

# ***Musangwe* - A No Go Space for Women: Implications for Gender (In)equality**

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## **Abstract**

This article discusses how both men and women can achieve gender equality among the Venda speaking Africans of Northern Limpopo. From time immemorial, both young and old men would often gather to fight as part of testing each other's strengths and displaying fighting artistic skills and knowledge. The *Musangwe* fist fighting it is argued in this article is one of the traditional mechanisms to assert masculinity among the Venda speaking people of Northern South Africa. *Musangwe* is Venda for bare-knuckle combat with the combatants mainly young and matured men. It is a no-go space for women. Men (young and old) volunteer to participate. Fighting skills are displayed and their strength is tested, either by being challenged or challenging opponents. Despite *Musangwe* being a male only protected sport, it is the women who wash the bloody clothes, nurture, and nurse and feed the participants yet culture restricts them from active participation. Women are barred from partaking in *Musangwe* hence it is Venda cultural taboo for them to even come in close vicinity to where *Musangwe* is fought. The author argues that *Musangwe* excludes and therefore marginalises women from getting themselves to the sport and not that women want to fight but only to watch. The article uses qualitative research approach by employing interviews and observation of *Musangwe*. In addition, the article uses the masculinity and radical feminism as theoretical and analytical frameworks

**Keywords:** Feminism, inequality, marginalisation, violence, space

## **1. Introduction**

Issues relating to gender inequality and equality, gender based violence, rape

and women exclusion and marginalisation are topical in the contemporary society. In South Africa, the subjugation of women and children under brutal actions in the form of physical abuse, rape, socio-economic exclusion coupled with escalating effect of 'triple evils' such as poverty, unemployment and inequality is prevalent (Taylor 1997: 50). Consequently these actions do not only undermine the gains of democracy since the new dispensation but also perpetuate gender inequality and therefore militate against women emancipation. Central to some of these violent deeds attributed to some elements of culture that are patriarchal which often perpetuate oppression against women (Hassim 2000: 43), excluding women from active participation in socio-economic and political mainstreams including both verbal and physical violence and abuse against women. In relation to socio-economic and political marginalisation and exclusion, Lewis and Kanji (2009: 79) argue that 'equality for women is impossible within the existing economic, political and cultural processes that reserve resources, power and control for small groups of people who happen to be men. According to Giddens (2004: 121) problem relating to gender inequality could be resolved through masculinity transformation including the change of attitude especially among men who are often perpetrators of crime against women and humanity.

*Musangwe* is literally a Masculine game of men at a Cattle Dip and which started when people were watching Bulls Fighting. The involvement of women is not justified at all. The game was meant for men from the onset that is why it is staged at the Cattle Dip. People even questioned the presence of a White Female Journalist who once came to film the event. The participants involved especially men argued that women start getting involved in *Musange* could change the stature of the game hence the level of participation may drop and the behavior of participants may also change. Imagine how it would be like to find matured men fighting for nothing in front of their wives and kids. Over the years, it has been and it remains as the Gentlemen's playground so that it can remain lively as it is. The involvement of women will change the game just the same way as when men are participating in women's League or community women's club activities. The advantage of this game on one hand is can only be understood by men. One earns respect for his fighting capabilities (It is man's nature to respect the strong fellow). Another advantage is that men express their strength and masculinity in a sporting activity and not by engaging antagonistic/conflictual fights.

On the other hand, the disadvantages are serious injurious that can be incurred during these less regulated fights. Currently, some critics are also raising the issue of contracting HIV due to direct contact with the opponent's blood. The article is divided into sections. The first section theorises African masculinity and the radical feminism as the analytical frameworks. The second section sheds light on the background of *Musangwe* followed by the research methods used. The fourth section presents the findings of the article.

