

The feminisation of poverty: A study of Ndau women of Muchadziya village in Chimanimani Zimbabwe

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Dates:

Received: 22 Sept. 2022

Accepted: 01 Dec. 2022

Published: 23 Mar. 2023

How to cite this article:

Mupangwa, T., 2023, 'The feminisation of poverty: A study of Ndau women of Muchadziya village in Chimanimani Zimbabwe', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(3), a8144. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i3.8144>

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Poverty statistics in many countries of the developing world, with Zimbabwe being no exception, continue to show a gender-skewed trend, with women more than men increasingly being more affected. This is worrying, considering the fact that it is women who are the majority, and they carry the brunt of the burden for most household duties. Zimbabwe adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and yet women continue to be hit hard by poverty. This was a qualitative study involving interviews and focus group discussions with 58 purposively sampled participants from Muchadziya village to determine the extent to which women in Muchadziya village are contributing towards sustainable development in Zimbabwe. The aim of this article, was to explore the ways in which women in Muchadziya village are contributing towards the alleviation of poverty. In the process, they will be contributing towards the attainment of some of the SDGs, such as the ones focusing on ending poverty in all its forms everywhere (SDG 1) and ending hunger, achieving food security and improved nutrition and promoting sustainable agriculture (SDG 2). Using Africana womanism theoretical framework, the article maintained that African women should be perceived as agents, not subjects, of development and transformation in their communities. Findings indicated that women in Muchadziya village are selling various products and have sought markets in Beitbridge, Gweru and Zvishavane to sell them; others have set up shops and flea markets, and others make use of the land even though they do not own it to produce farm products to fight against poverty. The study concluded that women, despite being in difficult circumstances, are capable of contributing towards the achievement of the SDGs, particularly SDG 5 focusing on women's empowerment and attaining gender equality. It is therefore recommended that women be given the necessary support to achieve more.

Contribution: In a context where women are the most affected by poverty, Ndau women have proven that they can be agents of change by contributing towards the achievement of SDGs such as ending poverty in all its forms, zero hunger, education, gender equality and women's empowerment and water and sanitation. Not much scholarly attention has been paid to the agency of women in Chimanimani in enhancing Zimbabwe's sustainable development. This gap in literature might be influenced by the fact that African women, particularly women in rural areas, are perceived as beneficiaries or recipients of aid or development initiatives. As such, most programmes mainstreamed by aid or donor agencies in Africa have a specific focus on distributing aid to women and girl-children. Unfortunately, such programmes rarely seek to capacitate or empower their beneficiaries; hence, their interventions eventually disempower the intended beneficiaries.

Keywords: Africana womanism; agents of change; feminisation; Muchadziya village; Ndau women; poverty; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Introduction

The impact of poverty is most felt by women, because they are the ones who give birth and they do most of the household chores. Poverty has been classified into two categories, namely structural and transient. Transient poverty is a kind of lack which is not permanent or long term, while structural poverty is a scarcity of resources that is permanent and has existed for a long time. Regardless of the category, women are the ones who have been hard hit by both forms of poverty (Malaba 2006:4). According to Malaba (2006:5), Zimbabwe has been subjected to both structural

Note: Special Collection: Religion and Theology and Constructions of Earth and Gender, sub-edited by Sophia Chirongoma (Midlands State University, Zimbabwe) and Linda Naicker (University of South Africa, South Africa).

and transient poverty. The most affected people are female-headed households, which are said to have been:

48 percent in 1995 compared to 39 percent for male headed households in 1995, whilst in 2003 it was 68 percent for female headed compared to 40 percent for male headed households. (Malaba 2006:6)

The poverty in Zimbabwe is being worsened by the human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome epidemic (Malaba 2006:8). Over two million in Zimbabwe according to research live with HIV and women take the greater percentage of that figure (Kang'ethe and Chikono 2014). Eradicating poverty in all forms everywhere remains at the forefront of Zimbabwe's development objectives. While poverty is profoundly a human problem, women particularly are disproportionately affected by poverty. Of the three billion people in the world who are affected by paucity, 70% are women (Malaba 2016).

In order to have a clearer picture on the Ndau women's agency in sustainable development in Muchadziya village, it is prudent to comprehend some pertinent background information on Zimbabwe's current socio-economic and political situation. Muchadziya village was hard hit by Cyclone Idai in March of 2019. In 2020, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) also came upon an area which was already ailing because of the impact of Cyclone Idai. Zimbabwe recorded its first covid case in March of 2020, by end of October of the same year 243 people had died as a result of the disease (Chitungo, Dzinamarira, Tungwarara, Chimene, Mukwenha, Kunonga, Masuku and Murewanhema 2022). Research has shown that natural calamities have a differential effect on men and women. There is gender disparity in the impact of atmospheric alteration and natural disasters. These two natural disasters caused psychological stress for women in Chimanimani. The disasters, especially Cyclone Idai, affected the farming patterns in the area, which eventually exacerbated poverty in Muchadziya village. Yields generally dwindled in terms of commercial crops such as bananas, yams and citrus fruits. Therefore, family incomes were heavily impacted negatively. Most families managed to survive through the handouts they received from well-wishers. Many families were displaced, and it was women and girls who bore the greatest risk in those circumstances. Many women were subjected to violence perpetuated by men, such as rape and exposure to prostitution as a result of the poverty which came upon them because of the cyclone (Nyahunda, Matlakala & Makhubele 2020:201).

