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Gender Imbalances in University Graduation and Its Impact on Patriarchal Marriage Institutions in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The contemporary educational landscape in Zimbabwe has witnessed a remarkable shift in university enrollment patterns, approximately 70% of university students now being female compared to only 30% male. This gender imbalance represents a significant departure from historical trends and raises critical questions about the future of patriarchal marriage institutions in Zimbabwe. This study investigates the potential implications of this female educational surplus operationalized as women's proportional overrepresentation in higher education relative to men for traditional marriage systems historically organized around male dominance and hypergamous marriage patterns (defined as women marrying men of equal or higher social status). Using qualitative research methods based on systematic document review, this study examines how changing educational demographics may challenge or transform patriarchal norms (understood as institutionalized systems of male authority and decision-making power) embedded within Zimbabwean marriage institutions. The findings suggest that the increasing number of female graduates relative to male graduates creates measurable pressures on traditional marriage market structures, potentially resulting in delayed marriages, increased singlehood among educated women, renegotiation of gender roles within marriages, and transformation of bride wealth practices. The research demonstrates that patriarchal systems historically dependent on male educational and economic superiority encounter substantial structural pressure when women surpass men in educational attainment. However, the study also reveals that patriarchal norms show remarkable adaptive capacity, often reconfiguring rather than disappearing in the face of socio-demographic change. This investigation contributes to understanding the complex interplay between educational expansion, gender dynamics, and marital institutions in African contexts. The paper concludes that future policy interventions should consider both targeted educational access for males and structural support for women navigating transformed marriage markets.

Keywords

Gender, Patriarchal marriage, Graduation, Gender imbalances, Marriage institutions

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1. Introduction and Background

Zimbabwe's education sector has experienced dramatic transformations over the past three decades, particularly regarding gender equity in access to higher education. Following independence in 1980, the country embarked on ambitious educational expansion programs aimed at redressing colonial-era inequalities [1]. While early efforts focused primarily on achieving universal primary education, subsequent decades saw increased emphasis on secondary and tertiary education access. The deliberate policy interventions to promote girls' education, combined with various socioeconomic factors, have resulted in a remarkable reversal of historical gender gaps in university enrollment [1].

Before proceeding with the analysis, three core concepts require explicit operational definition to ensure analytical clarity: female educational surplus refers to the proportional overrepresentation of women in higher education relative to men, measured as the percentage point difference in enrollment and graduation rates. In Zimbabwe's case, this translates to women comprising approximately 70% of university students while men comprise 30% which is a 40 percentage point gap [1]. Hypergamous Expectations denote social and institutional norms that prescribe women should marry men of equal or higher educational, economic, or social status [2]. This is operationalized through observing match patterns in spouse selection, normative statements in literature and policy, and reported preferences in household surveys.

More so, male authority in marriage institutions refers to institutionalized decision-making power, encompassing control over household finances, reproductive choices, residence decisions, and social mobility such as structures embedded in customary law, kinship systems, and economic arrangements rather than individual preferences [3]. This is distinct from de facto influence and must be measured through examination of legal frameworks, household bargaining outcomes, and intra-household conflict patterns.

The current situation, where approximately 70% of university students are female, represents not merely gender parity but a significant gender imbalance favoring women [1]. This phenomenon mirrors trends observed in other parts of the world but carries particular significance in the African context where patriarchal social structures remain deeply entrenched [4]. Research from sub-Saharan Africa indicates that educational gender gaps have evolved differently across the region, with some countries experiencing declining gender disparities while others, like Zimbabwe, have witnessed a reversal where women now outnumber men in higher education institutions [1].

Several factors contribute to this enrollment disparity, though causal mechanisms remain contested. Young men increasingly pursue informal economic activities, particularly in mining, cross-border trading, and agriculture, which offer immediate financial returns without requiring tertiary credentials [5,6]. Additionally, migration patterns demonstrate that men are more likely to seek employment opportunities before completing tertiary education, whereas female students typically view education as a pathway to economic security [6]. These patterns suggest that educational enrollment differentials may reflect broader labor market structures rather than educational access barriers alone. Existing research has extensively documented Zimbabwe's expansion of girls' education and the resulting female dominance in university enrollment [1], yet significant gaps remain in the literature.

