


Women in Zimunya and the *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* philosophy for sustainable livelihoods



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Dates:

Received: 29 Mar. 2022
Accepted: 02 Sept. 2022
Published: 12 Apr. 2023

How to cite this article:

Chirara, T. & Chisale, S.S., 2023, 'Women in Zimunya and the *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* philosophy for sustainable livelihoods', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(1), a7575. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.7575>

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The *musha mukadzi* (Shona) or *umuzi ngumama* (Ndebele) is an African gendered philosophy that means women make up the home. This philosophy has been researched in African traditional religions (ATRs) and is interrogated from interdisciplinary angles in academia. African feminist research has highlighted how this philosophy can be derogatory, stereotyped and oppressive to women if it is naïvely used in domestic contexts. As a result, contemporary African feminists and gender scholars attempt to expose both the liberative and oppressive nature of this philosophy. This study seeks to interrogate how women from the grassroots understand this philosophy. It draws from in-depth interviews with women from Zimunya, Mutare, in Zimbabwe who describe this philosophy as a resource for sustainable livelihoods. Methods used to collect data involved in-depth interviews from a sample of 10 women whose ages ranged from 35 to 50 years. The findings highlight that for both single and married women in Zimunya, the *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* philosophy has empowering traits that enhance women's agency and sustainable livelihoods in the domestic household. They describe how this philosophy has empowered them to initiate income-generating projects that include rearing of poultry (road runners), membership to a sewing club, selling dried traditional foods and money savings (*mikando*).

Contributions: This article explores an African gendered philosophy, *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* [women make the home], and how this has been used as a resource by women in sustaining livelihoods.

Keywords: *musha mukadzi*; *umuzi ngumama*; women make the home; philosophy; sustaining; livelihoods.

Introduction

This article reflects on how Zimbabwean women exploit the Zimbabwean philosophy *musha mukadzi* (Shona) or *umuzi ngumama* (isiNdebele) [women make up a home, or a home is a woman] to enhance their agency and families' sustainable livelihoods. It interrogates how women in Zimunya, Mutare, use this philosophy as a resource for sustaining livelihoods. In Africa and globally, it is women who bear the brunt of poverty, because they experience multiple discriminations based on race or ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class (Mugehera & Parkes 2020). However, despite the stigma and discrimination, women have exploited resources around them to enhance their agency and families' livelihoods. Muzvidziwa (2000) rightly argues that there is a paradigm shift from how rural women have demonstrated their agency in sustainable livelihoods. The shift is that rural women who were traditionally confined to the domestic space are swiftly becoming industrious and taking the lead in initiating productive activities (livelihoods), which can provide income and food for the well-being of their families. Migration and urbanisation introduced female-headed households, where some men partially abandoned their rural homes in search of greener pastures (Mhaka 2021). In some Zimunya households, it is women who are the backbone and survival of the family. This shows that women are no longer dependents, but they have become providers and responsible for the welfare and sustenance of their families. For women to cater for the needs of their families, they have adopted various livelihood activities and strategies to survive. The involvement of woman in sustaining livelihoods is the driving force behind relieving economic hardships. Mushore et al. (2013) have this to say:

[D]ue to the tough economic conditions, women became more involved in economically productive activities of various livelihoods as gardening, pottery making, cross border trading, irrigation farming, buying and selling and informal employment. (p. 103)

Note: Special Collection: Women Theologies, sub-edited by Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale (Midlands State University, Zimbabwe) and Tanya van Wyk (University of Pretoria).

The study draws from qualitative themes that emerged from semistructured interviews conducted with 10 women from the Zimunya area. It seeks to explore a gender analysis of sustainable livelihoods in connection to *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* philosophy. The study is divided into four sections; firstly, it starts off by describing the methodological considerations of the study. Secondly, it describes the *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* philosophy in connection to sustainable livelihoods. Thirdly, it teases out themes from interviews that include *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama*, and these themes will be interpreted through sustainable livelihoods theory. Emerging themes suggest that women exploit the *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* philosophy to enhance their agency and sustain their family livelihoods. Finally, recommendations and the conclusion will follow.

