

# The Search for an African Feminist Ethic: A Zimbabwean Perspective

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## Abstract

In the field of ethics, women have been portrayed as inferior to men due to andro-centric attitudes (male-dominated ethics) that seems to define men as custodians of what is right or wrong. This andro-centric ethic has taken women out of the academic limelight as they are portrayed as less able to make valuable contributions in philosophy (ethics) and other fields of academic inquiry. It is encouraging to see feminist movements emerging, in the twenty-first century, to challenge this misplaced kind of thinking. This challenge is laudable and in this paper, I make an attempt to show that while women in the West have fought for their place in society resulting in developing 'the ethics of care', women from Africa are still struggling to find their feet. The African woman's moral point of view is still far from being respected because of the whims and caprices of patriarchy which is camouflaged in the communitarian philosophy of *hunhu* or *ubuntu*. Against this background, the paper seeks to show that an African feminist ethic can be developed and the fight for public recognition must begin in the home, taking cognisance of the fact that African women face several challenges as custodians of value. The paper argues that reclaiming motherhood in the context of the fight against HIV and AIDS will be a key step towards the realisation of African women's moral vision.

*Key words:* Hunhu or Ubuntu, Feminist Ethics, Content Analysis

## Research Question and Methodological Issues

*Can 'hunhu or ubuntu', as an organising principle of Southern Africa, be used to formulate a feminist ethic that is uniquely African?*

As a feminist scholar and a lecturer of feminist ethics at the University of Zimbabwe for close to six years, I have come to the realisation that philosophy in general and ethics in particular are guilty of complicity for their role in gender stereotyping in general and in the subversion of women values in African academic discourses. The history of philosophy or ethics makes sorry reading especially with its failure to document, deliberately or otherwise, the contributions of women in Greek philosophy or ethics as well as in African philosophy or African ethics.

While the discourse on *hunhu* or *ubuntu* has, to a larger extent, gathered momentum in Southern Africa in the last couple of years, most of the issues raised have centred on the distinctive nature of African ethics when compared to Western ethics. Issues of community, collectivism, reconciliation and restoration of relationships have dominated most academic discourses and very little has been written about African women's place and relevance in *hunhu* or *ubuntu* ethics. What is even more worrying is the fact that it is still men who are driving the *hunhu* or *ubuntu* initiative and women are passive recipients. It is this kind of background which prompted me to come up with the

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research question: Can ‘*hunhu or ubuntu*’ as an organising principle of Southern Africa, be used to formulate a feminist ethic that is uniquely African or more specifically that is uniquely Southern African?

As part of my research design, I relied on literature studies, content analysis and in-depth interviews. I carried out my study in Harare (Zimbabwe) in 2001 and 2005, and I sampled a representative category of women working in gender-based organisations such as Msasa project and those in the academia who are involved with research about gender issues and professional housewives. I interviewed about 30 women and most of them (about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of them) did not see any reprieve in *hunhu* or *ubuntu* ethics as they said that it was only there to entrench patriarchy.

The following are some of the questions that helped me to solicit answers from some representatives from Msasa project in 2001: When was Msasa project established? Why the name ‘Msasa?’ What do you represent as an organisation? What would you say are your major successes and failures in the last six years? In framing questions for the in-depth interviews, I was guided by the works of Erik Hofstee.<sup>1</sup> According to Hofstee, background type questions are important when carrying out in-depth interviews... and it is also important to keep the interviewee to the topic being discussed, but it can also pay not to be too rigid.<sup>2</sup>

One of the advantages of in-depth interviews is that the interviewee may even give you more than what you will have bargained for. But if not carefully administered, interviews can produce misleading responses, thereby affecting results. As Rujeko Sanda, a professional housewife in Harare lamented; “this thing called *hunhu* (the Shona equivalence for *ubuntu*) has brought more burdens than benefits especially to us housewives because when an irresponsible husband brings AIDS in the home you are required to care for him, even against your will. The elders will tell you that you will have to do that in the spirit of *hunhu*.<sup>3</sup>” For starters, Shona is the language that is spoken by the majority of Zimbabwe’s population, followed by Ndebele. So, I locate my study within these two linguistic categories for the simple reason that they are the language of instruction in schools apart from English. Having explored the research question and some methodological issues, I begin this discourse by defining feminist ethics from a Western perspective.