Notably, Zimbabwe-specific evidence on marriage market dynamics while studies document educational gender gaps, there is limited contemporary research examining how the mismatch between highly educated women and fewer comparably educated men specifically interacts with hypergamous expectations in Zimbabwe. Most marriage squeeze research focuses on India, China, and European contexts [7,8], with minimal attention to Southern African contexts where kinship structures and bride wealth practices create distinct marriage market conditions [2]. Further, research has not adequately documented whether and how patriarchal marriage institutions are responding to this demographic shift whether through preservation of traditional norms despite contradicted assumptions, selective adaptation of specific practices (such as lobola), or more fundamental transformation of household authority structures [9-11]. Limited research examines how impacts of female educational surplus vary across class positions and generational cohorts, despite evidence from other contexts suggesting stratified outcomes [12].

This educational transformation occurs within a broader context of patriarchal social organization in Zimbabwe, where marriage institutions have historically been structured around male authority, bride wealth payments (lobola), and expectations of female subordination [9]. Traditional Zimbabwean marriage patterns historically followed hypergamous norms wherein women marry men of equal or higher social and economic status, a pattern documented in specific African ethnographic and institutional contexts [2,9]. The patriarchal foundation of these institutions has assumed male superiority in education, wealth, and social standing as assumptions that are now directly challenged by changing educational demographics.

2. Problem Statement

The growing female surplus in university graduation in Zimbabwe has created a structural tension between contemporary educational realities and patriarchal marriage institutions that historically depend on male educational and economic superiority. Traditional marriage systems remain organized around hypergamous expectations (women marrying men of equal or higher status), the institutionalization of male household authority through both formal law and customary practice, and customary practices such as bride wealth (lobola) [10]. All these institutional arrangements

presume men's relative advantage in education, income, and social standing. With women constituting approximately 70% of university students and graduates, these patriarchal foundations face unprecedented pressure [1].

Marriage market theory predicts that this demographic imbalance produces a "marriage squeeze" which is a structural condition where highly educated women face constrained availability of partners meeting traditional status criteria [7,8]. The consequences of such mismatches are multidirectional: women may delay marriage, remain unmarried, or adjust expectations toward educational homogamy or hypogamy (marrying men of equal or lower education) [7]. Simultaneously, the relative scarcity of educated men may paradoxically grant those men increased bargaining power, potentially enabling them to demand more traditional arrangements even as women's educational and economic resources expand [13]. These shifts also place direct pressure on lobola and household authority structures, since women's increased earning potential can challenge both the economic rationale and symbolic meanings historically underpinning bride wealth and male decision-making dominance [11].

As educated women negotiate marriage under these altered conditions, new tensions may emerge within households and communities, including contestation over gender roles, control of household resources, and expectations regarding female submission or male authority [11]. Yet theory and evidence from other contexts suggest patriarchal systems may demonstrate adaptive resilience, selectively absorbing women's educational advancement while reproducing male dominance through revised institutional practices [14]. The central research problem is therefore: Does Zimbabwe's female educational surplus transform patriarchal marriage institutions, intensify conflict within them, or prompt adaptive strategies allowing patriarchy to persist in modified institutional forms? This problem statement translates into specific investigative foci outlined below.

3. Research Objectives and Questions

This study seeks to achieve the following operationalized objectives:

- (1) To identify and analyze the specific mechanisms through which female educational surplus creates measurable pressure on hypergamous marriage norms in Zimbabwe.
- (2) To analyze documented changes in marriage pattern outcomes (age at first marriage, marriage rates by education level, and patterns of educational homogamy/hypogamy) that empirical literature attributes to educational gender imbalances.
- (3) To examine how women's rising education and post-graduation economic autonomy intersects with traditional bride wealth (lobola) practices and formal/informal household authority structures, identifying points of institutional pressure and adaptation.
- (4) To identify and categorize documented conflicts and tensions within marriage institutions as educated women negotiate their positions in systems historically predicated on male superiority.
- (5) To assess the theoretical basis for patriarchal resilience and adaptive capacity, examining whether documented evidence supports claims that patriarchal structures preserve core inequalities despite demographic change.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study employs a multi-theoretical framework integrating three complementary perspectives rather than a single theory, because the research problem encompasses multiple analytical levels: institutional structures, individual decision-making, and market dynamics. Each theory addresses distinct dimensions of how educational gender imbalances interact with marriage institutions. A single theoretical perspective would inadequately capture this complexity.