Several scholars, including Mutopo (2011), Mutopo (2014), Jaka and Shava (2018), have written on rural women's agency in the sustainable development of Zimbabwe. However, not much scholarly attention has been paid to the agency of women in Chimanimani in enhancing Zimbabwe's sustainable development. This gap in literature might be influenced by the fact that African women, particularly women in rural areas, are perceived as beneficiaries or recipients of aid or development initiatives. As such, most programmes mainstreamed by aid and/or donor agencies in Africa have a specific focus on distributing aid to women

and girl-children. Unfortunately, such programmes rarely seek to capacitate or empower their beneficiaries; hence, their interventions eventually disempower the intended beneficiaries. Based on this background, the study focuses on the proverb 'give a woman fish and feed her for one day, teach her how to fish and feed her for a lifetime' (Lightner 2011). The objectives of this study were to identify ways in which women in Muchadziya village are contributing towards the achievement of development sustainable goals, to explore areas of contestation for women in polygamous marriages in Muchadziya village and to identify ways women in Muchadziya are managing tensions and contestations in polygamous marriages. Utilising findings from a case study conducted in Muchadziya village in Chimanimani, this study focuses on elucidating the fact that instead of stretching out their hands to receive aid from the donor community, Ndau women possess the capacity to become agents of positive transformation in their societies. By reflecting on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those connected to poverty alleviation, women's empowerment such as ending hunger, access to education and food security, the study illuminates various ways in which Ndau women's contributions, which are usually pushed to the periphery of societal development, can become the fulcrum of change and transformation in Zimbabwe. This article is divided into the following section: introduction, the Ndau people, theoretical framework, methodology, findings, theological reflection and conclusion.

The Ndau people

Ndau people are found both in Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Bourdillon (1976) states that the Ndau people in Zimbabwe occupy the south-eastern parts of the country. In Mozambique, the Ndau are found in areas facing the south-west, and their language is called Ndau (Muyambo & Maposa 2014:23). Mawere (2012:7) also supports the fact that Ndau people are also found in Mozambique. In Zimbabwe, the Ndau people specifically occupy the Chimanimani and Chipinge districts (Konyana 2016:52). That area was formerly called Gazaland (Duri & Gwekwerere 2007:2). In the present day, this is largely a rural area which still needs considerable development (Mapuranga 2010:49). They were named the Ndau because they say *Ndau-wee* when welcoming or greeting a visitor into their homestead (MacGonagle 2009:548). This is still their practice in the present day. The term has also a geopolitical dimension. The term Ndau denotes space, and in this regard, the term may raise issues to do with a claim to ownership of their space (Musanga 2022; Sithole 2018).

The Ndau people operate under the influence of a patriarchal social system which upholds the rule and control of men (Hlatshwayo 2017; Konyana 2016). Men dominate, while women and children are just followers. It is men who hold all decision-making powers, while women and children do not have access to such powers (Sultana 2010). This means that in Muchadziya village, the system has taken away the voice of women. This has resulted in a culture of silence among women in Muchadziya village.

Theoretical framework

Africana womanism

Africana womanism was conceived and developed by Clenora Hudson-Weems in the late eighties. This theory exemplifies a philosophy which emphasises the Africana woman and her experiences, realities, struggles and needs (Ntiri 2001:166). The intention of focusing on their experiences is to give power to black women and highlight any similarities among them. Kolawole (1997:25) states that Hudson-Weems' Africana womanism stresses the presence of similarities that are found among African women in the whole world. This theory is based on the African traditions; hence, it expresses the hardships they go through, their aspirations and what they require in life (Hudson-Weems 1993). However, this theory does not emphasise the experiences, realities and struggles of women in isolation. Rather, it looks at the Africana women and their men, as they are complimentary opposites who are both victims of history. It debunks some forms of Western feminism that are bent on pitting women against their male counterparts. The idea may not necessarily be that of giving power to women but that of empowering both men and women through revitalising the consensus decision-making process that has always been the way of the Africana women and men's relationship – thus, correcting the mistakes of the colonial experiences.

Family-centeredness is another characteristic of Africana womanism. A true Africana woman puts the family first, and never is she self-centred. Hence, concern about family is an important characteristic of Africana womanism theory. The expectation is that the Africana woman should be intentional about putting the family first and as a priority for eventual human existence (Al-Harbi 2017:119). The women in Muchadziya are putting their families at the centre; hence, they deliberately become agents of sustainable development.

Africana womanism also emphasises flexible role playing in the home. This means that the theory appreciates established gender responsibilities; however, they are not stuck in these gender responsibilities, for they attend to needs as they arise (Makaudze 2015). Everyone, male or female, is free to play any role in the home for the betterment of the family. Breadwinning is not just for men; neither is cooking for women only. Women in Muchadziya are not being trapped by gender, as they are taking the bull by its horns as they engage in breadwinning, a role which nowadays is expected to be occupied by men in many cultures. Women among the Ndau and the various Shona ethnic groups have always been the fulcrum of the household economies. The idea of men being breadwinners is a distortion ushered in by industrialisation and urbanisation, the programmes of the colonial system (Mukonyora 2007).