## **2. Theorising African Masculinity and Radical Feminism**

### **2.1. Colonial/ White View of African Masculinities**

Although people like Lord Baden Powell<sup>1</sup> had racist views on the African masculinity and viewed it as 'sluggish' and 'lifeless'. Missionaries and colonisers alike McFarlan (1946 in Unhand 2008) argues disseminated information on the African man as morally bankrupt, inept, barbaric, backward and doomed. Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994:39) state that European societies became the standard against which Africans were judged and were found lacking. African men were seen as intellectually weak. Many colonial writers, missionaries and anthropologists had the same view about African masculinity hence Baden Powell's racist reports of the nineteenth century. With this in mind, it was easy for Europeans to group African masculinities from a European social construction which did not include diverse masculinities across societies and across continents (Unhand 2008). However what the colonialist writers, reporters, anthropologists and missionaries failed to realise was that African masculinities were society specific. Unhand (2008) argues that masculinity in any given society accepts features associated with the male gender and expressions of maleness rather than the European descriptions and expectations of masculinity.

Regardless of racist attitudes towards the African male Baden Powell and Binns (1975) were impressed by the Zulu men. The Zulu masculinity was constructed under military regiments. Although Binns did not care much about any male from sub-Sahara Africa, he praised the Zulu masculine

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<sup>1</sup> Lord Baden Powell was a lieutenant general in the British army and founded the Scout Movement which trained young men discipline and survival skills.

subjects for their ‘unremitting discipline’ through honesty, wisdom, bravery and respect for authority. Binns described how the Zulu youth was brought up under strict rules from his mother and father thus instilling discipline in the Zulu man. With regards to the Shona in the modern day Zimbabwe, unlike other tribes in Africa who asserted their manhood through the rites of passage, the Shona according to Shire (in Lindisfarne 1994) asserted theirs through intellectual debate were thus declared as real men while those that were old and could not hold a debate were relegated to the position of boys. What is interesting among the Shona is that they had the attributes (intellectual prowess) of Baden Powell’s view of a real man. However the colonialists had negative views about African men thus as discussed earlier did not take into account the diverse masculine attributes of an African. The Shona masculinity was undermined by the English settlers through the introduction of the tax, which saw many men leaving the rural areas to cities in search of jobs. Men found themselves working in the settlers’ kitchens cooking and washing, a job that was specifically designed to women in their culture. The colonialists managed to emasculate the African man through a systematic racist hegemonic structure (see Gramsci 1971) where a white person regardless of age became more superior to the African man let alone the women who played a vital role in the African societies. Similarly to Lord Baden Powell, *Musangwe* teaches discipline and self-control.

## **2.2. Feminist Critique of *Musangwe* as a Male Dominated Sport**

Oakley (1972) and de Beauvoir (1949) among other feminists argue that for a long time women were perceived as mothers, daughters, wives and sisters only. Women were and in some cases perceived in relation to others especially family relationships and as a consequence feminists perceive the family as a central site for gender struggles. Looking at *Musangwe* from a radical feminist approach it is evident that the sport continuously keeps women in the private sphere. Firestone (1971) for example states that the origin of male domination can be found in the unequal roles of men and women in biological reproduction.

Out of this unequal power relationship stems the sexual division of labour and the accompanying sex-class system in which men dominate

women. This approach best describes women's position in the *Musangwe* sport. They are not allowed to even watch 'real men's sport' as their little hearts cannot stomach the bloody sport yet they are the ones left to wash the bloody clothes and nurse the broken limbs, split mouths, faces and swollen bodies among other bloody body parts. Interestingly women's role is in nurturing in this case nursing the sportsmen while men's role is to assert their masculinity among other men in the ring as well as in the home.

### **3. Background Information on *Musangwe* as a Sport**

#### **3.1. Background Information**

Musangwe is a Venda for bare-knuckle combat and the combatants are mainly young and matured men. Men (young and older) volunteer to participate. Fighting skills are displayed and strength is tested, either by being challenged or challenging opponents. The history of *Musangwe* is said to have originated in the late 1800s and has always included villages such as Gaba, Tshifudi, Tshaulu, Halambani and Tshifudi. Unlike professional boxing where the contestants compete for championship and financial gains, there is no price awarded to the champions or winners. Through *Musangwe*, fighters fight for personal pride and bragging rights for their villages (Ndevana 2012).