4.1 Feminist Institutional Theory

Feminist Institutional Theory provides the foundational analytical lens for understanding patriarchy as an embedded institutional system rather than merely individual attitudes or preferences [3,15]. This theory posits that gender inequality is reproduced through formal institutional rules (such as inheritance laws, marriage regulations, and property rights) and informal normative expectations (including culturally-enforced expectations regarding female domesticity, male authority, and female submission) [3]. The theory's critical contribution is recognizing that institutional change requires more than individual behavioral modification in which it demands transformation of the structural arrangements that systematically advantage one group over another. Applied to this study, feminist institutional theory clarifies that determining whether female educational surplus "transforms" patriarchal marriage requires examining whether women's education translates into genuine institutional change regarding authority, decision-making power, and recognition or whether institutions adapt superficially while preserving fundamental power asymmetries [3,15].

4.2 Marriage Market Theory

Marriage market theory conceptualizes marriage formation as a market process shaped by supply and demand for potential partners with specific characteristics [8]. This framework analyzes how the relative availability of men and women with different education levels, incomes, and social status influences marriage outcomes including whom individuals marry, at what age, and under what negotiated conditions [8]. The theory incorporates specific concepts relevant to this analysis: assortative mating (the tendency to marry someone of similar status/education), hypergamy (women marrying men of higher status), and critically, the marriage squeeze (structural imbalances in partner availability that constrain typical matching patterns) [7,8]. When educational gender imbalances occur, marriage market theory predicts measurable shifts in marital timing, partner selection criteria, and bargaining power that are predictions that can be empirically examined [7]. Importantly, this theory explains a counterintuitive finding that the scarcity of educated men may not automatically weaken patriarchy. Rather, individuals scarce in a marriage market can leverage their scarcity to demand advantages from potential partners [13], potentially reinforcing rather than weakening traditional patriarchal expectations [13].

4.3 Social Change and Gender Transformation Theory

Social change and gender transformation theory provides crucial frameworks for understanding institutional responses to challenges against foundational assumptions [16]. This perspective explicitly rejects linear progress assumptions, instead recognizing that patriarchal systems exhibit both remarkable resilience (capacity to persist despite contradicting demographic realities) and transformative capacity (ability to undergo fundamental change under sufficiently profound pressure) [16].

Rather than assuming women's education automatically erodes patriarchy, this theory identifies specific mechanisms of change and resistance, including women's collective agency, economic structural shifts, competing normative frameworks, and enforcement mechanisms (including coercion and violence) through which institutional power operates [15].

4.4 Theoretical Integration and Analytical Contribution

These three theories are not competing but complementary. Feminist Institutional Theory identifies institutional structures requiring analysis; Marriage Market Theory specifies demographic mechanisms creating pressure for change; Social Change and Gender Transformation Theory explains why outcomes remain uncertain and potentially contradictory. Together, they enable comprehensive analysis of how female educational surplus affects patriarchal marriage institutions without oversimplifying outcomes.

5. Literature Review: Theoretical Organization

5.1 Female Educational Surplus as a Marriage Market Phenomenon

The literature consistently establishes that female surplus in higher education creates measurable disruption in marriage markets structured around hypergamous norms. Marriage Market Theory predicts that where women historically married men of equal or higher status, a female educational surplus creates structural imbalance [7,8]. Evidence from India demonstrates that under strong hypergamous expectations, highly educated women experience increased delays in marriage and higher non-marriage rates [8]. European research conversely shows societies increasingly adopting educational homogamy (assortative mating with equal-education spouses) as women's educational advantage becomes demographically common [2,7]. These divergent outcomes illustrate a critical point: similar demographic shifts produce different institutional outcomes depending on how rigidly hypergamous norms are maintained versus how flexibly societies adapt matching criteria [7].