### **Feminist Ethics defined**

Feminist ethics is a field of philosophical inquiry which seeks to examine ethical issues relating to women’s experiences and their everyday association with men in society. Feminist ethics deal specifically with moral questions such as: How can we resolve moral conflicts – both personal and social – in feminist ways? What is the place – in ethics – of the moral traits traditionally associated with women such as sympathy, nurturance, care and compassion? How can feminist principles be lived in the public sphere?<sup>4</sup> What is the place and relevance of feminist ethics in the era of HIV and AIDS? How does patriarchy engender feminine oppression?

In this paper, I try to respond to almost all these questions but as I try to respond to the questions, I do not intend to argue for a universal feminist ethic as I am aware that women throughout the world have different struggles in their fight against patriarchy, but it is also important to note that the feminine problem is the same in all cultures; the difference is a question of degree or a matter of nuances (Eboh, 1998: 333). Against this

background, it is vital to note that women from the West have elucidated the moral framework of care (as among other things) reflecting the moral work that women have tended to do, as undervalued, and not fully conceptualized. This ethical perspective found an audience, but was also seen as entrenching women's traditional care-giving.

In response to the above challenges, modern and contemporary theorists have developed a more nuanced picture of care ethics. Among these are Carol Gilligan, Brenda Almond and Patricia Ward Scaltsas whose views shall be considered shortly. The African ethical concept of *hunhu* or *ubuntu* seems to resonate with the Western concept the only difference being that, women from Africa have many challenges to contend with due to poverty, disease, lack of proper education and cultural expectations. But just as with the Western care ethic, the African feminist ethic may both liberate/validate women's moral vision or may entrench patriarchal views of women's domestic work and roles.

Since a lot is already known about Western feminist struggles with patriarchy, a nuanced discussion of African women's struggles with *hunhu* or *ubuntu* expectations will set the stage for the development of an African feminist ethic. In this regard, the paper will focus particularly on women in Zimbabwe and the role they play in the fight against HIV and AIDS in the home front an approach which would also require taking this campaign out to the public sphere. But it is a matter of strategy to begin by looking at feminist ethics from a global perspective. In the next section, I look at women's moral experiences in history as a way of bringing the research problem to light.

### **Women and their Moral Experience: Historical Roots of the Problem**

Joseph P. De Marco asserts that in traditional relationships, women raised children and had less impact on politics, business and higher education.<sup>5</sup> Military leaders, police officers, fire fighters, construction workers, medical doctors and lawyers were mainly men. Mary Ellen Waithe demonstrates that women have been a significant and fruitful force in the history of philosophy in general and ethics in particular.<sup>6</sup> Yet men today and in the past have developed most of the dominant theories.<sup>7</sup> This fact alone raises the prospect that any feminine perspective on moral experience may have been excluded.<sup>8</sup> Added to this, many women philosophers and/or ethicists have been portrayed as subordinate figures.

These facts have led to an examination of the history and development of ethics such that when feminists trace this history from Socrates to Niccolo Machiavelli, they see it as biased towards men. They argue that traditional moral philosophy has been a largely male directed enterprise and has reflected interests derived predominantly from men's experiences. In other words, because men's experiences have often involved market transactions, their moral theories have concentrated on promise keeping, property rights, contracts and fairness.

As Patricia Ward Scaltsas explains in her essay "*Do Feminist Ethics Counter Aims?*" "The project of criticizing, analysing and, when necessary, replacing the traditional categories of moral philosophy in order to eradicate the misrepresentation, distortion, and oppression resulting from the historically male perspective is, broadly speaking, the project of feminist ethics." She maintains, as do many others, that most traditional moral theories have implicitly excluded and silenced women and their moral perspectives and, thus must be replaced with an ethic that re-interprets and validates

both.<sup>9</sup> In the opinion of most feminist theorists, these moral perspectives must take the direction of care and compassion.