Respect is another characteristic of Africana womanism. This theoretical lens emphasises that respect must be mutual, implying that it should not be one-sided. It should be a give-and-take type of relationship. For a peaceful community to exist, one must give respect in order to receive respect as

well. It is not only women who are expected to give respect, but everyone is expected to respect others (Hudson-Weems 1993). Respect is an aspect which is very crucial in a marriage setup, especially a polygamous marriage.

In addition, mothering and nurturing are also key in the Africana womanism framework. In an African setup, a mother is expected to look after the family and motherhood is highly regarded. It is the duty of a mother to nurture and raise responsible children who will eventually become responsible Africana citizens (Hudson-Weems 1993). The Ndau women in Muchadziya also take their mothering role seriously; hence, they make immense sacrifices to engage in various income-generating activities in order to be able to look after the family.

Also, this theory acknowledges that men perform an important function in dismantling the marginalisation and subjugation of females. Africana womanism is not exclusionary to men in its agenda for African women (Ntiri 2001:164). The major strength of Africana womanism is that no one is excluded. Everyone in the family, including men, is expected to participate (Hudson-Weems 1993). As opposed to white feminism, men are not enemies of women. According to this theoretical lens, African men have never looked down, oppressed or marginalised their women the way white men have with white women (Makaudze 2015). The African woman is not and has never been silenced. Amonyze (2014) avers that for Hudson-Weems, the African woman's voice was never taken from her. Therefore, African womanism has what Hudson-Weems termed 'Male Compatibility' (Hudson-Weems 2021:10). Africana womanism basically asserts that Africana women adore their men and are comfortable with the fact that they are women. It rejects the view that women are victims; instead, they are seen being active in constructing their own individualities as social beings (Amonyze 2014:49–50).

Methodology

The study was conducted qualitatively. Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions. The method aided the investigator to record the views of the participants. Children above the age of 18 years were selected because that is the majority age according to the Constitution of Zimbabwe. Anyone below the age of 18 is considered a child in Zimbabwe and therefore cannot give consent on their own. The participants' ages ranged from 18 years to 70 years. All of the participants professed to be Christians and are members of different denominations in the mainline, Pentecostal and African indigenous churches. Twenty-five of the participants are members of the African indigenous churches, while 25 and 8 are members of the Pentecostal and mainline churches, respectively. By capturing the views of the participants, this study is in tandem with what Creswell (2009) highlights that qualitative research gives the researcher the opportunity to explore and to reveal phenomena naturally. Qualitative research allows participants to express themselves without any control mechanisms, making the methodology more applicable for this study.

Participants for this study were purposively selected. Using the purposive sampling technique, the eventual sample size consisted of 10 women in polygamous marriages, 10 polygamous men, 15 adult children with polygamous parents, 3 church leaders belonging to churches that allow polygamy, 10 women and 10 men from monogamous marriages. By adult children, the study is referring to all children who are above the age of 18 years, because the Constitution of Zimbabwe acknowledges anyone above that age as an adult (Constitution of Zimbabwe 2013). Thirty-five participants were interviewed, and 23 discussed in clusters. Two focus group discussions were conducted once with each group. One group consisted of 12 married women in monogamous marriages, the other of 11 monogamous men. For qualitative research, 6–12 participants is the number approved for a focus group discussion (Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins 2010). They contend that this group size allows sharing of viewpoints among members and is substantial and adequate to capture different opinions. Eventually, the sample comprised 58 participants. Although a bigger group may seem more appropriate, the time frame during which the study was supposed to be conducted limited the study to the 58 participants. More so, for qualitative research to be valid, scholars such as Denzin and Lincoln (2005) contend that a sample range between 30 and 50 people is appropriate. Adler and Adler (2012) recommend a range between 12 and 60 participants. Therefore, the eventual sample size of 58 participants seems to be consistent with what scholars suggest. Purposive sampling, however, has the limitation that the researcher is subjective and has bias in choosing the research participants. This weakness was covered by defining a target population and sampling frame. This means there was a list of individuals from which the sample was drawn.

The data were thematically analysed. These themes were generated after thematic analysis of the data was conducted. The aim was to achieve the objective of the study, which was to identify the poverty-reducing activities that rural women of Muchadziya carry out, to explore areas of contention for women in polygamous relationships and how women are managing the tensions and contestation in polygamous marriages. The researcher familiarised himself with the data and generated codes. After coding, themes that emerged were generated inductively. The themes will be discussed concurrently with data presentation.

Findings

The findings will be presented under the following themes: poverty eradication, food security, access to education, equality, improved sanitation and standard of life, equality and ending hunger.

