

# Rural Women as Entrepreneurs in the Context of Patriarchy: Experiences of Female Entrepreneurs in Mudzi District, Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

This article reports on a study which aimed to examine the varied experiences of women involved in business across rural spaces in the context of patriarchy through an exploration of their narratives highlighting their challenges, successes, fears and hopes. The assumption of the study was that rural women in Zimbabwe occupy a particularly difficult space because of numerous structural impediments which include patriarchy, unequal access to skills, capital inadequacy and exclusion from formal economic systems. The study sought to provide a nuanced understanding of female entrepreneurship in African spaces with the aim of showing that there are varied stories of agency, challenges, successes and failures that can be documented. The study utilised qualitative methods which sought a nuanced analysis of women's experiences in Mudzi District, Mashonaland East Province, Zimbabwe. The data was collected through life histories, focus group discussions and key informant interviews. A total of 34 participants were recruited for the study through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The participants included women involved in a varied number of entrepreneurial activities such as bread making, vending, dress making, poultry and running micro enterprises. The findings showed that whilst women face multiple structural impediments as

entrepreneurs, they are active agents questioning and shaping their social spaces through business. Women embarking on entrepreneurial activities is in itself seen as a serious challenge against patriarchal structures.

**Keywords:** women; entrepreneurship; Zimbabwe; rural; patriarchy

## **Introduction**

The focus of the study was to analyse the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs in rural Mudzi District, Mashonaland East Province, *Zimbabwe*. Thus, the article documents the experiences of women involved in entrepreneurship at micro level by taking into account their experiences, reactions and barriers encountered. The economic space in rural Zimbabwe has remained highly masculine due to the continued permeation of patriarchy in all spaces of social, economic and political life (Mangena and Chitando 2011). The participation of women in income generating activities has been increasing across the globe and Zimbabwe is no exception (Van Eerdewijk and Mugadza 2015). As noted by Siziba (2010), since 1980, the government of Zimbabwe has initiated developmental programmes to economically empower women within societies. However, women – especially those in the rural areas – have remained marginalised and disempowered despite initiatives to empower them. Zimbabwe is a patriarchal society where culture plays a part in defining the roles of men and women in society (Mangena and Chitando 2011). As a result, gender sensitive barriers have inhibited women from entering the business world at the same level as men. Thus, this article examines how women construct livelihoods and engage in entrepreneurial activities within such a space. It also provides an analysis of how women in Mudzi have experienced government empowerment programmes, highlighting the limited impact such programmes have on rural women.

## **Understanding Women’s Experiences with Entrepreneurship**

Women in Africa have a long history of entrepreneurship dating to pre-colonial times. This section firstly outlines this history to provide a background on how women’s economic activities outside the home have evolved from pre- to post-colonial periods. Such an analysis, however, will not romanticise women’s participation but rather provide a nuanced analysis of how patriarchal structures have shaped and functioned women’s entrepreneurial activities. Across Africa there are many historical examples of women in pre-colonial times involved in various economic and innovative activities that formed part of their everyday lives. Chengu (2015) traces how in countries, such as Senegal, as early as 10 000 BC women pioneered organised crop and livestock cultivation, thereby creating the pre-conditions for surplus, wealth and trade. Leith-Ross (1939) shows that among the Igbo in Nigeria, pre-colonial women played an important role in petty trade. In Zimbabwe, in pre-colonial times, women were also involved in various economic activities but within the confines of a patriarchal system that governed their ownership of property especially land (Cheater 1986). What is clear from these examples is that in pre-colonial societies women were intimately involved in various

entrepreneurial activities and gained some influence in their communities though male dominance under patriarchy was rarely challenged.

