

Women and Traditional Governance Systems: A Case of Vukuzenzele Village, Mzingwane District, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

In much of rural sub-Saharan Africa, women in traditional patrilineal systems are generally subordinated to men, thus endangering gender equality. Women born and nurtured in such systems are relegated to second-class citizenship, are inferior to men, and are excluded from collective decision-making, as they are presumed to be represented by husbands and fathers. In the past decade, however, women's visibility and influence has increased. As women have begun to participate in political issues, discussions around gender equality have cut across various sectors, including governance. This article seeks to identify whether traditional governance systems are beginning to take gender issues into consideration in their organisation and composition. It also seeks to bring to light and document opinions of women living in rural Vukuzenzele Village on issues relating to traditional governance. Through interviewing traditional leaders and women in the community, this study sought to answer the questions: (1) *Do women have roles and responsibilities similar to male counterparts in traditional governance systems?* (2) *Do cultural attitudes still impact on gender roles?* (3) *How are cases and disputes involving women treated within the system?* (4) *How is the traditional governance system, in this case, affected by democracy or gender equality advocacy?*

Keywords: gender equality; patrilineal systems; rural communities; traditional governance; women



Introduction

The emancipation of women has been a burning issue on international, regional and local platforms. Women have been subjected to patriarchy, a system that has degraded them and above all, deprived them of rights in taking leadership positions, and owning land and property, among other things. Some patriarchal systems have promoted barbaric and inhuman practices against women, for instance in the form of forced marriages, or sexual abuse. The emancipation of women from traditional patriarchal, or male-dominated, governance systems has been a sizzling subject of debate—especially in the twenty-first century, which has seen the rise of pressure groups advocating for gender equity and the inclusion of women in decision making at all levels of life. Despite increased appointment and election of female presidents, ministers, and CEOs, the gospel of gender equity has faced resistance in some religious circles and in traditional governance systems that subscribe to patriarchal ideologies and beliefs. The norm in traditional governance has been such that leadership, for example, chieftaincy, has been hereditary, passing from the father to the male heir or first-born. Africa in general and Zimbabwe, in particular, has existed for centuries under traditional leadership systems dominated largely by men (Dodo 2013, 29). Women were relegated to second-class citizenship, not regarded as worthy to lead communities. The exclusion of women from decision-making processes has deprived them of a voice to advocate for their interests and further subjected them to abuse, for instance as sex slaves or other inhumane experiences. The twenty-first century has seen an increase in the quest for democratisation of the workplace, the marketplace, governance systems, religious circles, and academia, yet democracy in itself—the force behind gender equality—means different things to different people.

The Meaning of Democracy

The widely varied meanings and applications of the concept of democracy have caused confusion with measuring it, and have sparked debate and even wars. As a result, the gender equity, which is embodied in democracy, is also marred by confusion and conflict. Chemhuru (2010, 183) illuminates that in ancient Greek states like Athens, democracy was a practice through which only male citizens (i.e. excluding women, children, slaves, and foreigners) could meet, discuss and deliberate on matters affecting humanity. The need to demystify democracy is thus great, considering the fact that democracy can be tailor-made by despots, autocrats, monarchs and any political system to cushion their style of leadership. A simple and straightforward definition of democracy was coined by Abraham Lincoln who averred that democracy is simply a government “of the people, by the people and for the people” (Chemhuru 2010, 183). Thus, if women exceed 50 per cent of the population of a country like Zimbabwe, there is no justification for having a government system that is excessively dominated by men. According to the 2012 preliminary census results released by the Zimbabwe Statistics Agency (Zimstat), females constitute 6 738 877 of the country’s 12.9 million

population, about half a million (503 945) more than males, whose population stood at 6 234 931 (Media Monitoring Project in Zimbabwe 2012, 1). The democratic concept of “a government of the people, by the people and for the people”, can only be effective if all groups are represented fairly. Dahlerup and Freidval (2003) state that men and women might have conflicting interests, therefore, men cannot represent women. Abuse of women has thrived in most communities because the governance systems in place have been dominated by men who have been reluctant to give heed to calls to emancipate women

An online discussion coordinated by the Division for the Advancement of Women in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations (United Nations 2007, 6) buttressed the above assertion by quoting Margaret Rukuni of the Zimbabwe Open University, who noted that Zimbabwe has “finally passed a Domestic Violence Act, primarily because our Minister of Women’s Affairs is a female with passion for alleviating women from poverty, ignorance, and repression.” A democratic government must, therefore, represent the interests of its people and that also applies to traditional systems, which in Zimbabwe are a wing and function of the “democratic government.”