Poverty eradication

Clearly, women bear the brunt of poverty, both in their homes and their communities. Women embark on numerous income-generating projects to sustain their households and the community livelihoods at large. This was elucidated

by one of the women in polygamous marriages as follows, as she responded to the question on how she was managing the competition in a polygamous marriage:

‘Through experience, I have learnt that *musha mukadzi* [*A woman is the home*]. If a woman does not stand and fight all the challenges a family faces, the home will be a disgrace. In order for the family not to suffer in poverty, I engage in a number of activities. Firstly, I have joined other women who go to Zvishavane, Gweru, Shamva and Beitbridge to sell bananas. We have managed to secure markets for our bananas in those cities such that we are guaranteed of making profit. We hire a 10 tonne lorry as a group of 3 or 4 women to carry our bananas to those places. When I am not going to the market, I usually plait people’s hair. I also learnt to plait so that I do not become idle when I am not at the market. Rural women are also interested in plaiting their hair such that I sometimes get overwhelmed by the number of women in need of hair dos.’ (W1, Female, 35 years)

Another study participant also catalogued the other activities done by the Ndau women in Muchadziya village to help augment the community’s livelihoods and eradicate poverty:

‘As for me, I generate money through selling. I have an established flea market at Makina shopping center. I get my stuff from Harare. When business is good, I order new goods every month. When it is not, I go to Harare after every 2 months. These days, because many women are selling bananas, they can afford to buy clothes for their children. I am making some profit and I manage to buy food for the family. As you know, in a polygamous family you just have to make sure you look after your children. The husband does not even care.’ (W2, Female, 27 years)

The excerpts from the two study participants cited above clearly reveal the fact that Ndau women are contributing immensely towards poverty eradication and working towards the community’s sustainable development, even amidst the constraints of limited opportunities and resources. Although women’s domestic contribution is rarely considered productive work, the above information challenges policymakers and statisticians to rethink their format when calculating women’s economic contribution. Such information should also lead to refuting the general tendency of perceiving rural communities as merely recipients of charity, having neither agency nor willpower to transform their situation. Another participant chronicled the activities embarked upon by women in Muchadziya village as she responded to the question in which she was to explain the activities she is doing in an endeavour to eradicate poverty:

‘As for me, besides going to the market to sell bananas, I also rear broiler chickens. Whilst I am away, I have someone helping me to raise the chickens. This business has also proved to be profitable. I have managed to make some savings and I intend to buy a residential stand in Chipinge so that I can rent out the house in the long run. I want to own properties as well.’ (W3, Female, 45 years)

One of the male participants in a polygamous marriage also reiterated how women in Muchadziya are actively involved in poverty eradication by appreciating his younger wives as

he expanded more on how he manages tensions among his wives:

'Some of the wives especially the younger ones are really helping in looking after the family. As for my first wife age is catching up with her but she is also trying her best. They are sending children to school, making sure that food is on the table and buying clothes for the children. The money I bring from work will make up for the gap that they are failing to meet on their own. Therefore I really appreciate what they are doing because the family is too big for me to look after by myself.' (M1, Male, 55 years)

Women's activities aimed at poverty eradication have empowered the Nda women in Muchadziya village such that they can make some financial decisions together with their husbands. The statement made by the woman above about considering the purchase of an urban residential stand shows that the woman is now empowered financially and can make such bold declarations without fear. Property accumulation is one indicator of development in a home setup. The key to the true meaning of Africana womanism is its mandate for the inclusion of the whole family, men included (Hudson-Weems 1993). As opposed to feminism, men are not enemies of women in this theory. The cooperation between men and women in Muchadziya aimed at accruing wealth is evidence that, indeed, women are included in wealth generation. Africana women have never been excluded in the main economic activities in their communities (Makaudze 2014:20). This also supports the church teaching that 'there is neither male nor female for ye are all one in Christ' (Gl 3:28). This means no one is considered less important than or superior to the other. In a Christian family both the husband and wife should contribute in decision making over family matters.

It has been argued by Makaudze (2015:66) that as a result of colonialism, women are bound to do all the household errands in the home; hence, they have no access to jobs outside the home, resulting in their contributions being not recognised since are not paid. (Makaudze 2015:66). The activities that the Nda women in Muchadziya village are doing are evidence that these women are not confined to the home. They have given themselves liberty and autonomy, which had been taken away as a result of colonialism, which made men the only breadwinners. This shows that Nda women are expressing what has been the norm in Africa as Hudson-Weems (1993) expresses it, that women are never oppressed or confined to the home, have their autonomy and are breadwinners.

The economic basis, which means the activities that produce money, in Africa has led to the association of women with poverty. Farming is one activity that produces money for a number of families in Africa. According to Oduyoye (2004:58), the patriarchal system makes women poor by deliberately excluding them from farming activities. The Nda women in Muchadziya have refused to be pushed to the periphery and to be excluded when it comes to wealth

generation. They are pushing their way to the forefront in wealth generation, and they are making considerable progress by complementing the work that their husbands are doing to look after the family. Therefore, it can be noted that the Nda women are not carrying out wealth generation activities exclusionary of men's participation in some households. Responding to a follow-up question regarding how her husband is supporting her in all the activities she is undertaking as a woman in a polygamous marriage, one of the women said:

'Sometimes I go to Zvishavane together with my husband to sell our Bananas. Even in the occasions he does not accompany me he always helps a lot by carrying the bananas to where they will be packed in the trucks and packing them nicely so that we will reach our destination safely.' (W4, Female, 30 years)

The above narration shows that some men and women in Muchadziya are complementing each other well in their marriages. Hudson-Weems (1993) records that men and women have always complemented each other well, and roles are always fluid in the African home.

