

Poverty among women in Zimbabwe: The case of the Xangani women in Chikombedzi rural communities

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Abstract

This study was undertaken to investigate the causes of poverty among women in Chikombedzi, Masvingo, Zimbabwe. The quest to identify the causes of the failure of positive change to the lives of women in Chikombedzi was the motivation behind this research. A descriptive study was conducted using a mixed design to solicit respondents' views, opinions and sentiments through the use of questionnaires and interviews. The study established that Xangani women were side-lined in all economic activities. Lack of academic and professional qualifications as well as culture were identified as limitations that affected women's economic status. The study recommends education programmes that target girls and women to promote basic skills of reading and writing since most women in Chikombedzi lack such skills; women in Chikombedzi need to organise themselves into a women organisation advocating for women rights in their communities; civil society should come up with advocacy programmes that target both women and men so as to change the mind-set of the whole community on how they view women; and there is need for the alignment of traditional leadership with the rights of women as enshrined in the constitution of Zimbabwe and other global agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Key words: poverty, women, Xangani, Chikombedzi, rural communities, discrimination, Masvingo

1. Background to the Study

The issue of women poverty has become a global problem which various stakeholders internationally, regionally and at national level continue to fight. Multilateral institutions, non-governmental organizations, governments and women's organizations have come up with various strategies and interventions to address the problem of poverty among women. International conferences such as the 1975 World Conference of the International Women's Year in Mexico City, The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995 and The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which were held had one issue and goal in common, which was to improve the state of women's economic participation so as to reduce the level of poverty.

According to Razavi and Miller (1995) the movements such as Women in Development (WID) demanded the allocation of development resource to women as a way of improving the conditions of women while it challenged the 'trickle down' theories of development, which instead of improving women's rights and status appeared to be contributing to a deterioration of their position. Despite all the efforts of such movements as WID and Gender and Development (GAD) the status of women has not changed much.

Scholars have come up with various assumptions and propositions regarding the causes and the general conditions that exacerbate the levels of poverty among women. Moghaam (2005) argues that feminization of poverty in the sub Saharan context can be understood from three contributing factors: the growth of female headed households, intra-household inequalities and bias against women and girls and the neoliberal economic policies, including structural adjustments and the post socialist market transactions. Moghadam's ideas, concurs with Macpherson (2010), who argues that poverty among women is rooted in the interaction of three major factors, weak governance, traditional restriction on women property rights and violent civil conflict. Both scholars concur that tradition and culture especially patriarchy play a role in the entrenchment of poverty among women.

2. Statement of the Problem

Conferences have been held, donor organizations have provided money to fight poverty among women through projects. Governments have ratified international conventions on women's rights. National policies and legislation to promote women emancipation and empowerment have been formulated. But the condition of poverty among women in the Xangani community of Chiredzi has not changed much.

3. Objectives of the study

This study seeks to:

- establish the root causes of poverty among women in the Xangani community;
- establish how social factors impact on women's economic status; and
- assess women's level of access, control and ownership of resources in Chikombedzi.

4.Literature Review

4.1 The concept poverty

Poverty is an undesirable social problem (Haralambos and Holborn, 2000: 291). The World Bank (2001) reports that more than 2.7 billion people in the world are poor. Most of them (more than 85%) live in rural areas in developing countries. As further argued by the World Bank (2001), Haralambos and Holborn (2000: 127), Swanepoel *et al* (2000: 16), Moore (1993: 66) and Mokoena (2004: 15), the majority of people living in poverty are women. Bookie (1997: 3) writes, "Women constitute the majority of the region's [SADC] population at an average of 51%. They constitute the abjectly poor living in the rural areas, which are largely wanting of resources and facilities". The World Bank (2001) further reports that more than 318 million of the poor were in Southern Africa in 2001.

There is, however, controversy in the definition and understanding of poverty among the academia, theorists, politicians, development practitioners and other interested parties. As a result it is difficult to come up with a precise definition of poverty. This is why Leftwich and Sharp (1982: 240) believe that "Poverty is not easily defined." Haralambos and Holborn (2000) identify three areas of controversy in the definition of poverty. The areas of controversy are:

- whether to define poverty in absolute or relative terms;
- whether poverty is only material or multiple deprivation; and
- whether inequality is related to poverty or not.

