

## Problems Faced by Rural Women in Buhera District of Manicaland South Province of Zimbabwe

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### Abstract

Rural women account for a great proportion of the agricultural labour force, produce the majority of food grown especially in subsistence farming and perform most of the unpaid care work in rural areas. Women in general, are the backbone of both cash crop and subsistence farming, yet their non-market productive and non-productive activities are neither marketable nor recognised as economic outputs. In formal employment, they are concentrated in low pay, low grade sectors with poor promotion prospects. They are denied the tools and means of sustainability and still confront considerable discrimination that constitutes a major obstacle to increased productivity. Through their toil, knowledge and nurturing capacities rural women make tremendous contributions to food and agricultural production. However, studies show persistent gaps that impact and constrain rural women in their roles. The main objective of this study was to make an analysis of the problems faced by rural women in Buhera South district of Manicaland Province in Zimbabwe. The study employed the descriptive survey design and used both quantitative and qualitative methods in the collection of data. Data was collected using a semi structured questionnaire, focus group discussions and a semi structured interview. The findings from the study showed that poverty resulting from the depletion of natural resources and gender inequality are the underlying causes to the problems that these rural women are facing. These problems form a vicious circle that deprives women of their fundamental rights and freedoms as human beings. The study therefore recommended that the government must always approve rural development that is sustainable. Responsible ministries need to increase their political will on issues pertaining to rural women employing techniques of gender responsive budgeting to make sure that the budget has provisions for the unique needs of rural women and all disadvantaged in rural areas. The purpose of this paper was to highlight the problems that Buhera women face then suggest recommendations for the eradication of poverty in rural households as a way of developing a more practical approach to sustainable development for Buhera district of Manicaland province in Zimbabwe.

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**Keywords:** Buhera, development, problems, rural women, Zimbabwe

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### INTRODUCTION

Rural women constitute one fourth of the world's population (Block 2010, UN Women, 2012). They are leaders, producers, entrepreneurs, and service providers, their contributions are vital to the well being of their families, communities and economies. They play an important role in the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UN Women, 2012). In many developing countries women constitute more than 50% of the rural population and up to 50%-70% of the agricultural labour force (UN, 1992; FAO, 1997; ZWRCN, 2012). The United Nations Secretary General, refers to them as unsung heroes (UN Women, 2012). They play a key role in supporting their households and communities in achieving food and nutrition security, generating income and improving livelihoods and overall well being (Women Watch, 2013), yet they make up the majority of the 1.4 billion poorest people in the World. They work the longest and hardest often on pieces of land over which they have no ownership. It is estimated that 60% of the chronically hungry are women and girls and a fifth of the world population which is living below the poverty datum line the

majority of them are women and girls (ZWRCN, 2012).

Over 80% of women in Zimbabwe live in communal areas where they form the bulk of the farmers and provide most of the labour. The effective participation of women in these areas help in sustaining development (UN, 1992), yet everyday around the world, rural women and girls face persistent structural constraints that prevent them from fully enjoying their human rights and hampers their efforts to improve their lives as well as those around them. (Women Watch, 2012). The natural environment, that is land, water, forests and mineral are very important and closely linked to women's daily activities. These women largely depend on the land for the sustenance of their households yet in many countries there are customary and legal obstacles to land ownership for women, this deprives rural women of the privileges enjoyed by their male counterparts or urban women. Gender, cultural norms and security issues make it more difficult for women than for men in accessing public services,

social protection, employment and markets (UN Women, 2012).

The problems of rural women can be divided into four main categories that is economic, social, family and individual (FAO,1996).These problems are interconnected and they are closely linked to environmental, social and political changes taking place in countries .For many rural women the transition from one political system to another and the depletion of the natural environment has meant increased economic problems even loss of paid labour and unemployment (FAO, 1996). The lack of women's economic activities is not simply a women's issue, it is a development problem which must be addressed, because gender equality, poverty reduction and development are inextricably linked (UN,1992).It is important to take note of the problems of women.

#### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Rural women play a key role in the development of communities yet they represent the poorest and the less privileged in most communities. Despite various initiatives that have been put in place to reduce poverty in rural areas of Zimbabwe, not much has changed for rural Buhera women. Of the scarce research that has been done on Buhera district, there has been very little focus on the challenges that Buhera women face in their day to day activities. The haphazard construction of roads, schools, clinics and hospitals in the name of development has contributed greatly to women's inability to live in harmony with the environment thereby adding to their problems. This research therefore, was set out to explore the problems faced by women in this district.

#### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The study was carried out in Buhera district only because of limited funding. There was no funding for the study so the researcher had to use own resources, which allowed only one district to be covered by the study.

#### **Buhera South District**

Buhera South district is found in Manicaland Province of Zimbabwe and it comprises of Muzokomba, Chitambo and Mutiusinazita as the main business centres with Birchnough Bridge as a tourist attraction and a Growth Point in the district (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2011). This district is 93% rural (Mugumbate, 2010) and the people survive on subsistence farming and various forms of employment in cities and towns all over the country. Poverty levels in this district have increased as employment has become increasingly high and the recurrent droughts have also affected activities (Zimbabwe Election Support Network -ZESN, 2008).There are eight health facilities in this district and these are about twenty to thirty kilometres apart.

There are four non-governmental organisations operating in this area and they focus on poverty alleviation, education assistance, girl child assistance and food distribution.(Parliament of Zimbabwe 2011). The major challenges i this district are poor to very bad road networks, infertile soils as well as food shortages.

There is a general lack of access to the means of production for rural Buhera women. Even though there are two urban set ups in the district, namely, Murambinda (Buhera North) and Birchnough Bridge (Buhera South) Growth Points, the majority of women live in remote areas such as Machiragwama, Romorehoto, Bhegedhe Mutepfe Dune and Muchuva villages. These villages are very far away from urban centres and most of them are more than fifteen kilometres from the Birchnough Bridge – Murambinda main road .In these villages life is semi traditional punctuated by mainline and Pentecostal religious activities.

#### **STUDY OBJECTIVES**

The main objective of the study was to analyse the problems faced by rural women in Buhera South district. The study also aimed at achieving the following sub objectives:

- i) To establish the causes of women's problems
- ii) To identify the problems of rural women in Buhera South District
- iii) To highlight the socio-economic effects of women's problems
- iv) To find solutions to these perennial problems

#### **METHODOLOGY**

The study was a descriptive survey which was carried out in Buhera South District of Manicaland in Zimbabwe. Data was collected using focus group discussions, semi the questionnaire and the interview. Each focus group comprised of 8-10 people on average. Focus group discussions were held at communal gatherings that normally take place at townships, in schools or at the chief or village head's residence .This study used two township gatherings and three parents' meetings at different schools. In these meetings the researcher randomly selected ten women for focus group discussions and thirty women to answer the questionnaire. Two women per section were purposively chosen for the interview.

#### **Data Presentation**

In this section the study presented the biographical data of the respondents .Data relating to women's ages , academic qualification and the economic activities that they do were collected and presented in table form as shown below :

**Table 1: Background information of women Academic Qualifications**

| Qualification     | Frequency  | Percentage |
|-------------------|------------|------------|
| Grade 7 and below | 118        | 78.6       |
| “O” Level         | 27         | 18         |
| Beyond “O” Level  | 5          | 3.3        |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>150</b> | <b>100</b> |

**women’s age in years**

| Age in years | frequency  | Percentage % |
|--------------|------------|--------------|
| 16-25        | 17         | 11.3         |
| 25-35        | 24         | 16           |
| 36- 46       | 27         | 18           |
| 46-55        | 71         | 47.3         |
| 55 +         | 11         | 7.3          |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>150</b> | <b>100</b>   |

**Women’s economic activities**

| Economic activity     | frequency  | Percentage % |
|-----------------------|------------|--------------|
| Vegetable vending     | 27         | 18           |
| Flea market operating | 48         | 32           |
| Cross boarder trade   | 28         | 18.6         |
| Hut decorator         | 7          | 4.6          |
| Domestic maids        | 10         | 6.6          |
| None of the above     | 30         | 20           |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>150</b> | <b>100</b>   |

Source: Study

Women’s low educational qualifications determines the extent and manner in which they participate in economic activities. Much of the economic activities that women do are an extension of the household duties. These activities are low paying and they do not give women wide economic opportunities but just to improve their own welfare and that of their households.