For Zimbabwe specifically, the literature gap is significant. The 70% female university enrollment [1] should produce documented marriage market effects analogous to those observed in India (where similar educational gender gaps exist) or China (where gender-imbalanced education interacts with skewed sex ratios) [7,8]. Yet contemporary Zimbabwe-specific research examining whether educated women actually experience delayed marriage, increased singlehood, or shifts toward homogamy remains limited [9,10].

5.2 Adaptation versus Transformation: The Resilience Paradox

A central tension in the literature concerns whether institutional change represents genuine transformation or adaptive persistence of patriarchal structures under new forms. Feminist institutional theory highlights this distinction critically [3,15]. African scholarship particularly emphasizes institutional resilience: research on South African customary marriage documents that women's education and employment can coexist with persistent male household authority, continued expectations of female deference, and unequal resource control [9]. Similarly, studies from Ghana examining intimate partner violence show that women's higher education offers only partial protection against controlling

behaviors and physical abuse, suggesting patriarchal enforcement mechanisms operate through multiple channels that education alone cannot dismantle [17].

This evidence does not mean female education is inconsequential. Rather, it reveals that patriarchal systems demonstrate remarkable capacity to selectively incorporate women's schooling while preserving fundamental power asymmetries. Household bargaining research indicates women's assets and education do increase negotiating power over household expenditures and children's schooling [11], yet such gains in economic decision-making may coexist with persistent expectations of submission in other domains [15]. This pattern that is simultaneous empowerment in some domains and subordination in others characterizes institutional adaptation rather than institutional transformation [14,16].

5.3 Bride Wealth (Lobola) as an Institutional Flashpoint

Bride wealth practices exemplify institutional tensions created by female educational surplus. Traditionally, lobola serves dual functions: economic compensation and symbolic validation of male authority and kinship control [11]. The practice presumes male economic superiority and female economic dependence in which assumptions directly undermined when women possess education and post-graduation earning potential [11]. More over, the literature identifies two documented institutional responses: contestation (educated women resist or renegotiate lobola as symbolic of ownership/authority) [11] and adaptation (lobola persists but transforms through modified amounts, altered payment timing, or emphasis on symbolic/cultural functions over economic meaning) [11,14]. Critically, the literature cautions that adaptation does not necessarily signal patriarchal decline. Instead, practices may adjust in form while continuing to structure kinship power relations and expectations of female obedience [10,14]. Thus, this distinction matters analytically because it explains how patriarchal systems persist through institutional flexibility rather than rigidity which is a mechanism inadequately captured in research emphasizing either wholesale preservation or transformation of practices.

5.4 Household Bargaining, Conflict, and Institutional Enforcement

Comparative household economics literature establishes that women's education and asset control increase bargaining power over expenditures, children's education, and resource allocation [11,15]. Studies from South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia consistently document this relationship: female-controlled assets demonstrably shift household spending toward children's welfare and health investments [11]. On the other hand, yet this empowerment may generate household conflict rather than straightforward gender equality. Research on South African customary marriage particularly illustrates this dynamic, documenting how women's education and employment can trigger marital stress as expectations of male authority confront women's self-assertion and material independence [9]. The resulting conflicts involve disputes over finances, kinship obligations, social mobility, and decision-making authority that are areas where male identity historically tied to breadwinning and authority is directly challenged [9].

Importantly, literature on intimate partner violence reveals that increased women's empowerment can paradoxically increase risk of abuse in contexts where patriarchal enforcement mechanisms remain intact [17]. This counterintuitive relationship that women's gains in education and resources may intensify rather than diminish conflict underscores that institutional resilience operates through contestation and enforcement, not merely through passive acceptance [3,15].

5.5 Intersectionality: Class and Generational Stratification

The literature increasingly recognizes that impacts of female educational surplus are not uniformly experienced. Cross-national evidence indicates that educated women with higher incomes and stronger family support can negotiate more egalitarian marriages or opt out of marriage without severe economic consequences [12]. Conversely, economically precarious educated women face constrained partner choices and may accept unequal arrangements despite educational credentials [12]. Generational differences are similarly documented. Younger cohorts socialized after feminist movements and women's expanded education may normalize educational homogamy or hypogamy more readily than older generations deeply habituated to hypergamous ideals [2,16]. This variation suggests that impacts of female educational surplus should be analyzed not as universal but as stratified across class, region, and cohort which is a complexity that single-level analyses risk obscuring [16].