Food security

This section was guided by the research questions 'What are the activities Nda women are carrying out to alleviate poverty in their area?' and 'How do you manage tensions and contestation in a polygamous marriage?' Another important goal to be achieved by many countries is making sure that people are not dying of hunger. Wherever food is in short supply, women are the ones who are sacrificed. The backbone for most rural communities in Zimbabwe is farming. Nda women, who are the focus of this study, have welcomed different farming methods which emphasise zero tillage farming, popularly known as *dhiga ugute* [dig to be full]. The main purpose of this programme is to make sure that families are self-sufficient in terms of food provision. It is not labour intensive, for it does require land preparation. The government of Zimbabwe, through the programme, provides farmers with all the inputs required to yield a good harvest. The procedures are so simple that once the farmers grasp them, they do not require continuous assistance for inputs. This farming method is known as *dhiga ugute* because it requires digging holes which have a specified width and depth throughout a piece of land and adding organic manure to the holes. The holes are strategically dug well before the rains fall, especially soon after the harvest as they prepare for the next farming season. This ensures that the holes can store moisture, allowing manure to percolate and enrich the land. When the rains fall and the planting season commences, they will then go to plant the seeds into the already prepared holes. The aim for the *dhiga ugute* [dig to be full] programme is to produce food that can sustain the family for a whole year on a small piece of land. There has been resounding evidence of high crop yields through the adoption of this farming technique. An in-depth interview with one of the young women residing in Muchadziya village gives insight into how this farming technique has transformed their lives:

'I adopted this farming technique the first time it was introduced. I got very high maize crop yields. Since we started using the

dhiga ugute system, I have never lacked food in the home. This lessens the burden of food security in the home for me as a mother. As the mother of the home, I will only have to look for relish because sadza will be readily available. Also, I sell the surplus to improve the status of the home. I managed to build this 5 roomed house from the money I got after selling maize. I am hoping from the next season's produce I will be able to raise money to plaster and paint the house.' (W5, Female, 55 years)

Since the bulk of the household and reproductive needs rests on the shoulders of women, it became apparent from the information provided by the study participants that the success of zero tillage farming in Muchadziya village is the result of women being at the centre of it all. They are either digging holes in their parents' fields, in their homesteads as married women or they are providing hired labour in the fields belonging to elderly members of the community. Since most men in Muchadziya are working in South Africa, it is the women who have become instrumental to zero tillage farming in Muchadziya village. The Ndau women's involvement in this enterprise has made a positive difference in addressing not only food insecurity and nutrition but, more importantly, alleviating poverty levels. This foregrounds the agency of Ndau women, which is rarely acknowledged in official reports on community development. Their agency in embracing the zero tillage farming technique has made a whole world of difference in improving food production and consequently enhancing their community's sustainable development. This farming technique has become a very important pillar of augmenting sustainable agriculture, as the emphasis on using organic manure instead of fertilisers helps to preserve soil fertility. More so, the process of digging holes helps to preserve the moisture such that the crops will continue thriving even during the dry spells which the country has been experiencing.

This concurs with Makaudze's (2014) argument, which also applies to the Ndau women, that among the Shona, women are the main actors in all the farming activities which take place within the home. Therefore, women have access to use the field and control over how it is used and what they produce. This is the same case in Muchadziya village, even for women in polygamous marriages.

Access to education

Education is crucial to a girl child. It promotes confidence and gives women economic independence, especially in polygamous marriages. However, regardless of the significance of education to women, the truth is a greater percentage of girls in the whole world are not attending school. The Guardian: Online (2015) records that 65% of the children who do not go to school are girls, and the greater percentage of the world's uneducated persons are female.

All children deserve to acquire education. Nations can brag of development only when they have achieved Sustainable Development Goal number 4, which is focused on availing quality education to all children. Zimbabwe's literacy rate is

said to be 94%, but women are still lagging behind in acquiring education. More women are still said to be illiterate than men in Zimbabwe (The Chronicle 2018). The information availed by study participants above clearly reveals that rural women, young women included, shoulder the bulk of domestic chores, disadvantaging them from having equitable access to education compared to their male counterparts. More so, girls in Zimbabwe are the ones responsible for all domestic chores, often leading to most of them dropping out of school. Also, they may skip going to school during their menses because they cannot afford sanitary products (UNESCO 2014). The age-old adage 'Educate a woman and educate a nation' has to become a reality in Zimbabwe (Offorma 2009). This leads us to a discussion of SDG 5, focusing on gender equality and empowerment for women and girls, which came up as result of the participants' responses as they responded to the research question, 'What are the activities Ndau women are doing to alleviate poverty?', and how the women in Muchadziya village are working towards the attainment of this goal. One of the study participants, who is a woman in a polygamous marriage, put it aptly:

