

# “Awa ndi macheza aamai (This is women’s play)”: Examining Pleasure in Urban Malawian Women’s Social Spaces

Asante Lucy Mtenje 

**Abstract:** Women’s social groups and gatherings in Malawi, whether physical or virtual, are often dismissed as something not to be taken seriously, as they are imagined to be places where nothing useful but chitchat and gossip will emerge. Nevertheless, these spaces, as sites of leisure where women can engage in macheza (play), continue to play an important role in how urban women variously experience pleasure. Mtenje considers social media groups for women and bridal showers not only as spaces where women are free from male interference, which, in itself, invokes pleasure, but also as spaces where patriarchal norms can be and often are reinforced.

**Résumé :** Les groupes sociaux et les rassemblements de femmes au Malawi, qu’ils soient physiques ou virtuels, sont souvent rejetés comme quelque chose à ne pas prendre au sérieux, car ils sont imaginés comme des lieux où rien d’utile à part le bavardage et les commérages émergeront. Néanmoins, ces espaces, en tant que lieux de loisirs où les femmes peuvent s’engager dans la macheza (jouer), continuent de jouer un rôle important de la façon dont les femmes urbaines éprouvent divers plaisirs. Mtenje considère les groupes de médias sociaux pour les femmes et les douches nuptiales non seulement comme des espaces où les femmes sont libres de toute ingérence masculine, ce qui, en soi, invoque le plaisir, mais aussi comme des espaces où les normes patriarcales peuvent être et sont souvent renforcées.

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**Resumo** : Os grupos e encontros de mulheres no Maláui, sejam eles físicos ou espirituais, são muitas vezes desprezados, como se não devessem ser levados a sério, uma vez que são concebidos como lugares onde nada de útil emergirá, apenas conversas de circunstância e mexericos. No entanto, estes espaços, como lugares de lazer onde as mulheres podem entreter-se com *macheza* (brincar), continuam a desempenhar um papel importante no modo variado como as mulheres urbanas experimentam os momentos de lazer. Mtenje analisa os grupos femininos nas redes sociais e nas despedidas de solteira não só como espaços onde as mulheres estão livres de interferências masculinas – o que, por si só, invoca o prazer –, mas também como espaços onde as normas do patriarcado podem muitas vezes ser reforçadas, ou são-no efetivamente.

**Keywords:** leisure; pleasure; social media; patriarchy; play; bridal showers

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“The problem with young women today is that you spend valuable time chatting on your phones with your friends on social media instead of taking care of your husbands and children! No wonder marriages are breaking up easily nowadays!” These were the sentiments expressed by a woman, middle-aged and middle-class, at a friend’s bridal shower a few years ago. It is common practice in Malawi for a young woman who is about to be married to have a bridal shower on a Sunday, a week or two before the wedding. Here, older women with years of marriage experience “shower” the bride-to-be with pieces of advice and gifts which will enable her to start her marital journey on a firm ground, with knowledge imparted by those who have been there before. The woman, who was one of the speakers at the bridal shower, reiterated the concern that young women were spending more time on social media than working on building their marriages. Quoting from the Bible, “The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish pulls it down with her hands” (Proverbs 14:1), her advice to the bride-to-be, then, was to be careful with the amount of time she would spend chatting on WhatsApp and on Facebook, to avoid literally breaking up her marriage with her “texting” hands. This disapproval by women of an older generation toward modern, urban young women’s (and men’s) “obsession” with their phones and social media is not new. Over the years, there has been increased participation on social media sites and on the internet, which Sharath Srinivasan et al. attribute to “the reduced cost of smart phones, and low-cost and free access to social networking sites on both smart and feature phones” which, as a result, “have opened up new, networked opportunities for private and public communication and information flows” (2019:4).

Even though access to the internet in Malawi remains low because of the high levels of poverty and illiteracy, the number of people with access to the internet has increased from 9.6% in 2016 to 14.6% in 2019 (Kainja 2019,

National Statistical Office 2020). This increase in internet access translates to more people actively engaging on social media forums such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter, which are some of the most commonly used social media platforms in Malawi. Many Malawian Facebook and WhatsApp users also belong to social groups whose interests range from business to cooking, spirituality, gardening, hair, marriage and relationships, self-help, and health and fitness, just to mention a few.