Methodological considerations

The study was conducted in the Zimunya area in Manicaland province. Zimunya area is located 30 km from Mutare along Chipinge Chimanimani Road. Livelihoods in this area are sustained by farming; as a result, smallholder farmers inhabit the area and subsistence farming is common. Crops mainly grown include maize, groundnuts and beans. Ten participants were recruited, and among them were five married women, three single women, one widowed woman and one female village head; participants were aged between 35 and 50 years of age. Consent to conduct interviews was sought from all participants before the commencement of the data collection. All participants were assured of their identity protection through the use of pseudonyms. Thus, codes were used to refer to participants as W1 to W10; W stands for woman. Data were collected through telephone and face-to-face interviews. Women were key informants in the study, as they had firsthand information on their activities that sustain their livelihoods.

Musha mukadzi or *umuzi ngumama* and sustainable livelihoods theory

The term *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* is a proverb that has been 'philosophised' by the Shona and Ndebele of Zimbabwe since time immemorial. This philosophy is contested among scholars particularly African feminists and gender scholars. It has been viewed to be oppressive to women on one hand and liberative on the other (Samanga & Matiza 2020). For example, Mapuranga (2013:177) argues that religion and culture keep women in the kitchen, as they are deemed more helpful when it comes to private issues, or rather it is said the woman's place is in the home. In this case, women are primarily responsible for domestic and household chores, and at times they have little or no contribution at all in sustaining livelihoods in their families. Women are regarded to be confined at home by the proverb or philosophy *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* because of some patriarchal beliefs in religions such as African traditional religions (ATRs). According to Manyonganise (2015:2), often women are not consulted when decisions are made, silencing their critical voices as a result. The silencing of women is a

stumbling block towards their liberation. In Zimbabwe, for example, religion (particularly Christianity and ATRs) is the main barrier to women's liberation (Machingura 2012:50). Thus, women's contribution in sustaining livelihoods in the households is not recognised or acknowledged. Their role in the domestic household is not regarded as important; hence, they are not breadwinners like men, who are believed to be the ones who provide for their families through hustling or work in urban areas.

Although the *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* philosophy seems to confine women to the home, this philosophy also empowers them. Marriage is a highly commemorated phenomenon among the African people and cultures. It is one of the important institutions among the Shona and the Ndebele in Zimbabwe, as expressed in the saying *musha mukadzi* and *umuzi ngumama* [home is made by a woman] (Samanga & Matiza 2020). This common gender expression in Zimbabwe provides women with some safe space to resist domination and exercise their power, contesting the perceptions of those who use this philosophy in a way that oppresses women (Manyonganise 2010:16). For example, some women resist male domination by empowering themselves through hustling as farming and entrepreneurship. This has contributed to the strength of women, who are presented as pillars of survival and sustenance of the families. This is implied in *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* [a home is a woman], which means a home cannot be a home without a woman or wife (Taringa 2014:41). The views of the above scholars highlight some degree of emancipation in the *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* philosophy, which is very crucial in this study. The thrust of the study is to explore the liberative and empowerment aspects in the *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* philosophy and how women in Zimunya exploit this philosophy for their agency in sustainable livelihoods. There are also debates on whether single women exploit the *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* philosophy to sustain their families' livelihoods. According to Chambers and Conway (1992):

[A] livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living; a livelihood is sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long term. (p. 6)

Livelihoods are about meeting people's survival needs that include shelter, food and clothing. If these are not provided, people live in abject poverty, which is a condition that is not conducive to the survival of humanity. This is confirmed by Mphande (2016:17), who asserts that livelihoods are about gaining a living, particularly finding food, water, shelter, clothing and all necessities required for human survival at the individual and household levels. Livelihoods include capabilities, assets and activities that are required for human survival (cf. Scoone 2009). For a livelihood to be sustainable, it should be resilient to external shocks and stresses

(Department for International Development [DFID] 2000). In sustaining livelihoods, women in Zimunya are determined to fend for their families and have used the *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* philosophy as a stepping stone. Livelihoods depend on diverse capitals or assets; in this case, *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* is explored from a Shona perspective; the aim is to understand how both single and married women in Zimunya exploit it as a household asset that leads to their agency rather than their oppression. The study also explores challenges and struggles women face in efforts to sustain their families' livelihoods by conforming to *musha mukadzi* or *umfazi ngumama* philosophy.

