

# Socio economic challenges of women in Ntepe Village, Gwanda District, Zimbabwe

## Abstract

This study seeks to explore the socio-economic challenges rural women in Zimbabwe face. The research adopted a qualitative method technique. This study reveals several socio-economic challenges that rural women in Zimbabwe face. The results from the study also show that women are still marginalised in many facets of community development activities because of policies that do not take their needs into account. Furthermore, the study identified that rural women remain vulnerable and exposed to high poverty levels as they fail to get the maximum required support from their husbands, community leaders and national government through its policies that have isolated them.

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## Introduction

In most parts of the world and particularly in Africa, the role being played by women in the economic growth of their communities often go unnoticed. Development programmes seem to have favoured urban women and exclude rural women, and thus, this study explores the socio-economic challenges that rural women encounter in their everyday lives. It examines the important role being played by rural women in improving their socio-economic position. This role is not seen as these women are not fairly supported in their efforts.

Women and men in terms of gender dynamics play different but significant roles in contributing to the economic growth of Gwanda District in Matabeleland, South Province, Zimbabwe.<sup>1</sup> However, it is rural women who are much more challenged than women in urban areas and men in rural areas. When development programmes are undertaken, these tend not to include rural women, and their challenges and experiences are marginalised, further impacting on their personalised experience of poverty and social exclusion. The livelihood of these women is altered as a result of business people building industries on the land that was used for subsistence farming.

In many African countries, customary and statutory laws exist side-by-side to limit women's access to resources such as land, and this leads to vulnerability and poverty.<sup>2</sup> Higgs and Smith<sup>3</sup> point out that who we are is connected to our past, our culture and our upbringing, and this has caused women in rural Zimbabwe to continue to experience discrimination and marginalisation. Women's poverty levels are at the centre of political discussions around the world as government put in place initiatives and plans to mitigate these challenges. The marginalisation of women has continued because they are not directly involved in these discussions. Chant<sup>4</sup> points out that most of these plans fail to take into account the complex relationship of gender and poverty by approaching women's challenges in the same manner as those of men.

Many rural women in Ntepe village, a district in Matabeleland South Province in Zimbabwe experience high levels of poverty due to factors such as political exclusion, marginalisation from decision making in matters that concern them, and lack of infrastructure, and this makes them dependent on human aid assistance. Matabeleland South Province is a dry province due to irregular rainfall and drought. Most women and men in this province rely on small-scale farming for their livelihood. There is also economic and social migration as men migrate to cities like Bulawayo and neighbouring countries such

as South Africa and Botswana for improved economic opportunities, thereby leaving women with the burden of looking after their families and farming.

The economic lapse in Zimbabwe around 2000 led to job losses for men, and their return to the rural areas led to added pressure on women to look after them.<sup>5</sup> Deindustrialisation has put a lot of pressure on women. For years, the city of Bulawayo has been the centre of job opportunities for both men and women, but because of political and economic decline and sanctions imposed on the country, many industries and companies had to close, leaving many jobless.<sup>5</sup> In rural Zimbabwe, and mostly in Ntepe village, women provide agricultural labour to try secure food security for the family, while men go to bottle stores and drink alcohol using the same money that the wife made from sales of firewood and vegetables. Women constitute a marginalised group in society.<sup>6</sup> Women and men have different perceptions and concerns regarding to poverty alleviation strategies. Women prefer receiving financial assistance to start irrigation schemes for vegetables, manage poultry and doing sewing projects, whereas men prefer to keep livestock. Due to climate change and as a result of irregular rainfall, livestock keeping has become a challenge as animals die from lack of water and food.

Therefore, it is important to consider that the challenges of women in rural areas and of women in urban areas are different and that appropriate development initiatives must be designed to suit the nature of their problems.

## Problem statement

The liberation struggle of Zimbabwe was centred predominantly on ownership and access to land as a result of unequal distribution.<sup>7</sup> The two dominant ethnic groups, the Ndebele and the Shona, have resulted in a bipartisan political environment to the detriment and marginalisation of the minority Ndebele population from Matabeleland South Province. Perceptions of the province being the locus of opposition politics to the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) government has resulted in economic under-investment, reduced development and unemployment. Men and women in this dry and drought-prone area rely overwhelmingly on farming activities, but the few farms that created employment were seized by government in the 2000s, leaving many unemployed.<sup>5</sup> Men migrated for employment and better opportunities, leaving women behind to farm and leaving villages in extreme poverty and with little access to resources.