Ironically, while the speaker at the bridal shower quoted earlier was cautioning the young woman and others listening about interacting excessively on social media, bridal showers have also been interrogated and at times dismissed as fundraisers for the bride-to-be or simply as *kochezera azimai* (a place for women to chat and gossip) and therefore not something to be taken seriously. Oftentimes, women’s gatherings and spaces are divested of seriousness as they are considered to be places where nothing useful except gossip and chitchat will emerge, thus demonstrating how women’s activities, including their leisure, are devalued. This devaluing and stereotyping of women’s activities is even evident in the Chichewa proverb, “*pakundikana ntchembere pali bodza!*” (loosely translated, “where women have gathered as a group, gossip and slander will prevail”). Despite attempts to dismiss bridal showers, they, like women’s social media groups, continue to be well attended and enjoyed by women.

Observing how many Malawian women are eager to form or join social media groups and how bridal showers are attended by many urban women with joy and excitement led me to think through the question of pleasure among women in Malawi and the spaces where women experience pleasure. What draws women to these social gatherings, whether physical or virtual? Could what happens in these gatherings point to one of the ways in which urban Malawian women experience pleasure? Though they may be differently structured, these virtual and physical gatherings are spaces where women can engage in “*macheza*” (play). What does “*macheza*” mean in the social lives of Malawian urban women and how does women’s leisure expressed through “*macheza*” or play allow women to experience pleasure? As Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (2003) argues, the question of pleasure or fun, with which leisure tends to be associated, evokes the notion of play. Similarly, the participation of women in social media groups and bridal showers as leisure activities associated with fun and pleasure invokes notions of play. Play, Zeleza adds, is motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic or functional qualities. For starters,

in its qualitative dimensions it is characterised by its non-serious nature. Moreover, play is supposed to be ‘free’, self-contained, regulated and rule-governed, demarcated in space and time, and it involves make-believe and uncertainty of outcome which engenders pleasurable tension. Extrinsic play is justified on biological, psychological and sociological grounds, that it is developmental and educational, generates stimulus seeking behaviour, and is a vehicle for socialization, compensation and

sublimation for attitudes and activities that cannot find expression elsewhere in social life. (Zeleza 2003:xiv)

Participation in social media groups and bridal showers is understood as play because these are leisurely activities outside normalized daily routines. For the women who are the subjects of this paper, the pleasure experienced within these spaces was realized through the freedom and agency that play affords them as individuals and as a social group. Social media groups and bridal showers are spaces where women are free from male interference, which, in itself, invokes pleasure, but they are also spaces where patriarchal norms can be and often are reinforced. However, as will be shown later, women's participation in these leisure spaces does not necessarily translate into an experience of pleasure for all the women who have access to such spaces. In addition, I demonstrate how gendered arrangements inform the experience of pleasure for women.

Leisure is a phenomenon that is found everywhere, in both wealthy and poor communities (Zeleza 2003:vii). However, as Emmanuel Akyeampong and Charles Ambler state, what constitutes leisure anywhere is subject to continuous adaptation and change as boundaries of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and age affect the meanings of leisure (2002:5). Notions of leisure are understood differently by different categories of people and are historically specific. In defining leisure, Zeleza explains that "to many people, leisure is perceived in terms of time after work, or in relation to particular activities, or with reference to a specific quality of experience, or on the basis of its utility for individuals or society. In other words, leisure is conceived as residual time, as activities, as freedom, or as functional" (2003:xi). However, the disparate provisions of work and leisure, and the composition and location of the leisure activities themselves for different social groups, is often marked by inscriptions of class, status, gender, and other social factors structuring access to resources and power (Zeleza 2003:viii–ix). In Malawi, leisure activities and opportunities for experiencing pleasure through these activities are highly gendered, since the spaces for men's pleasure, which tend to be in the public domain and highly valued, often differ from the spaces for women's pleasure, which also vary according to the women's age, occupation, marital status, and affiliation with powerful institutions in governance and religion.