While women from the West have struggled to carve their own niche as far as gender equality in the academia is concerned, women from Africa seem to have had similar struggles too. This is so because the history of African philosophy (real or imagined) is largely dominated by men; Henry Odera Orika, Kwasi Wiredu, Godwin Sogolo, Paulin Hountondji, Emmanuel Chukwudi, Mogobe Ramose, Kwame Anthony Appiah and Kwame Gyekye to name just a few of them. There is no mention of any women philosophers let alone ethicists who have made contributions in the field of African philosophy or African ethics. This is the main motivation behind the writing of this paper. But before we delve into the main theme of this paper, it is important to have some bit of background regarding the Western ethics of care, that is, what is its nature and scope?

### **The Western Ethics of Care: A Brief Overview**

Many have turned to women's experiences with care giving – whether in childcare, friendships, or work – for concrete demonstrations of feminist ethics.<sup>10</sup> They view the willingness to nurture and a ready capacity for emotional involvement as essential to a human moral stance in a world replete with injustice and alienation.<sup>11</sup> They also argue that those values can be expressed in ways that are liberating to women.<sup>12</sup> Sara Ruddick remarks that the thinking that arises from women's traditional experience with childcare can be transformed into a liberating political and ethical stance of global significance.<sup>13</sup> This point finds support from Carol Gilligan who writes, thus;

*The moral imperative that emerges repeatedly in interviews with women is an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the 'real and recognizable trouble' of this world. For men, the moral imperative appears rather as an injunction to respect the rights of others and thus to protect from interference, the rights to life and self-fulfilment.<sup>14</sup>*

For Gilligan, women exemplify the important moral characteristic of care; theirs is a more inclusive morality, one that strengthens relationships and solves problems without resorting to the binding authority of conventions.<sup>15</sup> Women's basic moral orientation is caring for others - "taking care" of others in a personal way, not just being concerned with humanity, in general – and attending to their needs.... Sensitivity to the needs of others leads women to "attend to voices other than their own and to include in their judgement other points of view."<sup>16</sup> So much about the Western care-giving ethic and please note that the reason for being brief in this section is simply that readers are largely familiar with the Western care giving ethics, so there is no need to give more detail.

But while the idea of developing a care-giving ethic seems to be noble in Western thought, the question we should ask ourselves is; is this idea transferrable to African women's experiences in general and Zimbabwean women's experiences in particular? The answer to this question will perhaps come out clearly when I bring to the fore the African ethical picture as defined by *hunhu* or *ubuntu* philosophy later in this work. But it is crucial at this stage to consider the role of Zimbabwean women, that is, whether they hold positions of influence in order for them to be able to craft an ethic that is morally liberating and illuminating, an ethic that eventually elevates them to positions of

authority in the public sphere. This is important in the context of their role in the fight against HIV and AIDS.

### **Zimbabwean Women in Politics**

In Zimbabwe women, out-number men demographically and yet very few of them occupy positions of political and economic influence, that is, very few of them have ministerial posts in government. Rudo Gaidzanwa, a feminist scholar and activist in Zimbabwe, notes that, “the 2000 parliamentary elections saw the highest number of women candidates contesting an election in Zimbabwe’s history.<sup>17</sup> 55 women candidates from 5 political parties competed for 120 seats in the national legislature. Of the 55 candidates, however, 14 (25%) were elected.”<sup>18</sup>

This figure, argues Gaidzanwa, represents 9.3% of the total 150 parliamentary seats, fewer than those secured by women after the 1995 election when 22% of the parliamentary seats were held by women.<sup>19</sup> This result was disappointing to women’s groups, such as Msasa Project, especially after their efforts to conscientise women to vote for women and to promote the women’s agenda from a higher political level.<sup>20</sup> This is a very valid point from Gaidzanwa and it holds even up to this day as women struggle to out-wit men during elections as the electorate still has this misplaced perception that only men are born to lead. Just to add weight to this strong and reasoned argument, it is discouraging to note that of the more than 60 national heroes and heroines who have been buried at the Harare National Heroes acre, only 4 are women.