The political instability and economic problems have led to many men migrating from Ntepe village to neighbouring countries in search of jobs. Women remain behind as heads of the family in the absence of their husbands, leading to high numbers of female-headed households. This leaves women with the burden of income generation through various means and vulnerable to poverty. Poverty increases in these families as women fail to meet the needs of their families due to lack of decent jobs. The position of women has become difficult as some have to walk long distances in search of firewood for selling, wake up early to till the land, and walk far to fetch water. All these challenges make them fail to provide decent meals to their families, and as a result these challenges become worse in the sense that even women end up following their husbands and leaving children behind leading to child-headed families. Hall, Marera and Boulle<sup>8</sup> state that there is widespread concern because the number of children living in child-headed households is rapidly increasing as a result of migration. Thus, families remain trapped in poverty.

## Supporting literature

### Dominance of males over rural women

Samovar and Porter<sup>9</sup> point out that masculinity is the extent to which the dominant values in society are male oriented. This is a direct translation of what happens within the village of Ntepe. Ntepe is rooted to its culture and tradition of viewing women as passive in community development. Mawane and Garanyemba was used in comparison to Ntepe on how the women cope with the socio-economic challenges. The culture of these villages is also male dominated and view women as a supportive structure in the family.<sup>2</sup> Men are viewed as the decision makers within the family, and this leaves women to support the beliefs and actions of men. Women are silenced; they seldom attend community meetings and are relegated to maintaining the homestead. Women are treated as minors while men are treated as heads of the family.<sup>2</sup> Men are recognised and respected more than women, and this gives an advantage to men in terms of treatment. Defined loosely as patriarchal, men are at an added advantage in these villages. Most women as wives are expected to submit to their husbands, even when the husband is irresponsible in everything but for the fact that he is a man, the wife should submit to him.

Mushonga<sup>10</sup> states that, "It is important that we celebrate the road that we have walked as women and the gains we have achieved but we should realise that there is still work to be done to ensure that women enjoy their rights". As much as there has been progress in trying to celebrate women empowerment there is still more work to be done in order to achieve this. Osava<sup>1</sup> states that women's rights have not been observed in some countries as much as expected. This is so because women are not heads of the households, they live in. Failure to observe women's rights further alienates them from societal activities. Due to cultural beliefs, tradition and the religion of Ntepe village, women have been denied a chance to exercise their rights. These above-mentioned villages offer programmes to men such as being given cattle to start animal husbandry and being given fertilisers and seed or maize seed to practice farming, while most of the women in the village who do practice farming are not supported in this regard.<sup>1</sup> These programmes are aimed at improving the standard of living by giving them income returns on the work done. Furthermore, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as World Vision, Christian Care and Red Cross offered programmes as food aid to alleviate the level of poverty that the villagers were witnessing. These NGOs also operated in the nearby villages of Mawane, Garanyemba and Manama. These NGOs did not only offer food aid, but they also offered education programmes to the villagers such as Voter's Roll

and Human Rights and the nearby villages already mentioned above also benefited from the programs.

Higgs and Smith<sup>3</sup> argue that who we are is connected to our past, our culture, our upbringing and our life today. This means that the inability to give sufficient support to women makes them believe that they are connected to this culture or past that does not value them and by so doing they remain vulnerable to poverty. Failure to give support to women by those in positions of power make them weak and fail to meaningfully contribute to means of community development due to lack of resources. Tanner, Bahadur, Simonet and Morsi point out that there is need to ensure poor and vulnerable countries are better equipped to access international finance. This kind of financial aid will allow local governments to design programs that seek to improve the standard of living of vulnerable groups such as the livelihood of rural women.