Before looking at the above controversies it is important that clear communication is established by coming up with a definition adopted in this study. For Leftwich and Sharp (1982: 240) poverty is concerned with the relationship between the minimum needs of people and their ability to satisfy these needs. As shall be seen below, the difficulty arises in determining minimum needs and the amount of money required to satisfy these needs. Perhaps a more comprehensive definition of poverty is that by Matsebula (1998: 145). He sees human poverty as multidimensional, focusing on how the poor are deprived in terms of income, physical, material and psychic capabilities and other discriminatory factors necessary for social cohesion. This is well captured by Musingafi's (2008) definition that sees poverty as deprivation, a denial of access to those things which a person believes necessary for their life to be worth living: not only food, shelter and safe drinking water, but also education and the opportunity to engage with other human beings from a position of dignity.

Mokoena (2004), Swanepoel *et al* (2000), Haralambos and Holborn (2000), Matsebula (1998), Fowler (1997), Moore (1993), and Sen (1981), all agree that poverty is understood at mainly two levels, which are the absolute and relative poverty levels. Any analysis of poverty has to start from these two traditional levels. The researcher classifies the levels as the narrow and broad perspectives.

4.2 The Narrow Perspective of Poverty

The narrow perspective defines poverty in economic terms. At its extreme, the perspective is well captured by Sen (1981: 11) when he talks of the Biological approach to understanding poverty. Sen (1981: 11) quotes Rowntree (1901) who believes that families are in "primary poverty if their total earnings are insufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency." Starvation is thus the most telling aspect of poverty. Such levels of poverty are rampant in most African countries like Sudan and Somalia.

The narrow perspective is best described in the concept of absolute poverty. Absolute poverty refers to a desperate situation-the difference between life and death. The World Bank (1975) as captured by Swanepoel *et al* (2000: 2) describes absolute poverty as a situation where incomes are so low that even a minimum standard of nutrition, shelter and personal necessities cannot be maintained. This concurs with Rowntree's observation in 1901 (Sen, 1981: 11) that families are in 'primary poverty' if their 'total earnings are insufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency.' Haralambos and Holborn (2000: 291-2), Moore (1993: 44), and Leftwich (1981:240) agree with this contention for they believe absolute poverty involves the judgment of basic needs and is measured in terms of the resources required to maintain health and physical efficiency. The concept is often known as subsistence poverty since it is based on assessments of minimum subsistence requirements. Poverty is thus limited to material requirements, though Drewnowski and Scott (1966), as quoted in Haralambos and Holborn (2000: 291), believe that some concepts of absolute poverty go beyond basic needs by introducing the idea of basic cultural needs like education, security, leisure and recreation.

Some attempts at eradicating absolute poverty have been tried in Western countries through the creation of the Welfare State. In the United Kingdom, Nobbs *et al* (1989: 51) reports that, "The Welfare State grew out of the needs and miseries of those people in society who suffered from great poverty... Despite this real poverty

still remains today among pensioners, single parent families, the homeless and others” in Britain.

Though clear and specific, Moore (1993: 44) argues that the absolute poverty approach suffers from the fact that it is extremely difficult to define necessities. In fact, there is no agreement on what necessities are as already seen above. In most cases such definitions are affected by what Cateora and Graham (1999: 13-15) refer to as Self-Reference Criterion, that is, an unconscious reference to one’s own cultural values, experiences and knowledge. Haralambos and Holborn (2000: 292), say such needs vary between and within societies. The nutritional needs of the nomadic hunters and gatherers of the Kalahari Desert may well be different from those of office workers in London. Thus, as put forward by Sen (1981: 11), nutritional requirements are difficult to define precisely. People have been known to survive with little nutrition, and there seems to be a cumulative of life expectation as the dietary limits are raised (Sen, 1981: 11). Therefore there is difficulty in being arbitrary on minimum nutritional requirements across groups and regions. The concept becomes more difficult to defend when it is broadened to include basic cultural needs as such needs vary from time to time and from place to place, hence the problem of the Self-Referencing Criterion explained above.

Thus, as put forward by Moore (1993: 44), it can be safely concluded that the concept of absolute poverty is liable to abuse, pejorative and racialised stereotypes of impoverished people as powerless victims and passive recipients of aid programmes. On its own the concept is incomplete and therefore has to be complemented with other related concepts.