It is, therefore, critical to note that political representation in Zimbabwe is largely a masculine activity and femininity is relegated to the periphery of society. But it also critical to note that, of late, the inclusive government currently running the affairs of Zimbabwe has taken a giant step towards promoting gender equity by appointing a woman vice president and a woman deputy prime minister as well as a woman to head the Ministry of Youth, Gender and Employment Creation as well as the Ministry of Regional Integration. Feminist groups in Zimbabwe have seen this as a noble gesture in their quest for the realisation of their moral vision. This is to some extent true because political decisions tend to impact on the social outlook of a nation. This development is indeed positive and the search for an illuminating African feminist ethic looks promising.

While the inclusive government has taken some positive steps towards empowering women, by giving them key positions in government, this number is still far below 50% which is the index that can probably be used to see if men are prepared to share power equally with women. But nevertheless, there is some progress as compared to what it was at independence. But surely, having less than 50% of women in government is a sign that women are still to be emancipated from the yoke of patriarchy. As Priscilla Misihairambwi-Mushonga, a government minister and feminist activist, charges, “the very few women who occupy positions of power cannot represent the majority of the women’s interests who languish in poverty.”<sup>21</sup>

So, with this limited access to positions of authority in government, it has become very difficult for Zimbabwean women to fight for an African feminist ethic without seeking the opinion of their male counterparts. But as we should all be aware, every long journey begins with a step. Perhaps Zimbabwean women, just like their Western counterparts, need to consider reclaiming motherhood as the basis upon which they should fight the struggle. Whether or not this alternative will inspire them to finally

realise their goal is a matter of some dispute. But what is clear is that their biggest challenge has to do with what role they should play in the fight against HIV and AIDS in the home. If they can win this battle, then chances are that they will eventually win the battle of equal representation in the public sphere. The struggle against AIDS in the home seems to highlight men's weaknesses and women should capitalise on that.

### **Zimbabwean Women's Struggles in the fight against HIV and AIDS**

Apart from lack of political and economic influence, the plight of Zimbabwean women is worsened by poverty and lack of proper education as culture seems to have put much emphasis on educating the boy child at the expense of the girl child. Poverty has catapulted the rate of AIDS in Zimbabwe resulting in the death of many in the economically active category since the turn of the new millennium. Those members of society, particularly males, who make key moral, legal, social and political decisions in the context of *hunhu* or *ubuntu* culture, are the ones who are being wiped out by the AIDS pandemic leaving behind women, children and the elderly.

Women, more often than not, live with the virus for longer periods of time before they succumb to the disease as compared to men because men do a lot of hard work which, in many cases, expose them to opportunist infections as a result of exposure to inhuman working conditions as obtaining in most third world countries. Women are stronger enough to resist the pandemic to such an extent that they often become carriers of the virus for a period, which may exceed 15 years as statistics seem to show.

When their male counterparts have finally succumbed to the disease, females take over the responsibility of looking after children and some relatives of their deceased husbands, they are now expected to make key social and moral decisions and before the death of their spouses, they (women) bear the brunt of caring for them, giving them food, washing their clothes and taking them to health care centres for check ups. But because of patriarchy, women remain subjugated and disenfranchised. Gender stereotypes continue to haunt them because of men's bullish attitude. As Chitando puts it;

*In many cases, infected wives have taken care of their husbands up to the point of death, only for there to be no one to take care of them when they fall ill themselves. In addition, masculinities define male illness as more important, since the man is projected as the breadwinner, despite the fact that many women earn as much as, or in some cases, more than their husbands.<sup>22</sup>*

It is important to see the force behind Chitando's claim here especially as we grapple to envision how patriarchy can be tamed in order to create a society that is gender sensitive as we continue the fight against AIDS, but does *hunhu* or *ubuntu* philosophy bring any solace? Does *hunhu* or *ubuntu* have any gendered components which can help in the formulation of an African feminist ethic that should address these andro-centric attitudes as cited by Chitando? These and many other questions will be addressed in the next section.