### Government efforts to curb gender inequality

Governments, especially in Africa, have tried to align their policies with those of the Western countries to try to curb gender inequality and promote women empowerment and development; however, this has not helped much as women still remain the vulnerable group in society. Policies have not changed much to accommodate women empowerment.<sup>11</sup> Different treaties, ranging from the Beijing Conference of 1995, the New Partnership for African Development, Rio 2010 and Agenda 21, have put women as the focal point of discussion to empower them, but the results have been slow. In order to improve this, Bailey and Buck<sup>12</sup> state that, "governments to build a framework for guiding investment in initiatives that stand to sustainably improve the livelihoods of rural populations whose livelihood security is at risk". The turning of the wheel has been so slow that women from different spheres of the world formed social movements, such as Umoja from Kenya and India's Women of Guyana, to fight for and protect their rights. These social movements are an indication that women feel their national governments have failed them. In Zimbabwe, over 80% of women live in communal areas where they practise farming, yet they do not own land.<sup>10</sup> The programme of land redistribution by the government of Zimbabwe left less than 18% of the land to be owned by women; a sign of the inequality in ownership of resources between women and men. These inequalities do not only hold back women, but their families and economies are affected as well, and this further affects the family structure and the household. It is in this regard that the research seeks to unmask the socio-economic challenges that have hindered the progress of women in rural areas of Zimbabwe.

According to Van der Waldt and Knipe,<sup>13</sup> development does not only involve the provision of services but also involves the empowerment and active participation of people in helping themselves. Therefore, in order for the Ntepe to develop its community members, especially women, it has to recognise them and offer support and programmes that will allow them to be independent.

### Impact of women abuse on their socio-economic status

Women are exposed to different kinds of abuse as a result of patriarchal dominance in Ntepe village. Rieter<sup>14</sup> points out that what women do is perceived as household work and what they talk about is called gossip, while men's work is viewed as the economic base of the society. The abovementioned statement alludes to the fact that women's work is not easily recognised and appreciated and is treated as of no importance. The issue of patriarchy remains an alarming issue that needs to be corrected in the modern global world that we live in. There is a need to change the existing patterns in Ntepe village.

Women are viewed as a support base in marriages, and therefore, they remain over shadowed by their husbands in terms of decision making within the household. The issue of poverty is complex and debatable in other instances where men are also affected. In this case, men experience poverty better than women since men have support structures that allow them to have access to more resources than women. Men tend to gain more respect than women, and women are not even allowed to attend community gatherings chaired by the village heads. They can only be in attendance to represent their absent husbands, but cannot make suggestions. This shows that within the household women's rights continue to be violated. Masanga argues that as a country Zimbabwe has beautiful policy papers on gender, laws and a new constitution, but these are mere window dressing and are not being implemented. If not so, Ntepe village would not be still practising patriarchy to continue to isolate and discriminate against women because of their gender.

The unequal distribution of resources contributes to the issue of women poverty in Ntepe village. Women are only viewed as the managers of resources in the household but not as part owners. Women must be treated better. Mushonga<sup>10</sup> points out that it is critical to note that the wording of Section 17(1) of the Constitution makes it mandatory for the state to promote gender balance, particularly for the participation of women in all spheres, economic, political and social, of Zimbabwean society. This gap must be addressed with regards to how Ntepe village view women and their roles. Women play an integral role in providing essentials to family: They cook, collect firewood, collect water and even cultivate the fields, yet they do not even own the equipment they use. Poverty between men and women in the same households is not the same in the sense that men by virtue of being men own their resources.

The issue of unequal distribution of resources existed in black societies before Zimbabwe gained independence.

In today's society, it is expected that resources should be shared equally and that women should also be part of this integration to eradicate their poverty. Addison and Laasko<sup>7</sup> point out that when independence was gained, Zimbabwe had unequal distribution of land. This has not changed yet, as women in Ntepe village still experience lack of land ownership. The reproductive role for women in providing food for the family gets defined in only that and nothing more. This makes women household property in most marriages. Ntepe village is rich in livestock or animal husbandry, and villagers use cows, goats and sheep for livelihood by selling meat for income. Women are the ones working in these areas to produce food for households, and due to climate change, women are affected most as the only means to provide for their families are being affected by different weather patterns.

Habtezion<sup>15</sup> points out that the degree to which people are affected by climate change is partly a function of their social status, gender, poverty and power and their access and control over resources. Women in Ntepe village are highly dependent on local natural resources for surviving. Drought makes women fail to maintain their livestock, thereby leaving them exposed to poverty due to the death of these animals that they use as a source of earning income for survival. Good climate that provides good rains allow women to produce land products to feed their families and sell the surplus.