Since the 1800s, *Musangwe* has grown to be one of Northern Limpopo's most watched cultural events and is often held annually everyday between 16<sup>th</sup> December and 1<sup>st</sup> January. Popularly, *Musangwe* tournaments are held at Tshifudi village which is approximately 20km from Thohoyandou. According to the elders, the ground where *Musangwe* is fought is prepared with charms and herbs obtained from Maine (traditional healer) while the preparation is done by the president of *Musangwe*. The cleansing process is traditionally considered as one way of informing the ancestors about the official opening of *Musangwe* tournament. It is said that only one fighter died in 1929 and his spirit is summoned at the commencement of each tournament to protect all participants (Tshikhudo 2009). Wende (2011) acknowledges that there are three rules to *Musangwe* boxing and the fight continues until blood is shed, or someone is knocked out, or one of the fighters raises his hand to signal surrender. *Musangwe* has been fought in Gaba and Tshifudi valleys for centuries. Originally *Musangwe* was a way of teaching men to be

warriors and selecting the bravest to fight for the tribe including their families. Since then the custom has never died. Tracing the history of *Musangwe*, there is a trend of fighters and champions within families and Ndevana, the current president of *Musangwe* Association and once-invincible champion said:

This is a sacred place. The blood of our forefathers and their teeth has all fallen here. My grandfather was a fighter here in 1939 and then my father, and then I started in the 1970s (in Wende 2011).

In defending the sustenance of *Musangwe*, Ndevana (2011) also known by his fighting name, 'Poison' argues that even though 'some people see it as barbaric' it is our culture and for us it is like Karate for the Japanese'. *Musangwe*'s champion/winner in return earns respect and often times emerge as community leaders since their victory and their strength is proof of one that is able to protect one's family and community. *Musangwe* also engenders masculinity which Laack (1995: 54) defines as roles that men play by saying that they are:

... largely bound up with what men do and what jobs they have. Under the patriarchy one role has been predominant in defining man's position-being the head of the family.

Unlike other sports, *Musangwe* does not have strict rules, anything goes, fighters can head butt or knee-jerk an opponent. There are also implications embedded in bare-knuckle combat of *Musangwe*. One such implication is regarding health since during *Musangwe*, combatants are exposed to blood which can have HIV/AIDS related ramifications especially without the presence of health professionals. The second implication has to do with entrenching violent behaviours and culture especially among the young combatants who upon their victory of mere participation tend to extend their bravery to others in the general community members.

*Musangwe*, or bare-knuckle fighting, has become part of the lives of the rural communities mostly in the Vhembe region. One such community where the sport has manifested itself is Tshifudi-Gaba outside Thohoyandou. During the festive holidays, men as well as a few young boys spend much of their time at a secluded spot where men take turns in challenging others for a

fistfight. The sport is now the in-thing in the area and has become so popular that it has become a big crowd puller of even prominent people in the community (Mavhungu 2009).

The president of *Musangwe*, Mr. Tshilidzi ‘Poison’ Ndevana, vowed that the sport is here to stay, saying no one will stop them from practicing what he terms Venda culture. ‘Bare-knuckle fighting has been part of our lives since the 18th century and we are not prepared to trade it for anything’, he said. He feels the sport builds men to be responsible beings who know how to take care of their families. ‘This is a sport that teaches us respect and all the aspects of manhood and we will continue doing this as part of our culture like other nationalities do’ (Ndevana 2011). Below are two pictures depicting *Musangwe* tournaments in a fight.



The above picture depict *Musangwe* fighting tournaments hosted by two communities at Tshifudi and Vhufulwi. According to Ndevana (2012), there are six categories of fighters: Vho-Mammvide (9-13 years old), Roverside (14-17), Pre-Ngwenya (18-25), Ngwenya (26-35), Mature Ngwenya (36-45) and the Legends (45 and older). The first tournament scene reflects a category known as Ngwenya which constitutes young men between the age of 26 years old and 35 years old. From the picture on the left hand side, the boys were busy picking on each other by exchanging blows, preparing the ground for the older fighters. The second picture on the right above features

the mature-ngwenya (Champion) whose ages range from 36 years old and 45 years old. The man in the circle is a challenger inviting for anyone who can come forth as it is said that:

If you feel like fighting, all you need to do is storm into the centre of the circle, stretch your arm and point one fist at potential opponents.