Under colonisation, however, the need to control women's movements by the colonialists and the introduction of male wage labour led to fundamental shifts in how women participated in entrepreneurial activities. Mubonderi and Rwodzi (2015, 64) argue that in Zimbabwe, "Victorian ideas of female domesticity confined women to the private life of the household space. This was buttressed by the kind of patriarchal missionary education that emphasized decorum and male guardianship over them in all spheres of life." This meant that women were largely segregated from economic spaces. Chiweshe (2015a) further argues that women were largely excluded from urban spaces by the colonial government but the few who found their way into the areas were involved in multiple economic activities including sex work, vending and illicit beer brewing. Thus, women have continuously engaged in economic activities through petty trading and small-scale entrepreneurial activities. They have done this in the face of multiple structural challenges and this has continued even in the post-colonial context.

Jalbert (2006) argues that entrepreneurship offers tremendous opportunity across the world by opening up doors to greater self-sufficiency, self-esteem, education and growth, not only for the women themselves but also for their families and communities. Women are consequently changing the face of business ownership, and although they are emerging in the entrepreneurial arena with full force, their full economic empowerment has been largely noted within the most economically developed nations (Panigrahy and Bhuyan 2006). Globally, women are becoming entrepreneurs, but in the developing countries they represent a minority group mainly involved in agricultural related businesses or small enterprises (Esplen and Brody 2007). Women have the capacity to start and manage their own businesses but factors, such as education, patriarchy and culture, and gender roles, are some of the inhibiting factors undermining the economic empowerment of women through entrepreneurship. Chigbu (2015) places this within the inferiorisation of women within cultural spaces in patriarchal societies. Women face structural challenges in starting and managing enterprises. Datta and Kornberg (2006) note that the World Bank states that half of the world's economic growth can be attributed to the contributions of female entrepreneurs but paradoxically this has not been the case in Africa.

Kibas (2005) argues that women are the backbone of rural economies in developing countries especially in Africa as they play a significant role to ensure their families' wellbeing. This is seen in terms of providing food, shelter, health and education for the family; yet in terms of their economic empowerment, women have remained marginalised and disempowered (Esplen and Brody 2007; Mboko and Smith-Hunter 2009). In Africa, entrepreneurial activities are gendered in terms of access, control and remuneration. As a result of their lack of equal economic rights and opportunities, women have failed to take full advantage of economic opportunities (Gana 2004 cited by Esplen and Brody 2007). Kibas (2005) notes that the status of women within a

patriarchal society makes them dependent on the men in their lives. Lack of family support is a major barrier to female entrepreneurship as close family members often make decisions that go against female entrepreneurship (Mboko and Smith-Hunter 2009). The multiplicity of roles, such as productive, reproductive and community roles, often prevents women from running competitive and sustainable business endeavours. Yet, the proceeds from the businesses are mainly used towards household expenses such as food, clothing, school fees, looking after relatives and the sick. Chant (2003) observes that women's purported single-handed management of income-generation, housework and childcare further compromises economic efficiency and well-being. On the one hand, women who are married are conjectured to have less time and energy to perform the full range of economic activities because of the dual roles they play as mothers and businesswomen. On the other hand, Gaidzanwa (2016) notes that married women are not given support from their husbands and kinsmen and this tends to undermine their confidence in carrying out their enterprises.

Ekpe, Mat and Razak (2010) observe that women operating businesses tend to face a variety of constraints that limit their full expansion and growth within their businesses. The major constraints faced are in terms of finance, that is, accessing credit that is unavailable within the rural areas as there are no commercial banks there. The lack of financial stability entails shortage of capital to increase stock buying and expand as well as the sustainability of the businesses. Women in Ghana have adopted the round table concept, or group lending or small cooperatives, in which they rotate in giving each other money and some use that money to expand or start small enterprises (Chamlee-Wright 2002). Entrepreneurship involves some level of risk taking; however, for women in the rural areas, gender stereotyped perceptions of self, a lack confidence and assertiveness appear to be a barrier as well as the fear of risk (Nani 2013; Nyamwanza et al. 2012). Support, such as financial backup, encouragement and love, advice and actual male involvement in the business, has been seen to be lacking mainly because female entrepreneurs are thereby perceived to be questioning male predominance (Green 2009). Singh (1999), however, shows that in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, rural women turn to interpersonal relationships articulated through their households, kinship networks and community structures for support and survival.

