



Evaluation of Sexual Cleansing Ritual on HIV/AIDS: A Case of Zambezi District in North-Western Province, Zambia

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Abstract: *The sexual cleansing ritual is a tradition that requires widowed women to have sexual intercourse as a form of ritual purification. It refers to sexual cleansing is part of the social transition process for widows to become eligible to remarry after the death of her husband. This ritual is conducted to cleanse the widow of evil spirits resulting from the death of her husband. In Zambian context, widow cleansing is a ritual which demands a widow to have sexual intercourse with another man, normally one of her brothers-in-law in order to let the spirit of the deceased rest in peace among the dead. The rationale behind this ritual is the belief that the spirit of the deceased husband still recognizes the widow as his wife, hence interfering with any relationship the widow might establish. The ritual of widow cleansing was however challenged by various groups especially at the dawn of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Through increased awareness about the HIV and AIDS malady and its widespread effects on human health, communities in Zambia have adopted alternative cleansing rituals to cleanse widows without the act of sexual intercourse. Subsequently, the study aimed at evaluating the effects of sexual cleansing ritual on HIV/AIDS in a case of Zambezi district of North-western Province in Zambia. The study engaged the qualitative method approach that sampled the widows and some selected community members within the designated area. Data was obtained from the respondents who had undergone sexually cleansing by means of interviews. who had undergone sexually cleansing. Data was analyzed using conventional content analysis where three main themes emerged in the exploration of the social construction of the sexual cleansing ritual of widows The findings discovered that some people still preferred sexual cleansing to other safe methods of cleansing even when they knew that HIV can be transmitted through sexual intercourse. Also, the study found that respondents had different reasons for choosing particular cleansing method but they all had an aspect of the great values*

they attach to their respective cultures. The findings therein highlight the hazardous situation of widows and the need for social support services for women who have been sexually cleansed.

Keywords: Cultural Practices, Ritual, Sexual Cleansing, Social Construction, Widow and Widow Inheritance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sexual cleansing is a social norm of widowhood in some cultures. Social norms are created, understood, and

exchanged through social interactions among members of a family, community, and society (Munala et al, 2022). Social norms govern the behavior of people of the same reference group through social interactions. Through social interactions, social knowledge is understood and exchanged to create a sense of reality that becomes embedded into the institutions of society, and it is enacted based on the reciprocal interactions of people's roles in relation to each other. The social realities are created to lead to the understanding of the intersubjective set of beliefs and behaviors that are considered true and appropriate to define the individual's concept of reality. Each and every society in the world is subjected to various cultural practices of which Zambia is the case in point. Nyirenda (2018) says that culture is very important for national identity. Each nation has some ways of life that are unique to it. Culture is also important for national development. As it is rightly argued, people without a culture are like a tree without roots. Culture is at the root of national development, and for that development to be sustainable that culture must be vibrant. In African traditional setting, the ritual of sexual cleansing is an important practice that every widow and or widower ought to undergo through. This is because the Traditional cultural practices and sexual rituals have an important role in the life and structure of tribal groups within Africa.

Cultural practices such as child marriages, Female Genital Cutting/Mutilation (FGC/M), breast ironing, foot binding, and female infanticide and/or son preference are among several cultural practices that perpetuate violence against women and girls. These cultural practices persist even though most practicing communities are aware of the psychological and health consequences. For instance, FGC/M is internationally recognized as a violation of human rights (WHO, 2019), but often justified as a protective factor to uphold and maintain family and community values of honor, marital fidelity, spiritual cleanliness, and premarital virginity. The associated meanings and values are how cultural practices are socially constructed and reinforced through social pressure and social obligation within the community. Sexual cleansing is a social construct because its meaning is created through social interactions guiding people's behavior and actions in accordance with widely agreed-upon norms. Widows are compelled to engage in sexual cleansing to conform to societal norms of behavior. Research shows that informal social sanctions are usually placed on the widow by family and community members if she refuses to undergo the cleansing ritual because it is the accepted prerequisite to reintegrate her back into the community. Also, those who refuse to undergo sexual cleansing are ostracized, taunted, and humiliated (Ngulube, 2018). These social sanctions are in place because of the traditional perceptions in the Luo community that a widow possesses evil spirits as a result of the death of her husband. To say that sexual cleansing is socially constructed is to emphasize that the meaning, idea, and understanding of the cultural practice are shaped by social forces of human interactions for the practice to exist and evolve over time and be maintained in the community.

