

Unpacking the socio-economic and environmental trajectories of Mucheke women who are fighting hunger at the grassroots thorough quarry stone extraction

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Abstract: The purpose of the study was to unpack and enrich the theory around the socio-economic and environmental trajectories of Mucheke women who are fighting hunger at the grassroots thorough quarry stone extraction. It was a qualitative study that collected data through interviews and observations of the women at their work place. The findings of the study were that the aspect of owning resources was critical to the survival of women in this study, but they felt that they wielded less 'power over' and 'power to' than either their male counterparts or other women. This is because they heard of women empowerment from the newspapers and radios but had not experienced anything. They are driven by poverty, shifting of gender roles, twin dynamic of practice and practising gender in what they do. However, the women in this study opined that they were ready to discard their environmentally destructive practices and join in projects that could help change their lives. The study concluded that in the wake of the theoretical framework of this study which is hinged on the Rio+20 summit that took place in June 2012 addressing issues of sustainable development, the work of women in this study needs the attention of all those who value sustainable development. The study recommended that there is need for integrating gender issues into public policy so that gender mainstreaming is institutionalised and is systematic.

Keywords: Women, empowerment, sustainable development, power over, power to and practising gender

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

One of the few women presidents in Africa Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia said that the world has greatly evolved since the Millennium Development Goals were established almost 15 years ago, and in 2015 the international community will set new development goals for the 193 United Nations member states [1]. She went on to say the creation of a common development agenda is a call to action for all of us. It is a call for action for women because they are at the fore front for development. Women cannot be left behind if we harbour intentions of eradicating poverty. According to International Fund for Agricultural Development [2], poverty is a multi-faceted phenomenon that is defined and explained as a situation in which a person lacks the necessary abilities, capabilities and entitlements to satisfy his or her basic needs and aspirations. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf cited in [1 p. 9] put it this way:

The Common African Position, derived from the African Union's 2063 agenda, is surely relevant to all the world's developing countries, from whichever continent they hail, as it aims to reorient the development paradigm away from externally funded

initiatives, towards those that are more domestically inspired and funded. These initiatives must be built on solid foundations: structural economic transformation; science, technology and innovation; people-centred development; environmental sustainability; peace and security; and partnership for development [1, p.9].

This was the case with women who made up this study. These are women who, like all other women in Zimbabwe have families to look after. Some of their husbands are no longer able to fend for the families because of varied reasons. A quick survey on why these women are desperate for something to feed their families with showed that of the ten surveyed:

Table-1 appears to show that there are five main reasons that threw the women in this study into the streets so that they are the sole bread winners in their families. Death appears to be one of the biggest robbers of their loved ones with 3 (30%) agreeing that they are now single because the husband passed away. Equally strong reason is that of retrenchment with 3

(30%) confirming that their husbands are out of employment. Divorce and separation also appeared to have a strong showing considering that 2 (20%) were in this category with sickness and having never married getting equal shares of 1 (10%) of the women in this study.

Table-1: Showing reasons why the women in this study were the main bread winners in the families.

Main reason for indulging in	No	%
Widowed	3	30
Retrenchment	3	30
Divorce/separation	2	20
Never married	1	10
Sickness	1	10

Gender inequality is a contemporary problem that countries the world over are grappling with. In Zimbabwe the issue of addressing gender inequality is provided for in the constitution where it is clearly stated that the state and all institutions and agencies of government must take practical measures to ensure that women have access to resources, including land, on the basis of equality with men [3]. In its efforts to address gender disparities in society Zimbabwe further drew a gender policy which aims to eradicate gender discrimination and inequalities in all spheres of life and development [4]. Notwithstanding policies and provisions of the constitution targeting to address gender inequality, the problem is still rampant in society. This could mean that there is a disjuncture between policy and practice hence women at grassroots level like the Mucheke women experience poverty that drives them in the onerous extraction of quarry stones.