As a social practice, Zeleza reminds us that forms and formulations of leisure, [its] "styles and symbols, modalities and meanings are not only socially constructed, but are deeply imbricated with the equally constructed social divisions and hierarchies of age, gender, race and class" (2003:xviii). The affordances of leisure among Malawian women and men vary and are often situated around patriarchal interests that frame men as entitled to leisure in a way that women are not. As Jessie Kabwila-Kapasula explains, "even though Malawi is made up of matrilineal and patrilineal communities, it is largely a patriarchal nation state because the gender relations in either system define man as superior to woman even though there are differences in the forms and degrees of the definitions" (2010:28–29). Given the prevailing

patriarchal arrangements, many Malawian women have more fragmented leisure time than men. Feminist research on leisure studies indicates that the patriarchal organization of society has resulted in notable differences in forms of leisure for men and women, not only in terms of domination of men in leisure spaces but also in the choice of leisure activities (Adam 2014). For example, in their research, Karla Henderson et al. (2002) noted that the pattern of leisure activity choice in terms of gender often had females favoring home-based activities while males leaned toward outdoor activities.

In a similar vein, in his study of leisure among university students in Ghana, Issahaku Adam also found that the popular leisure activities among female students included sedentary/solitary activities followed by socializing activities, creative/artistic activities, and physical/sporting activities. In contrast, for the male students, the popular leisure activities were socializing activities followed by sedentary/solitary activities, creative/artistic activities, and physical/sporting activities (Adam 2014:15). In her integrative review of the study of women’s leisure, Henderson (1996) makes a case against a “one size fits all” approach in understanding leisure among women, showing that there are many diverse factors including race, age, and sexuality that inflect the experience of leisure among women and the range of activities they participate in. Among other key observations that Henderson makes regarding the meaning of leisure among women includes the point that the more roles women take on, the less likely they are to take personal leisure time; leisure is an avenue for conformity to social roles as well as resistance to these roles, and as such, constraints to leisure may be more acute for women from non-dominant groups or who exist at the margins of society (Henderson 1996:151). Like Henderson, I adopt a feminist approach in examining how urban Malawian women navigate spaces of leisure and how these spaces function as sites where they can experience pleasurable feelings of joy, fulfilment, and peace, while also taking into consideration the socio-cultural contexts in which they exist. This approach helps in understanding how various experiences of pleasure within leisure spaces are informed by gendered notions and how these leisure activities, while providing pleasure, can also be sites for the reproduction of gender identities, resistance, and negotiations.

As a way of examining how urban Malawian women experience pleasure in bridal showers and social media, I interviewed thirty women from across the major cities of Malawi, namely Lilongwe, Blantyre, Mzuzu, and Zomba. These women, ranging in age from 18 to 67, belong to different occupations, have different educational qualifications, and come from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses. They included housewives, retired administrators, retired civil servant, bankers, marketers, post-graduate and undergraduate university students, entrepreneurs, teachers, a computer scientist, and a communication officer working for an NGO. With regard to social media, some of the questions I asked the women included whether they belonged to social media groups which are for women only, how many, whether they were active in them, and on which platforms. The women

were also asked why they joined these groups, the ways in which they benefit from the groups, and what makes participation in these groups enjoyable. With regard to bridal showers, I asked the women whether they had ever attended bridal showers and whether they found them enjoyable and why. The social media groups and bridal showers all functioned as leisure spaces available to women, but whether all women could experience different forms of pleasure in these spaces often varied depending on the age, interests, or social and marital status of the respondent.

### The Possibilities of Freedom and Pleasure in Social Media Groups

Access to the internet through digital media has allowed scholars to rethink the definition of publics and how they are convened. Srinivasan et al. argue that “digital media provide new possibilities for people to interact with one another and with the world around them. They alter existing forms of social exchange and belonging, and create new ones” (2019:9). Highlighting the possibilities offered by the digital space of the internet, Dina Ligaga explains that “because of its global presence, fluid nature, and multi-user characteristics, the Internet has grown into a space that makes it possible to imagine and create new narratives reflective of the desires and social lives of its users” (2012:5). Groups on social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook, for instance, provide an interactive space where users, especially women, can create new narratives about their aspirations and offer personal views about various issues. The proliferation of gendered social media groups is arguably more common among female Malawian users than male Malawian users. One often finds groups both on Facebook and WhatsApp exclusively for women that might be viewed as examples of *macheza*. All the respondents to my questionnaire belonged to various social media groups, in particular on WhatsApp and Facebook, and they navigated between these groups as spaces of leisure for entertainment as well as sources of information. In many instances, the lines separating entertainment and sociality from self-help and self-improvement were blurred. The numbers of groups to which the individual women in my study belonged ranged from three to ten.

