: 36). Medieval Christians were taught to see only shame in their sexual coupling, separating them from God (Ruether in Isherwood 2000: 44).

Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274 C.E.) was the greatest scholastic theologian of the Middle Ages and a most articulate exponent of natural law. He viewed male primacy as natural and women’s bodies and intellect therefore as lesser than those of a man. He taught that females are misbegotten males. The woman is the man’s helper; her tasks being procreation and the ancillary and secondary tasks of establishing a family and a household. Sex in marriage is justified because of procreation. Marital sex is sinful without the express intention of procreating, and sex outside of marriage is a far greater sin. The sin of marital sex, accompanied by passion and worldliness, will be forgiven if the couple beget children and

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remain faithful to each other. Lisa Sowle Cahill (1985: 119), however, views his insight into marriage as a profound form of friendship, intensified by physical expression, as his biggest contribution to an ethics of sexuality.

#### **4.2.2.5 PROTESTANTISM, PURITANISM AND SUBSEQUENT VIEWS ON SEXUALITY**

The Reformation deposed the system of male celibate clericalism, but only revised the Augustinian teachings on sex, sin and gender. Women were still viewed as subordinate to men and “have incurred the greater sin through their priority in disobedience that caused the Fall” (Ruether in Isherwood 2000: 45). Karen Armstrong (1986) feels that the regulation of sexuality according to Christian ideals was effectively handled by Protestantism and Puritanism. Protestantism reverted to the teachings of Augustine and Puritanism managed to enforce its rigidity and inflexibility on people. The concept of sex and body as evil persisted and compounded the negative attitudes about sex.

Reformer Martin Luther (1483 – 1546 C.E.) posited that marriage is a vocation to which all humans are called by God. All should marry in order to obey God’s command in creation and to avoid the greater evil of fornication (Ruether in Isherwood 2000: 45). Male and female partnership and complementarity are mandated at creation. Luther sees procreation as a blessing, but paradoxically views sexual passion as sullied by lust. Many occurrences of the Augustinian negativity towards sexual activity are noticeable in Luther’s sexual teaching.

These ideas were carried further in Victorian England where the hate and fear of sex became a powerful underground force. The idea that sex equated man with animals pervaded and it became “a human’s duty to shun his lower animal, sensual nature, and scale the spiritual heights of true humanity” (*Ibid*: 48). During this era sex became linked to illness and was invested with a terrifying power of life and death.

Contemporary societies are still inundated with the ideas about sex and sexuality noted above and these beliefs and attitudes prompted twentieth century

theologian Karl Barth to proclaim: “Women are ontologically inferior to men” (Collins: www.nathanielturner.com). Postmodern and post-Christian societies are still affected by the Christian views and patterns of thought on sexuality. Karen Armstrong (1986: vii) feels that Christian attitudes to sex and to women are simply irrational and inconsistent, while Christine Gudorf suggests that traditional Christian sexual ethics is too inadequate and antiquated to address contemporary sexual issues, because:

*[t]he Christian sexual tradition uses scripture and theological tradition as supports for a code of behaviour which developed out of mistaken, pre-scientific understandings of human anatomy, physiology, and reproduction, as well as out of now abandoned and discredited models of the human person and human relationships. The churches are still today ... teaching a sexual code based in the fear of the body and of sexuality, in understandings of sexual virtue as the repression of bodily desires by the force of the rational will, on physicality, especially sexuality, as an obstacle to spirituality, and on women as lacking reason and only possessing the image of God through connection with men.*

(Gudorf 1994:2-3)

### 4.2.3 SEXUALITY AND PROCREATIONISM

Procreationism has maintained male power across the years and “ensured property rights and the maintenance of control of women and children for economic stability” (McClintock 2001: 38). Christine Gudorf (1994) believes that the concept of procreationism is still prevalent in society today and an obstacle in the way of a just and more humane sexual ethics. Procreationism was prevalent in most of the teachings of the church fathers and the church through the ages. It holds that sexual activity should exclusively be geared towards the creation of human life. It is generally seen as a Roman Catholic problem, but Gudorf contends that “procreationism is a much broader and deeper phenomenon than a ban on the use of artificial contraceptives, and it is embedded in Western history and culture in ways of which we are scarcely conscious” (*Ibid*: 29). Procreationism is based on the hetero-patriarchal meta-narrative that the only acceptable and legitimate sex is penile-vaginal intercourse. This influences and diminishes sexual activity where coitus is not possible and colours attitudes towards using

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contraceptives. Sex without contraceptives consequently becomes more moral than sex with contraceptives.

