

## **Sources of conflict between mother in law and daughter in law: A case of Chivi District in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe**

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### **Abstract**

*The study sought to assess the sources of conflict between the mother in law and the daughter in law in Chivi, Masvingo Province. A phenomenological design was used in the study. Eighteen participants composed of nine mothers in law and nine daughters in law took part in the study. Purposive sampling was used to identify the participants. The study used interviews to collect the data. Thematic approach was used to analyse the data. Results of the study revealed that the kitchen, management of finances, parenting style, and witchcraft as the main sources of conflict between the mothers in law and the daughters in law. The study came up with the following strategies to reduce the conflict: counselling, separate living of the daughter in law and her mother in law as soon as possible and also daughters in law to seek employment to reduce continuous contact with the mother in law. The study came up with recommendations.*

**Key words:** conflict, mother in law, daughter in law, Chivi

### **Introduction**

Marriage brings together different families which are expected to have a cordial relationship (Finkel, Cheung, Emery, Carswell & Larson, 2015). In an African society and other societies when a son marries they say that the mother-in-law (MIL) gets a new daughter and the daughter-in-law (DIL), a new mother. Notwithstanding that, mother in law and daughter in law conflict has been a subject of debate in many fora. Many stories and songs have been composed regarding the negative relationship that defines their lives in the homes (Ayadi, 2014; Mota, 2009). Several studies for example, in America, (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009; Fingerman, Gilligan & Pitzer, 2012; Prentice,

2008) India, (Adhikari, 2015) in China, (Chan & Douglas, 2010); in Taiwan (Huang & Hsu, 2006) and in Nigera, (Olutola, 2012) have revealed that there is conflict between mother in law and daughter in law. It is the aim of the study to unveil causes of these variables that influence the conflict between mother and daughter in law.

Conflict is seen as the struggle between groups or individuals in trying to maximise the benefits and exercise influence and control over others in order to achieve their own goals as people with different interests and values (Wilmot, 2001). Given the collectivist nature of most African communities, one might suggest that no conflict is truly interpersonal (between two individuals), but is always intergroup because of the responsibilities and obligations of the individual to the group (family, clan, village) of which he or she is a part (Jabs, 2014). In other words, behind every interpersonal conflict especially in an African setting there are other extenuating variables that may exacerbate the conflict.

The coming in of a DIL in a family may alter the rules and regulations in trying to accommodate her. The adjustment is not always simple in most cases as she is considered an outsider. In many circumstances as defined by the cultural beliefs, this outsider is expected to follow numerous traditional norms, including obeying her in-laws, taking care of her in-laws when they are sick or elderly, and showing filial piety toward her in-laws (Chen, 2006). These cultural norms may contradict the equality and independence that modern women seek (Lu, Gilmour, Kao & Huang, 2006).

Violence on women to women in the family has been revealed in a number of studies globally for example, Rew, Gangoli and Gill (2013), Donovan et al. (2002) in India established that women to women violence was rife. Sources of these violent behaviour have been identified as emanating from both the nucleus and extended families.

According to a study in India, (Rew et al., 2013) the conflict arises when the MIL tries to disturb the development brought by the DIL and slow down the intimacy between the son and the daughter in law. In other words the mother in law is in most cases against any developments that are initiated by the daughter in law. Other conflicts may emanate from the failure to bear children by the daughter in law (Li & Gao, 2013), controlling of finances (Nakazawa, 1996), discipline of children (Link, 2010), Sharing a kitchen (Antonucci, Jackson & Biggs, 2007) and different life styles of the two (Silverstein, 1990).

According to Vera-Sanso (1999), many residents of low-income settlements in India complain that in the city daughters-in-law do not submit to the demands and wishes of their mothers-in-law as they do in rural Tamil Nadu, a South Indian state of which Chennai is the capital. Younger women in these settlements, wishing to stress the inversion of the 'typical' order of the MIL and DIL relationship, state that it is the daughter-in-law who lies on the bed ordering her mother-in-law around (Vera-Sanso, 1999). In other words both the daughter in law and the mother in law may be culprits in causing disharmony in the family dynamics. The conflict may culminate into deadly violence between the two which may lead to loss of life. Even when abuse does not culminate in death, there is growing evidence that many women suffer violence at the hands of their MIL (Dave & Solanki, 2000; Gangoli & Rew, 2011).