### **The African Feminist Ethic: An Exercise in *Hunhu* or *Ubuntu* philosophy**

The idea of *hunhu* (in Shona), *ubuntu* (in Ndebele or Nguni) and *botho* (in Sotho) is central to the understanding of morality and ethics in African philosophy (Mkhize, 2008: 35). In particular, this idea is important if we are to succeed in our struggle to

search for an African feminist ethic. *Ubuntu* determines both the norms of conduct and criteria for success, and it is characterised by a deep sense of corporate life, which expresses itself in an intricate network of social and kinship relationships.<sup>23</sup> In this intricate social network, the individual finds him or herself related almost to everybody else in the community as father, mother, uncle, cousin, niece, aunt etc. Their well-being is supposed to be his or her well-being as well.<sup>24</sup> Any misfortune that befalls any of them affects him or her as well... His or her identity is caught up in the social identity – ‘I am because we are, and since we are, therefore, I am.’<sup>25</sup>

*Hunhu* or *ubuntu* is therefore the ethical benchmark of African societies.<sup>26</sup> Locating this within the discourse of feminist ethics, it means any feminist ethic must also take cognisance of this communitarian aspect by way of conformism. In any case, *hunhu* or *ubuntu* has so much respect for the extended family which is seen as a proverbial African expression and an African village community.<sup>27</sup> In this extended family, the woman is not only expected to take care of his husband and children but also to take care of those other people related to the husband – the significant other. The woman is expected to play her reproductive role by bearing children for her husband and also socialising the children into the mainstream culture which is patriarchal anyway.

In most cases husbands work far away from their homes and the wife fills the void by playing the role of both husband and wife. She sees to it that all the members of the extended family are well looked after in terms of both financial and morale support. She does not really enjoy the benefits of marriage that is enjoyed by women married in a nuclear set up. The philosophy of *hunhu* or *ubuntu* demands that whatever support the woman gets from her husband must be shared with other members of the extended family without necessarily having some privileges.

Among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, the mother-in-law (VaMwene) is always fighting with her daughter-in-law for the control of the husband’s finances and other material possessions. While the daughter-in-law remains part of the family, she nevertheless feels as if she is a stranger in her home. What is even more disturbing is the fact that *hunhu* or *ubuntu* expects the woman to perpetuate sex differentiation by telling her daughter that she is not equal to her brother in any way. This is seen in the way in which the boy child is given more freedom to go and associate with his friends while the girl child is always at home helping her mother with household chores.

The impression is that the girl child’s role is to serve the man. So, the mother spends time teaching her daughter how to cook or ensure cleanliness in the home so that when she gets married she will be able to look after her husband. Such lessons are not extended to the boy child who is seen as *baba vemangwana* (the future father). But most importantly, the extended/communal nature of the African family makes it difficult to equate it with the Western nuclear family and subsequently to argue for a universal feminist ethic. In the West, the care-giving ethic is developed in a context of sanity, that is, there are no mitigating factors such as the woman’s lack of education, prevailing poverty and *hunhu* or *ubuntu* expectations as found in the African context. So, for the Western woman, it is a question of saying: What form should a care-giving ethic take? While for the African woman the question is: What am I expected to do by my culture?

Lamenting the oppressive nature of the African extended/communal family, Rujeko Sanda (an interviewee) remarks that;

*Kusadzidza nehurombo ndizvo zvinoita kuti madzimai tishingirire kuchengeta dzimba dzedu, asi zvinorwadza nekuti varume havatendi basa ratinoita rekuvachengetera vana vavo nehama dzavo. Se munhu wemukadzi ungagodii iyo nyika iri yevarume (Lack of education and poverty make us persevere in otherwise unworkable relationships, but its painful for us as women because we do everything to make these relationships work including taking care of the children and relatives on the husband's side, but our husbands have no appreciation of what we do for them. As a woman, there is nothing you can do because society seems to belong to men).<sup>28</sup>*

Based on the above paragraph, it is important to observe that the philosophy of *ubuntu* is there to extend or entrench patriarchy. But in this paper I argue that while it is part of the problem, it is also part of the solution. For I take it that in order to successfully cultivate a feminist ethic, women in Africa need to take a stand and fight the masculine ideology that is perpetuated by *hunhu* or *ubuntu* through socialisation. This should be the starting point and everything will follow. This fight should begin by reclaiming motherhood.

