

Rural Women and the Land Question in Zimbabwe: The Case of the Mutasa District³

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Abstract

Zimbabwean rural women make significant contribution to agriculture and are the mainstay of farm labor. Although they do the majority of agricultural work, men, for the most part, continue to own the land, control women's labor and make agricultural decisions supported by patriarchal social systems. Women's access to land is usually through their fathers, husbands, brothers or sons. This has made it difficult for women to gain equal access to land under the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP). Findings indicate that there are a number of challenges and constraints that are experienced by rural women under the FTLRP, which include male land registration, inadequate farming support mechanisms, lack of awareness of government laws and policies concerning women land rights. This is exacerbated by cultural and traditional practices, which disadvantage them in favor of men, as in the inheritance of land and property in the household. To improve women's access to land in the future, the study recommends that serious intervention by the state should occur coupled with the revitalization of the land reform program. This also calls for a paradigm shift towards an effective food security program, which puts emphasis on women and their impact in agriculture.

Keywords: FTLRP, agriculture, patriarchy, women.

Introduction

There is a growing recognition of the significance of land tenure among women in the sustainable development process in Zimbabwe. Land is a fundamental resource to most women in Zimbabwe and is essential for enabling them to lift themselves out of the shackles of poverty.

In Zimbabwe, women constitute 53% of the population and 86% of those residing in the countryside depend on land for their livelihoods, and they provide 70% of all agricultural labor (Women and Land in Zimbabwe, 2008). One would expect that women would be considered an integral part of the FTLRP in line with their important roles in agricultural production and labor reproduction (Mann, 2000). The FTLRP seems not to adequately meet the needs of the poor and landless, and the needs of women, in particular, continue to be neglected.

Women's access and control of land has become more critical in developing countries like in Africa as land is a major resource for survival to the majority of people, especially rural women. Nevertheless, the gendered discourses on access, ownership and control of land have prevailed and dominated pre-colonial, colonial and post-independence Zimbabwe. The perverse social relations in pre-colonial society were contrived during colonial and contemporary times by the male domination in the socio-economic and political power structures. One thread which links the

³This paper based on a master's theses with the same title.

pre-colonial, the colonial, and the post-independence experiences is the consistent denial to women of the right to independent access to land, and to the control of the resources produced by the combination of land and labor.

Zimbabwe land reform may seem ironic, especially in the light of the country's current land reform efforts, which appear to be motivated more by racial or political considerations and less by arguments regarding economic efficiency, gender balance, social equality or poverty reduction. Lack of land rights deprive women the right to economic empowerment and their struggle for equality and equity within a patriarchal society (Wiggins, 2003). The male dominated Zimbabwean government also adopted a 20% quota for women during the land reform program. It is not clear how and why this quota was arrived at and what validation was given for this quota as a yardstick for fair distribution of land to women. This justifies the need to pay attention to gender dimensions in the FTLRP as an entry point to address gender differentiated opportunities in development towards equal access to land and food security.

Despite women central roles in agriculture production across the region, it is agonizing to see that they are often excluded from property and land ownership on gender grounds. In general, a women's rights to land are extremely insecure. The major forms and sources of this unequal land distribution and tenure problem is its derivation from the dominance of patriarchy and customary land tenure systems and traditional authority structures (Mpahlo, 2003). The traditional structures of power and authority continue to marginalize rural women's access to land. In this scenario, women are frequently believed to only have secondary rights to land, thus making them reliant on their husbands, male relatives and social networks.

On the other hand, the majority of rural women are often poor and too illiterate to deal with bureaucratic procedures that are necessary to gain access to land ownership or fight for their land rights (Mgugu, 2008). This lack of access to land threatens women's security and leaves them vulnerable to poverty. Access and control of land can provide women with security they cannot derive from elsewhere and allows socio-economic independence, hence, often challenging the very political or customary expediency that is responsible for women's marginalization.

Women's limited access to land has also hindered them in accessing credit facilities. Land is the only or major asset of the rural women that they can use as collateral security in acquiring bank loans. Denial of secure land property rights make it difficult for women to access credit facilities. Lack of credit obstructs their agricultural potential. This is worsened by insecure government policies and an inadequate farming support system. However, it is argued that women's access to land and other agricultural supporting mechanisms can lead to positive effects on national and household food security levels.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The Gender and Development (GAD) approach, which has been underway since the 1980s, was partly borne out of recognition of the inadequacies of focusing on women in isolation. The approach emphasizes the historically and socially constructed relations between men and women (Moser, 1993). This allows for a deeper understanding of the relational nature of the gendered

power, and of the interdependence of men and women. The GAD approach was projected towards strengthening the effectiveness of development work in improving the situation of both women and men, and achieving progress towards social and gender equality.