4.3 The Broad Perspective of Poverty

The broad perspective of poverty is flexible, multidimensional and fits well with the concept of human development. Human development is about the expansion of human choices. Poverty is about deprivation, denial or reduction of these choices. The Human Development Report (1997: 15) quoted in Mandaza (1998: 151) argues that over and above the denial of basic necessities, poverty is about denial of a long, healthy and creative life; denial of a decent standard of living; denial of freedom, dignity and self-esteem. This is further reinforced by Matsebula in Mandaza (1998: 51) when he says poverty in the context of human development goes beyond the consumption dimension. It incorporates “the lack of real opportunity-due to social constraints as well as personal circumstances-to lead valuable and valued lives” (Human Development Report, 1997: 16). The Report goes on to say this would include, among other things, prevention from mixing well with others, not participating effectively in community affairs, being disabled, suffering the effects of destructive behaviour, lacking social support, having to put children in employment, having to accept demeaning work, and being dependent on common property.

The broad perspective sees poverty as a condition, which may affect individuals or collective groups not only in developing countries, but also in developed countries. In developed countries poverty manifests itself in a range of social problems including homelessness, and the persistence of ghetto housing clusters. As already shown above, Nobbs *et al* (1989) talk of poverty among several groups of people in Britain. Thus poverty may be seen as situational, relative, comparative, value laden or defined by policy (Sen, 1981: 11). As put forward by Haralambos and Holborn (2000: 296) poverty is thus measured in terms of the standards that are specific to a particular place at a particular time. In Western societies products such as cold and hot running water, refrigerators, washing machines, medical and dental care, full time education and motor cars have moved from being luxuries through comforts to necessities (Haralambos and Holborn, 2000: 296). Any definition of poverty should thus link it to the demand and needs of a changing society. Haralambos and Holborn (2000: 296) further say poverty also exists where members of society are excluded from the life style of the community to which they belong. Thus poverty varies according to how affluent that society is. The analysis of social aspects of poverty links conditions of scarcity to aspects of the distribution of resources and power in a society and recognizes that poverty may be a function of the diminished capability of people to live the kinds of lives they value.

Relative poverty, as one of the major variants of the broad perspective of poverty, is an expression of one entity in relation to another entity (Swanepoel *et al* 2000: 2). In relation to South Africa today, Zimbabwe is poor, or in relation to the United Kingdom, South Africa is poor, and so forth. In relation to the average white American family, the average African American family suffers poverty, or in relation to the average African American family, an average South African family suffers deprivation, and so forth. Analyzing poverty in America in 1982, Leftwich and Sharp (1982:241) observe that the incidence of poverty is higher among black families, young families, large families and families with the head of the family uneducated, unemployed, or not in the labour force. Relative poverty is thus comparative. This concept refers to people whose basic needs may be met, but who in terms of their social environment still experience deprivation. Women are among such social groupings, especially single mothers in the developing countries.

From the above discourse it is clear that the broad perspective of poverty stresses not so much necessities, but social exclusion from normal patterns of life in a society. The definition implies that poverty cannot be eradicated. The approach’s strengths lies in the fact that it relates poverty to the expectations of society,

broadens the idea of what poverty is and gives a realistic picture of deprivation within a society (Moore, 1993:44).

According to Moore (1993:44) the problems with the broad or relative approach to poverty are if taken to extremes, it would mean that as long as there is inequality there is poverty, and also the approach can lead to people ignoring the differences across societies.

A poor woman in Latin America (Moldova, 1997) summarized poverty thus, "Poverty is pain; it feels like a disease. It attacks a person not only materially, but also morally. It eats away one's dignity and drives one into total despair." The World Bank (2002: 29) reinforced this line of thinking as follows:

Poor people suffer physical pain that comes with too little food and long hours of work; emotional pain stemming from the daily humiliations of dependency and lack of power; and moral pain from being forced to make choices such as whether to use limited funds to save the life of an ill family member or to use those same funds to feed their children.