Fending for the socio-economic wellbeing of the family has in many cases and situations been strongly dominated by men. This area, in African tradition is seen as the masculine business or at least used to be, conventionally constructed mainly in masculine terms [e.g. 5]. This scenario, then according to [6], relegates everything socially perceived as “non-masculine” to the marginal, and places it primarily outside the scope of women, and also makes it harder for women (with family responsibilities for young children) to be involved in issues of survival where they rely on undertaking very difficult menial jobs in order to eke a living.

According to Arthus-Bertrand [cited in 7] women and men do not experience today's challenges in the same way, be they environmental degradation, threats to bio-diversity or violent conflicts. This may apply to women in this study. They were on their own without men. They were doing work that is perceived to be men's according to our culture. That women and men do not experience today's challenges in the same way, to Arthus-Bertrand [cited in 7], how can they

when women own less than 1% of the world's land property, are often responsible for the majority of agricultural production, producing the bulk of domestically consumed food and sustaining the livelihood of their families. This means that if we don't take into account gender roles in our assessment of challenges and solutions for sustainable development, we are generating fallacies [7]. Women's labour, skills and knowledge of how to use and manage natural resources will then be either ignored or exploited (Arthus-Bertrand, cited in [7]).

The important role women play in society has motivated feminists to advocate for gender mainstreaming in all spheres of life. Gender mainstreaming ideology emphasises on incorporating gender issues in developmental programmes undertaken in society [8]. Seed Gender Equality Award is one such an organisation at International level that emphasises on gender mainstreaming. It supports small scale social environmental entrepreneurs around the globe at the same time working towards a greener economy as well as tackling poverty, marginalisation and social exclusion [9]. Commenting on the role of SEED, the Director L. I. Yong said “Promoting women's economic empowerment is an integral part of SEED's work. As half of the world's population, women play a crucial role in economic growth, environmental sustainability and poverty reduction” Against this backdrop one can infer that the Mucheke women go about their business of extracting quarry stones with no or little knowledge about the environmental degradation caused by their activity. This begs the question: who is responsible to disseminate information on conservation of the environment to the grassroots.

In the recent past, sustainable development has become a buzzword in developmental programmes at different levels of society. It is imperative to define and characterize the concept in order to examine the engagement of the Mucheke women in the extraction of quarry stones in this context. The Brundtland Commission defines sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs [10]. To what extent do the women of Mucheke consider posterity in their engagement with the environment? A survey of the area where women extract quarry stones by the researchers revealed that there is land degradation of the highest magnitude. It is characterised by gullies and dongas an indication that the issue of sustainable development is either alien to them or that poverty is forcing them not to embrace it. Brundtland had this to say about the link between development and the environment: “The “environment” is where we live, and “development” is what we do in attempting to improve our lot within that abode. The two are inseparable” [10]. This observation points to the need to sensitise everyone who interacts

with the environment in one way or the other of the need to conserve the environment and the women of Mucheke badly need this knowledge if environmental degradation they cause is to be arrested.

Communities are often characterised as sites of constraint as well as opportunity [6]. They are also further characterised as forums of continuous activity where gender often passes unnoticed or denied partly because it is “done” routinely and automatically, concealing its precariousness and performativity [6]. This is also the same with the Mucheke women in this study. They go about their routine menial jobs unnoticed by members of the community partly because they are women. They perform some of the hardest menial jobs trying to extract quarry stone from very hard rock in the environment. [11] identify five masculinities that men enact at work. One of these is the “macho” management style. They use this style, according to these authors ‘emphasizing qualities of struggle and battle, a willingness to be ruthless and brutal, a rebellious nature and an aggressive, rugged individualism’ (p. 3). To them, ‘man’-agement came to be defined in terms of the ability to control people, events, companies, environments, trade unions and new technology”, something that continued well into the 1990s where management and the shop floor seemed equally preoccupied with the “masculinist concern [for] personal power and the ability to control others and self’ [6: p. 5].