Traditional sexual ethics, based on understandings of scripture, tradition and natural law, “predicated that sex was made for the purpose of procreation, and therefore only belonged in marriage, where the marital union could provide for the needs of children conceived” (*ibid*: 32). Sex outside of marriage was forbidden because it was deemed irresponsible and ignored the will of God. Procreationism is a hindrance to the construction of pleasurable, fulfilling and creative sex.

## **4.2.4 SEXUALITY AND THE BIBLE**

### **4.2.4.1 INTRODUCTION**

Reading and interpreting the Bible is a complex activity. Patriarchy and misogyny permeate scripture, and male exegesis has often based universal claims on select texts that support its particular interpretation. The creation accounts in Genesis and the household codes in the New Testament are particularly problematic and awkward for the emancipation of women. In the next section a brief description of the male-biased interpretations of these texts will follow.

### **4.2.4.2 THE STORY OF CREATION AS A PATRIARCHAL MYTH**

Male interpretations and patriarchal attention to Genesis 2-3 have patterned the lives and sexuality of women for centuries. Apart from Mary, mother of Jesus, no woman in the Bible has received more attention than Eve. In patriarchal rhetoric “Eve represents sin, seduction, and the secondary nature of woman” (Meyers, Craven and Kraemer 2000: 79). Elaine Pagels (1989: xix) shows that the story of creation became “a primary means for revealing and defending basic attitudes and values”. Many beliefs and attitudes towards sexuality still pervasive today were formed by traditional Christian attitudes towards sex. Augustine developed many concepts from the story of the creation: the idea that sexual desire is sinful, the concept of original sin and the corruption of nature as a consequence of sin. Phyllis Trible (in Clifford 2002: 66 – 67) stresses that the Genesis myths must be attended to by feminists because it acquired canonical status and unrivalled

respectability over centuries. These creation texts are more than often used to denote and justify the secondary status of women in church and society. Misogynist construal of Genesis 2 and 3 contains the following flawed and inconsistent interpretations:

- A male God creates the male first (Gen 2:1), then the woman (Gen 2:22), indicating the will of God in the superiority and hierarchical position of the man.
- The female is created as a helpmate for the man (Gen 2:18-23), not as an independent, autonomous creature as *imago Dei*; disregarding the common humanity of male and female.
- Woman is created from man (Gen 2:21-22), therefore she is dependent and reliant on man. Man is thus primary, while woman is derivative.
- Man is given the divine authorisation to name woman (Gen 2:23), thus he defines her and tells her story.
- Woman tempted man (Gen 3:16); she is therefore a temptress, responsible for sin in the world, unreliable, susceptible and naive.
- Woman is cursed (Gen 3:16) and man acquires a divine right to rule over woman.

Rebecca Groothuis (1997: 127) finds evidence of the traditional, androcentric views in the writings of Abraham Kuyper, who sees Eve as the embodiment of all that is female, while Adam embodies all that is both male and human. The persistence of the thought that man is primarily a human being while the female is primarily a sexual being is evident in Kuyper's train of thought. The conclusion that the female is deficient when removed from her association with man through marriage, undergirds the patriarchal system of gender roles today.

#### **4.2.4.3 TEXTS OF SUBMISSION**

"Women are told to submit to their husbands in Ephesians 5:22-24, Colossians 3:18, Titus 2:5, and I Peter 3:1-6" (Groothuis 2000: 163).

The story of Eve set the stage for the misogyny and hatred of sexuality that coloured the interpretations of the submission texts mentioned above. Jonathan Draper (in Ackermann, Draper and Mashinini 1991: 45) expounds the rationale and theological base behind the patriarchal interpretation of the Eve story:

*Women are fickle temptresses and deceivers, who cannot be trusted with leadership in church or society. The “punishment” for their sin in the Garden of Eden, namely childbirth, will continue to be the means of their “salvation” in addition to faith. They must be kept rigorously in subordination to men for their own good and the good of society!*

The contexts of the texts of submission were the Graeco-Roman and the Jewish patriarchal societies. Draper (*Ibid.*: 28) shows that the moral instruction found in the epistles of the New Testament has been used to oppress women through their personal relationships, their leadership and ministry in the Christian community and their Christian influence in the wider society. He also contends that the patriarchal base of these texts cannot be ignored or neglected.