Source: BBC - [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from\\_our\\_own\\_correspondent/9387520.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/9387520.stm) 2012/01/24.

Those willing to take you head-on will declare their intentions by pointing a fist back in retaliation. If they are not in the mood to fight or fear you, they can simply ignore your provocation or raise their hands in surrender. If one wants out of the fight, one simply raises one's hands.

### **3.2 Masculinity through *Musangwe Sport***

This article also aims to dispel the widely held beliefs and lies about African masculinities. Morrell (2001) and other African scholars argue that African masculinities are varied and can be expressed in diverse ways. Their view is that African masculinities have evolved since colonial interferences. Unlike the narrow colonialist and racist views of the African man many authors concur that there is no one particular expression of masculinity; all men



regardless of colour express their masculinity according to societal expectation or according to gender alignments – e.g. homosexual masculinities and female masculinities.

Connell's work is highly renowned for demystifying masculinities. The author discusses the different types of masculinities found in different societies. His theory is the opposite of the single, unitary emphasis on one instrumental role discussed by Baden Powell (1896) and Parsons (1954) (in Uchendu 2008). Connell (1995) argues that masculinity is a place in gender relations, where men and women practice and engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture. He further describes multiple masculinities that are hierarchically organised; different masculinities due to cultures and how masculinities change over different periods in history. More importantly he points out that masculinity is not simple as there are no set patterns as colonial views dictated. Thus masculinities are actively constructed and continually tested and contested. Masculinity is thus not formed nor caused by social context or at birth but rather shaped and constructed through interaction.

*Musangwe*, fist fight is both a sport and an expression of masculinity. Similarly to any other sport is one of the key multifaceted components in the complex construction of masculinities in most societies. Early studies on sport were concerned simply with the physical aspect – the human body. MacClancy (1996) argues that sport is central in societies and that it embodies social values. Thus sport is a major vehicle of identity. Similarly to colonial views on African masculinities, sport in Africa particularly South Africa racial divisions in sport were promoted. Football was relegated to African men while rugby was seen as epitomising fair play, manliness and Britishness (Alegi 2004). Alegi argues that the English speaking public schools epitomised 'white sport' with masculinity. Many sportsmen who play rugby are brawny and well-built compared to African football players who are mostly thin and athletic. The *Musangwe* fighters compared to what is perceived as sport are nowhere near to being brawny and well built, some of them are scrawny and some have pot bellies but it is the skills and discipline that makes them real men in the eyes of the Venda societies. Thus sport can not only be seen as body beautiful and brawny but also in many other body attributes.

*Musangwe* is a test of courage and machismo. Families and communities are proud of their best fighters. The fighters draw pride and

respect from their own and other communities for their prowess. Traditionally the sport is a domain of both boys and men testing each other's strength.

#### **4. Research Methodology**

The article uses a qualitative interpretive research approach to solicit data relevant towards understanding *Musangwe* and how *Musangwe* as an indigenous sport can be used to socialise and educate both men and women towards achieving gender equality or gender inequality. The strengths of the qualitative (interpretive) method, Neuman (2006: 89) argues is that apart from seeing 'human social life as an accomplishment' it further holds that 'social life is based on social interaction and socially constructed meaning'. For the purpose of this article, twenty people comprising of 10 men and 10 women were sampled. Their ages ranged from 25 to 50 years old. The participants were drawn from two villages namely Tshifudi and Vhufulwi, the two places famous for hosting big *Musangwe* tournaments. The author used the following questions to elicit information:

- How does *Musangwe* socialise men with the exclusion of women?
- What is *Musangwe*?
- Does *Musangwe* socialise across gender?
- To what extent does *Musangwe* engender either gender equality or gender inequality?
- What are taboos embedded within *Musangwe* sport?