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in the feminist theoretical framework specifically the Marxist feminist theory. It is rooted in the discourse of gender and sustainable development. The ideology of feminism challenges the hegemony of patriarchy which militates against the advancement of women [12]. Like other branches of feminism, the Marxist feminists’ assumption is that there is gender inequality in society which is biased against women and therefore should be addressed. In most societies, Zimbabwe included, there are differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned. The Marxist theory which anchors this research is rooted in Marx’s ideas of social class [13]. Marxist feminists argue that the oppression that women experience in society is attributed to non-ownership of means of production [14: p. 41]. They further assert that oppression of women is a result of gender stereotypes which militate against them to participate in the public sphere that is influential areas of life such as politics, religion, education and economy [8: p.55]. According to Marxist feminists, women’s place is the home, the private sphere. Marxist feminist argue that domestic work done by women is not valued by the capitalists hence is not paid, although capitalists depend so much on it [15: p. 565].

It can be drawn from the Marxist feminist views that since domestic work is devalued by the capitalists and not paid, women live a parasitic life, which means that they depend on men who work in the public sphere. In the case of Zimbabwe, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Report [16] revealed that, women were poorer than men with 68% of female headed households living under the total consumption poverty line [17: p.12]. The same report highlighted that women have a higher structural unemployment rate of 70% compared to 56% for men. In the same vein, the Zimbabwe demographic Health Survey 2010-2011 indicated that 37% of women, compared to 62% men were formally employed (National Gender Policy [NGP], 2013:14). The statistics above show that Zimbabwean women are economically disadvantaged compared to their male counter-parts. The desire for women to liberate themselves economically in a patriarchal society drives them to engage in income generating activities no matter how dehumanizing they may be. It is against the background of high incidence of poverty among women coupled with high unemployment rate that the involvement of the Mucheke women in the extraction of quarry stones vis-a-vis sustainable development is explored.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Severe environmental degradation is taking place around the outskirts of Masvingo. The areas are now a sore to the eye and the public have started to utter statements that fuel hate, torment the women concerned and denigrate their practices. This is done without finding out the reasons behind their practice. This study was an attempt to fill that void.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of the study was to unpack and enrich the theory around the socio-economic and environmental trajectories of Mucheke women who are fighting hunger at the grassroots thorough quarry stone extraction.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the socio-economic and environmental trajectories of Mucheke women who are fighting hunger at the grassroots thorough quarry stone extraction?

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study was largely qualitative. The research design for this study was the Qualitative Multiple-Case Study design [18]. Qualitative multiple-case study design is an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources [19;18]. Through the use of a multiple-case study design, the researchers discovered that this design enabled them to explore differences within and between socio-economic trajectories taken by women to improve

their lives. The goal was to replicate findings across cases [18]. This shows that the purpose of this research is to enrich theory around contemporary issues of socio-economic and environmental trajectories under conditions perceived as inferior gender identity. Such multiple-case study research requires shifting from a measurement mode to a more “narrative” mode that was employed in this study in order to be able to stress description and historical detail into the process of socio-economic and environmental trajectories construction.

RESULTS

Participation in people-initiated projects

The women in this study opined that they were ready to discard their environmentally destructive practices and join in projects that could help change their lives. One important point that came out of this was that:

We need to be part of people-initiated development projects and not public-initiated development projects.

It appears the women in this study saw differences between people-initiated development projects and public-initiated development projects. According to Government for Development [1], better information to them is however, not enough. They point out that knowledge must be put into practice, results observed in context, and then used to inform public policy and service design. They supported their thinking by saying this requires evidence on ‘what’ really works, analysis of the ‘why’ and exploration of the ‘how’. To them, better evidence can certainly help us learn from experience the general principles and transferable solutions that may best fit local needs and practices [1].

Access to resources at the expense of the environment

Access to resources was mentioned by respondents in this study. They saw the aspect of owning resources as critical to their survival. One of the respondents mentioned that:

I do not have access to resources. This is one reason I am here. I want to buy my household goods. Something you will call mine.