Although both the MIL and DIL play a role in the conflict, the MIL has been cited as showing over possessiveness, and creates tension because she feels that her son's love and attention would be exclusively claimed by an outsider (daughter in law) (Murickan, 2002). The reluctance and resistance of the DIL towards financial and administrative control of the family creates critical situations in the family. Consequently, it yields a threat in the mother's mind so that she reacts in a negative manner, and leading to hurt feeling in DIL (Murickan, 2002, Adhikari, 2015, Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Zimbabwe has not been spared with regards to the conflict between the MIL and the DIL (Ndulo, 2011) hence the need to empirically investigate the sources of conflict that exists between the MIL and DIL.

### *Objectives*

The objectives of this study were to explore:

- Possible sources of conflict between the MIL and the DIL.
- Strategies that can be used to reduce conflict between the MIL and the DIL.

### **Method**

#### *Research design*

The study used a phenomenological research design. Phenomenological studies examine human experiences through the descriptions provided by the people involved. Phenomenology aims to describe a person's lived experiences (phenomena) in an

attempt to enrich lived experience by drawing out its meaning (Helmane, 2017). The phenomenological research design was the most appropriate for the current study as it allowed the participants to explore their experiences of the sources of conflict between MIL and DIL.

### *Participants*

A total of 18 purposively sampled participants took part in the current study. The sample was composed of 9 mothers in law and 9 daughters in law. Of these participants, 3 mothers in law and 3 daughters in law were pairs sharing the same house and the rest of the participants came from different set ups. The DIL who participated in the study were between 0 and 10 years in marriage.

### *Research Instrument*

Interviews were used to collect data. The interview guide was used as an instrument by the researcher to ensure that none of the important issues to be discussed was left out of the conversation. The format of the interview itself was that of a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews combine the flexibility of the unstructured, open-ended interview with the directionality and agenda of the survey instrument (De Clerck, Willems, Timmerman & Carling, 2011). The semi structured interview allowed the researchers to be flexible in collecting the data on sources of conflict between MIL and DIL.

### *Data Collection Procedures*

Appointment with the participants was made two weeks before the data was collected. At least three participants were interviewed per day until all the participants were interviewed. The interviews were done by the first author. Where the MIL and DIL were staying together, the MIL was interviewed first as a sign of respect. The interview took an average of thirty minutes per person. Most of the interviews were done at the homesteads of the participants during the day.

### *Data Analysis*

Data was analysed using the thematic approach. The thematic approach involves the integration of various content fields exploring an exciting idea which is closely linked with the content of different subject areas (Helmane, 2017). Thematic approach was suitable for the current study as it allowed the researchers to connect together and integrate sources of conflict between MIL and DIL within selected themes.

### *Ethical Considerations*

The researchers observed the principle of confidentiality by recognising vulnerability of the participants and their contribution to the study. Data in the current study was coded so that participants' identity remained anonymous. The principle of informed consent was also observed. Participants of the current study were put in the picture of what the study entailed and they volunteered to participate. The objectives of the study were clearly explained to the participants.

### **Results**

The aim of the study was to unveil the sources of conflict between MIL and DIL. The results of the study were grouped into 2 themes. The first theme was on possible sources of conflict which had sub themes on management of finance, parenting style, the kitchen and witchcraft. The second theme was strategies that can be used to reduce the conflict between the MIL and DIL. Pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity of the participants.