The meanings and interpretations of this ritual remain a powerful driving force for the widows as well as the members of the communities they are a part of.

Nelly and Chita in their (2015) journal “African Traditional Religion Harvest Festivals in the context of climate change in Eastern Zambia” have contended that traditional rituals, ceremonies and festivals are an expression of African Traditional religion just as shrines, sacred places and religious objects, art and symbols, music and dances, proverbs, riddles and wise sayings, names of people and places, myths and legends, beliefs and customs and all aspects of life for the African who sees no separation between the sacred and the secular. This implies that African traditional religion depicts all round aspects of African. Zambia is a country with about 18.38 million people (2019 Census). Mbiti (2016) points out that the people's culture however, vary from tribe to tribe and continues to be inherited by each succeeding generation. Some of these cultural beliefs are however, fading away while others continue to be deep rooted in each generation due to a lot of factors. People's change in cultural beliefs is determined and influenced by several factors, among them, the environment, the way they are brought up and live, educational backgrounds, friends, peer culture and traditional background, (Siwila, 2021).

Among the cultural beliefs which are still practiced in some parts of Zambia like Zambezi district is sexual cleansing. This custom is a tradition of the Lunda, Kaonde, Kalubale, Bemba, Tonga Ila and Nyanja's. Sexual cleansing is a custom that requires the surviving spouse to have sexual intercourse with his or her deceased husband or wife relative preferably, from the matrimonial relations to neutralize the deceased's ghost, (William, 2017). He goes on to say that, the ghost is believed to be very harmful to the surviving spouse and other family members if not neutralized before the surviving spouse engages himself/herself in daily community activities. On the other hand, there is the pandemic of sexual transmitted infection which is reportedly to be on the increase. Over 37.7 million people are affected by sexual transmitted infection worldwide. Similarly, WHO in a Biennial report (2019) states that by the year 2024, 40 to 50 million people affected by HIV and 54.9 to 56 million people would have developed AIDS giving a ratio of 1 to 55.9 million people being affected worldwide, (Shandera, 2016). The report however, further states that, sexual transmitted infection is increasingly becoming a disease for developing countries. The above scenario is worrying considering the fact that Zambia is one of the developing countries. The National Health policies and strategies for Zambia (2020) however, points out that since AIDS was documented in Zambia in 1985, 23984 cases of HIV and AIDS related complex (ARC) have been reported with 1593 deaths. But these figures have since increased to alarming numbers going by some reports. According to a Times of Zambia for Tuesday 31st May, 2020 story which they obtained from the WHO, the average life span of a Zambian has been reduced from 66 years to 33 years and that statistics indicate[^] that one of every three Zambian could be HIV positive. Among the routes of HIV infection, the main one is through sexual intercourse. A WHO periodical (2019) claims that today over 90% of newly acquired HIV is through sexual intercourse. Similarly, (Shandera,2020) states that today in Africa, hetero-sexual mode of HIV transmission is the highest following measures taken to reduce HIV infection in other modes of transmission for example screening blood before transfusion and maintaining sterility when administering parental drugs.

AIDS is caused by a human immune Deficiency virus I and II that grows in T helper cells which are responsible for maintaining the immunity of the body. Thus, making the infected body susceptible to any infection. After the pandemic was reported in Zambia, anti-AIDS campaigns were initiated by

the Ministry of Health and other non-Governmental organizations. The National Health Education Unit report (2015) says that, following the documentation of sexual transmitted infection in Zambia in 1985, a National Surveillance task force was formed to plan short- and long- term measures to help in the control and spread of HIV and care for AIDS patients. These measures have since been decentralized to all districts and closely supported by the Government in terms of both material and human resources including monitoring their activities, (Vending 2018). Zambezi as with other districts also established an anti-AIDS surveillance committee coordinated by a health Education Officer. They have since set up 42 anti-AIDS clubs which are active and are involved in a lot of activities some of which are aimed at reducing the spread of HIV through sexual intercourse. Some of their activities includes: encouraging use of condoms and distributing them freely, discouraging sexual cleansing and encouraging alternate safe methods, educating people on modes of HIV transmission and measures they can take to control the pandemic. They use Drama, Songs, workshops and discussion to educate the public.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