Findings and discussion: *Musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* and sustainable livelihoods

The aim of this study was to explore a gender analysis of sustainable livelihoods in connection to *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* philosophy. Household sustainable livelihoods are often gendered and hierarchical. Seemingly for some communities, a livelihood is gendered or classified in marital terms. Women are often linked to unpaid domestic work and men as the breadwinners who are responsible for sustaining family livelihoods (Chidakwa et al. 2020). Gendered philosophies such as *musha mukadzi* or *ikhaya* or *umuzi ngumama* highlight the role of women in sustainable livelihoods.

Drawing from semistructured interviews conducted with women from Zimunya area (see Table 1), this study explores *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* philosophy in connection to sustainable livelihoods. It explores how married and single women understand this philosophy in connection to household livelihoods.

Musha mukadzi or *umuzi ngumama* and sustainable livelihoods, single women's lived realities

Single women are viewed with various lenses in the society. In conservative African communities, single women are sometimes regarded as misfits, while at other times they are accepted as part of society. Biri argues that 'single women are deemed unfit in comparison to married women in positions of authority and moral status and are rendered suspects by

virtue of their singlehood' (2021:28). Biri (2021:28) explores some categories of single women, such as widowed women; the other category of single women includes those who lost their husbands because of divorce, as a result of diverse factors such as 'immaturity at time of marriage, physical violence, witchcraft accusations, cheating, irresponsible husband, barrenness and the gender of a child' (Biri 2021:69). Biri also categorises some women as 'the hit and run', women who initially engaged in premarital sex, were impregnated and were later deserted by their so-called partners (2021:69). Moreover, there are single women who passed the marriage age without getting married; there are also those who have separated from their husbands but not officially divorced (Biri 2021:69–74).

Participants presented a diverse understanding of sustainable livelihoods in connection to *musha mukadzi* and single women. According to W1:

'Musha mukadzi chokwadi uyo mukadzi anogara apo akasosiwa nemurume wake asi haana kumbosiya musha nemhuri arikundochengeta vana wake ega murume pasina.' [It's true that a woman makes the home, that a woman who lives in that home was left by her husband, but she did not desert her homestead and her family. She is fending for her children in the absence of her husband.]

W3 narrated that:

'[I]ni ndinogara ndega nemhuri murume wangu vane makore gumi aenda joni haasati adzoka kumba uye haatumire chinhu chekuchengeta mhuri, ndinongonzawo nemakuhwa kuti vane imwe mhuri ikoko. Upenyu hwakaoma asi ndinoshanda nesimba kuchengeta mhuri yangu.' [I live with my family in the absence of my husband, who went to South Africa 10 years ago. For the 10 years, he has never come back home, and he does not send anything for the family upkeep. I only heard through the grapevine that he has another family in South Africa, but I work hard for the sustenance of my family.]

W5 highlighted the strength of single women in sustaining livelihoods when she said:

'[I]ni ndakandobariswawo vana wangu vatatu vana baba vacho vakawaramba ndakapilwawo pekugara nehama dzangu. Ndinogara pano ndipo pamusha pangu ndichichengeta mhuri yangu.' [I was impregnated and gave birth to these three children, but their fathers denied responsibility, so my relatives gave me a place to inhabit. I live here; this is my homestead, and I fend for my family.]