The so-called household codes in Colossians and Ephesians “have led to incredible suffering in the human community down the centuries” (Rakoczy 2004: 211). These codes regulate the rights and duties of husbands and wives, parents and children, and slaves and masters. The male head of the household would be the primary partner in each of these cases. The preconceived prejudice against women is clearly reflected in the texts: children and slaves must be obedient, but wives must be submissive. The mutuality of responsibilities is male-biased and simply defines the authority of the male over the female. These codes legitimise the oppression of women both in the home and society. I Peter actually promotes submission as desirous suffering, imitating of the suffering of Christ. Draper (in Ackermann, Draper and Mashinini 1991: 47) notes that the “one way submission of wives, slaves and children is radically qualified” in these texts.

The Colossians patterning is again followed in Ephesians – children and slaves must obey the authority of the father, while wives must submit to the authority of the husband. The example of Christ is given as the role model with

adverse results: whereas women are made in the image of the church (Eph 5:23-24), husbands are made in the image of Christ (Eph 5:25-32). This gives a theological base to the assumption of the inferiority of the female and the “subversive intention becomes the legitimisation of the oppression of women in the church. After all, if males are the image of Christ, then it is natural that they should be Christ’s representatives in ministry” (Draper in Ackermann, Draper and Mashinini 1991: 47). According to Nicholas King (1998: 180) the reading of these texts in Christianity, gives us much of what to be ashamed of; “they carry with them the permanent danger that they will be read in the interests of the powerful”.

#### 4.2.5 THE LANGUAGE OF SEX

Alison Webster (1995: 30) verbalises the problem of the language of sex as follows: “The perceptions of sexuality which are most common in Christian discourse about sex are very narrow and male-defined. Consequently, the language employed lacks imagination, pluralism and sophistication”. Language focuses on terms like the *sex act* and *intercourse*, which is clearly an indication of the perception of the sex act as penile penetration of the vagina with male ejaculation as the intention. This focus on “male monogender mating” (Daly in Loades 1990: 193) and the embodiment of male sexual values exclude the female understanding and reality of sexuality. According to Isherwood (2000: 11) there is very little language available to women to describe the female experience of sex. Female experiences are therefore a linguistic absence. Most language is imbued with phallogocentric meaning. Furthermore, female knowledge and female language are situated in bodies other than their own. The absence of an inclusive and holistic language with which to describe female considerations of sex leaves the female body as lacking in worth and significance. Male language on sexuality controls and defines female sexuality and tells women’s stories.

As already mentioned, the problem with male sexual language is the pre-occupation with genitalia and the sex act. Male sexuality ultimately focuses on intercourse and the physical, reproductive act. The symbolic power of sex is manifested in everyday language where women are “fucked, poked, given one, screwed, had, taken” (Isherwood 2000: 26). Language like this does not denote

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equality between the sexes. Male sexual language cannot describe sexual relations as mutual and empowering; it simply leaves women alienated in their own bodies. It furthermore creates no space for the myriad other possibilities which are open to people who wish to express intimacy through their sexuality, or for people who wish to express their sexuality in other ways than penetrative hetero-sex.

Patriarchal thought and language portrays men as being masculine, powerful and ultimately violent. Masculine sexuality consequently combines violence and sexuality as an ultimate ideal. The commonly used word *fuck* is laden with ambiguity, meaning both intercourse and exploitation/assault. This leaves a thin line between sex and rape, which is an act of violence expressed in a sexual way.

Activist and philosopher Cari Beltane ([www.militantveganstraightedge.com](http://www.militantveganstraightedge.com)) describes the negative influence of sexist and misogynist language on women. Language does not always describe reality, but reinforces the spurious views that serve patriarchy. Languages were created and perpetuated to serve male privilege, hegemony and supremacy. The female is then dissected and categorised according to the needs of men and ultimately sexualised and objectified to become the sexual property of the entitled male. Language becomes the tool of the oppressor, permeating the thoughts and actions of society, to perpetuate thoughts regarding social power and hierarchies. Beltane questions the usage of certain words and phrases: "If women are allowed to be thought of as bitches, sluts, and whores with pussies, tits, snatches, and spoken of as such, what does this represent as far as women's place in the cultural mindset" (*Ibid*: 3) is concerned?