In the context of Zimbabwe, Chitsike (2000) observes that women running small businesses in an isolated rural villages face different structural barriers from those in the city. However, women in both the village and the city identify cultural barriers as problems. These are the roots of women's marginalisation from economic, political and social resources and their heavy dual workload of family caring as well as production (Chitsike 2000). In Zimbabwe, women are traditionally brought up to view business as a male domain in which women are to play supporting roles (Mariwo 2008). Women are permitted to want money but not large sums; thus, when they have some, they have to hide the fact, neither showing it nor claiming that they have earned it due to their personal success – instead they have to say it belongs to their father (Matondi 2013). Customary law in Zimbabwe views women as not having individual economic rights on

the ground that they have benefits given to them through their spouses or male relatives (Mariwo 2008). In rural spaces, such as Mudzi, customary law is entrenched through the constitutional recognition of traditional leaders though women have agency to challenge these structures through various strategies such as migrating to urban areas.

The role of patriarchy in understanding female entrepreneurship in Africa requires a more nuanced approach. This is because the experiences of women entrepreneurs in colonial and post-colonial rural Zimbabwe have tended to be undermined by the structural and cultural barriers to women's economic empowerment (Chitsike 2000). As outlined above, although the role of women has evolved over time in Zimbabwe, in rural areas they continuously face cultural barriers. However, as the current case study will show, women have used various strategies to respond to these challenges and carve out various entrepreneurial spaces. The status of women within a patriarchal society makes them dependent on the men in their lives. In such settings lack of family support is a major disincentive to business startup as other close members often make decisions that go against women entrepreneurs. The excessive demand on women's time as wives, mothers and managers of the home makes it nearly impossible for them to successfully operate an enterprise. Whilst some studies across Africa have shown little difference between female and male entrepreneurs (Chirwa 2008; Kuada 2009), the researchers argue in this article that patriarchal challenges pose a great threat to female entrepreneurs in rural areas.

## **Methodology**

The study utilised a qualitative research paradigm that provides thick descriptions of women's experiences in Mudzi. Mudzi was purposively chosen for the case study because of its relative isolation from urban centres. The aim of the study was to show how women in rural spaces cope with entrepreneurial activities in the face of structural challenges such as isolation and limited access to urban markets. A case study design was very useful as it facilitated the analysis of the experiences of these women within their natural setting and enabled observation of their roles and activities. Mudzi communal area is located in Mashonaland East Province, Zimbabwe. It is located in the far eastern part of Zimbabwe under Mutoko District, and covers 4 075 square kilometres. As of the 2012 census, the district had a population of 133 252 with women being the majority of the population at around 52% of the total population. The major livelihood activity in the area is farming involving both livestock rearing and crop production. Other households engage in micro enterprises, such as operating small shops, grinding mills, butcheries, supermarkets, horticulture, selling vegetables, and engaging in cross boarder activities to Mozambique to sell and purchase goods for resale. The study targeted a sample of 34 women who were involved in a variety of entrepreneurial activities. The sample was purposively chosen focusing on women who were involved in one or more forms of small businesses. To complement this, the researchers used snowballing sampling where purposively selected participants were used to lead to the next participants. This method proved to be effective because the

participants belonged to a similar social group and knew each other well. Referral sampling technique also improved the response rate as it built rapport with the participants when they heard that the researchers had been referred to them by someone they knew already. The study utilised the life histories of 10 female entrepreneurs in Mudzi, which allowed the researchers to explore microhistorical (individual) experiences within a macrohistorical (history of the time) framework.