Women have a key and crucial role in today's society. Many households in Ntepe village are headed by females. Females are left with a lot of burden by their husbands, either due to death or migration for employment in the cities or towns. Females are left with the burden of managing the family with minimal or no resources. If they are lucky, their husbands will send them money, but many husbands

forget their families, re-marry and leave their wives at home with the responsibility of raising the children alone.

If the situation worsens, women also migrate with the hope of finding jobs so that they can provide for their families and this leads to child-headed families. Russel<sup>16</sup> argues that this can be attributed to the level of poverty and woman's decisions to migrate as result of the difficulties they encounter when trying to provide for their families. There are cases where some families in Ntepe are now headed by children because of their mothers migrating to cities such as Bulawayo and even abroad to neighbouring countries like South Africa in search of better living conditions and jobs. Todaro and Smith<sup>17</sup> state that "rural women have less access to the resources necessary to generate stable income". This causes many women to migrate from their villages to better places in pursuit of having access to resources that will help provide food to their families.

### **Contribution of lack of access to resources to rural women's socio-economic status**

Lack of access to local natural resources makes women vulnerable and fail to provide for their children. Todaro and Smith<sup>17</sup> argue that "women and their dependents remain the most economically vulnerable group in the developing countries". This means that in developing and underdeveloped countries such as Zimbabwe women remain vulnerable to poverty because of the unequal distribution of resources. Sunderlin, Dewi, Pantadewo, Muller, Angelsen and Epprecht<sup>18</sup> point out that the remoteness of some villages also limits opportunities for alternative employment or income. This means that Ntepe's chance as a rural place to boost their chances of employment are slim.

Female-headed households experience poverty more severely. Chant<sup>19</sup> points out that women's responsibilities and obligation in the household are as a result of feminisation. As a female heading a family, responsibilities become so much that women find themselves trying to sell assets that they do not even have. Families end up being headed by women. Sometimes it is because the husband has passed on. The United Nations Development Plan (UNDP)<sup>20</sup> argues that widows are often dispossessed of their assets. This can be true in the sense that no one will stand for the widows in the village. Widows can also face far more daunting situations, like being banished from the village.

Women are sexually abused by their partners and because of fear of divorce, abuse and finding themselves with no shelter they keep quiet. Furthermore, women are exposed to various diseases from their partners. Gillet and Parr state that many women choose not to disclose their HIV status for fear of negative outcomes such as blame and rejection. Women live with a too big burden on their shoulders. Other women face physical abuse from their husbands. Meinck, Cluver and Boyes<sup>21</sup> claim that there is now conclusive evidence of the major and long-lasting negative effects of physical and sexual abuse that many women and children are still exposed to. According to UNIFEM,<sup>22</sup> the patterns of gender-based violence vary from place to place. Ntepe village experiences different forms of gender-based violence, including physical abuse.

### **Impact of political decisions on rural women**

The political space of any country determines the level of development of that country. Political decisions have either positive or negative bearing on the economic development of communities, especially the rural poor. Communities whose economies are stable are a result of sound political decisions that favour growth and development. Giddings, Hopewood and O'Brien<sup>23</sup> assert that there



are different policies to political and policy frameworks and different attitudes towards change and means of change. These policies need to abolish women's isolation in terms of acquiring resources. For example, most rural women practice agricultural activities for income generation to support their families, but none of these women own land or are included in agricultural programmes that include new technologies. This is exactly what women in Ntepe village experience: They practice subsistence farming but none of them own land because the land belongs to their husbands and male children.

Development is political. Some places are developed as a result of political affiliation, for instance, who you know in the political space. These are problems that are embedded in Zimbabwe. Chiumbu and Musemwa<sup>24</sup> argue that Zimbabwean crisis is in fact a series of crises. The problems are a result of a host of factors. Ntepe village is in Matabeleland South Province, a Ndebele speaking region. Historically, there are two dominant ethnic groups in Zimbabwe, the Ndebele and the Shona. The Ndebele come from Matabeleland and the Shona come from Mashonaland. The Ndebele are labelled as supporters of the opposition party, the Zimbabwe African People's Union Patriotic Front (ZAPU-PF). ZANU-PF is the ruling party and has the power to develop communities. Ntepe village is one of many villages that is underdeveloped because of political reasons. The village lack infrastructure such as schools and clinics that could help local residents. This lack of development negatively impacts women who cannot go to clinic to access medical help and for family planning contraceptives. Girls find it difficult to walk the long distances to school and they end up dropping out. Mtetwa, Dziro and Takaza<sup>25</sup> state that most communities cannot access education and health services, not only because they cannot afford them but also because they are too far from them. This has led women and girls in this village to experience more struggles than their counterparts. Development initiatives that other districts get have not happened in Ntepe as it is politically labelled to be supporters of the opposition party.