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Research Design and Analytical Approach

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in systematic document review, selected as appropriate for: (1) synthesizing existing evidence on how educational gender imbalances relate to marriage institutions, (2) identifying patterns and contradictions in the literature, and (3) mapping research gaps specific to the Zimbabwe context [1,9,10].

6.2 Scope and Focal Problems

Given the breadth and complexity of the overarching topic, the methodology intentionally narrows analytical scope to two interrelated focal problems most directly linked to educational gender imbalance:

Marriage Pattern Changes:

Documented shifts in marriage outcomes (age at first marriage, marriage rates by education level, patterns of educational homogamy/hypogamy) attributed to educational gender imbalances;

Patriarchal Persistence and Adaptation:

Mechanisms through which patriarchal authority structures either persist or transform in response to women's educational and economic advancement, with specific attention to household authority and bargaining dynamics.

6.3 Document Selection Criteria and Sources

Documents were selected purposively based on explicit inclusion criteria:

Thematic relevance: Primary focus on (a) female educational expansion and gendered labor-market outcomes, or (b) marriage institutions, gender norms, and intra-household power relations;

Geographic scope: Studies of Zimbabwe, sub-Saharan Africa, or comparative contexts where educational gender imbalances create theoretically comparable conditions (such as South Asia or East Asia);

Source quality: Peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports from credible institutional sources (World Bank, UN Women), national statistical publications, and academic books;

Temporal scope: Priority given to publications from 2000 onward, with selective inclusion of foundational theoretical texts (such as Agarwal 1997, Quisumbing & Maluccio 2000) integrated with recent literature.

6.4 Analytical Process

Analysis followed a thematic-analytical approach involving: (1) systematic coding of included documents for recurring explanations, tensions, and patterns; (2) identification of how authors link women's educational surplus to marriage-market outcomes; (3) examination of claimed mechanisms explaining persistence or transformation of patriarchal authority; (4) documentation of evidence supporting or contradicting key claims; and (5) synthesis of findings to identify robust patterns versus context-specific or contradictory findings.

The analytical process specifically attended to: distinguishing between behavioral change (e.g. more women marry educated men) and institutional transformation (e.g. normative shift in whether male superiority is required for marriage validity); noting where evidence comes from contexts differing from Zimbabwe; and identifying claims lacking empirical documentation.

7. Findings and Discussion

The document review indicates that Zimbabwe's female educational surplus likely produces multi-layered and sometimes contradictory effects on patriarchal marriage institutions. Rather than generating uniform shift toward gender equality, the evidence points to contested change across multiple dimensions. The following sections present findings organized by analytical category.

7.1 Marriage-Market Disequilibrium and Pressure on Hypergamous Norms

The literature consistently documents that when women's educational attainment outpaces men's in contexts prioritizing hypergamous matching, marriage markets experience measurable disequilibrium, characterized by increased delays in marriage and non-marriage among educated women [7,8].

Under strict hypergamous preferences, educated women seeking partners of equal or higher status face constrained choices when the supply of comparably educated men shrinks. Given Zimbabwe's 70% female university enrollment, literature suggests a significant proportion of educated women will encounter restricted partner availability if traditional matching expectations persist [1,8]. Indian research demonstrates this effect directly: highly educated women experience measurable delays and elevated non-marriage under rigid hypergamous norms [8]. European research conversely shows adaptation via normative shift toward educational homogamy, where societies increasingly accept women marrying equal-education men [2,7]. These divergent responses illustrate that similar demographic shifts produce varied institutional outcomes depending on norm flexibility.