The study also utilised three focus group discussions in collecting data. The advantages of using focus groups are that they tend to generate discussion and gain a greater insight of the topic under discussion from different viewpoints (Guba and Lincoln 1990). The female entrepreneurs in Mudzi represent a complex heterogeneous social structure with a wider variability as some are involved in poultry, market gardening, soap and bread making, dressmaking and operating a shop and grinding mill. Each focus group was made up of six respondents. To augment the group discussions and narratives, the study also conducted key informant interviews. Kutz (1999) posits that key informant interviews involve identifying different members of the community who can in turn assist in identifying others as well. The technique employed is a face-to-face interaction that provides free exchange of ideas and lends itself to asking more complex questions and getting more detailed responses. Six key informant interviews were conducted and these were ideal in the study of female entrepreneurs in Mudzi as the researchers had little knowledge and information about these women; therefore, identifying these key informants was crucial as they had access to many different women who were involved in entrepreneurial activities. The study was done in an ethical manner where the participants were involved in the research through informed consent. The proposal was approved and undertaken under the auspices of the Women's University in Africa. The researchers had to explain the nature of the research before involving the participants. The participants' confidentiality was also safeguarded by using pseudonyms in the research report. The researchers also ensured that the data generated was protected and never shared with any third party for any reason. Protecting the participants was also a priority for the researchers and this included physical and emotional protection. The researchers ensured that the participants were not endangered during and after the research. The participants' privacy was also respected in the research by conducting the interviews in private.

## **Findings**

### **Social Differentiation of Female Entrepreneurs in Mudzi**

Most of the female entrepreneurs were aged between 24 and 36 although there were three over 50 years of age. This indicates that women are getting involved in trading and informal business activities at a young age. From the focus group discussion held these women noted that those who are involved in entrepreneurial activities are within the economically active group and are able to travel and carry out their activities. Women who are within the economically active group have the energy to run around looking for

products and markets. Some of the products require travelling across borders and this requires young people who are still energetic. According to the respondents, younger women have small families and fewer children and thus are able to travel long distances easily. Over half of the women in the sample were married which means both married and unmarried women are involved in economic activities in rural households. Married women, however, face serious challenges in terms of balancing their marriages and work. The increased infiltration of married women into entrepreneurial activities is seen as a means to supplement their husbands' income. One of the female traders noted that:

My husband works in town [Harare] and it has been difficult to just wait upon his salary alone, as an initiative we decided to embark on these varied activities as a means of sustaining our livelihoods and that of our family and relatives.

Widowed and single women noted that married women face more patriarchal pressures as they are supposed to be subordinate to their husbands. An example is when married women have to declare their earnings to their husbands, whereas unmarried women have complete independence over the use of their resources. Those who are married also noted that it is difficult to have profits and channel them back into the business for expansion as they have an obligation of looking after their families and relatives who are looking up to them. One woman noted the following:

Once you make some profit from the enterprise, it is difficult to then grow the business by investing the money back. There are always competing interests over the money. Only the person involved in the business understands that the business grows by more investment. The rest think that profit should be immediately used for family needs. Sometimes it then becomes difficult to ignore family needs.

One married woman shared the following experience on the matter:

I am a married woman and I have been doing poultry for five years now. I have met many challenges in my business because of my extended family especially my husband's relatives. These relatives were not keen for me to start a business and persuaded my husband not to give me money for a start. I however got the money from my sister but since then the problems have continued with accusations of prostitution and that I got the money to start the business from a boyfriend. My husband believes some of these lies and this has led to many fights in our house. It has been challenging to continue doing business but I have kept on.

This is a different case altogether with those who are single and widowed as they have control over their money and what they do with it, although they alluded to the fact that they also have to look after their families and relatives. One woman had the following to say:

There is a relative advantage of being single when it comes to management of income/profits. Unlike our counterparts who are married, some of us who are single find

more flexibility to make independent decisions on the use of money. This is however not to say it is best to be single, but on the aspect of independence we are much better [off].

The following narrative is from one woman who shared her experiences on the matter:

I am a single, young woman who decided to embark on market gardening as a form of entrepreneurial activity. My background did not allow me to make ends meet. As a young woman I was expected by my family to be married and be a mother. It was difficult to convince my family and relatives that this was a good idea to earn a living. The other problems I experienced included the lack of start-up capital and had to borrow the money from my uncle. My family were against my idea and did not offer any support. It was even difficult to obtain the seeds, fertilizers and markets were not readily available and because I did not have the adequate knowledge of growing the vegetables at times they would fail to grow properly. Furthermore, the lack of economic empowerment programmes for women in terms of credit lines, training and support are a great hindrance to women in rural areas succeeding in their business activities. Society has its own expectations of a young woman and if one fails to conform they will be viewed as a deviant like in my case.