According to the Times of Zambia for Monday 20 Jun 2019 story, all Zambian tribes recognized the tradition of cleansing the surviving spouse following the death of his/her wife or husband. The report however state that, the methods used to clean varies from tribe to tribe. But in Zambezi district where the research was conducted, the common method used is sexual cleansing. The existence of sexual method of cleansing was re-affirmed by other local people through informal discussion (Richards, 2017). Failure to fulfil this procedure usually leads to court cases. A Time of Zambia for Monday 20 Jun 2019 story says that in accordance with the Zambia customary law, it is a legal requirement for in-laws to clean a widow or widower after husband or wife's death. However, with the pandemic of sexual transmitted infection, ritual sexual cleansing has an effect on people's health (Reinsman, 2018). The main problem lies in that despite anti-AIDS clubs relating to some of their health education messages on sexual transmitted infection directly towards discouraging sexual cleansing through their songs, drama, workshops and discussions, same people are still adamant to change their attitude towards it. It was from this view that the researcher conducted a study to evaluate the effects of sexual cleansing ritual on HIV/AIDS in Zambezi district of North-western Province in Zambia.

1.3. The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of sexual cleansing ritual on HIV/AIDS in Zambezi district of North-western Province in Zambia.

1.4. Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

- Identify social factors that compel people to practice sexual cleansing ritual in Zambezi district of North-western Province in Zambia.
- Determine the knowledge level of people on HIV/AIDS transmission in Zambezi district of North-western Province in Zambia.
- Offer recommendations from the research findings towards improvement of health education and sexual cleansing in Zambezi district of North-western Province in Zambia.

1.5. Conceptual Framework

This practice of sexual cleansing still prevails among many Zambians and while some widows agree to it, others oppose it. The ritual of cleansing stems from the belief in the influence of

ancestral spirits; a sexual cleansing is considered necessary in order to chase away the spirit of the dead husband from the wife, as otherwise the spirit may cause misfortune and trouble. This explains why some women consent to this life-threatening practice. For (Kinoti,2018), one of the reasons in support of levirate marriage was that in African society very few men would agree or want to marry a woman who belonged to other people who had paid bride wealth for her. In other words, once a woman was married to another man, not many men would be interested in marrying her following the death of her husband, a situation which would compel the family to look for someone in the immediate family or clan to take care of her. Furthermore, (Malungo,2019), found that certain categories of people are more likely to be sexually cleansed than others: the older people (35 years and above), people living in rural areas, people with lower educational attainment (primary level and below), farmers, and people who irregularly attend church services.

1.6. Significance of the Study

The study is important because it shaded more light on the effects of sexual cleansing ritual on HIV/AIDS in Zambezi district. The findings also brought out reasons as to why sexual cleansing is still being practiced in Zambezi district, despite the increase in the number of cases of HIV/AIDS. The research was worthy conducting because it documented the extent of the problem of the ritual in relation to HIV/AIDS pandemic. This allowed the researcher to add more new information to that which already exists hence increasing the chances of the people being helped. It is therefore hoped that the obtained information would enable the necessary authorities to take action and implement plans and policies. In addition, the findings are beneficial to the local public once the improvements take place and recommendations put into perspective.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Study Design

Participants were selected through criterion sampling in which the researcher purposefully identified and recruited the widows and members of the community. To be eligible to participate in the study, participants had to be a widow, 18 years or older, had undergone sexual cleansing and reside in Zambezi district. In total, 25 face-to-face in-depth interviews were completed from the participants with widows aged 25–90 years old, who had undergone sexual cleansing. Additionally, another 25 face-to-face in-depth interviews were completed from the community members.

2.2. Research Site

The research was conducted in Zambezi district of North-western Province in Zambia from which respondents were also sampled.

2.3. Population, Sample and Sampling Procedure

The population for the study comprised of widows and some selected members of the community. The target population was 500. The sample size involved a total of 50 respondents which included fifty (50) widows and fifty (50) members from the local community. This study used a qualitative research study design. The protocol utilized a semi-structured interview format with 10 main questions with probes and demographic information that was collected at the conclusion of the interview. Questions for the interview protocol were generated based on a review of the literature on sexual cleansing ritual, wife inheritance practices and how these factors are linked

to HIV/AIDS pandemic. The questions focused on the experience of widowhood, challenges faced, community treatment, reasons for sexual cleansing, and perceptions of sexual cleansing.