Male hegemony has also given men a male monopoly over definition. Male definition, which has been both deliberate and pervasive, has defined female existence in a narrow and sexually dependent manner. Whereas the male is the norm, whole, powerful and rational, the female has been defined as deviant, unfinished and lacking. This exclusivist definition has given men the power to

explain and subjugate women and the earth, with the male as the centre of the universe. Gerda Lerner ([www.dhushara.com](http://www.dhushara.com)) expounds this fallacy as follows:

*By making the term “man” subsume “women” and arrogate to itself the representation of all humanity, men have built a conceptual error of vast proportion into all of their thought. By taking the half for the whole, they have not missed the essence of whatever they are describing, but they have distorted it in such a way that they cannot see it correctly. As long as men believe their experiences, their viewpoint, and their ideas represent all of human experience and all of human thought, they are not only unable to define correctly in the abstract, but they are unable to describe reality correctly.*

Male religious language contributes further to the subordination and domination of women. Susan Rakoczy (2004: 64) quotes Elizabeth Johnson in describing the patriarchal and exclusivist male religious language as “humanly oppressive and religiously idolatrous”. Women are marginalised when language maintains that only the male can image God. Men thus equate themselves with God and distort the image of women as God. Mary Grey (2001:11) contends that the naming of God as Father can be considered so harmful to and excluding of women that this term does not describe the authentic God of Judaism and Christianity. She asks whether “‘He’ is a distortion, a projection or caricature needed by societies for whom it was convenient to adhere to male dominance and control of power? A concept of male dominance that required the subordination, limited participation and damaging (even demonizing) stereotyping of women?” (*Ibid*: 11) Ecclesial androcentric language austere reinforces the patriarchal structures of society and church and underpins the image of women as the lesser other.

#### **4.2.6 THE QUESTION OF PLEASURE**

The simple quest for pleasure in sexual relations has been stumped by patriarchal Christian beliefs. The teachings of the church have forced people into sexual shame about sexual desire and pleasure, and patriarchal discourse is an obstacle to sexual unions that are mutual, empowering and relational. Patriarchy has contributed to the exclusive male perspectives in Christian sexual theology. Lisa

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Isherwood (2000: 223) feels that sexual experience under patriarchy is truly obscene and abusive, “because real women are lost in the process and constructed according to a set of values that are not their own”.

Augustine saw sexual pleasure as dangerous, causing a loss of control and responsibility. Early Christian sexual teachings advocated the avoidance of sex wherever possible, and where sexual encounters were inescapable, they had to be performed with as little pleasure as possible. Aquinas equated sexual pleasure with something that humans have in common with animals and contended that sexual pleasure should be projected towards a higher end, such as procreation (Gudorf 1994: 83). The Augustinian teaching of the irresistibility of sexual pleasure and the subsequent loss of control has pervaded Western culture. This has ultimately led to male hostility towards women’s sexual feelings and the concept of inherent danger for women in sexual relationships (*Ibid*: 87).

Feminists possess divided loyalties towards the question of pleasure in sex: some feel that too much emphasis has in the past been placed on sexual danger and violence and too little on sexual pleasure, while others feel that pleasure is a problematic concept under patriarchy. The right to sexual pleasure is therefore seen as counterproductive to women’s emancipation (Richardson in Robinson and Richardson 1997: 163).

Carole Vance (in Kemp and Squires 1997: 327 – 335) explores the link between sexual pleasure and sexual danger under patriarchy: “Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure and agency” (*Ibid*: 327). She feels that to speak of pleasure only ignores the patriarchal context of sexual encounters. Sexuality is a complex issue and contains elements of pleasure and oppression. It is only through reconstruction, daring and communicative change that the positive possibilities of sexual intimacy, sensuality, adventure, excitement and connection can open up.

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### 4.3 SEXUALITY AND WOMEN IN THE AFRICAN CULTURE

#### 4.3.1 INTRODUCTION

African women theologians are very outspoken about the treatment African women receive at the hands of men. They critique a whole range of activities in which women are subjugated to the power, will and often violence of the men of Africa. They speak about the lack of fidelity in relationships; the fact that a women's children do not belong to her, but to her husband; bride price; prostitution; violence in relationships; sexual and other demands on their time and bodies; HIV-infection; the AIDS-pandemic; the treatment and humiliation of widows and unmarried females; the fact that women have no right to say no; the shame of childlessness; the idea of having sex with virgins to cure AIDS; and so forth. African women theologians focus very strongly on the locales of marriage, family life and children and critique the treatment that women and children receive in these contexts.