From the above interviews, it is clear that the *musha mukadzi* is also applicable to single women who are responsible for sustaining livelihoods of their families. Single women in Zimunya area work hard for their families by engaging in various activities that bring bread and butter on the table. Biri (2021:36) argues that at times, women are treated as objects of sympathy. Treating women as objects of sympathy in Zimbabwe complicates women's struggle, because all women, whether single or married, lead in sustaining their families' livelihoods. The difference is visible sometimes where women are formally employed, while some work in the informal sector. Those who are formally employed may

TABLE 1: Profile of participants.

Participant number	Age	Occupation
W1	49	Peasant farmer
W2	44	Teacher
W3	41	Peasant farmer
W4	37	Pastor's wife
W5	36	Vendor
W6	42	Peasant farmer
W7	41	Vendor
W8	35	Peasant farmer
W9	39	Tailor
W10	49	Village head

have a more stable income to sustain their families than those who work in the informal sector, because that depends on the demand for the services and products they sell. For Biri, the difference is between single and married women, as single women are at times more economically stable than their married counterparts (2021:36). Though single women are at times looked down upon, they have played a very crucial role in fending and providing for their families and at times have made great sacrifices while men or the fathers of their children do not provide anything for the upkeep of their children. It is high time that society embraces, values and appreciates the work done and the strides being made by single mothers in providing for the welfare of their families.

Musha mukadzi or umuzi ngumama and sustainable livelihoods, understanding by the church

The church has played a significant role in encouraging women to work hard and provide for their families through the *musha mukadzi* philosophy. According to a pastor's wife (W4) from one of the mainline churches in Zimunya, *musha mukadzi* is a philosophy that is a reality for the church, particularly the prayer women's league. She said:

'[I]su semadzimai tinoziwa kuti musha mukadzi tinodzidzisa madzimai kuchishanu chemadzimai kuruwadzano kuita mapurojekiti anovapa mari yekuchengeta mhuri. Semudzimai usamirira mari yababa shandawo mari yako. Nyange madzimai asina varume ngaazviriritire nekushanda nesimba.' ['We as women know that women make the home. We teach women at our women's organisation, through Friday prayer, to embark on income-generating projects so as to raise money for family upkeep. As women, you should not look up to your husband for survival but find your own means of raising money. Even single women should work hard and fend for their lives.']

W2 resonated with W4 as she said:

'[K]uchechi semadzimai tinodzidzisana kuti mukadzi anofanira kushanda zvoitwa nemukadzi unotaurwa nebhaibheri kuna zvirowo 31. Munhukadzi unofanira kushanda nesimba kuriritira mhuri yake.' ['At church, as women, we teach each other to work as hard as the women in the Bible in Proverbs 31. Women should work hard and provide for the family.']

Although Proverbs 31 seems to provide the model of an ideal woman who is hard-working, at times men take advantage of this teaching and abuse women to shoulder the burden of providing for the family. The majority of the church membership are women (Chisale 2020, Mwaura 2005); thus, it should be the duty of the church to empower these women for sustainable livelihoods. For Biri (2021):

[S]ingle women devote significant time to the church at the same time have the burden for their children, some who are deserted by a husband who is not a responsible father. (p. 28)

The church has played a significant role in encouraging women to work hard for their families through the *musha mukadzi* philosophy. The church women's organisations are a safe space to empower women in sustainable livelihoods through income-generating projects, and in some instances,

the church can source money for vulnerable congregants or members of the community to start projects to sustain their livelihoods or give charity by donating material things for their family upkeep.

Methods employed by women in Zimunya for sustainable livelihoods

Although the *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* philosophy seems to confine women to the domestic space, women in Zimunya are exploiting this philosophy to sustain their families' livelihoods. They have become breadwinners of their families by initiating income-generating projects to sustain their families' livelihoods. They are active participants in fending for the welfare of their families and in sustaining livelihoods more than men. The following are some strategies that are adopted by women in Zimunya area in sustaining livelihoods.

Rearing poultry or road runners

Women are rearing chickens (or road runners) in their homes that they in turn sell for cash. According to W6, women are keeping chickens that they sell locally and in Mutare, the nearest city:

'[K]uti vanhu vati musha mukadzi ndokunga pamushapo paina mai vanopikitika kushandira mhuri yake. Ini ndinorarama nekuchengeta huku dzechibhoi.' ['When people say women make up the home, it means a woman who works hard for her family. I earn a living through rearing poultry.']