It appears the need for resources is one of the driving forces behind the work of the women in this study. Women want to have resources but one thing is outstanding. They need to work for those resources. This finding, confirm earlier findings by Swamy [cited in 7] who found out that women are less involved in bribery than their male counterparts. In that study, Swamy then concluded that women have higher standards of ethical behaviour and are more concerned with the common good. It appears this was the case in this study. They were very concerned with the common good. However, they were not concerned about the

environment. Their practices were not environmentally friendly as they caused severe environmental degradation.

Power over and power to

The idea of power came out in this study. It came from the fact that the women felt they wielded less power than either their male counterparts or other women. They mentioned power over

I do not have what I can call mine. I have no power over what is in my home because I did not contribute to it. I will rest when I have something that I call mine.

With respect to women, the idea of power was mentioned by [20] who saw the idea of power as something that is found and located at the root of the term empowerment. The two authorities pointed out that power can be understood as operating in a number of different ways. They mentioned some of these ways in respect of women in their study:

- *power over:* This power involves an either/or relationship of domination/subordination. Ultimately, it is based on socially sanctioned threats of violence and intimidation, it requires constant vigilance to maintain, and it invites active and passive resistance;
- *power to:* This power relates to having decision-making authority, power to solve problems and can be creative and enabling;
- *power with:* This power involves people organising with a common purpose or common understanding to achieve collective goals;
- *power within:* This power refers to self confidence, self awareness and assertiveness. It relates to how individuals can recognise through analysing their experience how power operates in their lives, and gain the confidence to act to influence and change this Williams [cited in 20].

[20] further argue that whilst understanding of power and empowerment have come from many different movements and traditions, the feminist movement has emphasised collective organisation which is in this case ‘power with’ and has been influential in developing ideas about ‘power within’. Power over is important for women empowerment. They cannot be empowered when they have no power over influential things. They also mentioned power to which it relates to them being able to make important decisions that affect their lives.

Women empowerment

Women empowerment is a buzzword in Zimbabwe. The same concept came out of this study. The respondents in the study confided that:

We only hear of empowerment in the radio and in the newspapers. We also hear about women empowerment at churches and rallies. However we have not experienced that women empowerment. The button has not reached us. We will gladly embrace it when it reaches us.

The issue of empowerment is very important for women. [21] saw empowerment as a multi-dimensional definition of power. He argued that it is evident that empowerment has several different and inter-related aspects. To him, empowerment is not only about opening up access to decision making, but also must include processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy that decision-making space [21]. On the other hand, [2] concurs and adds that empowerment becomes necessary to focus on empowerment of the poor. This is because women empowerment particularly empowerment of the poor is a necessary but crucial requirement for a sustainable solution to poverty and hunger. [20] point out that empowerment is a useful concept because it emphasises the idea of women as active agents in, rather than passive recipients of, development strategies. The women in this study were active agents in quarry stone extraction and were in no way passive recipients of development strategies. [21] points out that empowerment are a bottom-up process and cannot be bestowed from the top down. He argues:

The outside professional cannot expect to control the outcomes of authentic of empowerment being given by one group to another hide an attempt to keep control. [21: p. 104].

According to [2], empowerment is defined as the ability of people, in particular the least privileged, to: (a) have access to productive resources that enable them to increase their earnings and obtain the goods and services they need; and (b) participate in the development process and the decisions that affect them. These two aspects are related; one without the other is not empowerment. The most unfortunate thing in this study was the fact that access to productive resources that enable women in this study to increase their earnings were at the expense of the environment which was the biggest causality.

Poverty and shifting of gender roles

Poverty is the major factor cited by women in this study as the force driving them to do manual jobs like quarry stone extraction. One woman expressed that:

What can we do against the harsh economic environment? Companies are closing and some are retrenching. Our husbands who used to take care of the welfare of the families have been incapacitated so we are here doing this dirty and strenuous job to provide food for our families.