The Convergence of Tradition, Culture, Patriarchy, and Matriarchy

Patriarchy has thrived through the vehicle of culture and tradition, where certain practices that are oppressive towards women in communities cannot be contested or questioned, just because they are culture and tradition. Albertyn (2009) posits that culture is usually portrayed as a closed and separate space that should be free from external influence. Thus, any external influence that may include, for instance, human rights activism or democracy, may be deemed as challenging the sanctity of culture and tradition. Albertyn (2009, 175), however, personally feels that culture is contested and dynamic, as cultural values, norms, and practices can be challenged, subverted and amended over time.

Tripp (n.d, 16) notes that prohibitive cultural attitudes against women’s involvement persist among both men and women, and these are reflected in voting patterns, media coverage of female politicians, and even in blatant attempts to suppress women’s assertion of their political rights and views. Davis (as quoted by Albertyn 2009, 171) postulates that the enforcement of traditional gender roles, defined largely by women’s sexual and reproductive capacity, tends to maintain women in inferior power positions dependent upon men for status and resources. Albertyn (2009, 171) is of a view that a change in the meaning and place of women can thus be particularly strongly contested, as they affect the distribution of political and economic power within a community, and more widely in society. Oduyoye (2001, 3) observed that African culture is replete with language that enables the community to diminish the humanity of women. Gender activists vying for gender equality have been usually viewed as challenging culture and

tradition, yet in the words of Nyanhongo (2011, 2) many African women do not want to do away with tradition, but only the oppressive aspects thereof.

Some African traditions limit the rights of women. In this way, some taboos have been understood as a means of enforcing patriarchal dominance (Famulusi 2012, 303). Some proverbs in Africa mirror the perceptions that society has towards women. Schipper (1985, 20) cited the following African proverb: “If in times of drought a woman comes and tells you she has found a well, do not listen to her.” Proverbs are a reflection of the wisdom and understanding of a given society, and thus, if the degradation and oppression of women is engraved in proverbs, which are a reflection of wisdom, then Africa has a long way to go in emancipating women. A number of cultural practices are harmful to the physical integrity of the individual and especially women and female children (Wadesango, Rembe, and Chabaya 2011, 1).

Commitment to Gender Equity by the Zimbabwe Government

The Government of Zimbabwe has made commitments to foster gender equality, evidenced by participation in international, regional and local conventions on gender equity. According to the Government of Zimbabwe Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development (2013–2017), Zimbabwe is party to a number of international conventions that provide for gender equality. These are:

- i. the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1991);
- ii. the Beijing Declaration on the Platform for Action (1995);
- iii. the Convention on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR);
- iv. the Equal Remuneration Convention;
- v. the Convention on Prohibition of Discrimination in Occupations,
- vi. the Convention on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour and,
- vii. the Convention on Economic, and Social and Cultural Rights (ECOSOC).

At regional level, Zimbabwe has also made the following commitments in line with gender equality:

- i. In 2008, Zimbabwe ratified the protocol to the 2003 African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women.
- ii. In 2004, Zimbabwe ratified the 2004 Solemn Declaration on Gender and Equality in Africa.
- iii. In 1997 Zimbabwe ratified the Southern African Development Community’s (SADC) Gender and Development Protocol.

- iv. Zimbabwe ratified the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, which was adopted by the SADC in 2008.
- v. Zimbabwe also subscribes to the COMESA Gender Policy, which fosters gender equality and equity at all levels of regional integration and cooperation (Government of Zimbabwe, Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development, 2013–2017).

National Legislative and Policy Framework

Zimbabwe has made significant strides in amending and enacting legislation and has passed 17 pieces of legislation to advance the gender equality and equity objective (Government of Zimbabwe, Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development 2013, 2). These include Matrimonial Causes Act (1987); Maintenance Act (1999); Administration of Estate Act (1997); Maintenance Act (1999); Sexual Offences Act (2001); Education Act (2004); Labour Act, [Chapter 28, 01]; Criminal Law Act (2006); and the Domestic Violence Act (2007). The 2004 Public Sector Gender Policy put in place Gender Focal Points in all Ministries and parastatals and in 2012 dialogue was initiated to set up a Gender Commission (Government of Zimbabwe, Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development 2013, 2).

The above-mentioned commitments are a foundation for gender equality advocates. They do not necessarily mean that there is effective change but are just signs and legal documents that show the country's commitment to empowering women. According to Langa (2018), six out of 217 chiefs were female—that is in traditional courts presided over by the Chiefs, six were women, with three from Matebeleland, one from Mzingwane and two from Mutoko. A lot, therefore, needs to be done to include women in traditional governance systems, as having only 0.36 per cent of female chiefs in the country is not enough.