**Table 2: Economic and social problems of women**

| Problem                         | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Poverty                         | 117       | 78         |
| Currency                        | 103       | 68.6       |
| Illiteracy                      | 114       | 76         |
| Distant social services         | 138       | 92         |
| Ignorance of technology         | 63        | 42         |
| Unemployment of spouses         | 57        | 38         |
| Extra marital affairs           | 21        | 14         |
| HIV/AIDS                        | 123       | 82         |
| Wife beating                    | 49        | 32.6       |
| Female headed households        | 19        | 12.6       |
| Dissertation                    | 15        | 10         |
| Poor sanitation                 | 23        | 15.3       |
| Malnutrition                    | 40        | 26.6       |
| Diminishing sources of firewood | 57        | 38         |
| Poor harvests                   | 80        | 83.2       |
| Domestic Violence               | 63        | 42         |
| The use of technology           | 57        | 38         |

Source: Study

Women’s problems are interconnected but they are strongly rooted in environmental degradation and gender inequalities .Gender inequality causes women’s poverty, and economic dependence on men. On the other hand illiteracy due to religious beliefs and cultural norms contributes greatly to women’s poor relationship with the environment.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Interviews were held with randomly selected women. In the following section are found some of the responses from interviewees:

- As women we depend on the work that we do and also sell beasts to people or at the market but at times we are cheated by our husbands or the buyers at the end of the day the money one gets will be ten times less than one would be supposed to get.
- This issue of using the US dollar gives us problems especially when they say dollar for two and when I must use denominations from the rand or pula as change for a US dollar transaction.
- Transport is a problem here .Timetables for buses are not user friendly, the roads are very bad so women have problems of getting to our markets, to clinics and to hospitals .Hyenas are all over attacking people and buses are leaving as early as 2 or 3 am.
- My husband left for Chiyadzwa ( for gold panning activities) three years ago and he has never returned. I have four school going children and I am not employed, it is really difficult for most women in my situation
- I am a widow and a grandmother of seven orphans (due to HIV/AIDS). At my age I really find it difficult to raise these children from my meagre resources.
- For most women in polygamous marriages raising children is the woman’s issue, paying school fees for children becomes a great challenge.
- Limited grazing area because of increasing human settlement
- When one is suspected of belonging to a certain political party, one can be victimised in a number of ways like burning of houses, being beaten for dead or even be gang raped

Patriarchy which works together with oppressive religious and traditional norms take advantage of women’s illiteracy to oppress women. The custom in this district is that key resources like land and cattle cannot be owned by women. If a woman happens to get a cow in her name (normally from the marriage of her daughter), and then decides to sell it for some reason , she cannot do it totally on her own .She must seek some male help either from her husband or from her brothers. In the process women are cheated

by men in such a way that some will even regret the whole idea of selling the beast.

From January 2009 the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe legalised the use of foreign currencies such as the South African rand ,the Botswana pula, pound sterling. euro and the United States Dollar in Zimbabwe (Kramarenko, et al 2010; Steve and Kwok, 2009). The most popular currency is the US dollar but there are no US coins to change the dollar, so the pula and the rand are used for that purpose. The use of these currencies in one transaction becomes a challenge for these women .Most of the women do not have knowledge of these currencies. When this study was carried out it was five years after the introduction of the multicurrency system but some women had never handled a fifty US dollar note. Lack of education, poverty, issues on HIV/AIDS, poor harvests and scarce resources were identified as problems in this district .Affiliation to certain political parties emerged as another problem for women. Some respondents highlighted cases when women were gang raped or had their houses burnt in the name of politics. This kind of victimisation has left women homeless and stripped of personal dignity and hope for survival. This is what women lamented most because when one is suspected of being affiliated to certain political parties she/he would be denied food aid until she/he publicly repents. In this district food aid from donor agencies is very critical because food production is at pathetic levels even Mugumbate(2010) had observed that food deficit is a persistent problem in this area.