### Causes of female-headed households in Ntepe Village

Economic instability is rising in the global world, across Africa, in the region of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and more particularly, in Zimbabwe, whose economy has been eroded and where there are high levels of inflation. Factors such as political instability have caused the decline in the Zimbabwean economy.<sup>26</sup> Unplanned land reform programmes implemented in 2000 crippled the economy even further. Many industries closed in Zimbabwe, leaving men to seek employment in neighbouring countries such as South Africa and Botswana. This migration caused many women to remain in charge of their families Gandure and Marongwe.<sup>27</sup> Women resorted to selling firewood, vegetables and beads in order to survive. This new family set-up altered the nutrition levels within households as many families could not afford to have three decent meals a day. Poverty levels also rose in Ntepe village.

Divorce is another factor that contribute to female-headed households. Chant<sup>4</sup> asserts that there is considerable evidence that upon divorce, women and children suffer and experience emotional trauma and economic decline. If the husband was the provider in terms of paying school fees, this often changes and children need to leave school. All these factors promote poverty within the family set-up.

### Political interference with official aid

For official aid to be effective, there must be no politics involved. In most parts of Africa, Zimbabwe in particular, politics has been interfering with official aid disbursement. The process of democracy in Zimbabwe remains unclear, and mismanagement of official aid is

suspected, though there is not sufficient evidence of this act. Chiumbu and Musemwa<sup>24</sup> state that politics in Zimbabwe has hindered the effective distribution of food aid assistance. It is suspected that the ZANU-PF government label food aid donors as supporters of the opposition party who undermines the democratic revolution and ideologies of the ruling party by influencing members to support the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

## Findings and discussions

The findings of the study have been categorised in themes. Different themes give clear findings of the study in different levels. This provides an opportunity to address a variety of challenges faced by rural women in Ntepe village which are in general experienced by other rural women in other areas of the province, the country and the also the continent.

### Theme 1: Lack of education

It emerged that the level of primary education for participants is at 80%. This means that there is low rate of participants that have attained secondary level education. Only 10% of the participants attained secondary education and another 10% have a college education. This qualifies the manner in which the participants responded: Most participants lacked confidence in their responses because they do not know how to express themselves. Education plays critical role in allowing participants confidence and to engage in meaningful discussions. The study points out that most of these women whose education ended at primary level were deprived and denied a basic human right, which is education. Women have a low socio-economic status as a result of lack of education. Baden<sup>28</sup> asserts that inadequate education is a contributing factor to women's poverty. This means that minimal education increases chances of poverty through lack of employment due to lack of qualifications for certain jobs.

The study points out that women become less confident in themselves to actively participate in community development projects. They fail to raise their voices to address matters that concern and affect them directly, not because they are ignorant but because they lack the character and ability to confidently express themselves. All this is caused by lack of education because they feel inferior and incomplete when they compare themselves to others. This continues their social exclusion from critical platforms that can promote and improve their position in society. Women remain marginalised in public policy participation because they did not complete their primary education. This study's findings show that the level of education plays a critical role in promoting and building local currency.

### Theme 2: Lack of resources

Lack of resources is a critical element that contribute to women's poverty. Theme 1 showed that 80% of the participants only have primary education and that the reason why most of the women did not to proceed to secondary education is lack of resources, such as money, schools, clinics and roads. This study highlights lack of resources as the cause of the village's underdevelopment, leading to a shortage of schools. The school that is available is very far and it is impossible for girls to walk the distance.