The views expressed by the women in this study confirm [22]'s finding that the informal sector has now emerged as the real survival platform in the work of deepening economic crisis. He further opines that the sector now accounts for 80% of the labour force, majority being women. While it is acknowledged that there has been a paradigm shift in gender roles in society that has seen more women participating in the public sphere, a cause for concern with the Muccheke women in this study is the environmental degradation they cause in pursuit of eking a living through quarry stone extraction.

Twin dynamic of practice and practising gender

The element of twin dynamic of practice and practising gender was evident in this study. One women opined that:

We will provide you with all the stones that you want "we are men"

This is evidence enough that women in this study used the practice of gender in their work. They also went further to practise gender in their operations.

Practising gender was evidenced in the observations we made in which women in this study practised gender through performing very hard work that under normal circumstances has been reserved for men if cultural practices are to be taken into consideration.

[23, p. 343] remarks that "practising gender is the doing of gender [. . .] in real time and space". In her argument, she draws a distinction between practices that are culturally available to "do gender" and the practising of gender that is constituted through interaction [23]. She then went on to argue for, as was the case in this study the importance of studying the "twin dynamic of practices and practicing". [24] weighed in on the same subject and pointed out that behaving "like a man" or performing masculinity is paradigmatic even for the women in their study. The two pointed out that being assertive, forsaking a family life and taking risks are seen by some of the women in the research as the only option in order to get ahead. It appears this was the case in this study considering that women in this study had to forego normal family life and took risks to engage in quarry stone extraction which under normal circumstances is a job that is a preserve for men. However performing masculinity in this study had a price. That price was environmental degradation that ensued.

This shows that the twin dynamic of practice and practising gender was evident in this study considering that the women in this study did not really leave gender at the door when entering the work fields for quarry stone extraction. Rather, they were seen

“doing” gender in specific ways, that were in some cases reflexive and in other cases perhaps not. It can be argued that the “strange silence” [11] about men as managers and the embedded and taken-for-granted association of men with organisation power, authority and prestige [6] is evident in this study.

CONCLUSION

In the wake of the theoretical framework of this study which is hinged on the Rio+20 summit that took place in June 2012 addressing issues of sustainable development, the work of women in this study needs the attention of all those who value sustainable development. Like the Rio+20 summit leaders from all over the world we reaffirm our commitment to sustainable development and in the process we want to ensure the promotion of an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future for our planet as well as for present and future generations. Against this assertion, the socio-economic and environmental trajectories of Mucheke women who are fighting hunger at the grassroots through quarry stone extraction is driven by among other issues the need for resources, power over and power to, women empowerment and the twin dynamic practice and practising gender. However, these very noble and good intentions fall short when it comes to environmental protection. What it means then is that the importance of innovation in the quarry extraction sector that is embedded in good environmental practices has become critical.

Practical value of the research

This research has tried in a small way to reinvigorate the debate around how the development community can better achieve its mission to reduce poverty and promote sustainable development at the same time. It is a small attempt at bridging the gap between designing good projects or policies and implementing them for sustainable development

Recommendations

- Fostering participation in policy-making decisions through innovative participatory mechanisms
- Government should put in place numerous initiatives to encourage social participation in local planning and budgeting processes for organised groups seeking to influence the public agenda, especially on issues involving minorities and vulnerable populations that include ethnic minorities, the elderly, women, the poor, immigrants and indigenous groups.
- There is need to put in place much-needed legal and policy reforms required to facilitate mainstreaming of gender issues.
- There is need for integrating gender issues into public policy so that gender mainstreaming is institutionalised and is systematic.

- Replace the fragmented public policy that lack strategic aims because it fails to recognise that investing in the rights of women improves the survival rate and promotes sustainable development.
- There is need for engagement with multi-stakeholders to build space for reform, because responsibilities for managing civil service are highly fragmented across different agencies putting poor people like women in this study at a disadvantage
- Companies licenced to extract and sell quarry stones should charge affordable prices so that buyers do not go to unregistered dealers who cause environmental degradation
- The government and Non Governmental organisations (NGOs) should sponsor income generating programmes in urban areas so that women who are not formally employed are occupied productively,

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