'Through the income generating activities that I do, I managed to take all my children to school. Since I am in a polygamous marriage, my husband was overwhelmed with the number of his children who required school fees. So he would choose to send the children of his favorite wife to school. This pushed me to work hard and to make sure that my children attend school as well. As of now, I have two children doing their secondary school and two in primary school. I pay for their school fees from my business activities. Secondary schools are very far, then I decided to rent a house for them close to the school. I also pay their rent every month from the money I get from selling bananas and broiler chickens.' (W6, Female, 52 years)

The participant is exuding a passion for education and that her children acquire quality education. She is going to all lengths for her children, especially the girl child, to acquire education. The participant did not just wait for the husband to provide school fees, but she realised that it was her responsibility also to participate in providing school fees for her children. Furthermore, this shows that among the Ndau, there is now flexibility in gender roles. It seems the men are no longer feeling intimidated by the fact that women can become breadwinners. One of the men, who is in a polygamous marriage, outlined how he is managing the politics in a polygamous marriage:

'The Zimbabwean economy does not allow you to stop a woman to work for her survival and that of her children. On my own I cannot manage to send all my children to school. Therefore my wives are engaging in a number of activities such as going to Zvishavane to sell bananas and hairdressing, for them to be able to have money to send children to school. Without their help a few only, of our children would have managed to go to school. This has helped in them fighting over upkeep from me as the husband.' (M3, Male, 57 years)

This refutes the stereotypical belief that the Ndau, because of patriarchy, do not allow women to become breadwinners. As

in many other communities in Africa, the Ndaou have adopted role allocation which is not fixed or rigid (Hudson-Weems 1993). By way of explanation, the roles are fluid, and everyone is free to tackle the role which is needed at that particular time (Makaudze 2014).

Poverty eradication cannot be achieved in the absence of ensuring improved sanitation and standard of living. It is to this SDG that the article turns to discuss below.

Improved sanitation and standards of life

Sustainable Development Goal 6 is targeted towards the provision of hygienic water and general cleanliness (Tortajada & Biswas 2018). The objective is to attain easy access to safe water for all people, men and women alike, throughout the world. Collectively with the other goals for sustainable development, the standard of living for many people will be met if it is met. Communities should have proper toilets in order to avoid the contamination of water sources by human faeces (Tortajada & Biswas 2018:21).

Culturally, in Africa, women are responsible for fetching water and its management in the home. Women fetch water twice as much as men in most African countries. This is prevalent in most rural areas (UN 2010). However, in many countries, water is not readily available, and this affects women, who are generally responsible for all household chores which need a large amount of water. Therefore, women spend a great deal of time, at the expense of education, fetching water in order to improve sanitation and cleanliness in the home (UN Women 2016). Some women have developed some health problems such as back aches as a result of carrying heavy buckets of water. Besides household chores which require large amounts of water, women are involved in farming, which requires plenty of water as well. This increases the burden on women, especially if the water is not readily available.

The right to access sanitation facilities is very important for women because they undergo certain life situations such as menstruation, which men do not undergo. Therefore, it is imperative that sanitation and water facilities be readily available to avoid the transmission of diseases, which most of the time disproportionately affect women in a greater way as compared to men (Davies & Kudzai 2016). Better hygienic amenities decrease death triggered as a result of diarrhoea by 65% (Chancellor et al. 2003). In addition, sanitation facilities influence school attendance. Scarcity of water and proper toilets when girls are having their monthly periods is a hindrance to their attendance at school. Some girls may choose to abscond from lessons because they do not have pads and there are no proper bathrooms for them to clean themselves during menstruation. (Vashisht et al. 2018). Therefore, insufficient toilets and provision of clean water sources slows down progress. One of the women narrated how they have improved water provision and sanitation in the home:

‘We managed to buy some pipes to draw water from one of the clean sources in the mountains. We used to go very far to fetch

water but with this development, we get water right in the homestead yard. I do not have to spend lots of hours fetching water. This has improved sanitation as well in the home. We can wash our clothes at any time because water is accessible. It is not only accessible but it is coming from a very clean source. Our toilets are always clean as well because we have water readily available.’ (W1, Female, 35 years)

An in-depth interview with one of the women gives insight on how they have improved sanitation in their home as well:

‘When I got married, the family used to practice the bush toilet system. Poverty was at a high level. We now use a Blair toilet. The toilet was one of the things that I managed to accomplish because it was really a shameful thing to use the bush toilet in this time and age. Besides, with the bush toilet system there is no privacy. You are always afraid that someone would see you doing your business. Having toilets in the community has curbed diseases such as diarrhea.’

One of the husbands in a polygamous marriage, appreciating one of the wives for improving the quality of life in their home, explained:

‘My wife number two really worked hard the past year. She managed to build a toilet on top of sending children to school. We used to go into the bushes to relieve ourselves. Now it is very easy and easily accessible. I am thankful because I cannot afford to do all things with the money I get from pirating with car. At least if I manage to buy a few groceries they can augment the little I am doing. I am too old now, I do not have the strength any more.’ (M4, Male, 60 years)

The Ndaou women are not being viewed as victims; instead, they are seen being active in constructing their own individualities as social beings in solidarity with their husbands (Hudson-Weems 1993).