Most women in the village practise subsistence farming for food security in the household. Women farmers lack the necessary equipment to increase crop yield and facilitate better food production. The lack of appropriate resources has promoted or acted as stumbling blocks that shattered their hope and dreams of obtaining better sustainable livelihoods for their families. This lack of resources is very

clear in the inequality gap between men and women and that women's poverty are much more severe than that of men. The fact that women remain socially excluded in decision making that can improve their position in society means that they remain unable to access resources and assets that may improve the family structure for better sustainable livelihood. The study further reveal that not only do rural women lack resources, but their poverty is increased and facilitated by factors such as lack of access to credit. Credit plans available to rural women further drain them because they do not have stable jobs to qualify for these, even though these institutions claim that the programmes are meant to empower women. The study findings reveal that for every decision woman make, they must first get their husbands' approval.

The study further highlighted those institutions such as banks consider rural women high-risk borrowers without surety or a clear payment plan. Even though women are often seen as more trustworthy than men, they remain socially excluded from many facets of community development. These experiences confine women to low socio-economic positions that keep them in poverty. Rural women in Ntepe village practice small-scale farming, but because of the persistent drought they have trouble producing food product for their household needs. The acute economic decline of the Republic of Zimbabwe in early 2000 worsened the plight and position of poverty in rural women. This means that even institutions such as banks that had been offering credit to women as smallholder farmers seeking to boost food production and security could not help women, leaving them with no means or access to opportunities.

### Theme 3: Culture and traditional values

The study conducted in Ntepe village revealed that men still dominate women in decision making within the household, and this makes women vulnerable and weak, especially considering that they do most of the work in the household but cannot make decisions about what they do. Everything needs to be run by the husband first. The culture and tradition in the village still promotes social discrimination, oppression and exploitation of women. Women's roles are mostly defined within the household structures, and the village thinks that it is a taboo for women to work in towns; those that do are labelled as having loose morals and not having been brought up well by their families. This is a challenge experienced by rural women. Women are expected to live by the standards set by their communities. If they act or think otherwise, they face the consequences of domestic abuse. Though there have been numerous global initiatives to address issues of social discrimination in societies, there is little evidence that it has worked since women remain the most marginalised group. The following statement by one interviewed women shows the hardship women in Zimbabwe faced:

*As a married woman with four children, my husband is a drunkard and spends his time drinking. The little that he makes he uses it for alcohol.*

*I don't work. I only do piece jobs in people's yards to feed my children. My children have dropped out from school because I don't have money to pay school fees. The little that I make from the fields I only managed to buy food. Again, culture and tradition in this village make us women to suffer because it doesn't support women to leave their homes and go to look for work. If my husband is drunk, he gets abusive and beats me in front of the children. Because of my role as a wife, I can't even report him because in this village you will be seen as lacking morals or manners if you do that.*

The above statement pinpoints the nature of abuse women face. Women have to plan and see to it that there are meals for the family

while men are busy spending money on alcohol. The little that women have those institutions to be shared among all the family members. As if this was not enough, women are often physically abused by their drunk husbands. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development,<sup>29</sup> Zimbabwe's new constitution recognises that men and women are equal and should have opportunities in political, economic and cultural spaces. Despite this, this study revealed many gaps that need to be addressed related to women being abused by their husbands.

### Theme 4: Drought

The study's findings indicated that the drought further increased the poverty status of women. Women mostly rely on subsistence farming, and because of the drought women cannot farm for food production and security. This has negatively affected households' food supply. Lack of agricultural input has also impeded women's efforts at food production. As a result of the drought, even livestock such as cattle that is very valuable in rural areas got sick from diseases such as anthrax and foot and mouth and eventually died. This caused a lot of strain since cattle provide women with milk that they use as a relish and some sell to make an income. Women to a large extent carry the greater responsibility for food provision in the household, and drought has made this harder.<sup>30</sup>

Women in this village as smallholder farmers experience various challenges due to drought, such as poor soil nutrients that diminished crop production. This has led to many families experiencing hunger and starvation. Children has to go to school on empty stomachs and some had to drop out of school. Learner performance at school dropped. Every child is born to succeed and no child should be a failure, however, the drought made this assertion difficult to achieve. Drought cause many imbalances within the household structure and have many effects, but women feel it most because of their role in the family and their responsibility to feed their families. Drought has destabilised the local economy, causing funds that were meant for other community projects to be shifted to food relief. Funds get diverted from their main objectives simply because hunger remains the main priority.<sup>31</sup>

This study further revealed that the complex nature of drought exposed rural women to other challenges. Water is essential in any household for various purposes such as cooking, washing, drinking and bathing, but because of the drought water became scarce and women have to walk long distances in search of water. This means that rural women's burden increased because they had to walk long distances to find water. Balancing household duties became a burden to them. Women are not the only ones affected by drought, and even livestock suffer from lack of grass and water. The study found that there is an urgent need for humanitarian aid in the form of food packages to help women feed their families.