2.4. Data Analysis

The conventional content analysis technique was applied for data analysis. Conventional content analysis is considered ideal for the analysis of data to gain a richer understanding of a phenomenon being studied and is considered appropriate for this study because current literature on sexual cleansing is limited. Additionally, this qualitative approach to analysis was most appropriate because the interview protocol questionnaire and probes were open-ended to allow the researcher gain direct information without imposing preconceived categories.

2.5. Ethical Issues

An introductory letter from the local council chairperson for Zambezi district was sought in carrying out this study. Interviews were not conducted on one-to-one basis; instead, participants were grouped and identified using their titles. Additionally, an informed consent was sought before collecting information from the informants and guaranteed them with security of the information they provided. Furthermore, the main objective of gathering such information was made clear to the respondents. The researcher avoided pressuring respondents to take part in the research. Alternatively, permission consents, assents were obtained from respondents involved in the research and the research topic was strategically selected to ensure that there was no harm whatsoever to the research respondents. In this study, the researcher was fully conscious of the need to abide by the ethical rule of respecting the privacy of individuals taking part in the research. In the same way, all the respondents of the research were to remain unidentified to the public as all their valuable views, opinions and perceptions were only known by the researcher for use only in the research and participant's identities will always remain hidden.

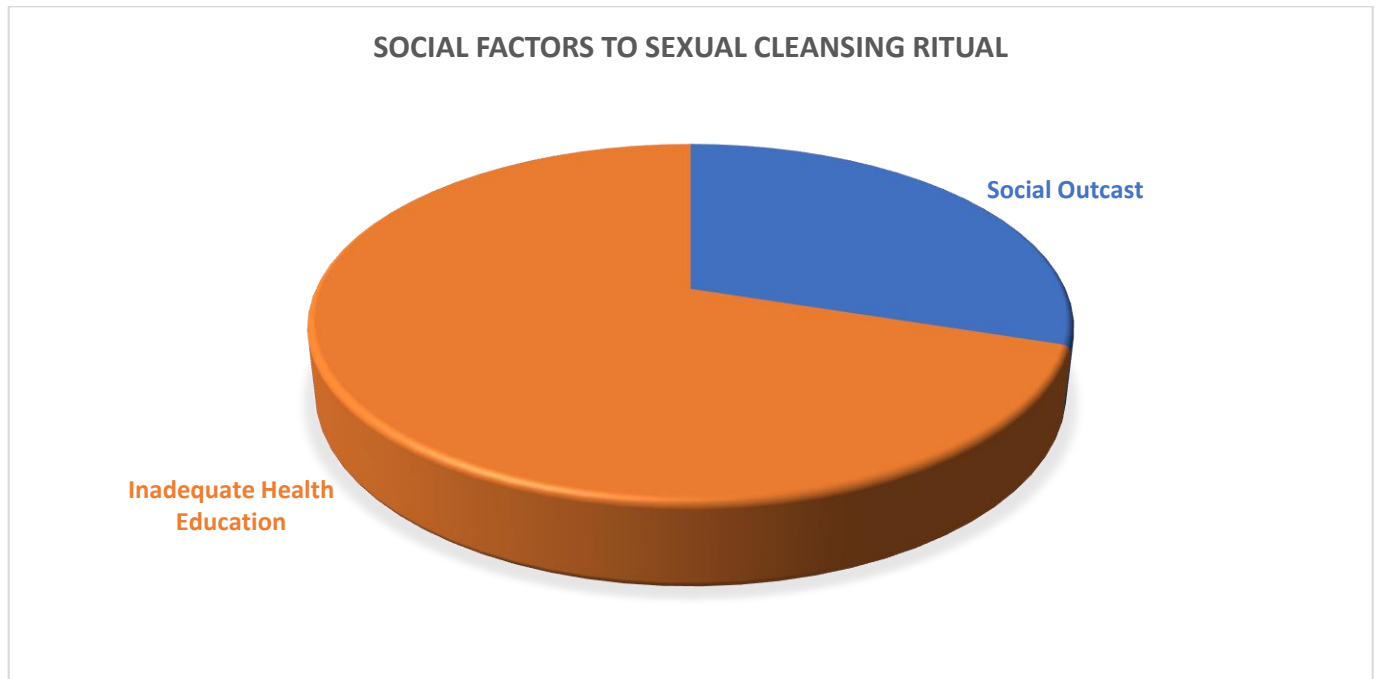
3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following findings and discussions were presented according to set research objectives:

3.1. Social Factors that Compel People to Practice Sexual Cleansing Ritual

The following are the findings regarding factors that compel people to practice sexual cleansing ritual in Zambezi district. According to the widows (30%), fear of litigation and fear of being a social outcast are the main social factors that led people to undergo sexual cleansing. On the other hand, community members (70%) outlined factors such as inadequate health education and social economic factors such as low income, lack of education, unemployment and lack of social support as some of the social factors that compel people to undergo sexual cleansing. Additionally, the respondents showed that some of the social factors that compel people to undergo sexual cleansing include the fear of the ghost and cultural values.

Figure 1: Social Factors that Compel People to Practice Sexual Cleansing Ritual



Source: Author, 2023

3.2.1. Knowledge Level of People on HIV/AIDS

Table 1: Knowledge Level of People on HIV/AIDS

AGE GROUP	KNOWLEDGE ON HIV/AIDS			
	NO	NOT SURE	YES	TOTAL
15-24 YRS	0	0	6 (12%)	6 (12%)
25-34 YRS	0	0	13 (26%)	13 (26%)
35-44 YRS	0	0	11 (22%)	11 (22%)
45-54 YRS	0	1 (2%)	2 (4%)	8 (16%)
55 AND ABOVE	1 (2%)	2 (4%)	8 (16%)	11 (11%)
TOTAL	1 (0)	3 (6%)	46 (92%)	50 (100%)

Source: Author, 2023

The table above indicates the knowledge level of people on HIV/AIDS in Zambezi district. From the responses given by respondents, it showed that the only respondents who did not know about

HIV/AIDS was above 55 years and those who were not sure were also in the age group of between 45 and 54 years while the rest knew about the existence of HIV/AIDS. The majority of the respondents knew the major route of HIV/AIDS and only a few were not sure and no one did not know. However, knowledge about sexual cleansing did not discourage them from choosing sexual method of cleansing as can be seen from the table above. This can be traced from the studies by Lugira, (2018) that the transitional ritual is a risk factor to HIV/AIDS infection because it involves unprotected sexual intercourse between the cleanser in the transition stage and the inheritor in the incorporation stage. When literally translated, the ritual means to cut the cord. It signals the transition of a woman from the status of a widow to an eligible wife to be. The ritual has deep emotional and psychological connotations for those who shun it and those who practice it. It also relates to changes in the social position of a widow and her interactions with other community members. During the mourning period the widow is in an interval of social timelessness or in a vulnerable abnormal position. From the above study findings on sexual transmitted infection knowledge, we can say that although there are various sources of sexual transmitted infection information within the district, they are not catering for all the population hence the inability of some age groups and classes of people to know about sexual transmitted infection and its transmission. On the other hand, the educated and the young have access to the information; maybe it is because they are mobile and privileged in many ways as compared to the aged who are not mobile.