Relevance of African Institutions of Governance

The traditional governance system is key in many ways to the African and Zimbabwean community. Large segments of the rural populations, the overwhelming majority in most African countries, continue to adhere principally to traditional institutions (Relevance of African Traditional Institutions of Governance n.d.). Among other things, traditional African institutions of governance have been key in safeguarding the national heritage and natural resources. The roles that traditional authorities can play in the process of good governance can broadly be separated into three categories: first, their advisory role to government, as well as their participatory role in the administration of regions and districts; second, their developmental role, complementing government's efforts in mobilising the population for the implementation of development projects, sensitising them on health issues such as HIV/AIDS, promoting education, encouraging economic enterprises, inspiring respect for the law and urging participation in the

electoral process; and third, their role in conflict resolution (for instance in distribution of communal land, and settling civil disputes), an area where traditional leaders across Africa have already demonstrated success. Sithole and Mbele (2008, 18) cite Zimbabwe as one of the African countries, which recognised the importance of traditional leaders after liberation from colonialism. In most situations in Zimbabwe, traditional leadership systems serve to reduce crime rates and juvenile delinquency through community programmes and restrictions that deter members of the community from engaging in crimes. Daneel (1996) and Rukuni (1998) underscore that management of communal grazing areas and other natural resources could only be achieved by village-level traditional leadership institutions.

Traditional Governance in Zimbabwe: An Overview

Dodo (2013, 30) clarifies that in Zimbabwe, traditional leaders are selected by their families but eventually get confirmed and endorsed by the executive. In Zimbabwe, traditional authorities are incorporated into the government system, based on the Westminster model and exist through the Traditional Leaders Act of Parliament (Dodo 2013, 30).

The Traditional Leaders Act of Zimbabwe

Traditional leadership is guided by the Traditional Leaders Act of Zimbabwe, a piece of legislation that sets the parameters of how business should be conducted in the countryside. But about mechanisms such as a quota system to ensure that women are given a chance to be involved in traditional governance systems, the Act is silent. Section 2 of the Traditional Leaders Act Chapter 29, 17: “Subject to subsection (2), the President shall appoint chiefs to preside over communities inhabiting Communal Land and resettlement areas.” It is, however, spelt out in the Act that the President shall give due consideration to the prevailing customary principles of succession. This piece of legislation, therefore, means that the appointment of chiefs by the president, follows customary principles of succession and it is a known fact that a woman will become chief only if there are no rightful male heirs to take the position. Thus, women cannot contest for inclusion in traditional leadership since there are no provisions for such in the Traditional Leaders Act.

Women in Traditional Institutions of Governance in Africa

Women’s participation in decision-making varies from one community and country to another. In general, women in communities, who control wealth or who are engaged in the production of high-value products have greater access to decision-making power than women who do not have economic independence. In most cases, the position of women in matrilineal societies also seems to be better than those in patrilineal societies (Relevance of African Traditional Institutions of Governance n.d.). According to Dodo (2013, 41), there were matrilineal societies in Africa, where women held leadership

roles in governance structures as advisors, regents, soldiers, army commanders, and bodyguards amongst others. In an ancient Kingdom in the Congo, there were female regents and rulers, such as Donna Veronica and Donna Susanne di Nobrena and Queen Amina of the Songhai kingdom in Niger during the 15th century. Queen Amina is believed to have been a strong warrior who successfully warred against her neighbours, and built cities received taxes from other chiefs, and was known for introducing the cola nut to Niger (Loth, as quoted by Dodo 2013, 41). Mbuya Nehanda of the pre-colonial Zimbabwe and Mekatilili of Kenya waged spirited wars against the British in 1896 and 1913 respectively, as they resisted colonial administration. With great wisdom and precision, these women leaders managed to mobilise their subjects against a common enemy.

In Northern Ghana, especially among the Dagombas three “skins”—Kukulogu, Kpatuya, and Gundogu—are purposely reserved for women. The modes of succession to these skins are also well-defined. Among the matrilineal Akans, the top leadership positions and responsibilities are divided between men and women (Owusu-Mensah 2013, 32). In South Africa and Botswana there is a gradual progression to formally appointing and allowing women chiefs/traditional leaders.

Despite such pockets of active women’s participation in political decision-making, however, women are generally subordinated to men in much of Africa, and especially in patrilineal systems. Women and young adults, for example, though not formally prohibited by rule, are often presumed to be represented by their husbands and fathers, respectively, and are customarily excluded from participation in the decision-making assemblies. Although in some cases, women played various key societal roles, the patrilineal systems are particularly weak in protecting gender equality in decision-making on issues of a public nature.