### Theme 5: Migration

The study found that due to economic hardships many men have left their homesteads to go to towns and even neighbouring countries in search of a better standard of living with better employment opportunities. Furthermore, the findings from the study pointed to many families having to live with broken homes due to migration. Family members have to leave their loved ones in search of better employment opportunities, and as a result, families are divided by long-distance relationships that are hard to maintain. The study also revealed that because of migration, there are many more female-headed households.<sup>32</sup>

Two groups of female-headed households emerged, the *de jure* and the *de facto*. The *de jure* female-headed households are those where husbands are absent because of death or divorce. Whereas, *de facto* female-headed households are those where the husbands are absent from their daily lives yet remain the sole decision makers for the household. The *de jure* households experienced different challenges than the *de facto* households because the women have the extra burden of looking after the family with no additional support. This does not mean that *de facto* households are not experiencing challenges, but theirs are better for the mere fact that they have husbands who at times help them lessen the burden through emotional support by listening and encouraging them. The study findings highlighted the distinctive responsibilities that the two groups experience in the household. However, both the *de jure* and *de facto* remain marginalised groups and are socially excluded from most community development projects, thereby impacting their socioeconomic status in their communities. Hunger and poverty force women to revert to other means of making money to support their families. In so doing, they expose themselves to various diseases. Food insecurity, socio-economic challenges and HIV prevalence are closely related and a result of poverty.

### Theme 6: Lack of Government support

Government support is crucial for the sustainable development of any community. The study's findings revealed that rural women were given minimal support to face their socio-economic challenges. Government support can take many forms, such as offering rural women training on income generating projects or microloans, but none of this have materialised, thereby continuing to expose women to poverty. The political climate in the Zimbabwe has also worsened the position of women in the village. Ntepe village is in Matabeleland South, a province that has been abandoned by the government due to the belief that people in this province support the opposition party. Other provinces like Mashonaland received government support; for example, smallholder female farmers were given fertilisers and agricultural equipment. This has not happened in Ntepe village. This political discrimination has led to the lack of appropriate infrastructure that can benefit community members and improve the plight of rural women by participating in empowerment projects.

Women cannot remain isolated from community activities, and government support for women is key to their empowerment. According to Van der Waldt and Knipe,<sup>13</sup> "development does not involve only the provision of services but also it involves the empowerment and active participation of people in helping themselves". This means that women should not only be given handouts, they should also be offered training and workshops that will improve their skills to be self-reliant. The study revealed that lack of government support discourages rural women to actively participate in community development projects.<sup>33</sup>

### Conclusion and recommendations

The study findings shows that there are various socio-economic challenges that women in rural Ntepe village face. The recommendations made here are in line with helping the community of Ntepe village improve their poverty position and are drawn from the findings.

#### Recommendations to the Central Government of Zimbabwe

The central government of Zimbabwe should change its policies that exclude women politically and economically. The First National Gender Policy was drafted in 2004 by the government of Zimbabwe and it provided a gender perspective on the principle of 'Growth with

Equity' to address gender and race inequalities. The policy increased awareness of gender equality and equity for social wellbeing and a sound economy. However, it failed to reach its target, and women continue to be marginalised in development activities. It further failed to address the 2008 SADC Protocol and the MDGs, which objectives were not achieved.

The Constitution of Zimbabwe was amended and adopted in 2013, and was widely acknowledged for its strong, firm commitment to gender equality. Chapter 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of Zimbabwe on National Objectives spelled out gender balance as one of the objectives to guide the state, all institutions and agencies of the government towards women empowerment. The silence in women's voices affect their active participation in matters that promote their own empowerment, thus the urgent need for the central government to address inequalities that still exist in communities. These policies must be conducive for institutions to be more responsive to poor women. The policies must remove barriers to political participation for women. Women's rights need to be observed, and therefore, these policies need to address that. Domestic violence against women must end, but this can only happen if the central government puts policies in place that will combat this and take stringent measures against those who abuse women. Women are not safe in their communities, and for this to change they need support from the central government through policies that will condemn the behaviour.