Equality

As a result of the economic activities that women in Muchadziya are undertaking, there is now equality that is being experienced in homes and the community as a whole. One of the participants said the following to this effect:

‘When it comes to education, all my kids can now go to school. Before I could raise money on my own, the girls would suffer. My husband, because he has many children from the polygamous marriage would opt to pay school fees for the boy children only. The girls would end up getting married at a very young age. When I realized this, I told myself that this should never happen to my girls. As of now, I rent out a field with a banana plantation so as to increase my income through banana selling. My children are all going to school including the girls. One of the girls is now doing her A’ level and I am hoping that she will make it to University. I am prepared to support her until she has a university degree.’ (W6, Female, 52 years)

One of the men in a monogamous marriage had this to say about equality in the home:

‘There had been a general tendency in the past not to send girls to school. Boys were considered as the future fathers therefore they had better opportunities of going to school. Things have

changed for the better. Thank God that some of the women in the polygamous marriages have been given access to the land and banana plantations. Now they can afford to send their girl children to school together with the boy child. Had it not been like that, most of the girls would not even go up to grade seven.' (M6, Male, 46 years)

The narration above shows that the boys and girls in polygamous families are being treated equally. Responding to a follow-up question after being asked how he was managing tensions among his wives, one of the polygamous church leaders with three wives stated he has a number of shops and each wife has a shop she is managing. He said:

'Each wife is managing a shop and the shops are in different locations here in Muchadziya. It is from the money they are generating that they get money for school fees, food and anything that they want. I also help with buying the groceries required in the shops and also with balancing the books so that they can make profits and the business continues. So each wife has to work hard to be able to sustain the children.' (M7, Male, 70 years)

The above narration shows that all their efforts as husbands and wives are to look after the family. Family-centredness is another characteristic of Africana womanism (Hudson-Weems 1993). They are putting the family first and everything that concerns the family is a priority. Marriage is also highly regarded by Christians, as they believe it was ordained by God (Sande 2019). These Nda women are making efforts to preserve their marriages as they work together with their husbands to maintain equality in the home.

Ending hunger

The problem of malnutrition in poverty-stricken societies is prevalent. It is crucial that people eat nutritious meals because nourishment is important for human survival. Most families are undernourished because of hunger. Food in certain areas is scarce because of droughts that are being experienced because of climatic changes being faced throughout the world. Out of nine persons worldwide, one of them has malnutrition (OECD 2014). Malnutrition disturbs the school attendance of children, leading to continuous poverty and hunger in many families. Through the *dhiga ugute* farming method, selling of bananas and opening of flea markets in the area, Nda women are fighting hunger, and they are making sure that food is always on the table for the family. Most of the time, the family is assured of good quality food. Also, through running around selling, they make sure that a proper diet in the home is provided. They are managing to buy meat, chicken and fish to supplement their diet. One of the children, who was 23 years old, stated that:

'Since our mother started going to the market in Gweru to sell bananas, we have never lacked food in the home. There is now variety on what we eat. We actually choose on a daily basis what we want to eat, unlike before. Before mum started these different projects, we used to have one proper meal per day. We would be very hungry the greater part of the day. We usually

had Sadza and vegetables. These days, mum can afford to buy meat as well.' (C1, Female, 23 years)

Women and men together in Muchadziya are real agents of change in their families and community. The attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals requires effort from everyone in the community, including women. As members of the different churches, men are giving women a voice in the running of the home so that they complement each other. No one is being considered less capable.

Theological reflection: Towards a theology of development, gender justice and women empowerment

All the participants in this study professed that they are Christians. This means that their marriages and homes are being guided by Christian principles. Christianity upholds male headship. However, we can decipher that some men in Muchadziya are sharing power and decision-making with their wives. They may hold the title of being the head of the family, but in practice and principle, they are acknowledging that women are capable of making sound decisions as well. The Africana womanist theory champions that women are and have always been powerful, and they work together with their men to lead the family. Decision-making in the home is no longer left to the husband, but women are also taking the lead in the home in Muchadziya village. The Nda women have a voice, which validates the Africana womanist theory which states the Africana woman is not and has never been silenced (Hudson-Weems 1993). Daly (1975:167, 188) postulates that when it is only the men making decisions and leading, the status of women is reduced and degraded. Likewise, Ruether (1983:141) advocates for a strong and clear refusal of the dogma that embraces patriarchy, which upholds men being leaders and women as followers as the norm; male headship and female subordination as the 'order of creation', divinely commanded. The Africana womanist theory refutes this kind of headship but upholds men and women working together. The male headship described by Daly (1975) creates enmity between men and women. In Africana womanism, a man is never an enemy to a woman. Hudson-Weems (2021) calls it 'male compatibility'. That male compatibility is seen in Muchadziya village as women work together in farming activities to generate money. There is liberty for both the husband and wife to use the proceeds of their hard work, as the wives are also making decisions, even to buy housing stands in Chipinge. The idea in Africana womanism is not necessarily to give power to women to dominate their male counterparts. Instead, it is about empowering both men and women through upholding the consensus decision-making process which has always been the way of the Africana women and men related. African theologians such as Ezra Chitando, Mercy Oduyoye and Sophia Chirongoma also acknowledge the fact that men and women should work together for gender inequalities to be eradicated. Ezra Chitando and Sophie Chirongoma (2008:66–67), in an article they co-authored, challenge men to