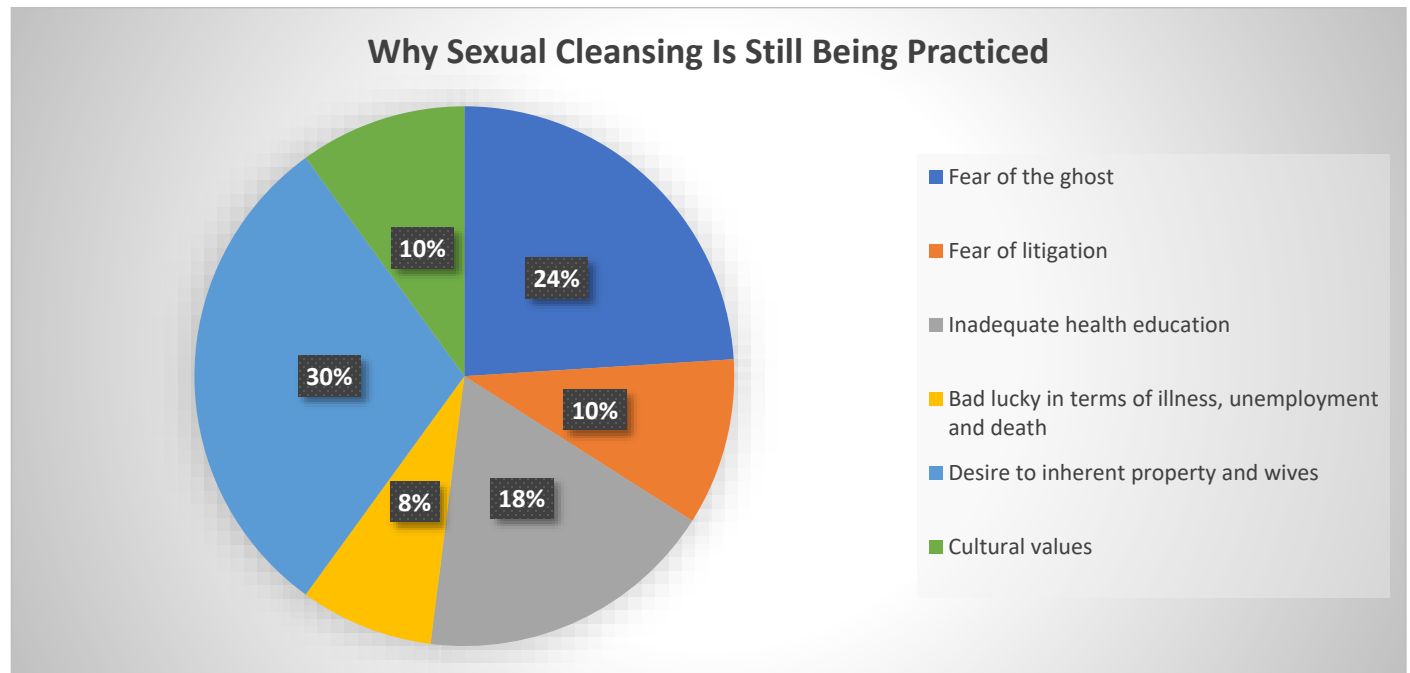
The above observations are similar to a report that appeared in a WHO Periodical (2019) which said that the simple provision of information is inadequate to evoke the bad behaviour from individuals and society that will be necessary for the control of HIV/AIDS. He therefore, calls for a different approach based on principles of health which can be understood by everybody.

This also, shows according to the study by Delamyo, (2018) that health education measures put in place do not seem to be achieving their goal in changing people's attitude towards sexual cleansing because the majority of the people are aware of sexual transmitted infection but they have not been convinced that even sexual cleansing can be one way in which HIV can be transmitted. In other words, the table above illustrated the differences in the ages about the knowledge on sexual transmitted infection and people's preference for sexual cleansing do not reconcile as there is a big disparity. Furthermore, it is possible that some people may know that HIV/AIDS are transmitted through sexual cleansing but these ideas may be over shadowed by affinity to culture (WHO, 2020). In short, health education achieving the objective of informing people about the existence of sexual transmitted infection but not changing their attitude towards bad practices that can increase its transmission like sexual cleansing. The study therefore suggests that a way should be worked out to

trying and change people's affinity to culture by ensuring that culture is incorporated in the health education strategies towards the control of HIV/AIDs. This is because, as observed from the study, it is difficult for people to abandon their cultural practices they have been involved in for a long time because of an unknown disease which they do not understand.

3.2.2. Why Sexual Cleansing Is Still Being Practiced in Zambezi District

Figure 2: Why Sexual Cleansing Is Still Being Practiced



Source: Author, 2023

All the respondents outlined different reasons as to why people of Zambezi district still practice sexual cleansing ritual. But the majority (30%) outlined the desire to inherent property and wives as the main reason. (18%) inadequate health education in the district was another concern raised by respondents. (8%) of them outlined bad lucky in terms of illness, unemployment and death and (24%) fear of the ghost as the other reasons. (10%) mentioned cultural values and (10%) fear of litigation as the other causes of increased sexual cleansing in the district. From the above findings we can conclude that whichever method used or preferred for cleansing has funder lining reasons. Among the reasons advanced are that, some feel somebody who was married leaves a ghost with his/her surviving spouse once he/she dies and should be neutralized. The other group felt they will be rejected from their families and will not be free members of their community.