### **Experiences with Entrepreneurial Activities**

The women in Mudzi undertake diverse entrepreneurial activities. From the findings it can be deduced that the majority of these women are involved in poultry activities whilst others engage in market gardening, dressmaking, soap and bread making, and another two women are running a shop and a grinding mill, respectively. The key informant interviews and focus group discussions revealed that it is not easy for a woman within a rural set up to manage large enterprises, such as operating a shop, as it is usually viewed as a male domain and the majority of the shops within Mudzi are run by men. One respondent had the following to say:

There are some limitations against women when it comes to the size of the enterprise they can manage. It is sometimes rare to see women running a big supermarket in communities as this is mainly dominated by men. The main reason is the resource base that is required and the time and effort that is required to run such an enterprise.

The findings highlighted various reasons as to why these women in Mudzi decided to embark on entrepreneurial activities. The need to sustain their family and provide a means of livelihood; the idea of the exploiting an opportunity; and the need to achieve self-fulfilment are some of the motives behind these women engaging in these activities. One woman noted that “through entrepreneurship women will not only generate income for herself but this can also generate employment for other women in the locality”. It is clear that women have varied reasons for embarking on economic generating activities.

The enterprises can broadly be described as individually owned or cooperatives. These women had different reasons for being part of the different forms of business. Those



who are individual owners, especially the two women who operate a shop and a grinding mill, respectively, posited that it gives them a sense of ownership and they also like the feeling of running the business by themselves. Furthermore, they do not have to divide the profits, as they are the sole owners. One of the women commented:

To me, one of the most important things about being a woman in a still male-dominated business world is to realise that I have the power of choice as to how I want to be seen and treated. I do not have to buy into other people's stereotypes about women or their opinions about me. I am responsible for my own branding and my own self-definition and people will respond to me according to what I think about myself.

Entrepreneurship goes against the monolithic view of rural women as lacking agency, ambition or knowledge to improve their situation. Women who are part of the co-operative argued that being part of a group entails distribution of tasks and involves delegation. This allows them time to focus on other tasks such as household activities and spending time with the family. They also commented that being part of a group reduces incompetence, as each one has to play her part to the fullest to ensure greater rewards. The sales they make during the month determine the amount of money they each receive. The group also provides an important social resource in terms of need because the women help each other in cases of sickness or death.

From the focus group discussions, it was noted that these women have devised a mechanism of circulating money among themselves through what they termed the group lending or round table concept and this money has assisted them in the running of their enterprises. For instance, those who are within the poultry project tend to give each member US\$5 every Friday; thus, being a group of 11 members means that the women will each have US\$50 which they use for various things. These women noted that the money they give each other has greatly assisted them in carrying out their activities and meeting their household expenses. One woman had the following to say:

My capacity to improve my business has significantly benefited from the group savings. It is from such schemes that I am able to buy more stock in large quantities hence enjoying some discounts.

The women do not have access to credit facilities and the only bank available is the Post Office Savings Bank which is located in Kotwa. This is very far, and as it does not offer credit, it is thus unhelpful to them. One woman lamented as follows:

Our greatest challenge is limited sources of funding to grow our businesses. For any business to grow, there is need to have access to credit especially from banks. In this community, we do not have access to such institutions. We end up relying on loan sharks who charge very high interest should we require urgent credit. The available bank does not offer micro credit facilities to entrepreneurs like us.

Thus, the lending groups have emerged as an important savings and loan institution for rural female entrepreneurs. The women also noted that because of the lack of sustainable credit facilities, instead of using the group lending for expanding their businesses, they have tended to use the money for either buying food for those at home; looking after the sick; or helping relatives who come to their homes needing assistance.