**Economic and Social Problems**

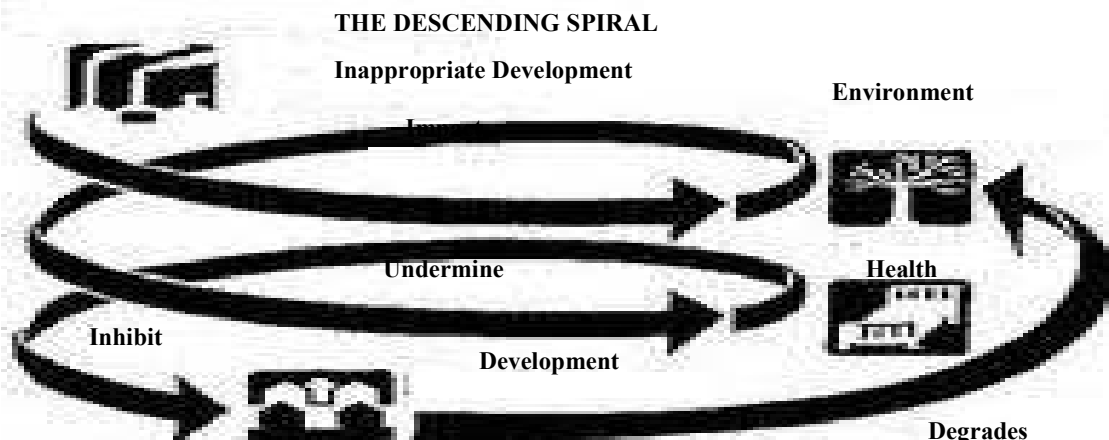
Despite African women’s active role in the management and protection of urban and rural environment, they are discriminated against with respect to their access to and control over land and property. Legislation, traditions and harmful practices relating to religion and social norms prevent women from inheriting and having control over land and

property (United Nations Environment Programme, 1994). After the land redistribution exercise in Zimbabwe, over 80% of A1 and A2 land in Zimbabwe was taken by men while women received less than 18% (ZWRCN 2012). Women’s lack of control on key resources imply that women cannot fulfil their potential even in the development of rural areas and this inequality does not hold only women back , but their families , their communities and local economies (IFAD 2011 ).Land and forests are primary sources of agricultural production and are essential to maintain human life and well being. The poor use and maintenance of the environment has led to environmental degradation, reduced agricultural activity and poverty. Nayak (2004) noted that there is a two way linkage between poverty and environmental degradation. Women with little or no resources to depend on are affected more by poverty which adds to the myriad of women’s problems.

Past and present neglect of the basic rules of pastoral and agro-pastoral systems has been and still is the main cause of environmental degradation and decline in animal and crop production. Areas that used to thrive from diverse agro pastoral systems have grown to be bare deserts. Western education took long to realise the importance and value of traditional farming practices which were at one time considered as primitive and heathen . On the same note the African elites inherited the same mentality even in the post-colonial era . Traditional methods that were environmental friendly have been abandoned and gradually the environment is slowly depleted which has brought social and economic problems (Otim, 1992).

The following figure illustrates the cyclic nature of women’s problems and how they relate to environmental degradation.

How the depletion of the natural resources adds to the problems of women



Source: adapted from UNEP, in Rodda 1991 <http://www.fao.org/docrep/v5406e/v5406e02.htm> (accessed 14 December 2013)

When there is an overuse of natural resources people's survival is at stake. Due to limited resources they attack the environment for survival. That way they create more problems for themselves. (Pinstrup et al, 2004). Issues of poor health, malnutrition, poor harvests and general poverty are strongly linked to the state of the natural environment which is key to rural survival. Besides the discriminatory land distribution processes, poor access to agricultural inputs and other resources, rural women also face challenges of sustaining households in the vagaries of climate change (ZWRN, 2012)

Change in the environment is also associated to development. The clearing of natural vegetation for the construction of new buildings brings in a variety of problems for society especially women. In this district a lot of new schools have been built, existing business centres are enlarging, the introduction of bush boarding facilities have also contributed to the enlargement of business centres and the exertion of more pressure on the environment. The housing investment, a major user of wood products has been rapidly growing owing to the increasing population in the area and causing widespread deforestation (Zaccheus & Nwokoma, 2013). Much of the natural vegetation that used to grow in this area has been cleared, the natural fruit rich in nutritional value, the vegetative cover and the shade for humans and animals all have been cleared leaving land bare and infertile. Firewood is now a problem in the Muzokomba, Manjokota, Nyadi and Matsakanure villages. Women use firewood because it is a cheap and affordable source of energy since electricity and kerosene or gas are too expensive for many of these rural dwellers (Yokubu & Iduma, 2002).