willingly give up the advantage they have as men to dominate women and take up life-giving maleness which values women. Some of the men in Muchadziya village seem to have thrown away toxic masculinities and embraced the redemptive masculinities; that is the reason why they allow their wives to work and contribute financially in the home and even to make decisions. Undoubtedly, if culture and churches are to uphold male headship, they hinder the transformation which is so much needed for development and gender equality. It seems the churches in Muchadziya village are making an effort to teach about men and women working together and valuing each other, as evidenced by the results which showed that men and women are working together to eradicate poverty in the area.

Culture has been one barrier to gender equality. It seems as if culture is changing in Muchadziya village as a result of the contribution of the women towards attaining sustainable development in the community. The culture and the norm have been that the boy child is the only one who could easily access education. In Muchadziya village, even the girls are now accessing education because women have chosen to change the culture of leaving the responsibility of being the breadwinner to men. This is evidence that culture can be changed from time to time, in order to serve the needs of the society. According to Ayanga (2008:37), culture can be created and recreated constantly as people find new ways and means of meeting and satisfying their needs. Hence, the continued fall-back on culture as if it is a static entity can be dangerous.

Another lesson that can be derived from the Ndaun women's lived experience is that one does not always have to hold placards for the state of affairs to change. The Ndaun women in Muchadziya have quietly, without causing havoc, changed how men and women relate in the home and community. Feminist theologians from Africa reinforce the idea when they too refer to the concept of 'treading softly but firmly' (Counted 2016:350). Previous attempts by some women in the past to change the status quo by protesting have not produced tangible results like what the women in Muchadziya are producing. An example is the Mini-Skirt March which was staged in Zimbabwe. The *Newsday* of 01 December 2015 records that the march was not successful, as women are still being deprived the freedom to wear whatever they want. Gender roles are no longer fixed but flexible such that everyone in the home carries out duties according to the needs at that moment. Muringa and Makaudze (2014) appear to be endorsing this article's view when they say that gender roles in the Shona culture were always flexible. It can be concluded that slowly, the Ndaun women in Muchadziya village are bringing the community back to their original culture of men and women working together and complementing each other in the home.

The Ndaun women are portraying the Proverbs 31 woman who is virtuous and at the same time giving herself freedom. This agrees with Masenya (1996:8) when she pointed out that Proverbs 31 reveals both liberative and oppressive aspects of the Bible. Riding on the liberative

aspects, by being hardworking and being virtuous, the Ndaun women are complementing their husbands and recognising that their husbands are not enemies but they need to be complemented. The Ndaun women are presenting themselves as persons with intelligence or willpower who can contribute in building up a man, as shown in Proverbs 31:10–31. Therefore, at this stage, Hudson-Weems's (2021) portrayal of the African woman as independent and progressive rings true. The Ndaun women are independent as they work hard and make choices for themselves and the family.

The production ethic that women in Muchadziya village are portraying is commendable. I concur with Masenya (1996:198), who stated that hard work as a quality is mandatory for every society. With the economic meltdown in Zimbabwe, the culture of hard work has been lost. More and more, people seem to be comfortable earning money which they did not work for. Masenya (1996:198), also concurring with Hudson-Weems (1993), argues that African women have always worked, and women in Muchadziya are taking it as their responsibility to revive the culture of hard work in Zimbabwe. However, the culture of hard work is not supposed to be confined to women only. Everyone in the family, both men and women, including children, should work for the welfare of their family. If the work ethic can be restored to the whole nation, Zimbabwe will improve in all aspects of life. Nationally, the restoration of the culture of hard work by all is urgent for the boosting of the already weak Zimbabwean economy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, women's agency in Zimbabwe's sustainable development needs to be given attention by both government and civic organisations. If all women throughout the country engage in different economic activities as the Ndaun women in Muchadziya village are doing, then poverty will be alleviated starting from the household level. Women, despite being in difficult circumstances, are capable of contributing towards the achievement of SDGs. It is therefore recommended that women be given the necessary support for them to achieve more. However, the responsibility should not rest completely on women. Roles should always be flexible so that everyone in the home gets involved. The women in Muchadziya should not have a mentality that they can be successful on their own. Although that is possible, there is need for women to work together with their husbands, fathers and brothers. With men in the equation, the women in Muchadziya village will achieve more and better in life. A woman in Africa is always concerned about her household; that is why African womanism places great importance on the family. She must be intentional about putting the family at the centre for ultimate human survival. The women in Muchadziya are putting their families at the centre; hence, they deliberately become agents of sustainable development.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

Author's contributions

T.M. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The data are readily available, as they were saved on an audio recorder. There are no restrictions on data availability.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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