#### 4.3.2 THE FACE OF FEMALE SEXUALITY IN AFRICA

Lloyda Fanusie (in Oduyoye and Kanyoro 2001: 135) describes the rejoicing that the birth of a child brings, yet also bemoans the fact that various biases and determining factors come into play from the moment of birth of every infant. The psychosocial experience of male-female relationships is reflected in the religious and spiritual spheres of life, which reflect the male dominance in society and church. Women live with contradictions all the time. She illustrates how antiquity still influences perceptions today: "A study of ancient religion gives the general impression that women were originally exalted, uplifted, and glorified. There is also evidence of feelings of ambivalence towards women, making them pure and virtuous on one hand, and on the other hand regarding them as polluted, unclean, and contagious" (*Ibid*: 137). African women live under a strict control system. They are relegated to being mere property, belonging to their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons. "It is our experience that the ancient myths of Africa and the Jewish and Christian myths have contributed immensely to the plight of women in Africa" (*Ibid*: 138). Ancient myths were reassigned to real life and led to the

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incalculable suffering of women. These myths position women in two categories according to her docility or assertiveness:

*If passive, she is noble, saintly and pure, and inspires man. If assertive, than she is evil, distracting man from his religious and worldly pursuits; she is a witch, a temptress, or a prostitute; and some myths even present her as a demon and symbol of sensual lust, a being whom man must fear.*

(Fanusie in Oduyoye and Kanyoro 2001: 138)

Daphne Maphuti Majapie Madiba (in Kanyoro and Njoroge 1996: 275) also points to the specific roles that women are assigned in church and society. “Women have been labelled as sinners, temptresses, childbearers, servants and subordinates” (*Ibid*: 275) and have been relegated to performing a certain role in society and church. Society and church have also laid down specific codes of conduct about women’s morality, to keep them submissive, docile and obedient. The bad woman is usually one that is free with her sexuality, while the good woman is chaste, virginal and asexual.

Lloyda Fanusie laments the dualism in the religious experience of the women of Africa. Although the Christian and Islamic religions significantly influenced African communities, the still extensive adherence to traditional religious beliefs and practices places a double burden on the women of Africa. African women always belong to someone and are more often than not “blamed for many sexual inconsistencies in the human experience” (*Ibid*: 141). Many African women theologians refer to the double burden of the African female. The sexist elements of Western culture penetrated and promoted the cultural sexism of traditional African society, compounding the marginalisation and domination of the African female.

A recurring theme in African woman theological writings is the lack of male responsibility concerning women, sex and commitment. Lloyda Fanusie raises some very pertinent questions about virginity and fidelity in marriage. The men of Africa place a very high premium on the virginity of women at marriage. Virginity

at marriage is regarded as the ideal. She then asks: "Should not men, too, be subjected to the demands of virginity and fidelity in marriage?" (Fanusie in Oduyoye and Kanyoro 2001: 149) and again: "At the onset of marriage, females face pressure as males stress the importance of virginity. Why only the female? Should not the male be virtuous?" (*Ibid*: 150). Male promiscuity before and after marriage is acceptable and actually endorsed by societal values. The consequences of this phenomenon in Africa have ruinous effects, as illustrated in the next paragraph.

Zimbabwean author Vee Ndlovu (in Van Niekerk 1998: 155 – 160) describes the occurrence and the devastating results of male promiscuity in a heart-wrenching story<sup>1</sup>. In this story of extraordinary forgiveness and empowerment, Ruvimbo discovers that her baby is HIV-positive and is actually succumbing to AIDS. She also realises that the only way the baby could have become infected was through her and that only her husband Ndogo could have infected her. She relives her husband's infidelity and the way he reacted when she confronted him: "She knew then she was being faced with the riddle of 'the African man', and that her expected response was to be 'the African wife', that these small lapses were something she should not concern herself with" (Ndlovu in Van Niekerk 1998: 156). She also experiences extreme pain at the thought of her baby's suffering: "Was he to suffer, never to grow up because of Ndogo's weakness and selfishness?" (*Ibid*: 157). She then decides that she cannot allow her family to be torn apart; she also cannot go through this alone. Her husband has to do his part: she "would not let him run away from them and his responsibilities" (*Ibid*: 157). Ruvimbo's strength and resolve will help her face the future.

Bernadette Mbuy-Beya (in Oduyoye and Kanyoro: 155) acknowledges that the subject of sex is taboo in African culture. She is adamant, though, that African women theologians must study sexuality issues, because sexuality is a prime factor in the behaviour of men and women alike. Under the leadership of Sister Marie Bernadette Mbuy-Beya, fifteen women undertook a study into the sexual

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<sup>1</sup> Ndlovu, V. "For Better or for Worse" in the Zimbabwe Women Writer's Collection, *Gazing at the Environment*, 1992.