4.4 Global attempts at improving women's position

In most Western economies and other African economies like South Africa, there is a Welfare State that caters for the poor and the vulnerable like the disabled, single mothers, and the elderly, among others. The Welfare State is based on the assumption that the poor are passive victims who need help. Proponents of the Welfare State accept Rein's line of thinking as quoted in Sen *et al* (1982: 11) that "People must not be allowed to become so poor that they offend or are hurtful to society". They argue that while capitalism has a lot of benefits, it also brought a lot of harm to the weak and the vulnerable-most of whom are women. Hence the need for a welfare state. It is therefore the duty of the more affluent, through taxation, to support the poor (Moore, 1993:15). But the Welfare State has failed to eradicate poverty as already shown above.

The United Nations declared the 1970s a Women's Decade as a result of various northern women pressure groups. The General Assembly urged governments to pursue policies that ensured the incorporation of women in the planning process. This provided the context within which the new bourgeois programmes like Women in Development (WID) and later Women and Development (WAD) were to be conceived. According to Meena (1992: 20) WID sees development in terms of increasing efficiency in producing goods and services in a competitive environment. Women were thus added in the mainstream plans to improve efficiency of production. But the attempt to add women into the development strategies did not provide a point of departure from the Welfare approaches. According to Meena (1992: 20) it led to an increase of "donor-funded income generating activities for women, but these activities were not part of the mainstream plans". Most of these projects were conceived by donor agencies in collaboration with national governments. Women who were supposed to have been the targets of the projects were marginal actors in conceiving, monitoring and evaluating such projects. As a result, according to Mbilinyi (1992: 48), the WID strategy did not enable women to improve their status, build their self-esteem, and enhance their capacities to get involved in the development process in identifying, designing, implementing and controlling the development plans. It did not increase women's access to resources, both tangible and nontangible, which would have enhanced their greater participation in the management of the society in which they were living. It thus did not lead to women empowerment.

WID was thus replaced by Women and Development (WAD), which also failed to yield desired results. WAD concentrated more on women's practical needs such as maternal services, health and education, than on strategic needs like unequal sexual division of labour, legal discrimination and sexual abuse (Meena, 1992:21).

Then came Gender and Development (GAD), which recognizes that women, poor men and other disadvantaged groups are the victims of social structures that impact them negatively (Japan international Cooperation Agency, 2008). It postulates that both men and women should work together for the improvement of society. Both must be fully involved in decision making on issues that affect society. GAD seeks to understand the different development priorities and needs of men and women. The approach was later modified to Gender Mainstreaming addressing gender issues in all development policies and projected programmes irrespective of sector or type of project (Japan international Cooperation Agency, 2008). The aim is to ensure that development brings significant benefits for both men and women by ensuring that policy formulation, planning and decisions reflect, and are influenced by the perspectives, experience, knowledge and interests of women as well as men. (Japan international Cooperation Agency, 2008). It is thus a holistic approach that seeks to cater for both sexes' interests to ensure development occurs.

The story is long, to cut it short let us just say conventions, symposiums, workshops, legislation after legislation, declarations, among a host of other related things have been tried after the WID, WAD and GAD experiments, but still the journey is not yet reached.

The Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action on Gender and Development in September 1997 still holds today. It identified the following six critical areas of concern as far as development and women empowerment are concerned:

- insufficient mechanisms at all levels to promote the advancement of women;
 - inequalities between women and men in power sharing and decision-making;
 - inequalities in economic structures and policies in productive activities at all levels;
 - lack of respect for, and inadequate promotion and protection of human rights of women and the girl-child;
 - the situation of women in the context of armed conflict; and
 - gender capacity-building.
- (Gwekwerere, 2000: 3)

Obviously this makes women a very fertile ground for study. The only challenge is these studies should bring positive results by providing information leading to a solution to the problem!

5. Research Participants

According to Yount (2006), population consists of all subjects one wants to study. It comprises of all possible cases that constitute a known whole. Carroll (2013) holds that it is a group that one is studying or collecting information on for data driven decisions. In this study the population comprised of approximately 1500 Xangani women who reside in ward 11 of Chiredzi South in the administrative district of Chiredzi in Masvingo Province in Zimbabwe.