This resonates with Mangena (2009), who writes that 'apart from being able to initiate and influence things in the home and in the larger community, women organize and sustain the society' (2009:25). In Zimunya, some homesteads have an average of 250–300 poultry that they are rearing for survival. They also sell their chickens from a price that ranges from 6 to 10 American dollars (USD) for each bird (observations by researchers). Because of the high rate of inflation in Zimbabwe, these women prefer selling their chickens in American dollars, unlike the Zimbabwean dollars that are susceptible to inflation.

Besides selling poultry, women are also selling manure and eggs in order to sustain their families. The researchers' observations confirm that people buy and prefer eating these eggs as they regard them to be highly nutritious, and a few people would buy these eggs for ritual purposes in African-initiated churches. Rearing poultry has, to a greater extent, improved the diet of many families as there is a supply of food rich in protein in the form of meat and eggs. A good diet is a prerequisite for the good health and well-being of humanity. Instead of waiting for their husbands to cater for the needs of the family, women are being involved in activities and projects that enhance sustaining of livelihoods. Besides selling eggs and manure, they also spread the manure in their fields so as to nourish their soils and conserve their surroundings. More so, so women in their homes have also initiated sewing clubs as a way of sustaining livelihoods. In

that situation, women are striving to make the best of their situation and raise income for the family's upkeep.

Sewing clubs

Jaka et al. (2021:236) assert that 'women play a role in both productive and reproductive work, and have shifted from being caregivers to providers of household needs'. Women in Zimbabwe have initiated sewing clubs within their homes. They collect adult old clothing and re-mend them into children's clothing. Instead of throwing away old clothes as garbage in their surroundings, women collect these clothes and modify them into children's clothing. This was confirmed by W5, who highlighted that '*Mbatya dzekare hatirasi tinodzigadzira tosona mbatya dzevana*' [We do not throw away old clothing, but we mend them into children's clothing]. These clothes are then sold in the community for a cheap and affordable price. Women also exchange these clothes for maize, beans or anything else, which they in turn sell and use to fend for their families. In doing this, they are utilising the *musha mukadzi* philosophy as a tool for sustainable livelihoods. In this case, women are being creative in modifying old adult clothes into children's clothing. Women also use the small pieces of cloth to make pillows that they also sell for income. On the one hand, women are earning a living through collecting and reusing old pieces of cloth, and on the other hand, they are getting rid of unnecessary garbage in the community, thereby conserving their surroundings. One of the challenges that Zimbabwe is facing today is the degradation and littering of the environment. Women in Zimbabwe, however, are conserving the environment from unnecessary garbage through collection, recycling and reusing of old clothes. According to Subbo and Moindi (2008:318), 'recycling is one way to reduce waste, reusing products is another. Products that can be recycled include everything from paper, plastic, clothing and scrape metal' (emphasis added). Women clean up garbage from their surroundings and reuse some of the garbage to make money. A healthy environment is habitable, and in sustaining livelihoods, women clean their surroundings so that their families have a habitable environment. The savings club has also become a way of sustaining livelihoods among women in Zimbabwe.

Saving clubs or *mikando*

Muzvidziwa observes that 'rural women have initiated several *livelihoods acts* as an answer to the ever-growing *needs* to alleviate poverty and hunger in their households' (emphasis added (2000:69)). Many women in Zimbabwe are involved in money-saving clubs (*mukando*), where each member invests 10 USD every month (interview W5). If a member borrows the money, she pays 2% interest. These women will share the money after every six months and sometimes yearly. Through these savings, women have managed to sustain their families.