#### *Possible sources of conflict between MIL and DIL Management of finance*

Most DIL alleged that their MIL wanted to control finances and issuing of food items in the home. The following verbal quotes illustrate the foregoing:

*My MIL always suspects that I steal especially food items so that I give to my parents, yet when I visit my parents, they make sure I come home with food items for the grandchildren. The other problem that I have with my mother in law is that she wants to know even how much I earn and how I use my hard earned money. I teach at a local preschool which doesn't pay much. My MIL thinks I earn a lot (Mambano).*

*My MIL is very strict about how the food was used and the management of finances. Every cent must be accounted. She would go to the extent of asking her son about the money he would have left (Mancube).*

*In the event that my parents or relatives come my MIL would check whether they had been given something especially food items. The good part about my MIL is that she would not reprimand me in the presence of the guests but would mention it when she is angry (Manyoni).*

*I love my DIL so much but she doesn't speak back. However, she is reckless with the money. My son gives her a lot of money but nobody knows where the money goes.*

*She is always in debt. She should improve on that. I wish someone could knock some sense in her head (Gogo Ngida).*

*All my daughters in law are okay except the younger one. She is egocentric and sometimes stingy (Gogo Hamadziripi).*

*My DIL does not have the sense of saving money. She spends money on useless things. She should develop a culture of saving (Gogo Ngida).*

### *Parenting style*

Parenting style was also raised as an issue that caused commotion between the two. Many daughters in law and mothers in law were concerned about child rearing styles. Mothers in law blamed their daughters in law and daughters in law in turn blamed the mothers in law. Each of them wanted to be in charge of children's welfare and to raise them to the best of their ability. In response to the above issue, the following were raised:

*I want to raise my children in my own ways, not to follow old traditional customs that are well out of fashion (Mancube).*

*I know how I should raise my children. I don't need to someone to teach me how to raise my children. I do respect my mother in law but when it comes to raising my children, I don't need to be schooled, it's my responsibility (Mampofu).*

In the same vein MIL had the following sentiments:

*Vamadhuve: Our daughters in law should respect their mothers in law. We have the experience that they don't have. We have raised children so if we tell them what to do we know what we are doing. They should listen but they don't (Madhuve).*

*During our time, our mothers in law would teach us how to properly raise our children. You wouldn't argue but just comply but today's daughters in law are very argumentative. They think they know better. Look at how today's children behave. It's a shame to say the least. These children should be raised according to our tradition where respect should be instilled in these children (Gogo Ngida).*

### *The Kitchen*

The kitchen was cited as a source of conflict by both the mother and daughter in law. The kitchen was cited as a source of conflict by the mothers in law. Most MILs revealed that their DILs were quiet wasteful and only think about themselves when it comes to

food. They also revealed that their daughters in law want to control the kitchen. The following verbal quotes illustrate the above:

*These DIL have problems, they want to be in charge with what happens in the kitchen forgetting that the kitchen is mine. I should determine what happens in the kitchen. She will do whatever she feels like when she moves to her own kitchen (Gogo Ngida).*

*My DIL brought her own utensils but hardly use them. She continuously use my utensils. Plates have been broken. It's unfair, isn't it? (Madhuve)*

*My daughters in law is wasteful. She doesn't know how to manage the food. Sometimes she prepares more than what we can finish. She thinks my son is a bank. It's painful where he works (Gogo Muwaniki).*

The DIL equally talked about the kitchen as a source of conflict. They revealed that MIL don't give them freedom to work in the kitchen. These sentiments are illustrated in the verbal quotes below:

*My mother in law is a problem. She doesn't give me the freedom to express myself in the kitchen. She interferes a lot. This other day she provoked me when she complained about how I use the utensils as if I did not bring my own utensils (Mambano).*

*My mother in law doesn't cease to amaze me. She doesn't want me to take control of the kitchen yet I am the one who does everything in the kitchen. She complains about the food. She thinks I misuse the food in the Kitchen as if she doesn't know where the food is going. She is taking long to give me my own kitchen (Mancube).*

*My MIL is difficult to deal with. This day she says this on a different day she says something else. This other day she tells me to use these utensils the next day she complains about the use of the same utensils. You are cooking too little food tomorrow you are too wasteful the food is too much. I'm in big trouble (Mampofu).*