Femocracy: Is it enough?

Mama (as quoted by Ibrahim 1997, 81) avers that femocracy is an anti-democratic female power structure, which claims to exist for the advancement of ordinary women, but is unable to do so because it is dominated by a small clique of women, whose authority derives from their being married to powerful men, rather than from any actions or ideas of their own. From time immemorial, some degree of “femocracy,” has been demonstrated when a wife influences a husband’s decision while in their bedroom, one of the few opportunities for a woman to co-govern in local matters (Dodo 2013, 30). However, although “femocrats,” have in this manner influenced some decisions, it has not been enough. What women are lobbying, for now, are democratic forms of representation that formally recognise their interests and needs.

Challenges faced by Women in Leadership

In as much as women are slowly being assimilated into governance systems, be they modern or traditional, they have faced sundry challenges in their endeavours as leaders. Ferguson and Katundu (1994, 18) pinpoint that in Zambia most women who were active in politics claimed that they had marital problems as a result of their involvement in politics. With a number of female leaders becoming divorcees, there are, therefore, stereotypes and prejudices that African communities attach to these women. Zungura and Nyemba (2013, 208) highlights that in Zimbabwe, whenever women who are divorced make contributions in Parliament, male parliamentarians loudly shout out details of personal family matters so as to silence them (Zungura and Nyemba 2013, 208)—one of various forms of harassment that women taking up leadership roles have to endure from their male counterparts. Majome and Muchinguri (as quoted by Zungura and Nyemba 2013) commented that in the Parliament of Zimbabwe, men use vulgar language to silence women who try to be vocal—instead of focusing on parliamentary business, men start describing women’s private parts just to frustrate women, who end up fearing to contribute in parliamentary debates. The assimilation of women into power is yet to sink deep into men’s thought processes, and before that happens, women will continue to be subjected to ridicule and humiliation in different ranks and their spheres of influence.

A study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (2000) interviewed 187 women politicians in 65 countries and found that cultural attitudes and attitudes hostile to women’s participation in politics was nominated as the second most important barrier to women running for Parliament, second to the problems of balancing time demands, as women also experience challenges in finding a balance between caring for their families and leading communities. Culture and tradition have been a stumbling block to women assuming leadership positions in communities that have been accustomed to patriarchy. The next section expands further on the influence of culture and tradition on women as leaders of their communities.

Research Purpose and Objectives

There have been many discussions on gender equality issues across various sectors of society. The governance sector is weak in the area of gender relations—even though most governments in most instances, have attempted to remedy the situation, through constitutional and legal changes. In rural areas, traditional people, especially the elderly, do not subscribe to ideas of gender equity. This group of people feels that female empowerment is a notion that has been brought forward to abolish cultural beliefs, values, and way of life. This article, therefore, seeks to identify the position of women in terms of the organisation and composition of the traditional governance systems, and to answer the following questions:

- i. What is the representation of women in positions of authority in traditional governance systems?
- ii. Do women have roles and responsibilities in traditional governance systems similar to those of their male counterparts?
- iii. Do cultural attitudes still have an impact on gender roles?
- iv. How are cases and disputes involving women treated within traditional governance systems?
- v. To what extent have traditional governance systems been affected by democracy or gender equality advocacy?

Methodology

The study employed a case-study design in which qualitative interviews were employed to amass lengthy narratives about the incorporation and roles of women in traditional governance systems. The informants of the study and those with whom structured interviews were conducted included one Headman, four *sobhuku* (kraal heads) (and four women from Vukuzenzele village in Esigodini, Zimbabwe). The Vukuzenzele village in Esigodini was chosen for this particular study because of its proximity and because the researchers could gain easy access to the area as a colleague was from the area.

Findings and Discussion

Representation of Women in Positions of Authority

In Vukuzenzele village only one woman was part of the traditional leadership and she was a *Sobhuku*. The other village leaders expressed that in the village women were always part of leadership even in the olden days—although not as chiefs, *sobhuku*, and village heads. Their roles were mainly aligned to issues of health and farming. The people in the village, however, expressed concerns about the notion that a whole village could be run by women and felt *abafazi bengabakhamela emadekeni* (“women might sink them in mud”). The males also felt women *sobhuku* still feel inferior to their male counterparts—and hence they are afraid to voice their thoughts and concerns among men. This, therefore, shows that even though women are being slowly assimilated in traditional systems of governance and given due respect—like their male equals, they are however not fully trusted as strong and capable leaders.