The findings of this study confirm that women in Zimbabwe have gone an extra mile in buying groceries through the women's saving club, and they call this *mukando wemagirosari*

(savings for groceries). Besides saving money, women in their saving clubs will purchase and share groceries of basic commodities. Women, through the saving clubs, will pay 10 USD per month, and after six months, they will purchase and share basic commodities such as sugar, cooking oil, rice, flour and soap. This is done so as to eliminate hunger and food shortages in a household, as malnutrition can cause diseases among family members, and for young children, they are vulnerable to kwashiorkor if they have no food or receive un nourishing food. Women used to look to their husbands for money to purchase groceries for the family, but now they are doing it on their own through these saving clubs. Zimbabwe is currently going through harsh economic inflation; however, women have against all odds managed to provide for their families through this climate. Regardless of the economic hardships, women in Zimbabwe can afford a decent meal through the grocery-saving clubs. In the confines of their homes, women are catering for the welfare of their families; hence, *musha mukadzi* philosophy is a reality because it is women who make up the home for sustainable livelihoods.

Furthermore, the saving clubs help women to buy kitchen utensils. The study observed that, through this type of saving, women contribute 5 USD per month, and at the end of the year, they purchase kitchen utensils such as pots, plates and cups, and they call this *mukando wemidziyo yemumba* (saving for kitchen utensils). W2 raised an important point that:

'[B]aba handiwo vanotsvaga midziyo yemumba yekubikira ibasa ramai saka zvichizonzi musha mukadzi. Isu sevakadzi tinotenga midziyo yekushandisa mumba kubudikidza nemukando.' ['The father is not responsible for purchasing kitchen utensils; it is the duty of women to purchase and source kitchen utensils and not the father. That's why people would say women make the home. As women, we have purchased kitchen utensils through our saving clubs.']

Through this initiative, many households have basic kitchen utensils to use for their day-to-day living. This is clear evidence that women are no longer dependents but are active participants in sustaining livelihoods. Women in Zimbabwe are innovative in many ways; they also sell traditional food as a way of sustaining livelihoods.

Selling traditional dried foods

In the contemporary Zimbabwe, the resilience of rural livelihoods is led by women. As a result, Maramura, Thakhathi and Tirivangasi (2021) argue that efforts should be made to empower rural women so that they are able to independently make decisions positively impact the livelihoods and well-being of their families without relying on men. The findings of the study confirmed that women in Zimbabwe sustain their livelihoods through the selling of traditional dried foods such as dried *nyevhe*, dried *munyemba* (cows' peas leaves), dried *tsine* or *nhungumira* blackjack, dried boiled maize *mumhare* or *mafuse* and cooked and dried nuts. It is general and common knowledge that traditional foods are healthy, as they are mainly organic. Sometimes

health practitioners prescribe diets that include traditional foods, as they believe that they contribute to physical, social and spiritual well-being of the body and soul. This is confirmed by Schuster et al. (2011) who argue that:

[E]ven if consumed in small quantities, traditional foods contribute large amounts of essential nutrients to the diet so that individuals have significantly higher micronutrients intakes on days when traditional foods are consumed than the days where traditional foods are not part of the diet. (p. 287)

Some people prefer taking these traditional foods in most of their meals so as to benefit from their nutritious ingredients. More so, there is a common belief among traditional families that including traditional foods in a diet increases the life span compared with people who rely on eating processed foods. Some people are believed to have lived above 80 years because of a diet that primarily focused on traditional foods. Traditional vegetables provide vitamins B and C and even some high amounts of minerals such as calcium and iron, as well as proteins. Traditional foods are good for the heart and for the strength of bones and teeth, and that forms part of the secret of why people who consume such foods are strong and live long. Traditional foods are consumed without undergoing scientific processes, and this makes them rich in nutrients (Nyahunda 2017:433).

One of the interviewees (W7) posits that:

'[I]ni ndiri shirikadzi asi ndatoraramisa mhuri yangu nekutengesa mufushwa wenyevhe, mumufushwa wemunyemba nemafuse.' [I am a widow, but I provide for my family through selling dried *nyevhe*, dried cows' peas leaves and cooked and dried mealies.]