Therefore, the literature identifies three plausible marriage-market outcomes: (1) delayed marriage and rising age at first marriage among educated women; (2) growth in never-married educated women; and/or (3) normative adjustment toward homogamy or hypogamy [7]. The first two outcomes challenge patriarchal systems defining women's social legitimacy primarily through marriage [18], while the third outcome directly threatens patriarchal ranking logics by

weakening the assumption that men must occupy higher status for marriage to be socially valid [8]. Evidence remains limited regarding which outcome(s) Zimbabwe is actually experiencing, as contemporary Zimbabwe-specific research on marriage timing and partner choice patterns by education level is underdeveloped.

7.2 Assortative Mating Adaptation with Normative Lag

Female educational surplus can push societies toward new assortative mating patterns (homogamy or hypogamy), but adaptation is neither automatic nor uniform across social groups [2,7]. Notably, the literature distinguishes between behavioral adaptation (women actually marrying equal- or lower-education men) and normative acceptance (public cultural endorsement of such matches as appropriate). Marriage market pressures may force behavioral shifts without producing corresponding normative change [2]. In contexts where hypergamy remains culturally entrenched, women's "marrying down" may become demographically common while remaining socially stigmatized or negotiated privately rather than openly normalized [2]. This creates structural mismatch: marriage-market pressures produce behavioral adaptation (who actually marries whom), while cultural institutions lag in normative acceptance, generating tension between practices and public ideals [2]. The finding implies that demographic change can increase "non-traditional" matches without immediately dismantling patriarchal meanings attached to male superiority. This suggests that measuring institutional change requires examining both behavior and normative acceptance, not behavior alone.

7.3 Bride Wealth (Lobola) Under Pressure: Contestation and Adaptation

Women's education and post-graduation earning potential create documented pressure on both material and symbolic foundations of bride wealth [11]. Traditionally, lobola assumes men's superior economic capacity and functions as both economic exchange and symbolic validation of male authority [11]. When women possess strong earning prospects and economic autonomy, the institutional logic becomes contested through two observable mechanisms. Notably, educated women may explicitly interpret lobola as implying ownership or legitimizing unequal authority and therefore resist it, demand renegotiation of meaning, or refuse payment [11].

Rather than disappearing, lobola may transform through modified amounts, altered payment expectations, extended timelines, or increased emphasis on symbolic/cultural functions over economic dependence [11,14]. Change in lobola form does not necessarily equal decline in patriarchy [10,14]. Practices may adapt while continuing to structure kinship power relations and expectations of female obedience that exemplify institutional flexibility preserving patriarchal essentials. This distinction between superficial adaptation and fundamental institutional transformation remains analytically crucial yet empirically underdeveloped for Zimbabwe.

7.4 Household Bargaining Power, Conflict, and Institutional Enforcement

Women's education and asset ownership are consistently associated with increased intra-household bargaining power, demonstrated through greater influence over expenditure priorities, children's schooling decisions, and resource allocation [11,15]. Comparative studies from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa document that female-controlled assets significantly influence household spending toward welfare-enhancing investments [11]. Applied to Zimbabwe, this suggests educated women will likely press for greater voice in financial decisions, mobility, reproductive choices, and distribution of domestic labor which is historically regulated by patriarchal authority [11]. Critically, the literature documents that increased bargaining power can simultaneously trigger household conflict [9,14]. Research on South African customary marriage reveals marital stress arising when women's empowerment confronts persistent patriarchal norms, with women reporting continued disempowerment despite formal educational and economic gains [9].

The tension emerges when women's material resources and self-assertion confront entrenched normative expectations of male dominance. Conflict involves disputes over finances, kinship obligations, social mobility, and decision-making which is precisely the domains where male identity has historically been tied to breadwinning and authority [9]. Evidence on intimate partner violence complicates this picture further. Studies from Ghana show that women's higher education can offer some protection against abuse, yet controlling behaviors, coercive practices, and violence can paradoxically elevate risk in contexts where patriarchal enforcement mechanisms remain intact [17]. This counterintuitive relationship demonstrates that institutional resilience may operate through contestation and enforcement rather than passive acceptance, and that women's gains in power may provoke backlash rather than straightforward movement toward equality [3,9,15,17].