### **Reclaiming Motherhood and the Moral Promise**

As intimated earlier on, Zimbabwean women, just like other African women elsewhere, are the custodians and gatekeepers of cultural values because of their strategic position in the home. Within the context of *hunhu* or *ubuntu*, reclaiming motherhood means strategically accepting the responsibility of looking after children including those other members of the family that lie outside one's family circle – I mean outside the nuclear family – as a way of fighting patriarchy from within. There is no doubt that all these responsibilities will leave the African woman so much burdened but she remains the nerve centre of the family and this should give her some sense of pride and initiative. While *hunhu* or *ubuntu* promotes masculine values, it also gives women the opportunity to show men that apart from being able to initiate and influence things in the home and in the larger community, women organise and sustain society. There is no better way of putting it than this;

*The success of African womanism derives from the discovered awareness by women of their indispensability to the male. This is the bedrock of their actions; this gives the anchor and the voice. Thus, the myth of male superiority disappears, for the woman looks inward for a fresh appreciation of self.<sup>29</sup>*

This fresh appreciation of self should be viewed as authority that men cannot lay claim. The close bond that children have with their mothers than with their fathers should empower women to wield greater influence on what goes on in the home. With this point, the idea of formulating an African feminist ethic will not be far from real. In a way one could argue that the philosophy of *hunhu* or *ubuntu* has gendered components as the role of the mother is also typified by the expression, 'Africa is our motherland' as put by Yvonne Chakachaka.

While this is deeply rooted in *hunhu* or *ubuntu*, it is also a belief that is deeply embedded in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and that tradition has thrown up many examples that submissiveness is not powerlessness but can even be used as a weapon in a different kind of trial of strength.<sup>30</sup> The portrait of the female as an initiator of change and influencer of events can be traced back to the Genesis story in the Old Testament

bible. While Eve's creation as the product of Adam's rib is usually taken to confirm her secondary status, the more remarkable point is that it is Eve, not Adam, who plays the dominant role in this story.<sup>31</sup>

This genesis story is probably more applicable to the African woman whose influence is seen in the way she organises the home, the key decisions she makes on issues relating to children's upkeep and schooling. She is also the family 'treasurer' as she is responsible for the family budget. If the search for an African feminist ethic and the fight for existential space in the public sphere is to be realised then women should start from here. The struggle should begin in the kitchen going outwards. Instead of focussing directly on issues of equal opportunities in politics and the larger society, the success of the formulation of an African feminist ethic will depend in part on whether or not women realise that they are strongest in their home settings and that the fight for moral recognition in the home front should be the starting point and should automatically translate into the fight for public space.

This fight has to be done in the context of HIV and AIDS and home-based care. For there is no doubt that HIV and AIDS has become more of an ethical issue than it is a clinical issue in sub-Saharan Africa and the African woman has borne the brunt of this scourge especially the dual role of carrying the virus planted in her body by her husband because of his irresponsible behaviour and also having to look after the husband in times of sickness and also to fend for the family.

While issues of personal autonomy or individual freedom may have saved women in the West thereby limiting their moral compass to the ethics of general care and nurturance, the same can not be said of women in Africa and in particular Zimbabwean women who have to see to it that their husbands are taken care of when they have contracted AIDS as a result of their irresponsible and bullish behaviour. This, however, should not be interpreted to mean that its only men who are always to blame when HIV and AIDS invades the home, in some cases, women also take the flake, but it is the nature and organisation of African cultures that give the man absolute power to decide what is good for himself and his partner, which allows me to conclude that men are always the chief culprits.