The incomes from the enterprises are used in meeting the day-to-day household expenses, especially food and clothing as well as school fees and looking after relatives. A small amount of the money is used either to expand or improve the enterprises. One woman had the following to say:

Our biggest challenge is to maintain the business running in face of several competing challenges at home. Ours is more like hand to mouth. The little that is obtained from business ends up being consumed at home which is the reason why our businesses struggle to expand.

The respondents noted that these entrepreneurial activities have changed the nature and status of women as they now have money to buy food and clothing and pay school fees and hospital expenses. This income has also allowed married women a level of independence as they can now do things within the household without waiting for their husband's income. One of the women had the following to say:

[We] women who are involved in business have really transformed the power dynamics in our homes. The ability to contribute in household income has also given a voice in the home as we can now contribute towards the sustenance of the home. We have now gained new abilities to meet the needs of the home unlike before.

The women also noted that they have their own money that they can use in their own way without having to ask their husbands or relatives for money. The enterprises are thus largely dependent on networks of friends who assist in various ways including small start-up finances. At the start of their enterprises most women were not supported by their families and faced discouragement from close family members especially their husbands. One woman had the following narrative on the issue:

I am a businesswoman operating a shop at Nyamande Centre and have been in the business for four years. I am also a married with four children. My participation in this business was not easy at the beginning. When I told my husband that I wanted to open a shop, he was against the idea. He said that I would neglect our children, fail to perform my duties as a mother and not have time for him. He was further worried about what his family and other members of the society would say about him failing to control his wife and allowing her to do what she wants. I was, however, determined to do something for myself. During the first years it was difficult since I did not have start-up capital or money to purchase products and I had no access to credit. I started small with items that I could afford to buy and sell and would save money. My husband was against the idea the whole time and never assisted me and at times my children had to assist me with the

selling. But due to perseverance my business has managed to grow and I sell products such as food, clothes and beer.

Another female entrepreneur had the following to say:

It was not easy to start the business due to discouragement from close family members. It is always the case that women are looked down upon in our community such that very few give them a chance of success. Even our husbands had no faith in our enterprising endeavours when we started. Maybe they were afraid that our success would challenge them and threaten their position in the home.

This, however, has not deterred their endeavours and many of the women are seeing an improvement in their lives. Despite the fact that the status of women is changing, in actual effect the majority of married women have little control over how the money is used in the household. One woman commented:

Myself I don't take all the money home because my husband tends to take it all away from me so I take half of it and show him the other half so that I can be able to use it for other purposes.

Thus, the female entrepreneurs have developed techniques to survive under a patriarchal system in which control is vested in the male household head.

### **Challenges Faced by Female Entrepreneurs**

In the process of trying to economically empower themselves, women's experiences within an isolated rural set up have limited the full operation and expansion of their entrepreneurial endeavours, as they tend to face a number of problems. Financial constraint is the major challenge affecting female entrepreneurs as they do not have access to credit or loan facilities to expand or start business ventures. The women were not even aware of the microfinance including government programmes which provide loans to women operating businesses. As a result, the majority of their businesses tend to be small and expanding them is beyond their reach although they would want them to grow. The women also noted how their roles as mothers and wives within a rural set up affect their ability to establish a large enterprise which is also viewed as challenging men. Going beyond small enterprises is thus culturally inappropriate as women tend to be confined to running small operations without the view of expanding their horizons. One of the women had the following to say:

It is not easy to run a business when you are family woman. The daily chores at home do not disappear because one is running a business. It then becomes a challenge to manage the time between the business and the home. A woman running a business needs to be very careful because any supposed neglect of the home will attract rebuttal from the husband and other family members. This then becomes a limiting factor that restricts the expansion of the business.