### *Witchcraft*

The issue of witchcraft was also cited as borne of contention in families. Most daughters in law had a feeling that mothers in law practiced witchcraft. Out of the nine daughters in law five felt that their mothers in law consulted traditional doctors. The following verbal quotes reflect the DIL's sentiments towards their MIL:

*What is new about mothers in law associated with witchcraft? It's known all over (Mambano).*

*I don't know whether my mother in law practices witchcraft but we hear that many mothers in law are witches (Mancube).*

*She has a lot of belongings she keeps which are associated with witchcraft. Why does she keep such things? She also uses a lot of natural herbs and traditional things. I'm really afraid of her (Mampofu).*

On the other hand as regards witchcraft, most mothers in law pointed fingers on their DIL. The following sentiments were raised by the interviewees:

*One of my sons was charmed and does not think straight anymore. My daughter in law is a big suspect even the family she comes from is known for witchcraft (Gogo Hamadziripi).*

*My DIL comes from a family which practices witchcraft. Just imagine, will you exonerate her (Gogo Ngara).*

*Gogo Dzikiti: My DIL visits traditional healers a lot. She brings a lot of charms. She is not good (Gogo Dzikiti).*

*Strategies that can be used to reduce conflict between mothers in law and daughters in law*

The issue of lobola was raised especially by daughters in law as a thorn in the flesh. Suggestions were raised that the sum be just a token. Some even called for complete removal of it but others wanted it retained. Most mothers in law wanted it retained as it was part of their tradition. Other strategies that were suggested were as follows; these of different kitchens, that daughters in law attain academic qualifications thus educating the girl child.

*Lobola is our tradition. You cannot just wake up and dream about removing it. There are good reasons why our forefathers came up with the idea. Even in the bible payment of lobola was as in thing. Young people should always embrace our tradition. You cannot just take someone's daughter and ignore to appreciate people who raised her. It's impossible. However, the charges must remain minimal and affordable (Mbuya Ruchanyu).*

*The issue of lobola can't be debated it's our culture. What is wrong about it if late it is done. The charges are becoming astronomical and absurd to say the least. Lobola should be just a token of appreciation (Gogo Ngida).*



*Lobola has always been part of our culture but lately people have become greedy. They charge very exorbitant prices. People should go back to the olden days where lobola was just a token given to the in-laws (Gogo Dzikiiti).*

The following strategies were raised by DIL:

*DIL should be given their kitchen early so that they enjoy their independence and autonomy. Cooking for one's husband without interference is what most women want (Mambano).*

*The issue of lobola must be completely removed because it's a source of many problems. Some MIL contribute towards the payment of their DIL so if you don't touch the line are reminded of their contributions (Mancube).*

*Lobola is okay but it should be charged as a token of appreciation not as a business venture. Sometimes both the husband and the MIL take it as if they bought you. On another note, Women should acquire qualifications so that they get employment. Problems that take place between the DIL and her MIL are as result of idleness (Mampofu).*

*There must be a paradigm shift by the society from viewing daughters in law as enemies or aliens but as one of them. The family should not segregate DIL as outsiders but to view them as family members (Mambano).*

## **Discussion**

Most daughters in law and a few mothers in law in the present study agreed that their relationship between the two was on management of finances. The study revealed that the mother in law wanted to control the family finances. The finding is in line with previous studies (Huang & Hsu, 2006; Adhikari, 2015) which reported that mothers in law were not happy with the way daughters in law spent their son's hard earned money. Apparently, before the son marries the wife, it is the mother who was benefiting from the son's finances and also getting a bigger share of the cake. When the son marries, the mother's share depletes drastically to accommodate the needs of the wife. Such eventualities may not be taken lightly by the mother in law and would vent her anger on the daughter in law.