Roles and Responsibilities of Women in Traditional Governance Systems

The chief and village heads consulted revealed that unlike in yesteryears, where women were inclined to feminine roles, the tide was changing as women in a number of communities were becoming chiefs or village heads, or taking up other village leadership roles. Reference was made to one woman, who was endorsed as chief in a community in Mzimunye in Gwanda, and the community under study had one female

village head at the time of conducting the study. Within the village under study, women have also taken up leadership in non-hereditary roles like heading the dipping of livestock, which in the past, was usually a role reserved for men.

However, it was highlighted that chieftaincy and village headship were hereditary and, therefore, after the death of a chief or village head, the heir to the throne is supposed to be the first-born son. In cases where the first-born son could not assume his duties as chief, his male sibling would take the position. Female children in the family only take the position if there are no male heirs to take the position. In cases where the heirs are too young to lead after the death of a chief or village head, the wife usually becomes regent chief until the children are old and wise enough to take up their roles. However, the chief and village heads highlighted that in some cases such female regent chiefs or village heads continued leading even after the heirs were grown up and mature.

A female village head who was interviewed confidently said that as a woman leader she was not facing any resistance for her role and responsibility as village head. She highlighted that men took orders that she gave with respect. Male village heads also confirmed this position, when they said that villagers respected their female leaders as there had been no case of men disregarding orders from a female village head.

Cultural Attitudes and Gender Roles

The current study also sought to find out if cultural attitudes still have an impact on gender roles. The results have shown that a number of factors have over the years, influenced culture and tradition, and these include education, religion and democratic forces advocating for gender equality. The research participants stressed that there were no cultural barriers in their communities hindering women from becoming leaders. However, among male respondents, the feeling was that women, although allowed to lead or participate in traditional governance, were not supposed to dominate these systems. Men highlighted that they were not comfortable with a leadership dominated by women, and that the only acceptable situation is where men dominate and women are a minority in leadership. The feeling was that if the community was to be led by an assembly of women there would be chaos in the community as women would introduce foreign cultures and traditions that would corrupt the communities.

In some instances, taboos and traditional beliefs have been highlighted as barriers to women assuming leadership positions. However, the respondents in this study felt that there were no taboos barring women from becoming leaders in their communities.

Cases and Disputes Involving Women within Traditional Governance Systems

Cases to do with women are somehow pigeonholed in the village studied. Spinsters who were interviewed complained that in the past their plight was that there was no one to represent their interests in their communities. The research also discovered that spinsters

and single mothers were traditionally not allowed to lead communities or even to be allocated land. This belief is still prevalent as the respondents highlighted that spinsters and single mothers (referred to as *omazakhela*) cannot take leadership roles or be allocated land—most men interviewed were quoted as saying that allocating land to single mothers land would fuel adultery as most married men would frequent homes of these single mothers to quench their sexual cravings. Such stereotypes against spinsters and single mothers embedded in culture and tradition are still influencing this community, which indicates that only married women or widows can be accommodated in the traditional governance systems. Conversely, the female village head interviewed shared the sentiments of spinsters and single mothers, as she felt that depriving these women of economic resources like land was undemocratic—she would thus be their voice in community meetings.

Stereotypes and misconceptions against unmarried women, therefore, also stand in the way of fair distribution of resources. They cannot be allocated land, and are thus, more prone to poverty. The feeling among most female respondents was that such women deserve to be allocated land in order to provide for their families.

Traditional Governance and Gender Equality Advocacy

Democracy has influenced a lot of veneers of human existence at varying degrees, and traditional governance systems have been affected—although the degree of influence cannot be ascertained in this study. However, all respondents referred to the fact that the Zimbabwe government now has a female vice president, ministers, and parliamentarians, which they saw as a sign that the times are changing and that traditional governance systems are succumbing. The female village head in the studied community, and female chiefs in places like Mzimunye in Gwanda and other communities, were proof to the villagers that democracy was slowly creeping into traditional governance systems.

By virtue of men in the village appreciating and respecting a female leader and taking orders from her, the feeling was that a paradigm shift was taking place in rural areas and that it would be up to female leaders to prove to these communities that they are capable and worthy of being renowned leaders. However, this study has shown that democracy, together with gender equity pressure groups, still has a long way to go in increasing representation of women in government—therefore, traditional systems also need to open up to democracy and increase representation of women.

Conclusion

Women are being slowly integrated in traditional governance systems. However, a combination of legal changes and revitalisation of customary laws, along with transformation through education and poverty alleviation, would be required for the

promotion of gender equity. There is also a need for research that will propose ways in which traditional authorities can help eradicate gender-related oppression.

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