The GAD approach emphasizes the reduction of the gender gap between women and men in order to achieve gender balanced development. This is crucial for most Zimbabwean women who have been left out of the national economic development structures and institutions. Beyond improving women's access to the same development resources as are directed to men, the GAD approach stresses direct challenges to male cultural, and social and economic privileges, so that women are enabled to make equal social and economic profit out of the same resources (Goetz, 1997). A GAD perspective leads not only to the design of interventions but to affirmative action strategies that will ensure that women are better integrated into on-going development efforts. It leads, inevitably, to a fundamental re-examination of social institutions and structures, and ultimately, to the loss of power of entrenched local elites, which can have positive effects on women as well as men.

Policies and projects designed from a GAD standpoint would question traditional and cultural views of gender roles and responsibilities. This points towards a more equitable definition of the very concept of "development" and of the contributions made by men and women to the attainment of individual and societal goals. The GAD approach was of importance to the study as it seeks to correct systems and mechanisms that produce gender inequality by focusing not only on women, but also on assessing the socio-economic status of both men and women.

Sample Size and Technique

The choice for the sample size was mainly based on the need for accuracy required by the researcher and the degree of variation in the sample. The informants in this study consisted of 100 women from rural villages in Mutasa District. Mutasa District is one of the seven districts in Manicaland Province. Manicaland forms part of the ten administrative provinces in Zimbabwe. This study mainly focused on women experiences and the challenges they face in accessing land under the FTLRP. The study used purposive sampling to select informants. This type of sampling permitted the selection of interviewees whose qualities or experiences permit a deeper understanding of rural women and the land question in Zimbabwe. Purposive sampling was very useful in making sure that people who do not fit the requirements are easily eliminated from the sample.

Research Instruments and Analysis

The researcher used semi-structured interviews and secondary data as research instruments. The main reason interviews were carried out as opposed to handing out questionnaires is that some respondents are illiterate in their own language and would not be able to fill out a questionnaire, but could participate in an interview allowing for richer and complex data to be collected. Semi-structured interview questions were also used to allow participants to engage in a process of exchanging information and experiences they have had in accessing land under the

FTLRP. Moreover, interviews were used to elucidate the participants' perceptions of the world without imposing any of the researcher's views, therefore, avoiding bias and achieving greater reliability (Babbie et al., 2001). The idea was to allow the respondents to express their opinions, concerns or views as freely as possible, and this can be done through the semi-structured approach, thus emphasizing the focus on qualitative research.

The interviews were structured by a written interview guide. The interview guide contained main topics and questions. The flexible guide ensured that the interviews stay focused on the development of the issue at hand. Nonetheless, the interviews were conversational enough to allow participants to introduce and discuss issues which they deemed to be relevant. The interviews were recorded using a tape recorder. The researcher only managed to interview four to five respondents per day. After tape recording, the researcher had to listen to each recorded interview repeatedly so as to get the respondents' general feelings about each question. The researcher proceeded by classifying the information into different categories.

The respondents were interviewed in their mother language which is Shona. Knowledge of the language of the people concerned helped the researcher make respondents feel free and comfortable to disclose their personal experiences. This promoted a unique closeness, and a comfortable, safe, relaxed environment in which the respondents felt safe to reveal their inner most feelings, anxieties and experiences. This was enhanced by providing privacy and confidentiality. The interviews were conducted in the participant's own home, preferably with fewer distractions. The respondents were expected to be more open in their own environment as opposed to a busy public environment. Great care was taken to ensure that privacy was maintained and disruptions were minimized.

Secondary sources took the role of explaining, combining and analyzing information from the primary sources. In this study, secondary data was used as a means of triangulating the primary information from the research. The secondary data obtained mainly captured women's access to land in relation to land reform program in Zimbabwe. The information was gathered from documentary sources such as books, journals, the World Bank and IMF documents, newspapers, reports, articles and other research related to this study. The essentials were to review literature about rural women's access and control of land in Zimbabwe. The literature to be reviewed served as both the theoretical and empirical base for the analysis of the data collected. It also supplemented the information gathered during the fieldwork.

On the other hand, data analysis allowed the researcher to understand the constitutive elements of the data collected through an inspection of the relationships between variables and concepts, and to verify changes that could be identified and isolated to establish themes in the data (Mouton, 2001). The data was first transcribed verbatim from the field notes onto a computer. To analyze and summarize the collected data, a descriptive statistical method was employed. To simplify the analysis of gathered information, the collected data was pre-coded before entering it into the computer. The information was grouped according to similarities before it was analyzed. The idea was to eliminate irrelevant data until only data critical to the research was identified and studied.