Because of the benefits of traditional foods for the health and well-being of people, women in Zimunya have found a ready market for selling these traditional foods in Mutare. Women pack these dried traditional foods and sell them for a living. These women are dealing with challenges of climate change as they preserve these foods when they are in season, and they sell them during the dry part of the year when vegetables and these traditional foods are scarce and out of season. During this period, they fetch quite a bit of money.

Challenges women face in sustaining livelihoods

In the given geographical location, women also face challenges in sustaining livelihoods through the above-mentioned means. The study findings reveal that female-headed families are numerous in Zimunya, and women suffer in the advent of climate change. Erratic rainfall also reduces food availability. One of the village heads (W10) in the area confirms that:

'[M]uno Zimunya madzimai aisirima magadheni emurivo mvura yanga isinganetsi kwanga kuchiri kunaya zvakakanaka nzizi nematsime zvakanakara mvura. Madzimai aitorarama nekutengesa murivo kwaMutare. Zvino mamirire ekunze achinja mazuvaano hakuchina mvura.' [In Zimunya, women used to be involved in gardening and survived by selling vegetables in Mutare. We used to receive adequate rainfall, and rivers and wells in the area were full, but these days the climate conditions have changed; rainfall is scarce.]

Climate change poses great challenges to the rural people in developing countries who rely on natural resources for their livelihoods. Recurrent drought leads to reduced agricultural productivity, which in turn leads to reduced household income. Women who earn a living through selling traditional foods are greatly affected by climate change, which affects their yields.

Findings of this study resonate with Jaka et al.'s (2021) findings; according to Jaka et al., challenges faced by women in sustaining livelihoods 'include climate change and unpredictable weather conditions that pose some pressure to seasonal farming, economic crisis since people cannot get enough capital to expand or diversify their livelihoods' (2021:234). Moreover, women (particularly those from rural areas) experience challenges of low or lack of capital to initiate, start or grow their already existing livelihoods. Poor soils and poor farming skills and methods are also some of the challenges faced by women. Climate change has impacted rural women more than any other people. This is confirmed by Madigele, Mogomotsi and Mogomotsi (2021), who describe water poverty in Botswana and its impact on rural households and agro-based livelihoods, especially the rural populace. Water poverty forces women to travel long distances to fetch water, owing to the depleted water table. When women travel for long distances to fetch water, this affects their zeal and potential for engaging in activities that sustain livelihoods such as sewing, farming and preserving traditional foods.

Climate change has also introduced 'climate-induced migration', particularly by men, which happens as a result of depleted livelihoods in rural areas and has shifted the burden of sustaining family livelihoods to women, who are forced to provide for the family alone, regardless of their marriage status (cf. Chidakwa et al. 2020). As a result, women face difficulties that include, among other things, the loss of essential natural resources, food insecurity, a lack of economic opportunity, the unmet need for social services, poor education, geographical location and poor infrastructure (Gibbens & Schoeman 2019) and long-distance relationships with their husbands, who are forced to migrate in search for better opportunities in the midst of poor agro-outputs. Gibbens (2016) therefore argues that the realisation of sustainable rural livelihoods should focus on empowering women with skills to access resources available for them in order to access land and food security. Other issues such as access to water, electricity and telephones, health facilities and issues emanating from customary law are also relevant to women.

The study noted that although women play a large role in sustaining livelihoods, in some households men are now reluctant and sit back while their female counterparts struggle to sustain their families. One of the interviewees, W9, pointed out that:

'[I]ni pandakatanga zvekusona nemikando ndichiita mari, baba vakabva vandogara hawo vachindoenda kubhawa komwa uye vanotora mari shoma yandinenge ndashanda komwa hapana chaachashandawo kuti

mhuri irame wakunditakudza ini mutoro wacho wekuchengeta mhuri. [‘While I became a member of the sewing club and money savings club to raise money, my husband is now not involved in any activities that raise money for the family welfare but has become a drunkard who also takes the little income I have raised for drinking, and I now shoulder the burden of providing for the family.’]