In order to answer these questions the article utilised research techniques such as participant observation, individual in-depth interviews and secondary document analysis including information obtained from the internet websites (Mouton 1996: 169). Through the use of participant observation the author was afforded an opportunity to have first-hand information on how *Musangwe* spectators, challengers as well as how current and former champions interact and behaviour during the tournaments. While standing there among a cheering crowd of more than 1 000 people, it is quite obvious -

*Musangwe* not only occupies a special place in the hearts of locals, but that it is a crucial part of their being and culture. Apart from observing the Melange's tournaments, data was also collected through random sampling (Mouton 1996) in which key informants as well as ordinary men (spectators) and women in the two selected villages were engaged in exploring the extent to which *Musangwe* sport contribute towards gender equality or gender inequality. From the interviews it was apparent that senior women would adhere to traditional protocols and therefore never bothered to challenge their exclusion to participate in *Musangwe* indigenous boxing. On the contrary, the middle and younger women were more curious and vocal, and ready to advocate for their inclusion especially in watching *Musangwe* tournaments without being ridiculed, humiliated and prejudiced against by their male counterparts.

## **5. Findings and Discussions**

### **5.1. The Assertion of Masculinity through Cultural Goals and Achievements**

From time immemorial societies had varied ways of expressing and asserting masculinities. The primary purpose of asserting masculinities was to consolidate manhood from boys to men and gender differentiation. From the Western perspective on one hand, sport plays a central role in enhancing manhood. The sport oriented masculinities are visible through displayed strength. On the other hand, from an African perspective various stages are considered for asserting masculinity especially through the rites of passage from boyhood to manhood. For example, African young men are taken through circumcision as a rite of passage in order to graduate to manhood (Van Gennep 2004).

Both boys and men are subjected to several aspects of masculinity roles and activities as part of assisting them to ensure hardships and adversaries in life. Either explicitly or implicitly, the decision to partake in *Musangwe* is by itself an act of bravery which from the preparation to the actual fight subject contestants to challenges embedded in life. In northern South Africa, men of the Venda tribe continue the centuries-old tradition of *Musangwe*, a form of bare-knuckle boxing that helps young men cope with present-day challenges.

## **5.2. Exclusion and Non-recognition of Women' Role**

Unlike other sports where people partake for commercial purposes such as boxing, wrestling, rugby and football to name just a few, *Musangwe* is free and the contestants fight without any expectation to get paid. As revealed from the interviews, it has become clear that some feel duty bound to fight - because their families have a history of producing *Musangwe* champions and thus have the need to maintain the legacy. Ndevana adds that most contestants descend on Tshifudi village to fight as part and parcel of honouring and representing their families, clan and villages. On the other hand families feel honoured for producing champions while on the other hand the community's pride is restored and maintained.

Within the sport fraternity, both family and village representation engender healthy competition which is often displayed through teasing and joking with the opponents. Similarly to a race where only one person wins, *Musangwe* is instrumental in building and institutionalising a sense of social inter and intra community cohesion among the spectators and contestants. Even though communities are not a homogenous entity, *Musangwe* fights tend to bring unity among disputing families. Most importantly, the sport does not only unify villagers but also assist in creating a social capital which both bridges and bonds them. In the recent past, one of the respondents indicated that:

*Musangwe* has sparked a fierce debate in recent years between those who believe it should be regulated and those who argue the sport should be left in its current format (Respondent No. 1, 2012)

The manifestation of bonding and bridging social capital is seen through the camaraderie where people as individuals and collectives defend their cultural and indigenous sport. On the positive note, *Musangwe* has been credited with producing professional boxers like Phillip 'Time Bomb' Ndou, who hails from the area. Women exclusion was also exacerbated by the fact that men tend to hide their weaknesses, one female shared that:

More often men are afraid that women would laugh at them when beaten to the pulp and exposure to their failure could make them to be undermined by women (Respondent No. 2, 2012)

Such a tendency not only obscured men's weakness as fellow human being but also further underlies Giddens (2004)' 'hegemonic masculinity' which in turn expand masculinity prone to torment and exclude women and therefore failed to recognise women's role. The reason given for the absence of women in *Musangwe* is their lack of self-control, which may be viewed as sexist. Women are also accused of giggling and less encouraging through the way they tease an aspect which discourages the fighters and men in general. In addition women are alleged to be weak and faint hearted particularly where there is 'violence' and spilling of blood.