Discussion of Research Findings

The women were requested to indicate their land ownership status. Data collected on land registration revealed that 56 respondents responded that land was registered in the name of their husbands, 20 respondents responded that land was registered in their own names, 16 respondents responded that land was registered in the name of both spouses, and 8 responded that land was registered and certified in their children's names. The policy of the government is to offer spouses joint tenure, but they do not force couples to apply for joint ownership or to register as individuals. The study noticed that the majority of women who jointly own the land with their husbands are those who are educated. These women participate in farm operations and management decisions through joint ownership with their husbands. Indeed, in general, these partnerships are more successful at running the farms because they have a larger economic resource base from which to pull for farm operations. With joint ownership of land, couples combine the labor, assets, financial resources and information they have in order to produce an agreed upon basket of goods and services. They can then consume or invest the profits they obtain according to their shared priorities.

Some women are not educated but they are married to educated husbands who are wise enough to jointly register the farm in their own names. The study also noticed that rural women who have civil marriages and registered customary marriages have more access to jointly owned land with their husbands, which is unlike those who have unregistered customary marriages. In the event of the death of the husband, if the farm had been registered jointly, the wife would remain registered right holder of the land and the house with the power and authority to mortgage, sell or carry out any other transactions.

Information obtained from respondents on women's involvement in decision-making on land and land related issues reflect that women in male-headed households have little say on what kind of crops to grow, on the amount to be sold and on the amount to be grown for family consumption. Crops were usually marketed through the husband's name and payments received in his name. Due to patriarchal controls, men are seen as powerful thinkers and managers in any development. They are recognized as the custodians or natural owners of land and other family properties. In this scenario, rural women are not given any chance to own property. Hence, gender policies need to be revamped to cater for the needs for co-ownership of property and land by women and strong enforcement of such policies must be put in place.

Most of the farms are separately owned by husbands although women have the right to use the land. Among the participants, land tenure was individualized and invariably adjudicated and registered in the name of "heads of households" or men. The majority of married respondents revealed that land was actually registered in the names of the husbands, because they were the ones who processed all the paperwork. The procedures that were required in order to access land were extremely complex and inaccessible for illiterate, rural women. In fact, these procedures are more suited for men and wealthier or politically connected women. There is also evidence that the land reform program was not formerly planned or structured, but was based on violent, social networking and political beliefs that women were not as strong as men. Few women take part in

the violent and chaotic land invasion of white commercial farms in the country. Henceforth, the farms were given to men because of their overarching dominance in land invasions. In general, the FTLRP resulted in a significant change in landholdings by race, class and, to a lesser degree, by gender.

Rural Women and Property Inheritance

Since land is a key asset and an essential source of livelihood, most communities have long developed rules to govern how land is transferred across generations. However, women's ability to inherit land is often restricted. Under customary law, land and other family property is owned by the husband, and widows cannot inherit the family property because a man's claim to family takes precedence over a woman's, regardless of the woman's seniority and age in the family. When the head of the household passes away, most respondents said it is the sons of that person who are supposed to inherit land from other family property. This was confirmed by 66 of those interviewed, whilst 20 said it was the wife who was supposed to inherit the property. Some said that the right to inherit belonged to the brother-in law. This was said by 8 respondents. Only 6 respondents said the right to inherit belongs to daughters.

Older sons are given more preference in property inheritance since they are regarded as the rightful heirs to family property. With respect to inheritance in the event of death, it was unanimously stated that male children were supposed to inherit the farm. The basis for doing so was customary law and patriarchy. The son was the inheritor of the farm because customarily he would be the new head of the household. What was also surprising is that the majority of the women were of the view that the sons, and not the girls, of the deceased were supposed to exercise overall control over the farm. While it is expected that boys would take control of major assets such as cattle and land, the girls were to get clothes and kitchen utensils. It was generally argued that girls could not inherit the land because they got married and left to live with their husbands. The views on inheritance, even by women themselves, reflect the weight of tradition in favor of the male rather than female children. Other respondents said that if there were no male children in the household when the husband dies, the land could revert to the chieftainship because daughters cannot inherit land.

Few respondents (20%) confirmed that they were able to inherit their farm following the death of a husband. However, inheritance practices can leave widows without land resources and livelihoods, unless a widow with minor children is allowed to remain on the land until a son comes of age. It seems that male children have legal rights to inherit the land whilst their mothers continue to exercise their use rights as before. Women and daughters are considered minors who cannot be allocated or inherit land on their own without men. Even if the property is acquired during the marriage union, women cannot inherit it from a traditional perspective. Moreover, with the majority of women having unregistered customary marriages, this means that women face serious property inheritance problems and find themselves without any recourse to redress (Anglophone Africa, 2004). In some instances, widows cannot inherit their husbands' estates even if their marriages were registered. Customs and traditions of various cultures take precedence, and belief

in them becomes very strong to an extent that they override legal preference.