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awakening of young women and also their position as unmarried women in African society. Mbuy-Beya (*Ibid*: 156) defines sexuality as “the ensemble of activities by which human beings seek and attain the satisfaction of their sexual inclinations”, but in Africa the female face of sexuality is secretive, hidden and reserved.

Although African tradition includes sexual initiatory practices, sex is a subject that is not discussed in public. Overt sexual behaviour is therefore also frowned upon. Female sexuality is generally not flaunted, but is discreet and covert. Sensuality is normally only expressed through posture, gait and dance.

Men and women are both initiated with one overarching aim in mind: the union of the sexes. Females are expected to come into marriage untouched and pure, in affective, relational and sexual terms. In traditional societies initiations were a prerequisite for marriage and remaining unmarried brought shame and humiliation on the woman and her family. A young woman who is no longer a virgin, cannot marry with honour and transgressions of sexual morality codes are often severely punished. Marriage is regarded as the ultimate purpose of women’s existence and is also “the sovereign social regulation of sexuality” (*Ibid*: 158). In marriage, the purpose of which is mainly procreation, the woman plays a passive role. The display of sensuality would indicate a proclivity towards sexual misconduct and adultery. Motherhood gives a woman social standing in society and demonstrates her sexual equilibrium and fulfilment. Eva das Dores Benedito Pedro Gomes (in Kanyoro and Njoroge 1996: 227) also mentions the fact that sexuality is something too shameful to be discussed in the parental home, and where it is discussed, the topic is the bearing of children. The question of sexual pleasure never arises. “The girl is taught that, even if she is desirous of having sexual relations with her husband, she is not supposed to ask for it or take any initiative. If she does ask, her husband may consider her behaviour as frivolous or suspect her of dangerous boldness. She is condemned to disguise her feelings and repress them” (*Ibid*: 228). The experience of pleasure is thus always associated with the impression of domination by men.

Josephine Gitome (in Kanyoro and Njoroge: 1996) raises concerns about the fact that young girls mature socially before they mature biologically. She feels that sexuality is an indispensable part of a woman's life, and that it should be guided, protected and appreciated. The physical changes during puberty and adolescence have an effect on a young girl's spirituality. The fact that the church is silent about sexuality can alienate young women from the church, yet the church could guide young women through the turbulent emotions associated with the transition between childhood and adulthood. Girls are often "torn between education, Christianity and parental culture" (*Ibid*: 216) and the church can play a decisive supportive role in the whole process.

### 4.3.3 FEMALE SEXUALITY AND HIV/AIDS

Another concern of African women theologians is the spread and impact of HIV/AIDS. In Africa this pandemic has the impact of a social upheaval and communal breakdown. It is both remarkable and a dichotomy that this pandemic has spread so rapidly on a continent where religion plays a great part in the lives of people. Both the Christian and Islamic religions prevalent in Africa prohibit pre-marital and extra-marital sex, yet the number of AIDS sufferers continues to increase enormously. Susan Rakoczy (2004: 125) expresses the pain of Africa as follows: "The Body of Christ is now HIV positive: all are either infected or affected".

The causes of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa are varied and complex. In Africa HIV/AIDS manifests as a heterosexual disease. In July 2004 the total number of people in sub-Saharan Africa living with HIV/AIDS was estimated at 25 million<sup>2</sup>. Mhalu (in Ross and Deverell 2004: 199) gives the major facilitators of HIV/AIDS in Africa as:

- The ignorance of the population
- Poverty and poor health care

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<sup>2</sup> Statistics supplied by the *National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases* website: [www.niaids.nih.gov/factsheet](http://www.niaids.nih.gov/factsheet).

- Social demographic and cultural conditions that result in the dominance of one gender
- The prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases and tuberculosis
- Heterosexual intercourse for the reason of procreation
- Lack of education and the mystification of sexuality.

#### 4.3.3.1 HIV/AIDS AS A GENDER ISSUE

HIV/AIDS is the inequality of sexes and the subordination of women in Africa made visible. Isabel Apawo Phiri (in Phiri, Haddad and Masenya 2003: 8) quotes Philippe Denis on this issue as saying: "HIV/AIDS is ultimately a gender issue". In Africa women are particularly at risk of becoming infected with the HI-Virus. In Africa 55 percent of infected adults are women (*Ibid*: 8) while the percentage is indicated as 70 percent in South Africa (Pick 2002: 42). In Africa AIDS has a female face.