The study further revealed that in the event that the daughter in law was also working, the mother in law wanted to know how she uses her money and wanted to make sure

that the money was not shared with the daughter in law's family or abused somehow. The finding is in tandem with previous studies (Choi et al., 2010, Adhikari, 2015) which revealed that mothers in law want to control both the son's and daughter in law's finances. Apparently in many instances the daughter in law does not allow the mother to control either her husband's salary or her salary. The resistance by the daughter in law creates animosity between the two.

The study revealed that the mother in law was always the source of the problem. This is in tandem with previous studies (Hsing-Miao, 2007; Adhikari, 2015) which purport that the mother in law feels insecure about sharing the most important person in her life. Apparently since the mother in law used to get all the attention from the son, the coming in of the daughter in law divides the attention of the son which the mother does not take lightly. The son enjoys the new partner leaving the mother with very little attention. Such scenarios could trigger bitterness and resentment.

The present study also revealed that the kitchen was a source of conflict between the mother in law and her daughter in law. Both the mothers in law and the daughters in law were in agreement that the kitchen was a source of problems between the two. This is in line with Kaneko and Yamada (1990) who state that sharing a kitchen was a source of conflict between mothers in law and daughters in law. Traditionally the kitchen belongs to the mother in law. However, when the daughter in law is brought in the family, she takes over all the kitchen duties that the mother in law used to do. The current study further revealed that the mother in laws are keen to know how the utensils are handled. No breakages or mishandling are accepted. If that happens that would be followed by reprimand that the daughter in law would not take easily.

Parenting style was also raised by the current study as another variable that creates tension between the mother in law and the daughter in law. Previous studies in China such as Huang and Hsu (2010) and Choi et al. (2010) revealed that mothers in law interfere with the way her grandchildren are raised. The mother in law wants her grandchildren raised according to their culture especially when the daughter in law comes from a different cultural background. Families are likely to protect their cultural values and norms to the extent of making sure that their grandchildren are raised according to the dictates of their culture. This may not be acceptable to the daughters in law who may have a different view. Such differences may cause serious disharmony between the two.

The study revealed that witchcraft was also a source of conflict between MIL and DIL. The finding is in tandem with Tatira (2014) who reflected that witchcraft belief plays a very important function in the lives of the Shona people. Chireshe, Chireshe and Shumba (2012) further revealed that in Zimbabwe, witchcraft is associated with power/politics and economic activities within family setups. In other words the struggle to control results in cases where witchcraft between the two becomes a scapegoat technique of survival or sympathy seeking from the social environment.

Results from the study suggested that daughters in law should work towards attainment of qualifications so that they can be employed so as not to depend on their husbands. The results of the current study are in line with a study carried in China which purported that daughters in law should seek employment outside the home especially when they are living with the parents (Choi et al, 2010). According to Choi et al. (2010), the idea of daughters in law to seek employment outside home would reduce stress and tension caused by the conflicts in the homes.

The study further revealed that as soon as the son marries a wife they should live alone as this would reduce the conflict between the mother in law and the daughter in law. This is in line with Choi et al. (2010) who purport that the son and his wife should separate from their original families to build their own home with little interference from the in laws.

The study also revealed that there must be a paradigm shift by the society from viewing daughters in law as enemies or aliens but as one of them. Most daughters in law argued that the husband's family should not segregate them as outsiders but to view them as family members. The results are in tandem with Adhikari (2015) who found that mutual understanding and compromises among family members are key determinants of a good relationship between the in laws. People should shun the uncivilised beliefs that label a daughter in law as an outside.

## **Conclusion**

The study concluded that the major source of conflict between MIL and DIL were the handling of the kitchen, parenting styles, management of finances. The study also concluded that daughters in law should work towards attaining qualifications and seek employment as a way of reducing the conflict between the two. Lobola should

be charged just as a token of appreciation. DIL should be viewed as part of the family and not outsiders.

## **Recommendations**

The study recommended that:

- Community leadership be trained in counselling to help in mending relations between the mothers in law and daughters in law.
- MIL and DIL should live separately as soon as possible to reduce conflict.

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