One married woman had the following to say on the experience of running a business:

Being a woman in business *zvakaoma weduwe kana uri amai uine murume kumba* (it is difficult to be a woman in business if you have a husband at home). Because of the fact that I was failing to balance my role as a mother and doing my dressmaking business led me to quit it all. My husband was always shouting at me, telling me that I was neglecting my family and it was becoming difficult each day. Furthermore, the money that I used to make he would take and go to drink beer with his friends. Starting this business was not easy and maintaining it was more difficult.

All the women indicated that they lack a sustainable market for their goods and services. This is mainly because the rural setting poses serious challenges to assess clients who are able to provide a consistent market. In the case of those involved in market gardening, the women are forced to travel to Harare to sell at Mbare *Musika* (market). This leads to high costs of transporting produce and there are cases where farmers have actually incurred losses by travelling to Harare and failing to sell produce at prices that cushion their costs. Some of the women noted that they cross the border to Mozambique in order to sell their garments and even agricultural produce. One woman commented as follows:

We face one marketing challenging in the community being of limited clients for our wares. Sometimes, we have to look from outside for us to remain in business. Some of the things we end up selling in Harare while some as far as Mozambique.

The lack of readily available markets has been a great hindrance to the success of their enterprises as at times they sell their produce at low prices. The following two narratives outline women's experiences and challenges with entrepreneurial activities:

I am a widow with five children and my husband died in 2007 and his death was a serious blow. I used to depend on him to support the family and his death meant I had to do something as a means to sustain the family. When I did my O levels [secondary education] I had done Fashion and Fabrics [practical subject taught in secondary schools] and still had the ideas in my head but during my married life I never thought of doing any sewing. The difficulty was that I did not have the start-up capital to buy the machine, threads, needles and cloth. My husband's relatives used to give me money to look after the kids and I started taking some from it to buy cloth, threads and needles. I would do the entire cutting and designing at home and would go to the local shops to do the sewing where I rented a sewing machine. When my husband's relatives heard of this they started shouting at me saying that I was using the money for my own activity instead of looking after the children. It was very difficult as I faced competition from other people who were also making school uniforms. I decided to diversify and would travel to Harare, Mutoko and Mozambique to sell my things and would leave my children with my eldest daughter to look after them. The people from the society started saying that I had a boyfriend that I was always going to and was abandoning my family. However, I have managed to buy a sewing machine and my business is growing and my family is being looked after by this dressmaking business.

*Vakadzi tine chido chekutangawo mabasa emaoko asi zvakaoma nekuti hapana kana anotarisa vakadzi kuti vawanawo here mari kana ruzivo zvarwo (As women we have the passion to do our own things but it is very difficult because no one has ever enquired on the status of women or even assists with capital or training.) As women within the rural areas we feel that our leaders have abandoned us in terms of assisting us to be fully empowered. We want to be able to do our things here in the rural areas and be able to contribute towards the growth of our nation, but how can we do so if the activities we do are not even sustainable and are small enterprises? We rural women are always the last to benefit and remain marginalised and disempowered. We have acted against structures within our own society to become independent but because of lack of support, there is no use in continuing but to drop the activities altogether.*

It is clear that female entrepreneurs are in many ways challenging patriarchal norms and thus face multiple challenges. There are many encouraging cases of women improving their lives within the study but in many instances women still face structural impediments in rural settings. The cultural context in which female entrepreneurs operate is largely constraining towards the realisation of the economic empowerment of women. The study participants alluded to the fact that religious and cultural beliefs foster a mentality of women not being regarded as ideal entrepreneurs and this, among other factors, prevents them from developing into viable entrepreneurs. The concepts of kinship and marriage have tended to define women's social and economic status in society. Although these cultural forces represent significant barriers to female entrepreneurship, the study participants have acted against these strictures in order to sustain themselves and empower themselves economically.