Carroll (2013) posits that a sample is a scientifically drawn up group of subjects that actually possesses the same characteristics as the whole population under study. The results obtained from a sample can be generalised to the whole population of the study. Shuttleworth (2008) concurs with Carroll and sees a sample as a subset of the population under study. It must be representative of the population from which it was drawn and it must have a good size to warrant statistical analysis. In this research, the researcher used the convenience sampling method to select the respondents. The sample comprised of 35 respondents where 30 were respondents for questionnaires while 5 were interview respondents. Distribution of respondents was as in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Respondents distribution

(Source: Primary data)

| Age range | Number of respondents | Percentage |
|--------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| 18-25 | 9 | 30 |
| 26-38 | 9 | 30 |
| 39-50 | 6 | 20 |
| 51-64 | 6 | 20 |
| Total | 30 | 100% |

Respondents' marital status was as in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Marital status of respondents

(Source: Primary data)

| Marital Status | Number of respondents per age group | | | | Total | Percentage |
|----------------|-------------------------------------|---------|---------|--------|-----------|-------------|
| | 18 – 25 | 26 – 38 | 39 – 50 | 51 -64 | | |
| Married | 4 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 13 | 43,3% |
| Single | 5 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 26,7% |
| Single Parent | 0 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 5 | 16,7% |
| Widowed | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 13,3% |
| TOTAL | | | | | 30 | 100% |

Table 3 below shows educational status of respondents. The fact that only 2 of the 30 respondents had gone to school up to Advanced Level shows that women education is not given required priority in the Xangani community. This can be attributed to economic constraints, lack of role models to motivate them and many other cultural factors. Educational levels have an effect in determining one's employability and the kind of employment opportunities she gets.

Table 3 Distribution of educational status of respondents

(Source: Primary data)

| Educational level | Number Of Respondents Per Age Group | | | | Total | Percentage |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------|---------|---------|--------|-----------|-------------|
| | 18 – 25 | 26 – 38 | 39 – 50 | 51 -64 | | |
| Grade 7 and below | 1 | 0 | 3 | 6 | 10 | 33,3% |
| Ordinary Level | 8 | 7 | 3 | 0 | 18 | 60% |
| Advanced Level | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 6,7% |
| TOTAL | | | | | 30 | 100% |

6. Findings Women Participation and poverty

This study sought to establish the root causes of poverty among women in the Xangani community; establish how social factors impact on women’s economic status; establish locally preferred poverty reduction strategies that are suitable to the community of Chikombedzi; and assess women’s level of access, control and ownership of resources in Chikombedzi.

6.1 Causes of poverty among women in the Xangani community

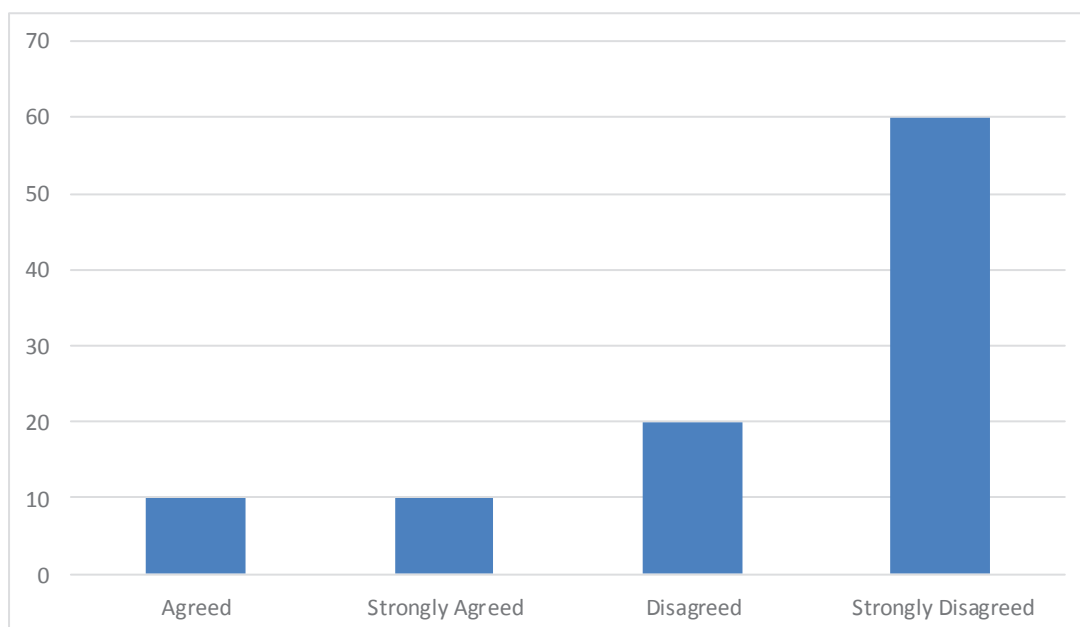


Fig 1 Respondents perception on women participation in decision making

(Source: Primary data)