Generational differences were evident in the number of groups the women belonged to and their reasons for belonging to those groups. As expected, for older women (over the age of fifty), their access to and participation on social media was lower than the access and levels of participation for younger women (under forty). Also notable was older women’s preference for WhatsApp as a platform for engaging with other women of similar interests. The groups which most of the older women participated in were of a religious/spiritual nature, and their reasons for belonging to those groups were to support each other and also to lift each other up morally and spiritually. They did this, for example, by sharing verses from the Bible which affirmed the participants’ Christian identities, or by sharing motivational books, audio recordings, or videos that are motivational. As an example, one of the respondents, who was 65 and retired, belonged to a prayer group

whose members meet either physically or virtually every week to pray for issues affecting their children, marriages, or any other relevant matters. She revealed that she also belonged to a women’s church guild-affiliated group which brings together women of different ages from across the country, and she participates in the group as a leisure activity which activates pleasurable feelings of joy and peace for her, since it is an occasion to socialize with other women through the sharing of sermons and inspirational verses. In addition, membership in this group enabled her to stay up to date with developments within the national guild. I consider this aspect to be particularly significant, in the sense that staying up to date with happenings within the guild was a way of affirming her belonging to the group, which induced pleasure for her as a retired person, since such individuals are normally relegated to the margins of social activities. Although this group is religious in nature and was originally constituted as a forum for discussions related to the guild, it also served as a socially interactive forum where the female participants could discuss their personal lives and the social activities in their churches, including the scandals and illicit behaviors by members of the clergy or church members, as such topics are often excluded from discussion in the formal spaces of the mainstream church. Thus, in these social media groups, women could evade the codes of respectability that typically constrain women’s conduct in religious circles. From time to time, the social media group becomes a platform for *macheza*, where women experience pleasure by sharing jokes and banter with one another and where new friendships across districts and age gaps are formed and enjoyed. In the absence of physical meeting places, these groups are convivial spaces which nourish the spiritual and social lives of the female participants.

Neighborhood social welfare groups were also common among women over forty, since visibility and participation in community activities is a marker of respectability for married women. Belonging to such groups enabled them to fulfill the cultural expectations that older women would serve as nurturing mothers and thus demonstrate their membership in the community. Another respondent, age 60 and recently retired, indicated that she enjoyed participating in these welfare groups because this allowed her to mingle with fellow women and to learn from them now that she is retired and no longer has many opportunities to socialize with other people. For such a woman, who described herself as an extrovert thriving in meeting and talking with others, these virtual welfare groups connected her to people and made her feel as though she could have a purposeful life even after retirement.

The choice of virtual social groups as spaces to experience leisure is telling of the gendered dynamics reinforced by patriarchal logics which intersect with the institutions connected to religion and culture that regulate women’s opportunities for leisure. What I gathered from the respondents is that women who wanted to experience leisure and pleasure using social media platforms found ways of navigating around the social constraints restricting women’s mobility. These virtual gatherings ensured that women did not necessarily have to leave the confines of their homes or neglect their



responsibilities as women in search of leisure pursuits. The observation by Georgette Wang et al. (2003) and Kathleen Clauderwood (2015) that WhatsApp and Facebook allow users to enjoy various features such as creating closed groups that enable them to advertise, educate and inform, form religious groups, as well as maintain relationships is relevant. Being able to freely express divergent views or anti-establishment sentiments to a group sharing similar opinions sustains relationships in these groups (O'Hara et al. 2014:36). Gregory Gondwe and Evariste Some (2020:5) also observe that using WhatsApp in Africa gives women the ability to chat and boost their self-esteem without being scorned by society.