### **Merging Theory with Action: Insights and Moral Challenges**

In fact, in most African cultures, masculine promiscuity is considered to be a mark of manhood. In Shona society there is a saying which goes like; *bhuru rinoonekwa nemavanga* (a real bull should bear scars as a mark of its fighting prowess). Chitando makes the important point that:

*The notion of a man as a sexual predator has had disastrous consequences... Cultural factors have led many men to regard themselves as having uncontrollable sexual urges and many have multiple sexual partners. Men in the military, truck drivers and those in activities that perpetuate specific notions of masculinity have often engaged in risky behaviours. The pre-occupation with virility has led many older men to court younger women.*<sup>32</sup>

I take it that this kind of attitude (which unfortunately is embedded in *hunhu* or *ubuntu*) has exacerbated the HIV and AIDS prevalent rate in sub-Saharan Africa. The AIDS pandemic has reduced most African women into health care givers in the home thereby

necessitating the need to develop a health care ethic that revolves around the role that women should play in providing home-based care to their errant spouses. This is not to say that the reverse is not equally true. In some cases, men are also found providing health care to their wives but rarely does this happen given the patriarchal nature of African states;

*Cultural factors have allowed men to have minimal roles in the provision of care to people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA). Home based care programmes that have been implemented throughout the region are, in fact, women based initiatives. Most men do not spend enough time at home to be in any position to provide quality care for those affected by or infected with HIV... Preparing food, washing and providing company to PLWHA are all activities that are seen as the responsibility of women.<sup>33</sup>*

Since women are the ones who have the initiative to provide home based care for their husbands by virtue of their emotional traits, which include but are not limited to caring, love, compassionate attitude and location; a home-based care ethic must be developed in order to reward them for their sterling efforts to maintain and stabilise families. It is them who should take this initiative to campaign for an ethic that challenges masculinities and promotes the values of care, nurturance, love and compassion in the context of HIV and AIDS and to take this further into the public sphere.

With the upsurge of AIDS in Africa, women need to be conscious of the fact that men will not always take the initiative to campaign for a feminist ethic which has a direct bearing on their authority. But may be it will be reasonable to pause for a moment and ask; but what benefits will accrue from formulating an African feminist home based-care ethic? What is wrong with the traditional ethics of *hunhu* or *ubuntu*? First and foremost, an African feminist ethic, will give women the opportunity to put their concerns on the table for debate by setting benchmarks of co-operation between them and men on issues of home based care within the discourse of HIV and AIDS. They will also be able to influence policy especially regarding their terms of reference as home-based care givers given the risky nature of looking after PLWHA.

The traditional ethics of *hunhu* or *ubuntu*, because of its communal nature, does not seem to draw parameters when it comes to the role of care-givers in African communities and women are always abused by being forced to look after sick persons who sometimes are not even be their husbands or progeny. In that regard, African feminist ethics will provide checks and balances. The only problem, though, is that ethics unlike, law can be disregarded without recourse to punishment. But is the African feminist ethic project possible, given that all social institutions therein are governed by *hunhu* or *ubuntu*-based masculine values? For some ethicists, the African feminist ethic project remains a utopia given that *hunhu* or *ubuntu* ethics do not give women a chance to make binding moral decisions as they are regarded as people of weaker sex. Even when they do, it is difficult to argue that they are driving the initiative themselves. It is the men who are pushing women to entrench patriarchy, as it is always the case that those who play the piper call the tune. But with the gradual fall in male populations in Africa due to AIDS, women seem to be slowly gaining ground and the search for an African feminist ethic looks possible and/or realistic.

## Conclusion

In this paper it has been argued that the need to establish an African feminist ethic is laudable and should start in the home front with women driving the initiative. The paper began by a survey of trends in the West in terms of how women have come up with what they consider to be a morally liberating ethics of care. This background was important for purposes of positioning the argument that African women can also develop a feminist ethic that is applicable in the context of the fight against HIV and AIDS in the home. The paper argued that despite *hunhu* or *ubuntu's* promotion of andro-centric attitudes in society, it was also part of the solution as it gives women a central role to play in the home. Women should reclaim motherhood as a matter of strategy in order to fight patriarchy inside out.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 54