The power relations between men and women can be seen as a contributing and exacerbating factor in the greater susceptibility of women to the HI-Virus. Apart from a greater physiological vulnerability to the virus, women's social standing leaves them more defenceless and powerless to protect themselves against the virus. Marriage is the centre of African community life, but in the marriage the man determines the women's identity. The woman's body and her sexuality belong to the man, whereas the man's sexuality can be shared. Heterosexual encounters are male dominated and this domination leaves the responsibility up to the woman to negotiate safe sex. Eleanor Ross and Andee Deverell (2004: 201) indicate that "sex is conceptualised as the husband's right in exchange for financial support. This serves further to reduce the autonomy and decision-making power of women". Madipoane Masenya (in Phiri, Haddad and Masenya 2003: 116) agrees with Nicolson who claims that

*AIDS has spread in sub-Saharan Africa because of cultural beliefs, and in particular the belief that men need, and are entitled to, frequent sex with a variety of partners. Even if we can immunise against AIDS, even if we find a cure for AIDS, issues such as the commercialisation of sex, the expectation among men*

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*that women have a duty to provide them with casual sexual gratification, the belief among young women that their worth is determined primarily by satisfying the demands of their partners, remain.*

Isabel Apawo Phiri (in Phiri, Haddad and Masenya 2003: 12) also blames the African culture for encouraging African men to continue having sex with other partners apart from their partners to whom they are officially married. Heterosexual marriages in Africa are therefore an extremely dangerous context for women in Africa. Such cultural beliefs and practices contribute towards making women extremely vulnerable to the HI-Virus.

Women in Africa are always hampered by a lack of control over the sexual act, because it takes place within a culture of male domination. The male face of HIV/AIDS is invisible and silent in Africa and female immorality is blamed if HIV-infection occurs. The fact that women marry with a bride price on their heads prevents negotiation for safe sex with the use of condoms; it also prevents them from refusing sex and speaking out about marital rape. African feminist Patricia McFadden ([www.wworld.org](http://www.wworld.org): 6) points out that when women demand their rights they are blamed for becoming inauthentic and un-African, and if women try to stand up against the archaic notions of what is African and of cultural appropriateness, they are branded as irresponsible and negligent. After all, men exercise their hierarchical control over women in having access to women's bodies for sex and this reinforces male domination over female subjugation. Partner communication on sexual issues is avoided and sexual encounters rely on the assumption that the male controls the process.

Lisa Isherwood (1998: 28) reiterates that patriarchy is a reality that most women have to contend with, even if it is to their disadvantage. The women of Africa cannot afford to remove themselves from the social construction of hetero-patriarchy and the cultural constrictions of their sexuality. They therefore keep on having sex with their HIV-infected husbands and partners even though they are fully aware of the precarious positions they place themselves in.

Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala ([www.looksmart.com](http://www.looksmart.com)) restates this perspective on the AIDS-crisis in Africa. African societies are especially vulnerable to HIV-infection, because of the high level of pre-marital sexual activity, extramarital relations and sexual violence. She confirms the “widespread beliefs that males are biologically programmed to need sexual relations regularly with more than one women” (*Ibid*: 2), which again points to the vulnerability of women in sexual and marital relationships. She also refers to the beliefs of young people that sex is necessary, natural and an expression of love. Peer pressure expects teenage sex, because it is an indication of normal bodies and normal behaviour. The use of condoms in pre-marital sex is taken as a sign of mistrust and indulgence in casual sex.

Sexual violence against women adds fuel to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Rape makes women extremely vulnerable to HIV-infection. The estimated number of women being raped in South Africa annually is approximately one million<sup>3</sup>, which leaves them to deal with the issue of rape as well as with potentially being infected by the HI-Virus. Rape is an act of power perpetrated against women and children. Susan Rakoczy (2004: 287) states that the “increasing prevalence of rape is fuelled by male dominance which is undergirded by cultural values”. The liability for the rape traditionally falls back on the woman, blaming her dress and behaviour as causing the man to lose control and having to rape her. The victims of sexual abuse also report that most men fail to show remorse, indicating that this level of violence is acceptable in society (*Ibid*: 287). The women of Africa are literally being fucked to death.

#### **4.3.3.2 WOMEN AND CHILDREN: VICTIMS OF AIDS**

Apart from the risk and vulnerability of women in the AIDS-pandemic, feminist theologians weep for the mothers, the children and the grandmothers who have to bear the full weight of the pandemic. The burdens of care and nursing the sick fall on the mothers, and when they die, young girls or grandmothers have to take over the task of taking care of the dying. Susan Rakoczy (2004: 126) quotes a study

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<sup>3</sup> This shocking statistic was revealed in the radio programme *Monitor* on Radio Sonder Grense on 2004/8/24.