### **5.3. Socio-cultural Socialisation of Women Outside Men's Sphere**

Sociologically, socialisation according to Togni (1996: 115) is the process whereby a human individual is taught to conform to norms and values of society, thereby becoming a 'social' being able to function within the parameters of that society. Giddens (2004; 22) in a wider sense associates the notion of culture comprising both intangible aspects (beliefs, ideas and values which form the content of culture) and tangible aspects (objects, symbols or technology which represent that content). He further argues that in reality culture is often concerned more about those aspects of human societies which are learned rather than inherited. The socio-cultural socialisation through sport such as *Musangwe* made people especially men to believe that sport meant for men can not even be watched by women let alone their participation. As one male teacher said:

We grew up knowing that *Musangwe* similarly to male circumcision was and is still a male domain and as such only men could exclusively watch or participate in the tournaments (Respondent No. 3, 2012)

Socialisation is therefore regarded as the primary channel aimed at transmitting cultural values and norms over time and generations. Such process of socialising people includes categorising roles and functions to be performed by both men and women. In order to radically challenge gender prejudice and gender inequality, Togni (1996: 124) is of the opinion that

gender role socialisation will have to take a different form based on the principle of equality of opportunity for both sexes, men and women. *Musangwe* similarly to other masculine sports or activities culturally socialise society in general and men in particular as a female respondent said:

society especially men are culturally socialised and made to believe that not only that women are naturally weak and inferior but also their weaknesses warrant men to exploit, marginalise, disrespect and abuse them without being questioned (Respondent No. 4, 2012).

The above statement reflects what Giddens (2004: 119) call ‘hegemonic masculinity’ which is defined as the social dominance more often through a cultural dynamic and as a result extends to both private lives as well as into social realms. In this case, Connell (1987) associates ‘hegemonic masculinity’ to inter alia, strengths and physical toughness which fit explicitly to masculinity promoted through *Musangwe* sport.

#### **5.4. The Marginalisation of Women**

*Musangwe* can be categorised as an indigenous sport which historically managed to attract men who volunteer to display their fighting skills and art. Women were not and are still not allowed anywhere near the venue ‘because it is traditional’ for men to be on their own. The marginalisation of women in this sport does not only manifest itself through their absence at the grounds (either young or old) and from partaking in the sport but it also culturally exclude them through a mere casting of an eye. In essence, the marginalisation of women in most male dominated sport hide behind culture hence its failure to transform society from gender inequality and discriminatory tendencies to gender equality and justice. Bonde (1995: 55) argues that either ancient or modern competitive sports could be an explicit justification for sport as the learning of the masculine code. Within the sport fraternity such as *Musangwe*, the marginalisation and exclusion of women is further deepened through ‘muscle-building’ or body strengths oriented sport which often treats women as weak species. In the contemporary world, women have made successful inroads in term of registering their interest and capabilities in what used to be male-dominated sports such as soccer, rugby,

cricket, marathon, mountain climbing including the extreme type of wrestling. Women in this context are disadvantaged, sidelined, excluded and marginalised in the name of culture. Through culture and cultural practices, either inclusionary or exclusionary undertones envisaged people especially the discriminated groupings such as women according to Garuba and Raditlhalo (2008:36) being marginalised on the basis of race, religion, cultural practices, gender or sexual orientation. On one hand, culture became a site of contestation and struggle not only against colonialism and apartheid, while on the other hand it was also used against oppression, domination and marginalisation. At the broader level, culture as Garuba and Raditlhalo (2008: 43) posit could be an instrument of anti-colonial resistance. In the South African context, culture was used as an instrument for forging identities towards the rebirth of a new democratic, non-racist and non-sexist society (Constitution 1996). However among the Venda similarly to other African ethnic groups, culture is used to reinforce male dominance in society.