## **Discussion of Findings**

The research has shown how various women in rural Mudzi are involved in a multiplicity of entrepreneurial activities as part of everyday survival. The female entrepreneurs' narratives outlined above highlight the varied challenges and experiences faced by rural women. The interviews all highlighted how the intersection of being women and rural has led to their continued challenges in accessing business spaces. These findings echo research by scholars, such as Esplen and Brody (2007), that has shown how structural challenges in rural spaces, such as a lack of access to capital and markets, intersect with the domestic barriers produced by patriarchy and work against the success of women in entrepreneurial activities. Chiweshe (2015b) has shown how women in farming communities in Zimbabwe are marginalised from opportunities due to a myriad of factors including cultural issues related to their gender as well as challenges of being located in rural spaces where there is limited access to productive resources such as energy, skills, financing and markets. The study has provided further evidence of these challenges and highlighted how the intersection of gender and location exacerbates the negative experiences of rural women involved in small businesses.

The study has also highlighted how these women are actively involved in responding to the various challenges they face every day. Female entrepreneurs are not passive victims

of structural barriers but rather they respond in various ways to the problems that they face (Ncube and Greenan 2003). For example, the study found that women are using migration (including to areas outside Zimbabwe) to find markets for their produce. The women's narratives provide an understanding that patriarchy as a system of exclusion is not totalising but rather leaves spaces where women can navigate and create entrepreneurial opportunities. Scholars, such as Bhatasara and Chiweshe (2017), have also highlighted the agency of women in responding to patriarchal and structural challenges especially in rural spaces where customary law is still prevalent. Empowering women in contexts where patriarchal norms are resilient and embodied in traditional chiefs is difficult to achieve as government is in many cases reluctant to anger the chiefs who are critical in election times (Mungwini 2007). The majority of women engage in micro enterprises as an alternative to farming in order to sustain their families. Most of the enterprises are not driven by the need to grow the business but rather the need to provide for their families. The enterprises thus remain at a micro level with little prospects for growth. The success of these enterprises has been contentious, as these women have tended to face structural and cultural barriers that have inhibited the full growth of their enterprises (Chitsike 2000).

Women's organisations and civil society have also done little to engage female entrepreneurs in Mudzi. In the focus group discussions, the study participants highlighted how organisations were only interested in helping with HIV programmes or small livelihood projects. The government programmes aimed at women's empowerment largely have an urban bias; for example, none of the women had received any support from government departments. The women, however, argued that the government ministries working in the district are not adequately engaging with the people except when it is for political events. They also argued that most of the functions to do with women occur in urban areas and thus the government had over the years excluded them from participating in empowerment programmes. Whilst the study was limited to a single case study, it provides important insights into rural women entrepreneurs' experiences. What is clear beyond Mudzi is that similar structural and patriarchal impediments face women across the rural landscape in Zimbabwe. This means that whilst the study cannot be generalised, it does provide nuanced analysis of how rural women experience entrepreneurship.

## **Conclusion**

The study of Mudzi District has highlighted that the experience of these female entrepreneurs occurs within a certain context where there are factors that either promote or inhibit women's entrepreneurial activities. For women to be fully economically empowered through entrepreneurship there is a need for national governments at all levels to provide the necessary environment and support for female entrepreneurs especially those within an isolated rural set up. Beyond this policy focused programmes there is a need to confront patriarchal beliefs and customs that inhibit female entrepreneurship by engaging men, especially traditional leaders, to promote women's

access to business spaces. The problems and experiences of rural female entrepreneurs are contextually unique. From the study participants' narratives, there are multiple patriarchal pressures that influence and affect a woman's decision to start or continue with an economic activity. These were said to be cultural norms and expectations that women are expected to play in the home, some power dynamics and decision making over control of resources in the home. These were viewed as favouring men who tend to control resources even if they are generated by women. The daily chores in the home were also said to be the primary responsibility of women despite them being involved in entrepreneurship. This created an additional burden on female entrepreneurs in rural areas. These challenges intersected with the structural barriers of being located in a rural setting where access to productive resources, such as energy, information, mentorship, financing and markets, is limited. Any initiative that focuses on female entrepreneurship in rural areas must therefore respond to the intersection of structural and patriarchal challenges. Such initiatives must also build on the agency of women who are already using various strategies to carve out spaces within the entrepreneurship space in rural Zimbabwe.

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