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which indicates that men are not overtly worried about the pandemic, nor do they think it is particularly onerous to take care of those who suffer and die.

When men die, women and young girls are often forced into prostitution just to survive. Selling sex is their only means of survival. According to Emma Guest (2003: 158) orphaned girls are particularly susceptible to sexual violence and sexual abuse “because they’ve assumed adult responsibilities, such as the caring for dying parents or raising siblings, without the maturity to understand quite what has happened to them”. The grief and loss that these girls suffer may cause them to turn their distress upon themselves, and open them up to exploitation and abuse in a never-ending spiral of poverty, drug abuse and a struggle to survive.

#### **4.3.3.3 VIRGINITY TESTING: REAFFIRMING PATRIARCHAL MORES**

Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala ([www.agenda.org.za](http://www.agenda.org.za)) describes an interesting male-defined solution to the problem of HIV/AIDS. One of the initiatives to combat the rapid spread of AIDS is the practice of virginity testing in some African countries, including South Africa. This practice is seen as a culturally appropriate strategy aimed at preserving and romanticising virginity, using control and gender-based rewards as incentives. Virginity is becoming an ever-increasing, important contemporary social issue and “the growth of public interest in virginity is most visibly occurring in countries that are grappling with the management of high rates of HIV and AIDS-related morbidity and death” (*Ibid*: 3).

Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala finds that the current spate of virginity testing is a distortion of cultural and traditional practices; that mass genital inspections border on sexual harassment and abuse and that such testing reinforces the patriarchal, discriminatory attitudes in society. It is very significant that virginity testing in certain areas corresponds with an increase in anal sexual activity, thus heightening female susceptibility to the virus. Because virginity testing excludes any male responsibility it is a subjugative and dangerous practice. Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala (*Ibid*: 8) concludes that an environment rife with violence and the existence of dangerous myths about the healing powers of virgins, leaves young girls with little choice:

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*The reality is that in many communities today, and for many girl children, choosing to remain a virgin until marriage is not a real possibility at all. Cajoled, coerced or assaulted into intercourse is hardly a matter of choice for many. It is also a far cry from anything remotely related to practices that could be called 'cultural' or 'traditional'. The revival of old-style local practices to address a modern global pandemic like AIDS will do more harm than good as long as it is marked by gender inequalities and sexual violence and hegemonic masculine sexualities are left unchallenged.*

#### **4.3.4 THE INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIANITY AND MALE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE BIBLE ON AFRICAN WOMEN**

Mercy Oduyoye (quoted in Rakoczy 2004: 29) speculates as follows on the ambivalent influence of Christianity in Africa:

*In my opinion, it is still debatable whether or not the influence of Christianity has been beneficial to the socio-cultural transformation of Africa – and I am most concerned with its effects on women. It seems that sexist elements of Western culture have simply fuelled the cultural sexism of traditional African society. Christian anthropology has certainly contributed to this. African men, at home with androcentrism and the patriarchal order of the biblical cultures, have felt their views confirmed by Christianity.*

The ambivalent image of Christ as conqueror and Christ as liberator, has plagued African women since missionaries ventured into Africa (Hinga in Oduyoye and Kanyoro 2001: 189-190). Africa has been characterised by a response to mission theology and major social upheaval over the past three hundred years (Oduyoye 2001). Patriarchal Christianity as well as cultural practices have served to dominate women and encumber them with a double burden.

The Bible is imperative to many African Christian women. They embrace the Bible as a norm for their lives and do not question the authority of the Bible at all. However, African Christian women have predominantly been exposed to male interpretations of the Bible. These interpretations have mostly contributed to the advancement of patriarchy, androcentrism and the submission of women. This

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has led to the socialisation of women to male interpretations of the Bible (Masenya in Phiri, Haddad and Masenya 2003: 115).

Madipoane Masenya (*Ibid*: 118) shows how Ephesians 5:22-24 and 1 Corinthians 7:5 are used effectively to enhance patriarchal control in the church. She maintains that women-unfriendly interpretations of the Bible “can only pave the way for the unilateral control of women’s bodies in the name of God’s will for family life. With such an understanding of the unilateral control of women’s bodies and sexuality, rich soil becomes cultivated for the entry and spread of HIV/AIDS” (*Ibid*: 121).

African women often find themselves caught between the African cultural notions of womanhood and the male interpretations of the Bible used to perpetuate the patriarchal status quo. For the African woman, this dilemma often means the difference between life and death.