The ritual of sexual cleansing is still practiced to date by widows and other members of the family who are faced with the misfortune of death, (Nkunika, 2014). This is classified as a ritual of social transition. In his studies, Nkunika traced the transitional stages that a widow goes through before she is integrated back into the community. In the first stage, the widow is removed from her normal social life through the death of her husband, and then she is set-aside for a period of time before she

is accepted back into the community. This removal from normal active community life is marked and symbolized by various customs and taboos that she must perform and adhere to. These symbols are evident through the broken or removal of the kingpost from her hut and the limitations imposed on her in terms of social interactions with family and community members. Sex when performed as a ritual has the power to reverse everything; sexual rites have deep cultural meanings that affect social interactions between widows and community members.

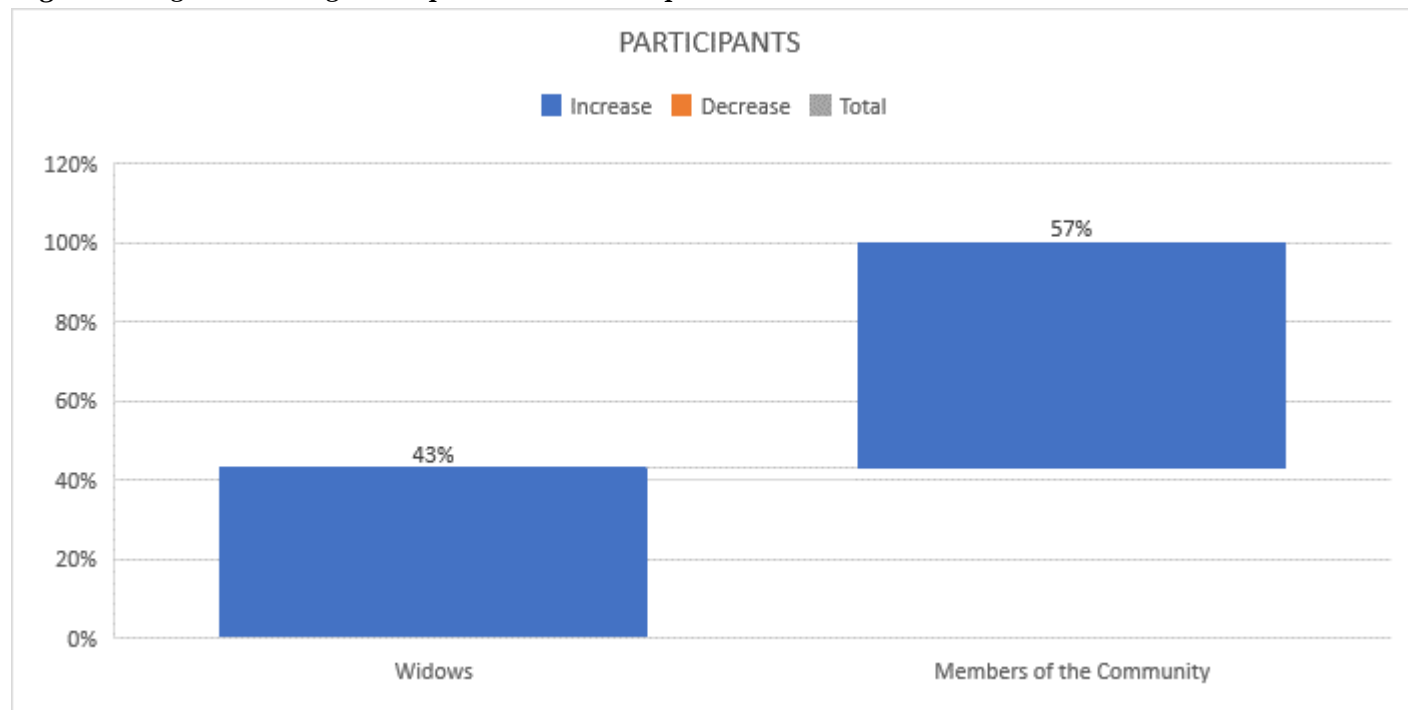
Similarly, the study by Vending (2018), indicates that indicators that culture is a very important aspect of our lives and is merely practiced without finding out why they have to practice certain cultural norms. The main contributing factor to this type of behavior are the social structures in our Zambian societies because people live in groups according to their clans and tradition being one way such people are united; cultural values are respected in our society. Hence the transferring of cultural norms from one generation to another without questioning the wisdom in some of them. Hence, the study suggests that measures be worked out to reconcile our Zambian culture and social life with reality so that we eliminate certain aspects of our culture which do not meet the present standards. This should not however mean doing away with our tradition. In other words, there should be integration of the good aspects of our culture with other people's culture that has good influence on health (MoH, 2020). This would allow people to judge and only practice cultural values that have a positive effect not only on their health but the social life as a whole. The above observations are similar to Jonathan (2019) sentiments that the third epidemic of social, cultural, economic and political reactions and response to HIV/AIDs is as important to the future of the epidemic control as the virus itself.