For most of the respondents who were under forty, WhatsApp and Facebook were the preferred social media platforms for interaction. Their reasons for joining groups on these social media platforms varied from seeking entertainment from the stories told in those groups to de-stressing after a hectic day of work, connecting with friends, and catching up on hot gossip and scandals about celebrities, politicians as well as men and women in society, which are not usually captured in mainstream media. The social media groups also operated as spaces for challenging misinformation that could be harmful to women, giving and receiving sex tips to enhance one's marriage or relationship, seeking hair and beauty advice, and creating business networks with other women. A number of respondents also belonged to sites on Facebook and WhatsApp that catered to various hobbies or other leisure activities, such as cooking groups where recipes and culinary experiences are exchanged or gardening groups where gardening ideas were shared. Participation in such groups often pointed to the gendered and class dimensions that inform women's choices of leisure and pleasure experiences. For example, Home and Gardening (Malawi) Women is a group created to bring together women whose hobbies are gardening and home-making. These hobbies are, however, tied to women's socially designated roles as caretakers of the domestic space. The group's description shows that it is a space where women can anonymously post pictures of their houses if they need advice on how to improve the decor and share tips on how to get rid of pests, for example, recommending products that would help to improve the cleanliness and presentability of the members' households.

This group is also meant to ensure that women provide a conducive environment for their families and therefore achieve respectability as homemakers, since a respectable woman is one "who is treated with deferential esteem, and who is perceived as an honourable and dignified member of her community or society" (Hungwe 2006:33). While respectability remains an enviable and sought-after quality for many women, engaging with other women on these forums provides a space for women with common interests and who enjoy gardening and interior decor to meet and form friendships and networks that transcend the virtual space of the group. For example, one of the respondents who has an interest in gardening reveals that she also belongs to another WhatsApp group which branched off from the larger Facebook group. By creating another smaller group with the specific purpose



of gardening, members were able to identify each other as people who enjoy the same interests and hobbies. They also have more freedom there to engage with one another and to share their enjoyment of their hobbies. As one respondent, age 38, who is a university lecturer and an avid gardener, revealed, she finds joy and fulfilment in interacting with other women gardeners outside the gaze of those who view their passion for plants as a “strange obsession.” Engaging with people of similar interests not only affirms and legitimizes her passions, it also provides her with a sense of belonging, which induces pleasure in itself. Furthermore, the gardening or home decor tips that participants exchange in such groups ensure that they derive targeted benefits from their hobbies. For example, the same respondent says that she had improved her gardening skills and felt more in tune with the earth after joining a WhatsApp group for gardeners. She enjoyed gardening even more because her beloved flowers and plants were healthy and blooming.

While this group’s focus is gardening and home decor, some respondents indicated that they belonged to other Facebook groups where the general idea is for women to freely discuss issues and chat with one another; their pleasure in participating in these groups was derived from this apparent openness, as respondents mainly under 40 revealed. Even the names of the groups that they belong to point to these sites as leisure spaces for women to chat with one another. One such group was named “*Timasukilane aamai*” (meaning “ladies, let’s be open/free with each other”), which suggests a safe space where women can be open about their lives without any repercussions. Common topics in these kinds of groups include issues pertaining to sex and how to please one’s male partner sexually. Another group, “Pamtondo Amai (*macheza*)” (a metaphor for “pamtondo” which evokes the traditional pounding arena), is a place where women have the license to criticize through word play, as members of this group are free to express themselves through jokes (*macheza*), to vent about their relationships with their husbands, in-laws, and other relatives to other women who understand and sympathize with them, and to give advice and offer solutions to their problems. All these conversations occur under the notion of play as earlier defined. Because their interactions are understood as play and because there is a provision of anonymity, one can be anyone one chooses to be on these forums, as there are no restrictions regarding what kind of identity one ought to assume and perform. Anonymity ensures that members of the group have relative freedom and can let their guard down. The language used on such forums is playful. This is in contrast to the way women usually talk about issues that are conventionally clothed in taboos and silences. Their banter and poking fun thus disrupt the deference that is traditionally paid to such topics (Mtenje 2021), and it is this freedom that women enjoy. Within this space, play affords the women a positive ephemerality that allows them to escape patriarchal control over what they can indulge in as pleasure. According to Stephannie Gearhart, through the notion of play, the woman presents a version of the feminine which “cannot be fully reproduced, regulated, or

controlled" (2000:21). These spaces also provide women with a platform to negotiate with external sources of tension which they cannot normally confront outside this space. Depending on the sensitivity of the topic they want to discuss, women express themselves through the metaphor of *chigoba* (mask) which disguises their identities, and their message is posted through the administrators of the groups who are themselves known to the group members. Sensitive topics refer to the participants' own personal experiences and include transgressive stories of women as cheating wives or as women who refuse to conform to gendered expectations about women's sexuality, shocking stories about cheating husbands, and how to deal with the husbands and the women who cheat with them. Interestingly, while these groups are exclusive to women, some of the concerns reflected in the most frequently discussed topics are still organized in relation to men's interests. What is apparent here is that even in these leisure spaces where women derive pleasure from evading male control or authority, they often use this freedom to reaffirm patriarchal expectations, or to strengthen their position within patriarchal arrangements.