Seemingly, some men who do not provide for their families’ livelihoods hide behind the *musha mukadzi* philosophy. Rather than providing for their families, they wait for women in the family to perform that role.

Recommendations and conclusion

Women in Zimunya are the pillars of sustaining livelihoods. They have employed sustainable methods such as saving clubs or *mikando*, sewing clubs and selling of traditional dried foods. Women are active agents when it comes to sustaining livelihoods; hence, women must be empowered to make decisions and access productive resources such as land, capital and technology. For sustainable livelihoods to be a reality in Zimunya, women must also be included in key leadership posts in the community that are relevant and can foster the sustenance of livelihoods in the area. Although women in Zimunya are making great strides in sustaining livelihoods without any form of training and education, formal training and education in managing their income-generating projects will increase profits that will sustain not only the family but the community livelihoods. If women in Zimunya receive funding from donors and the government, they can purchase new clothing materials, unlike using old pieces of cloth, and in doing this, their products will be more marketable, and there is also great potential for earning more income that would sustain their families. Moreover, for women to produce more chicks, they should have incubators that can produce many eggs to be hatched at the same time, and in doing this, they can rear more chickens and end up selling day-old road runner chicks.

Maramura et al. (2021:1266), in their study on *Women and economic production: Towards sustainable livelihoods in Zimbabwe*, came up with the following recommendations that are in line with this research: firstly, that ‘[a]gricultural extension officers should also educate farmers on how to make composite manure to improve their soil fertility with the aim of improving crop yields’; secondly, that ‘rural subsistence farmers should be conscientious on good farming practices like conservative farming and avoiding stream bank cultivation’; thirdly, ‘traditional leaders should desist from resettling people in mountains as this will expose vast amounts of soil to the agents of erosion and subsequently causing dilatation of rivers’ (Maramura et al. 2021:1266). These recommendations mainly help women who earn a living through the selling of traditional foods. Women in Zimunya in dealing with climate changes can also move from growing maize to small grain crops such as sorghum and millet, and they can also process these traditional crops into mealie-meal and sell them for survival. When women are educated on good farming methods, they can yield more crops and can dry them for repackaging.

Women should also have access to credit facilities so that they can fund their projects. As a result, the responsible government departments should work in partnership with the NGO sector in empowering rural women in economics and finance, so they know when and how to access credit facilities and loans from banks. The government can also support women in packaging their traditional products so that they can earn more money in the marketing industry.

Findings of this study highlight that women are making great strides in sustaining livelihoods through the *musha mukadzi* or *umama ngumuzi* philosophy. They have great potential in sustaining livelihoods in Zimunya and they provide the basic needs for the upkeep of their families through rearing poultry, sewing clubs, money-saving clubs and selling of traditional foods. They have utilised the *musha mukadzi* or *umama ngumuzi* philosophy in ATR(s) as a resource for their achievements. Although the *musha mukadzi* or *umama ngumama* philosophy seems to have been used as a tool of patriarchy to oppress and confine women to the home, doing nothing but waiting for men to fend for the families, there is a need to interrogate and reinterpret the *musha mukadzi* or *umuzi ngumama* philosophy so that it is used as an empowerment tool for women. Women should be empowered as they are drivers of sustainable livelihoods. Women, through hard work and being involved in activities that raise income, are vehicles of sustainable livelihoods. They are at the forefront in providing for their families, even in tough situations where their male counterparts lag behind. They do not desert their families but are hands-on in every activity that is a source of income for their families.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the contributions made by all women from Zimunya area, Mutare, Zimbabwe, who participated in the study.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors’ contributions

T.C. was responsible for data collection, the conceptualisation of the research question and the problem that the article addresses, formal analysis, visualisation of the expected research outputs and outcomes, writing of the original draft and managing and supervising the whole research process. S.S.C. contributed to the conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, review and editing of the draft.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to undertake the research was granted by the Faculty of Arts and Humanities Research Ethics Committee of the University of Zimbabwe (ref. no. 001/2018).

Funding information

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

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

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

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