3.3. Recommendations Towards Improvement of Health Education and Sexual Cleansing

Although people have the right to practice culture according to their tradition, Government institutions are concerned with culture and all those concerned with the people's social cultural life should ensure that only the good aspects of culture are practiced. This is because some consequences of cultural practices are reflected on the people's health as it can be seen with sexual cleansing's possibilities of being a major route of HIV transmission. Based on the findings of this research, the following were suggested measures to deal handle sexual cleansing; (43%) represented by widows stated that the public needs to be assisted to change their methods of cleansing through health education. Additionally, (57%) represented by members of the community suggested that health workers need to address the issue of sexually transmitted infections so that people do not just know its existence but be involved in preventing it. They further pointed out that health workers must also have an obligation of ensuring that they work hand in hand with other organizations like the cultural societies of Zambia when planning their strategies for health education to attain its effectiveness. William (2017) also observes that, ritual sexual intercourse cleansing requires counselling because it increases the chances of transmitting the HIV infection to either the cleanser or the surviving spouse, if one of them is HIV positive. The above is supported by Mukonde (2017) who claims that his patient died of AIDS and the deceased's wife was sexually cleansed. Mukonde further says that, the surviving spouse got pregnant and later gave birth to sickling child who died after a few months. A Publication on PPAZ involvement in HIV/AIDS (2013) also states that the Planned Parenthood Association of Zambia PPAZ are involved in the promotion of sexual health which includes HIV/AIDS prevention because they have been involved in changing people's attitudes from the traditional oriented sexual health to a modern perspective and they have succeeded in several places

(PPAZ, 2015). So, the study hopes PPAZ can succeed in the same way to change people's attitude towards the cultural values they attach to sexual cleansing and check the transmission and control of HIV/AIDS in the district.

Figure 3: Figure Showing Participants and their Response %



Source: Author, 2023

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis of this study is one step into an important area of research that examines the viewpoints of widows. The results of this study point to a further need to detail the social, emotional, financial, and health implications aside from HIV that are common to widows who are sexually cleansed. Such studies would bring attention to the impact of sexual cleansing on widows that will inform the community to ultimately decide whether or not the practice ought to continue, as well as identify prominent individuals and community-based organizations in mobilizing the eradication of the practice. The results elicited from this study tried to answer the broad research question on the social factors that compel people to undergo sexual cleansing rituals in Zambezi district of North-western Province. It was observed in the study that sexual cleansing is still being practiced by some people in certain tribes like the Kaondes, Kalubales and Kalundas. The research however found out that

sexual cleansing is done in all the tribes where respondents were drawn from in one way or another. The main feature that came out was that the methods of cleansing used were grouped according to tribes. The practice of sexual cleansing is however, dying away slowly in some families despite one's tradition because of education and socialization. But the latter seems to be playing a significant influence on certain people i.e., the young and those living in town because of the influence they get from others. The main reasons that were observed to be the contributing factor to the continued practice of sexual cleansing in the area were mainly cultural values, family ties and lack of a properly organized health education.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are actions that should be taken on the basis of the findings of this study:

- The local leaders should ensure that a comprehensive health education programme on HIV/AIDS is accessible to all the people in the district regardless of their age, sex and educational background.
- There is need to employ strategies that should be worked out in a way that cultural values are taken care of to suit the economic, social and traditions of the local people.
- The customary law should be amended to specifically raise awareness on the dangers of practicing this ritual act and suit the health educator's calls for the abolishment of this act.
- The various clubs on HIV/AIDS should be strengthened and supported in terms of finance, material, information and closely supervised in this district.

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