The study also identified the cultural practice of lobola (bride price) to be a contributing factor limiting women's access to land. Women are considered to be acquired like any other property. In addition, when women are married, they join their marital family with nothing. In case of separation, divorce or the death of their husbands, women are expected to join their natal families without anything, exactly the way they joined their marital family. If there are no brothers, the late husband's family decides on an appropriate inheritor. The property of the deceased, including his land, is then inherited along with the wife and children. Strong social and economic pressures impel women to be inherited (Agarwal, 2003). Biased inheritance rights often bestow land to male relatives, leaving both widows and daughters at a disadvantage.

The other group that would inherit the farm is the in-laws. In the absence of a son or male heir, the in-laws take the land and property of the deceased. They demand the property of their relatives especially if the widow does not have sons and married through unregistered customs. However, for fear of getting infected with HIV and AIDS, the in-laws no longer inherit widows. They now leave them to re-join their natal families and in the process, the widows lose the land to their in-laws. Exclusion from property inheritance can aggravate women's vulnerability to chronic poverty and the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Government Policies on Women

The sampled households were asked whether government policies regarding women are adequate to ensure them equal access to land. Of all the respondents 26% said that government policies are adequate whilst 74% said they are not. The problem is that people are unaware of the government policies that ensure that they get access to land under the land distribution program. The study noticed that most women lack access to information about land laws and rights, in particular those associated with inheritance. As the study findings demonstrate, most women in rural areas barely understand these policies, and implementers of the policies have not applied them with a special interest of women's needs. Furthermore, the respondents were dissatisfied with the support they are getting from the government especially in the provision of inputs and marketing of agricultural products. Inputs from the government are mainly received by those who are politically connected to the ruling government, especially war veterans. At the same time, state marketing boards like the Grain Marketing Board (GMB) continues to fail to pay farmers on time. This negatively affects their preparation for the next farming seasons.

Distribution of Farm Work

The respondents were asked about their main source of labor. The study revealed that 24% of the work force comes from hired labor, 6% from husbands, 4% from relatives, and 6% from children. The remaining 60% of the respondents said that they work alone in the field. Most men do not work in the fields as they are engaged in other non-farm activities or are seeking employment in urban centers. The need for labor contribution from wives in this regard is also evident in the trend in the Mutasa District. Wives do most of the work in the fields and in some

cases, are helped by their children and relatives. The work hours of women worsen in the farming season when their days would begin at half past four in the morning and end around six o'clock in the evening. Although women's hours of work are increasing, they are gradually becoming more and more marginalized in the ownership of land and farm decisions. In the end, women work in fields which they don't own although they have the right to use the land. This also limits their potential to maximize production since the husband, who does not work in the field, makes decisions about what the farm produces. This is unjust to the woman who spend most of their time working in the field.

Women Access to Credit Facilities

The respondents were asked whether they have access to credit facilities. Out of the sampled households, only 40% responded that they have access to credit whilst 60% do not. This limited access to rural financial services hampers women's efforts to improve or expand their farm activities in order to earn cash income to achieve and maintain household food security. The study observed that generally women are afraid to borrow because of the tedious paperwork that requires some proficiency in reading and writing. It was also revealed by the study that women are afraid of the adverse consequences of borrowing. However, these women need access to credit to give them reasonable access to inputs like fertilizer, hybrid seeds and pesticides. In short of these key inputs, women usually gain less benefits from their farmlands, which makes them vulnerable to poverty. Some respondents argued that they cannot access bank loans because of the long distances to reach financial institutions, poor transportation services and high transportation costs.

In addition, the 99-year lease given by the government is unbankable as it cannot be used as collateral security to access credit from the commercial financial institutions. The land is owned by the government so the banks cannot repossess the land in times of default. Arguably, access to credit will increase agricultural productivity and profitable entrepreneurial activity among women. Given women's particular role within households, increases in women's income should contribute to increased overall household welfare. Increased access to financial resources may also decrease rural women's dependence on male relatives, and/or enhance their status within their households and communities.