The interviewed women in this article reported that they would like to watch *Musangwe* rather than participate in the sport as it was too brutal.

### **5.5. *Musangwe* Taboos: A No Go Space for Women?**

*Musangwe* is anchored on testing each other's capacity and physical strength. In its heyday when there was traditional stability, at sunset, young men heading the cattle home would exchange nasty words in jest and then a human circle is created by other boys and two boys volunteer to fight each. The sport continues to attract not only young people but also seniors who serve as coaches and mentors hence *Musangwe* is no-go space for women. Historically, *Musangwe* is a socialised sport around male-dominated role such as cattle herding which in the African culture is done by boys and senior men.

On Saturdays after the cattle have been dipped, young men from various villages assemble to fight and the winner's victory is spread across the valleys and villages. Based on the fighters' capacity, a champion (ngwena) earns respect and is elevated by villagers as a community leader and defender of the village. Over the years, *Musangwe* has been sustained as a taboo for women to partake hence culturally they are and still prevented from even coming near *Musangwe* grounds. One of the taboos as revealed by a senior male respondent pointed out that:

Vhafumakadzi vho iledwa u dzhenelela Musangwe ngauri kaleni vho vha vha tshi ambara misisi, ho vha hut shi shavhiwa uri musi vha tshi lwa vha do wa vha penguwa, vhanna vha do vha vhonelela (women were not allowed to participate because there was fear that when they would be fighting since they used to wear short skin/leather dresses would obviously uncover themselves especially when they fall and men and boys would see their private parts-then an embarrassment) (Respondent No. 5, 2012).

For those women who are not interested to actively fight in *Musangwe* they argue that it was then that women used to be almost half-naked but that argument does not hold water since both men and women in the contemporary society can even wear trousers. Those who want to partake in the sport, argue for women's freedom to be involved in sports such as football, rugby, wrestling, cricket, etc, which used to only male dominated sports. Another taboo associated to women being barred from participating in *Musangwe* according to Mr. Ndevana is that:

*Musangwe* ground is considered sacred and has to be cleansed by a traditional healer from pollution prior to the fights. The mere presence of women stepping on cleansed ground is alleged would induce them to have perpetual periods (hune ha tambelwa hone *Musangwe*, hu a handululwa nga Maine, ngau ralo vhasadzi a von go tendelwa ngauri hupfi vha ima luvhandzeni musi vha tshiya maduvhani a vha nga do ima) (Male respondent No. 6, 2012).

The circulated myth that women are naturally weak is strong in isolating women from participating in the *Musangwe* sport. This justification is explicit as reflected from a female who commented that:

Women are strictly not allowed to be part of the sport because 'ngauri vhasadza vhana madamu- a vhana matzhende' translated to mean women have 'breast' and do not have 'balls' (Female Respondent No. 7, 2012)..

These taboos have in one or the other contributed to the stiflement of debates on *Musangwe*.



## 6. *Musangwe* and its Implications for Gender (In)Equality

*Musangwe* like any other male dominated sport socialise society and its people into sports, roles including public or private spheres which can be entered by men or women. Such gender categorisation does not only give rise to the ‘process of gender socialisation’ (Moffett 2008: 106) but also consolidate gender stereotypes that perpetuate ‘gender inequality’ (Giddens 2004: 112) which are often embedded within a patriarchal society. In addition, Chowdhury & Patnaik (2010: 455) view gender equality to imply:

... a society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights and obligations in all spheres of life.

In essence, deliberations on gender, gender differences including gender socialisation form part of the gamut of discourse that embrace gender equality or inequality. On the positive, gender equality considers both men and women as equal deserving a fair and humane treatment, thus including access to resources and socio-economic and political opportunities especially for disadvantaged groupings such as women to pursue a decent living. On the contrary, gender inequality according to Giddens (2004: 113) has to do with difference in terms of status, power and prestige women and men have in groups, collectivities and societies.