7.5 Patriarchal Persistence and Adaptive Resilience

A central pattern across the literature is that patriarchal marriage institutions often demonstrate substantial resilience even under significant educational change [10,15,19]. African gender scholarship documents that patriarchal systems may incorporate women's education and employment while maintaining core inequalities: women remain primarily responsible for domestic labor, men retain final authority in major decisions, and women remain vulnerable to coercion and violence [10,15]. Notably, women's empowerment in education may coexist with subordination in other marital domains [17].

Evidence on intimate partner violence particularly illustrates non-linear relationships: despite education's potential protective effects, controlling behaviors and violence exposure can elevate risk, indicating that education alone cannot dismantle patriarchal enforcement mechanisms [17]. This pattern suggests patriarchy can persist through reconfigured pathways even when its traditional "male superiority" premise is weakened demographically [16]. In the same vein, social change and gender transformation theory explains this resilience by emphasizing that institutions preserve themselves through multiple mechanisms beyond individual attitudes including legal frameworks, kinship enforcement, economic arrangements, and violence making simple demographic change insufficient for institutional transformation [15,16].

7.6 The Paradox of Male Scarcity and Reinforced Leverage

A counterintuitive pattern emerges: when educated men are numerically scarce relative to educated women, those men may gain increased leverage in partner selection and marriage negotiations [12,13]. Marriage market theory predicts that individuals scarce in a market can be more selective and can demand additional advantages from potential partners [12,13]. Applied to Zimbabwe's context, this translates into educated men potentially leveraging scarcity to: prefer partners conforming strongly to traditional gender roles despite women's education [13], resist egalitarian bargaining demands [12], negotiate marriage conditions reproducing male dominance even when women possess educational credentials [12,20]. This finding demonstrates that demographic-educational progress does not automatically weaken patriarchy and it can reorganize patriarchal power by shifting bargaining advantage in unexpected directions. Female educational surplus alone does not guarantee gender equality gains if marriage market dynamics grant scarce educated men increased leverage [12,13].

7.7 Stratified Impacts Across Class and Generation

The study revealed that consequences of female educational surplus are not uniformly distributed but stratified across economic position and generational cohort [12,16]. Educated women with higher post-graduation incomes and stronger family support are better positioned to negotiate egalitarian marriages or opt out of marriage without severe economic consequences [12]. Conversely, economically precarious educated women face constrained partner choices and may accept unequal arrangements despite educational attainment [12]. Younger cohorts socialized during periods of feminist advancement and expanded female education may normalize educational homogamy or hypogamy more readily than older generations deeply habituated to hypergamous ideals [2,20]. This suggests generational change in matching norms, yet this process remains undocumented for Zimbabwe specifically. Overall evidence indicates Zimbabwe's female educational surplus creates real structural pressure on patriarchal marriage institutions, but outcomes depend critically on how marriage markets, kinship systems, and gender norms interact [16]. The most consistent conclusion across contexts is that educational change generates contestation and adaptation, not straightforward collapse of patriarchal marriage [9,10,16,19].

8. Contributions to the Study

This study contributes to scholarship on gender, marriage markets, and patriarchy in Zimbabwe (and comparable African contexts) by offering several specific analytical advances. The study explicitly links Zimbabwe's high female university participation (approximately 70%) to marriage market disequilibrium patterns documented in other contexts, demonstrating that educational surplus creates measurable pressure on hypergamous norms [1,7,8]. This framing advances understanding of patriarchy as partly sustained through institutional "matching rules" (who is considered appropriate spouse) and shows how demographic-educational shifts threaten those rules [2,8].

Rather than treating bride wealth as static cultural tradition, the study examines how women's economic autonomy creates documented pressure for either resistance (reinterpreting lobola as problematic) or institutional adaptation (recalibrating amounts or meanings) [11,14]. This contribution illuminates concrete mechanisms through which education can reshape patriarchal institutions while also revealing how patriarchy may persist through selective modification rather than disappearance. More so, the study shows that women's education and economic resources enhance intra-household bargaining power (shaping spending, children's schooling, resource allocation) while simultaneously documenting that such shifts can provoke conflict, stress, and potential violence when women's agency confronts entrenched male authority expectations [11,17,20]. This nuanced contribution treats empowerment as relational and contested, producing simultaneous gains in agency and risks of backlash.