The Way Forward

Existing legislation for protecting the property rights of Zimbabwean women married under customary law need to be revised and strengthened to help prevent the plight of women on the death of their husbands. Rural women need proper and simple registration of marriage and the issuing of marriage certificates. The traditional leaders should be allowed to certify local marriages. This would help deal with accessibility of legal procedures in marriages at a more local level, and enable the majority of women to have registered marriages. Any intervention that seeks to protect women through registering their marriages needs to be supported by measures that encourage deposed women to seek help through legal channel.

There is need for laws guaranteeing joint ownership of property, and this law needs to be

enforced to protect women and children from property grabbing. Registering land in the name of the husband and wife can help reduce the loss of land rights of women, both within the marriage as well as in cases of abandonment, separation, divorce or widowhood (Grown & Gupta, 2005). This can also increase a woman's bargaining power in household and farm decision making. Gender policies need to be revamped to cater to the need for joint ownership of property and land by women, and stronger enforcement of such policies must be put in place. The legal processes for joint registration of spouses should be simplified to benefit illiteracy of rural women. It is recommended that the government should run a series of awareness campaigns in order to inform rural people, especially women, of their rights to land as well as other land reform programs.

Safeguarding Women Land Inheritance

Laws on inheritance and divorce also need to be coordinated so women are fully protected by a set clear of laws. Consistent with the findings of the study, it is recommended that laws be updated and reformed to protect women and girls' property inheritance rights across all age groups as women are victims at all ages. Women and daughters are not protected by customary laws of inheritance, and statutory law has not yet challenged community customs and traditions. Change is needed in property rights laws so that women may hold individual or joint land titles. This will decrease the chances of property and land grabbing by other relatives. There is a need to ensure female property and inheritance rights as this would help empower women and rectify a fundamental injustice. Therefore, the government should design strategies to address these issues through advocacy and awareness programs to change community practices and attitudes. Women need to be aware of their rights in order to claim them. Awareness is not only required for rights holders, but in many instances, other actors and stakeholders including policy makers, land professionals, magistrates and judges who need the knowledge and capacity to interpret and implement national laws with respect to equal inheritance rights.

Improving Access to Credit

Land reform without farm credit will achieve little in terms of redistribution for justice and efficiency. Access to credit and other rural finance services should be improved to strengthen women's potential to purchase key inputs, property and other assets needed for agricultural production. The study noticed that women lack access to credit to boost their agricultural investments. This is particularly due to the fact that most rural women do not own property that can serve as collateral, and major financing institutions, especially banks, are afraid of losing large amounts of money in unpaid debts (World Bank, 2007). Conversely, those who do own assets that serve as collateral are unforthcoming to put assets at risk as collateral when they are vital to their livelihoods. Therefore, there is a need to provide micro-financial services which will provide access to credit for rural women who do not have the collateral. Credit delivery can be improved by setting up micro-finance institutions in rural areas and reorienting the banking system to cater to the needs of women.

Measures should be undertaken by the government to assist commercial banks in reducing

their stringent lending criteria in order to accommodate women farmers. The criteria should focus on the viability of the project being financed and not strictly on the ability of women to pledge collateral. Viability-based lending is common in developed countries and can create access for rural women to financial resources. The banks should also be willing to offer lower interest rates or interest-free loans, which may be obtained without the requirement for collateral security. Policy initiatives for gender equitable finance cannot be limited to rural microcredit, but must involve the development of more inclusive and women-friendly formal financial system and vital complementary supporting services. However, credit facilities should be accompanied by human development training and agricultural technical skills both for men and women to enable them to receive and utilize full benefit from the loans. Both men and women must be familiarized with the principles of business economics and record keeping, and they should become proficient in farm management.

Conclusion

Land reform in Zimbabwe was an inevitable and necessary undertaking whose major aim was to redress the historical injustices that resulted following colonialism. The struggle for equality over access and control of land was largely driven by the need to redress racial imbalances whilst overlooking other class disparities that emanated from gender perspectives. This has led to the negation of women's concerns in relation to their access and control of land. The study agrees that the FTLRP was a noble cause, but it did not ensure democratic outcomes for women. It is apparent that the program was short-sighted and driven by other factors such as political expediency, and thus could not fully address women's concerns for land ownership and control. It is plausible to conclude that overall, the FTLRP diminished the opportunities or spaces for women to be empowered, and reduced the democratic spaces for genuine participation of women in the agriculture development processes by denying them rights to land, widening gender inequalities, and ultimately exacerbating their poverty. The situation of women has been worsened by a lack of credit facilities and a weak government agricultural support mechanism. It is important to note that understanding the gaps in terms of gender in the FTLRP is a crucial step in any reconstitution of future land reform policies that may be done in Zimbabwe. However, any land reform policy measures that might be taken in Zimbabwe should be guided by a new constitution that serve and protects women's rights to land and property.

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