Availability of water is a growing challenge in the Mutiusinazita and Bhegehde villages. Being in region four and five, most of these villages receive very low rainfall but indications are that of late the situation has been worsening and drought has been grown to be a very common in the district. Much of the drinking water is from rivers or boreholes drilled by donor organisations (Muris, 2010). In the event that a village fails to get a borehole it means that women have to travel very long distances to get safe water. A few privileged families use scotch carts for fetching water from distant sources. Unfortunately poor households do not have this privilege so women have to carry the water using their heads.

Costs of transportation are high due to poor roads networks. Often times transport providers are not prepared to deliver goods to certain areas considered inaccessible, so women have to make do with carrying produce on top of their heads across rivers and bad terrain. In the process they sleep on cold floors, travel long distances on foot at the end of the

day the majority of them make heavy losses and end up in serious health problems.

Because of the above scenario, there is need for research and an interpretation of indigenous traditions and cultures with sober minds. The greatest sign of hope for women from the agricultural and environmental point of view is the silent grass root revolution taking place in villages across Buhera. Hundreds of farmers are organising themselves into village self help groups with the help of NGOs and churches. The small scale farmers are aware that due to wrong government development strategies, they have been faced with growing challenges and difficulties which in some areas have contributed to rapid environmental degradation and decline food production and standard of living. The strains have been especially immense for women and children. Today rural women in Buhera have to walk for distances ranging from 1-30 kilometres in search of water and firewood and 70 kilometres or more to sell their produce. A lot of the mazhanje, matohwe and mauyu (natural fruits) being sold in Bulawayo, Gweru, Masvingo and Zvishavane are from Buhera (Sundays News, November, 24, 2013)

Economic and social problems are closely connected. When women leave their families to go and sell their wares in some distant places like Murambinda or Birchnough Bridge Growth Point they entrust neighbours to oversee the affairs of their children. In the process children are at times abused, may abscond themselves from school and start delinquent behaviour. If women travel long distances to sell their wares and they encounter losses it may give room to extra-marital affairs even prostitution and the spread of deadly diseases. Elderly rural women at times face social isolation as young rural women migrate into urban areas and male close relative search for greener pastures elsewhere (FAO 1996) Women remain deserted, lonely and poverty stricken which broadens inequality gaps between rural and urban females and all males in general especially in decision making (Mugumbate, 2010)

#### **Family and individual problems**

Although information is one of the strongest tools of empowerment, women's access to and control of the media and other resources of information is limited, particularly in the rural areas. In addition, culturally stereotyped portrayal of women as objects rather than individuals who contribute to the development still continues (United Nations Environment Programme, 1994). One interviewee above indicated that women in this district have problems in learning about technology. Use of cell phones and computers is still viewed with suspicion especially if it is done by married women. In-laws would prefer males to be more interested in computers and technology. On the other hand productive, reproductive and community

activities give women less free time to learn about technology. At times the technological advancement does not help women in their daily activities so rural women lose interest and develop negative attitudes to technology.

HIV/AIDS has also increased problems of rural women. Most rural areas have inadequate distant or/and diminishing health care facilities. Poor roads or limited and expensive transport may hinder women from accessing health centres. Rural women who are not economically empowered bear the brunt of looking after children after their husbands have died. This has contributed to the increasing number of female headed households which is a great challenge for women in rural areas (CESIE 2008). On the other hand labour intensive and time consuming activities further hinder women's ability to improve their income earning potential. Poor women are left with the sole responsibility for farming and raising the children (IFAD;2011). All these problems and challenges of women boil down to individual problems like lack of self esteem, inferiority complex and lack of interest in politics and public issues (FAO, 1996).

Despite the above mentioned problems nations recognise the importance and value of rural women and their contribution to democracy and socio economic development (UN 1992). It is therefore necessary that rural women's multiple contributions be acknowledged and properly valued.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be concluded from this study that most problems that women in Buhera district are facing are the result of environmental degradation and gender inequalities. Inadequate rainfall and soil infertility in the area contributes greatly to reduced crop cultivation which is a threat to food security for households. Poor grazing and recurrent drought has also affected livestock which was used by many families as an asset base. Limited education hinders and limits women's access to technology. There is need to educate and empower women in Buhera South District. This can be done through special training programmes and awareness campaigns. This study recommends that communities must take into consideration and value the multiple roles that women do in development. To address most of the problems highlighted, the study recommends that the Buhera Rural District Council need to use gender responsive budgeting techniques in addressing the challenges of these women. This will be done in the hope that budgetary commitment can bring a lasting solution to women's problems.

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