Respondents also indicated that they enjoyed participating in these gendered Facebook groups because of the comic relief derived from humorous posts specifically categorized as *macheza* which include jokes (memes) about men, humorous childbearing experiences in the labor ward, parenting, and other social issues. "After a hectic day at work and the challenges that we face every day, I go to this Facebook group to de-stress. I often laugh at the stories that women post in these groups," one respondent, a 37-year-old business owner, revealed. Humorous posts help in further creating openness and warmth among members and offer a temporary escape from the difficult issues women encounter in their daily lives. On the importance of humor in individual lives, Ebenezer Obadare (2010:94), posits that humor helps the marginalized deal with everyday pain. Humor can also help to "build collective identities, reduce stress, and burnout, and sustain the hope that positive change is possible" (Cameron 2015:279). In this way, *macheza* temporally postpones and disrupts the difficulties that women regularly experience by offering an absurd or humorous alternative to everyday reality for women. For example, one respondent mentions a post she enjoyed under *macheza*, where one user on the forum asked members what was the funniest thing they had ever done or said during labor. Responses varied from women using violent and vulgar language to their partners which they had never used in their lives before to stripping naked at the door of the ward in front of other patients and their guardians to having hallucinations. The responses humorize childbirth, a "messy" and painful life-giving experience, by collectively laughing at "embarrassing" memories and celebrating women's resilience and their power to give life.

For the six respondents who were between the ages of 18 and 25, their pleasure in participating in social media groups derived from being part of a community of beauty and natural hair enthusiasts. "I am in two WhatsApp groups about hair and what I enjoy the most is sharing tips on how to take care

of natural hair. Nothing beats getting feedback from someone who has benefitted from the hair regimens I share,” said one respondent, who is a 25-year-old natural hair enthusiast. Her pleasure stemmed from seeing other women’s hair thrive as a result of the advice that she had given on the group. There is a growing interest in natural hair among young urban Malawian women, who are ditching weaves and chemically treated hair in favor of natural hair. Many urban women with these preferences are engaging in research on the internet, searching for products which would work for their hair. The young respondents (who were all university students), cognizant of the politicization of women’s beauty and hair practices, experience pleasure from exercising their choice to grow their natural hair and to participate in the ever-growing discourses of natural hair in Malawi. Two respondents, who offer hairstyle and makeup services, also added that their pleasure in these groups derived from forging networks with women that were interested in hair products for future business prospects in the hair industry. Thus, their pleasure was not only experienced through defining their own sense of beauty but also by recognizing their active participation as a strategy for financial self-empowerment.

### **Malawian Bridal Showers and Women’s Experiences of Pleasure**

Bridal showers in Malawi have become social events that some urban women look forward to and enjoy attending. As a pre-wedding rite of passage, they foreshadow gendered cultural expectations that are amplified through the rituals of the wedding. Vikki Bell argues that “the wedding is indeed a moment in which certain cultural awarenesses and identifications are crystallised and anxiously ritualized.” However, rather than seeing evidence there of “a system of rules and avoidances, the wedding might be theorised as a moment in which people are invited to position themselves as cultural beings, to place themselves within the performance of culture in ways that involve placing themselves within spatio-temporal, discursive (and therefore bodily, sexualised and racialized) boundaries” (1998:464–65). Like weddings, bridal showers can also be considered ritualized sites for the performance of normative gender identities, with the result that these gendered arrangements inform the way women at bridal showers variously experience pleasure.

From the late 1970s, pre-wedding gatherings by women in urban areas, with the purpose of counselling young women who are about to get married, were called kitchen parties (Kamlongera 1987). However, somewhere between the late 80s and early 90s, kitchen parties gradually began to fade out as some faith-based institutions viewed the events as spaces where women taught each other “immoral behavior” which was inimical to female propriety. This perspective held by some of these faith-based institutions demonstrates how religion works to control women’s bodies and movements. It further illustrates “how religion greatly influences the development of social justice and ethical norms in our societies” (Tamale 2013:5). It is not clear

what these institutions meant by “immoral behavior,” though it is obvious that during this period, kitchen parties were viewed as a threat to the so-called moral fiber of the Malawian nation, and since women’s bodies were perceived as the embodiment of idealized nationhood, those bodies were always the subjects of moral panic.