World-wide, women have managed to make their mark especially in sports which traditionally used to belong and dominated by their male counterparts, yet *Musangwe* is strictly a male sport among the Venda speaking people. *Musangwe* is portrayed as a disciplined sport, as Ndevana pointed out that:

*Musangwe* builds men to be responsible beings who know how to take care of their families. ‘This is a sport that teaches us respect and all the aspects of manhood and we will continue doing this as part of our culture like other nationalities do’ (Respondent No. 8, 2012).

Contrary to the positive sentiment and assertion in favour of *Musangwe* above, some of the interviewees revealed the opposite of this assertion as one family member said:

Since my son got involved in *Musangwe*, he is bossy and at times he does not want to listen to his senior siblings including myself as his mother (Respondent No. 9, 2012).

The above mentioned quotation has gender inequality since it socialise young men to perceive women as weak sexes who due their 'perceived lack of physical strengths' could be bullied over. In addition, such mind-set entrenches violent behaviours and culture especially among the young combatants who upon their victory of mere participation tend to extend their bravery to others in the general community members especially at home. Thus *Musangwe* as Giddens (2004: 112) argues widens gender gaps and differences which in turn continue to serve as the basis for both gender and social inequalities. In Sport such as *Musangwe*, gender inequality coupled with abuse against females is socially accepted and within unequal power relations such behaviours and tendencies led to domination and discrimination against women and girls by men and boys (Chowdhury & Patnaik 2010: 458). In an attempt to deal with gender inequalities and all ills committed against women, Menon Sen & Shiv Kumar (2001) assert that gender equality should not be treated as just a woman's issue... but it is a people's issue and as such both men and women should work together in order to ensure rights and freedoms for all citizens-thus the movement for women's equality to become a people's movement.

## **7. Concluding Remarks**

From time immemorial societies had varied ways of expressing and asserting masculinities. The primary purpose of asserting masculinities was to consolidate manhood from boys to men and gender differentiation. From the Western perspective on one hand, sport plays a central role in enhancing manhood. The sport oriented masculinities are visible through displayed strength. On the other hand, from an African perspective various stages are considered for asserting masculinity especially through the rites of passage from boyhood to manhood. For example, African young men are taken through circumcision as a rite of passage in order to graduate to manhood.

In this article, *Musangwe* has been deliberated as one of the mechanisms to consolidate and deepen masculinity within the context of

capacity to either enhances or inhibits gender equality. The author acknowledges some of the positive changes brought through men and boys partaking in the sport similarly to other forms of asserting and affirming African masculinity (circumcision, hunting and the accumulation of wealth). *Musangwe* is still the domain of men irregardless of age. Women are not allowed anywhere near the venue 'because it is traditional' for men to be on their own. Despite being a sport, Ndevana pointed out that:

*Musangwe* builds men to be responsible beings who know how to take care of their families. This is a sport that teaches us respect and all the aspects of manhood and we will continue doing this as part of our culture like other nationalities do (Respondent No. 10, 2012).

In addition, either explicitly or implicitly, the decision to partake in *Musangwe* is by itself an act of bravery (asserting manhood) which from the preparation to the actual fight subject contestants to challenges embedded in life. In northern South Africa, men of the Venda continue the centuries-old tradition of *Musangwe*, a form of bare-knuckle boxing that helps young men cope with present-day challenges. Apart from these positive attributes, *Musangwe*'s participants have at times displayed ill-discipline which instead of uniting and building community, people especially women have been terrorised and bullied. The repercussions of such behaviours could be translated into undermining attempts already made towards gender equality thereby entrenching and consolidating gender stereotypes, inequalities and violence.

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**Personal interviews with:**

- *Musangwe* Organisers,
- President of *Musangwe* Association (Mr Ndevana)
- Men and women from Tshifudi and Vhufulwi Villages

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