The central government through its policies must create an environment that is conducive to both foreign and local investment. Through this platform it needs to target empowering women to be more independent and shift away from only being household material. Investment means the development of communities, and when this happens, it should be a priority to train rural women with skills that empowers them. It is the central government's responsibility to see to it that a favourable environment is created to promote women's active participation in community activities. This will improve women's involvement and raise their self-esteem. The empowerment of women should be done through workshops and training to teach them skills so that they can stand on their own.

#### Recommendations to local government

The local government or local municipality is a direct vehicle that must seek to improve the conditions and position of rural women by providing and facilitating workshops and training to empower women with various skills. In order for women to move beyond only being useful in the household, local government must design policies that support grassroots development and make women an integral part of it. There should be workshops and training to teach women different skills, such as managing income generating projects and savings and investment skills. This will boost their confidence to participate in community development projects since they will learn how to engage with each other. The workshops and training should take into account programmes that will promote women's participation and improve their skills and knowledge to manage resources.

The local government need also to prioritise women farmers by equipping them with training that will enable them to use appropriate farming methods to improve food production and security. This training will give women farmers the appropriate skills and tools they need to mitigate failure and to produce high yields. The training should also teach women which plants are better suited to dry areas. This will enhance a sustainable approach and allow food production to continue during droughts. If women master these skills, it will improve their household skill to provide essential services to their families.



## Recommendations to NGOs, including World Vision The

The NGOs play a pivotal role in improving people's standard of living through providing food aid relief. However, it is very important for NGOs to maintain their objectivity and operate within the framework of the Constitution of the Republic of Zimbabwe so that there will be no conflict of interest. The NGOs must operate within its jurisdiction and not overlap their responsibilities, and this should be made possible by a supportive environment from the central government through its policy reform. World Vision will need to exercise impartiality when distributing and implementing its food programme. Everyone should know how the NGOs operate so that there is no confusion. As NGOs seek to help, they should consider the conditions of the village and be mindful of addressing the interests of Ntepe rural women and not their own, and in so doing they will be able to address the core needs of the people.

It is very important that as Ntepe villagers receive external help in the form of food aid relief from NGOs, their culture and traditions are respected. Their vulnerable position should not expose them to being undermined and made to feel inferior. Therefore, it is the duty of the NGOs to understand and respect the culture of the local people. The assistance given to Ntepe village should not be a platform for NGOs to degrade people's way of doing things and their beliefs.

## Recommendations to the Ministry of women and youth development

### Awareness campaigns

The ministry should create awareness campaigns to train women and educate them in workshops on their rights. The campaign should aim to improve women's active participation in decision-making activities. The campaigns should be designed to raise awareness on issues that affect women in their everyday lives. The campaigns should act as an instructional tool that point at various issues of inequality in the community. Women's voices should be heard through the awareness, and not only heard but given appropriate and necessary support.

### Recommendations to rural women

Women should adopt a 'none but ourselves' approach to form groups or cooperatives that will engage them in providing possible solutions to the challenges they face. Ntepe village women should study the case studies of the SEWA group in India and the Umoja group in Kenya who formed co-operatives and helped each other to take control of their situations. It is only women who can change their position with regard to poverty. Groups or co-operatives will teach women different skills and life experiences to share with others. The SEWA and Umoja groups created various income generating projects to improve the socio-economic challenges they face, and through solidarity they were able to achieve their goals. The women do embroidery, poultry, irrigation schemes and stokvels, and all these generate income that sustain their livelihood. Engaging in co-operative groups will enable rural women to share skills, ideas and work together to improve their social wellbeing.

With rise of women abuse in different parts of Zimbabwe, women from Ntepe village should choose women leaders that will represent them in community meetings and will act as the voice of the many women who cannot afford to stand for themselves. The study recommends that these forum groups be led by women as they understand their own needs. The forum groups should act as a protective

safety net for women as a marginalised and vulnerable group. It will give women a voice to protect them against discrimination.

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## Conflicts of interest

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