The literature demonstrate that resilience and adaptive capacity of patriarchal marriage institutions mean societies may incorporate women's education and employment while preserving gendered domestic roles, male decision-making dominance, and violence vulnerability [10,15,16]. This counters linear progress assumptions while explaining how patriarchal systems adapt to new circumstances. The study adds insight into how scarcity of educated men may grant those men increased bargaining power in partner selection and marriage terms, potentially reinforcing rather than weakening patriarchal expectations [12,13]. This finding specifically addresses why female educational advantage does not automatically translate to female marriage market advantage. The study demonstrates that female educational surplus is not uniformly experienced: elite women leverage education into egalitarian arrangements or singlehood, while economically precarious educated women face constrained choices [12]. Generational cohort effects similarly

mediate outcomes [2,16]. This contribution refines analysis beyond simple "women versus patriarchy" framing by emphasizing stratification and cohort change as key mediating factors.

9. Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations requiring candid acknowledgment:

9.1 Reliance on Secondary Sources and Document Review

The analysis is grounded in document review methodology, drawing on studies from Zimbabwe and comparable contexts (South Africa, Ghana, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Ethiopia, India). While this strengthens conceptual comparison and enables synthesis across contexts, it simultaneously means the study cannot directly verify how these documented dynamics play out in contemporary Zimbabwean households and communities. Primary data collection through interviews, focus groups, or household surveys would provide essential verification of whether theoretical predictions match lived reality.

9.2 Limited Causality Establishment

The findings identify plausible relationships between female educational surplus and outcomes such as delayed marriage, bargaining shifts, conflict, and institutional adaptation. However, without primary longitudinal or experimental evidence, the study cannot definitively attribute observed changes in marriage behavior or patriarchal practices solely to women's educational advantage. Alternative explanations including economic crisis, unemployment, migration patterns, religious norm shifts, and legal changes may equally or more powerfully shape marriage outcomes. Causal attribution requires evidence this study cannot provide.

9.3 Context-Specificity and Transferability

The study draws heavily on research from India, China, Europe, and South Africa to theorize about Zimbabwe. While these contexts provide comparative leverage, differences in kinship structures, legal systems, religious contexts, and economic conditions may significantly mediate whether predicted outcomes actually occur in Zimbabwe specifically. Direct Zimbabwe research cannot yet be definitively synthesized with imported theoretical predictions.

10. Conclusion

This study examined the implications of female surplus in university graduation for patriarchal marriage institutions in Zimbabwe, where approximately 70% of university students are now female compared to 30% male. Drawing on systematic document review methodology and integrating three complementary theoretical frameworks such as the feminist institutional theory, marriage market theory and social change and gender transformation theory in which the research reveals complex dynamics of challenge, resistance, and potential transformation in marriage institutions. The findings establish that female educational advantage creates substantial structural pressure on patriarchal marriage systems organized around assumptions of male superiority. However, research simultaneously reveals significant resilience of patriarchal institutions, which may adapt to incorporate women's education while preserving fundamental power asymmetries dismantle deeply embedded patriarchal systems. For Zimbabwe, the coming decades will likely witness significant tensions and transformations in marriage institutions as increasing numbers of educated women navigate patriarchal systems structurally ill-suited to new demographic realities.

11. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should employ participatory methods engaging directly with educated Zimbabwean women and men to understand their lived experiences, negotiation strategies, and perspectives on navigating marriage in contexts of educational gender imbalance. Longitudinal studies tracking marriage patterns, household dynamics, and institutional changes over time would provide essential empirical evidence on actual transformation trajectories. Comparative research across African countries experiencing varying degrees of educational gender imbalance would illuminate how different contexts such as kinship structures, legal systems, economic conditions shape outcomes. Such research can inform policies and programs supporting genuine gender equality rather than superficial adaptations that preserve patriarchal power under reconfigured institutional forms.

Additionally, universities and tertiary institutions should develop deliberate mechanisms to attract male students to higher education through targeted recruitment, mentorship, and financial support, recognizing that significant gender imbalances in educational outcomes may themselves generate unintended social consequences requiring proactive institutional response.

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