The aim of kitchen parties was to give the bride-to-be diverse items that she could use in her kitchen as well as tips on how to build her marriage. Patronized by women only, the kitchen parties showed women being complicit in the reproduction of a patriarchal order that envisioned a woman’s place as being in the kitchen. Kitchen parties were re-introduced and re-invented after the adoption of multiparty democracy in Malawi in 1994, when they came to be known as bridal showers. Food and music are usually provided at these bridal showers, which makes the event lively and attractive. The recent trend in bridal shower fashions is for the bride-to-be to select a fabric locally known as *kalala* (color) as a theme for the day that women attending the event can choose to wear. Creating outfits for themselves using the theme of the day is an expression of solidarity with the bride-to-be and also an opportunity for some women to experience pleasure.

At the bridal shower, a few women with marriage experience, who are older and may be friends of the bride’s mother, aunts, or older sisters, are selected to speak on topics such as home management, communication, grooming and etiquette, financial management, self-development, and “wifing,” a term that refers to the methods for pleasing a husband. Bridal showers in Malawi are fraught with controversy, as critics argue that the advice and tips given to young brides “perpetuate the cycle of servitude in many Malawian marriages” (Manyozo 2012:n.p.) and that the occasions have also been turned into fundraising events for the bride-to-be. I agree with this to a large extent, and so did many respondents, especially the younger ones. Much of the advice meted out to the bride-to-be is repetitive and is in service to patriarchy, often presenting the future wife as subordinate to her future husband and placing the responsibility for building a successful marriage on the shoulders of the woman. The fact that the groom is barely mentioned in all the advice proffered at the bridal showers except when the conversation turns to the topic of financial management and communication confirms the gendered distribution of power and responsibility in marriage. Interestingly, it is women who insist on exclusive female participation at the bridal showers, and I am intrigued by this practice in relation to women’s opportunities for pleasure. As mentioned earlier, bridal showers tend to be dismissed by men and other groups as “*kochezera azimai*” (a place for women to chat). Still, we might ask, why have bridal showers endured despite this controversy, and why do they continue to be spaces where urban women converge in significant numbers regardless of age and social status? I recall the experience of a friend, who was getting married and who had to have the customary bridal shower. When I asked her how the wedding preparations were going, she jokingly responded, “I would have been less under pressure if I wasn’t doing the bridal shower, but they won’t allow it.” “They” here referred to older

family members who insisted that a bridal shower was necessary. My friend’s response here confirms that, inasmuch as the bridal shower is a space for leisure which can offer an opportunity for the experience of pleasure for some women, the same space can also be a source of stress for others. Clearly, a space of leisure does not always offer pleasure to all those in it, neither does it offer the same kind of pleasure to everyone.

Nevertheless, for many older women, the bridal shower is a welcome opportunity for leisure and pleasure, since there are few spaces for leisure available to older women. While men are free to patronize public entertainment spaces such as at clubs and football and golf matches and to socialize with friends at pubs after a long day at work, for example, women’s mobility, especially that of married women, is usually restricted to the domestic space and other socially acceptable places such as the church and women-only gatherings. As many of the older respondents indicated, bridal showers are sources of pleasure for them because they provide spaces for women to entertain themselves, to have fun, and to network. One 48-year-old respondent confirmed, “As a married woman you just can’t decide to go to a dancing place even if you really want to. At bridal showers, we socialize and also catch up with friends we have not met in a long time which is very nice.” Like the choice of social media groups as a site of leisure, bridal showers as leisure spaces also attest to how gendered dynamics inform experiences of pleasure for urban Malawian women.

For the older women, their pleasure in attending bridal showers also stemmed from the fact that their significant marital experience received recognition and that they were asked to give advice on marriage to younger women. This acknowledgement was useful for affirming their esteemed position within the community. For some older women, pleasure was experienced through showing solidarity with and support to other mothers, as one 60-year-old retired administrator indicated. For mothers whose daughters were getting married, it was an opportunity to gain public recognition and respect for having excelled at the job of raising a female child, which is considered a difficult task. As Elaine Salo (2004:175) notes, “a woman’s ability to control her own as well as her daughter’s sexuality is the constitutive sign... A respectable mother would not allow her daughter to be sexually active, use birth control or become pregnant out of wedlock.”

Throwing a public bridal shower is a way for a mother to show off a daughter, presumably untainted by sexual impurities and therefore desirable as a bride. Mothers, especially those of brides, occupy a central position at the bridal shower, as the event is more about acknowledging the work of the mother than it is about the bride-to-be. Mothers such as the respondent mentioned above, whose roles have been acknowledged at prior bridal showers, enjoy extending their support to other mothers whose daughters are about to get married. The bridal shower can also be read as a rite of passage, a moment for the mother of the bride-to-be to show her gratitude to fellow women who stood by her until her daughter was ready to transition to another stage of adulthood. Just like some women come together on social

media to celebrate motherhood through jokes about surviving labor, other women experience pleasure at bridal showers through the celebration of motherhood, and this celebration provides an opening for them to forget the problems they face, even if it is just for a day of *macheza*.

As I indicated earlier, all women at bridal showers do not experience the same kind of pleasure, and neither does their pleasure come from the same activities. The responses of younger women indicated that they found pleasure at bridal showers from having a space to dress and dance the way they liked, in ways that would not normally be approved. One respondent, a 35-year-old marketer, said that she enjoys attending bridal showers, not necessarily for the content which she dismisses as useless in the contemporary age, but because she is able to dance without any inhibitions. "I love dancing but in other contexts I can't dance freely because people may think I am a loose girl and that I want to attract men. But here, there are no men around, so I move my body the way I want." The uninhibited movement of the female body to the rhythm of music might be viewed as "improper" dancing and a marker of unrespectability for women, since it is assumed that a woman's bodily movement is always directed toward gaining male attention and never for her own self-enjoyment. In the bridal shower space, the respondent takes advantage of the absence of men to pursue her own interests for her own gratification, thereby disrupting the patriarchal assumption that women's actions are always intended for the male gaze.

For another respondent, a 32-year-old teacher, her pleasure at the bridal shower derived from being able to dress however she liked: "I am free to wear whatever I want at bridal showers even though there are some women who want to police my dressing but I don't care! I wear what I like!" It is common for some young women, both married and unmarried, to wear mini-skirts, colorful, short and tight dresses with stilettos at bridal showers in the urban areas in Malawi. In Malawi's conservative culture, wearing such clothes is considered immoral, improper, and an attempt to seduce men. Here again, these views are premised on the assumptions that women's self-assertion manifested in their gestures and their "sartorial agency" is always directed at men and "held to be an invitation to an erotic encounter that might often lead to unwanted consequences" (Bakare-Yusuf 2011:117). At bridal showers, for some women such as the respondent quoted above, asserting their sartorial and bodily agency through wearing what they want is a source of pleasure that is permitted at bridal showers. At other bridal showers, women might also consume alcohol, again an instance where ideas of female respectability are contravened. The space allows for such abandon with impunity because it is generally agreed that activities at the bridal shower should be interpreted and understood as play. The festive nature of the bridal shower as play allows women who are expected to adhere to respectability codes and are normally restricted from publicly consuming alcoholic beverages to experience pleasure. Here, they are permitted to temporarily ignore societal expectations and constraints and to simply enjoy themselves.

In conclusion, spaces where women meet and interact socially such as social media groups and bridal showers offer opportunities for women to experience pleasure. As leisure sites, these spaces which evoke pleasure are ambiguous spaces; however, they cannot simply be dismissed as spaces for useless chatter and play. These spaces for socializing with other women offer possibilities for urban Malawian women to engage in activities that give them pleasure as well as the possibility of claiming expressions of pleasure that are denied to them by patriarchal edicts. For brief periods of time, Malawian women appear able to evade patriarchal norms and disrupt patriarchal agendas. However, even in these leisure spaces where women derive pleasure from being outside of male control and authority, there is also a tendency to use freedom from male authority and the male gaze to perpetuate and affirm patriarchal expectations. In short, women sometimes find pleasure in the same spaces that may contribute to their own subordination.

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