Lack of decision making powers was identified as one of the reasons why the Xangani women were poor. Responses to the question on whether women participated in decision making were as in Fig 1. The Figure shows that the majority of the questionnaire respondents believed that women in the Xangani community are not involved in the decision making processes affecting their household and community. They also felt that women did not occupy leadership positions in their community.

The second factor that was identified as making women poor in the Xangani community was lack of education. Although the majority of respondents had gone to school up to Ordinary Level most of them did not attain a full Ordinary Level certificate. It was established that the Xangani community do not value education, especially for the girlchild as illustrated in Fig 2.

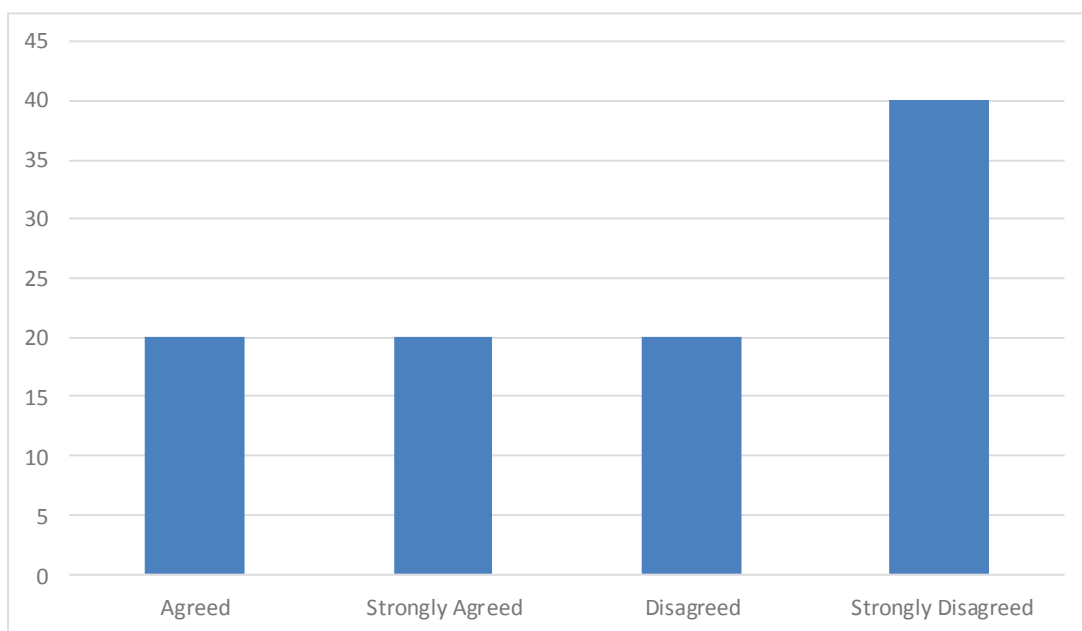


Fig 2 Respondents' views on the importance of education to women
(Source: Primary data)

Education for women was viewed as consumption rather than investment. Families were not willing to lose their resources investing in women since at one point in their life cycle girls will get married to another family which would then benefit from her education. This failure to invest in girlchild education indicates that education is actually not viewed as a basic human right for women in the Xangani community. It is therefore concluded that women in the Xangani community have low levels of education and therefore remain trapped into poverty.

Respondents acknowledged that culture played a significant role in making women poor. Most respondents viewed the Xangani culture as a culture that put barriers in the progress of women. Fig 3 shows that the majority of respondents (80%) felt that Xangani culture have no respect for women freedom and dignity. It is therefore concluded that culture is a major obstacle to poverty alleviation among women in the Xangani community.

Respondents also felt that the promotion of intra household inequalities through sons' preferences contributed to the feminisation of poverty. This segregation has translated into men getting better education than women resulting in a situation where men participate more in the decision making process in their communities than women. The Xangani culture maintains a patriarchal society which perpetuates male dominance over women.

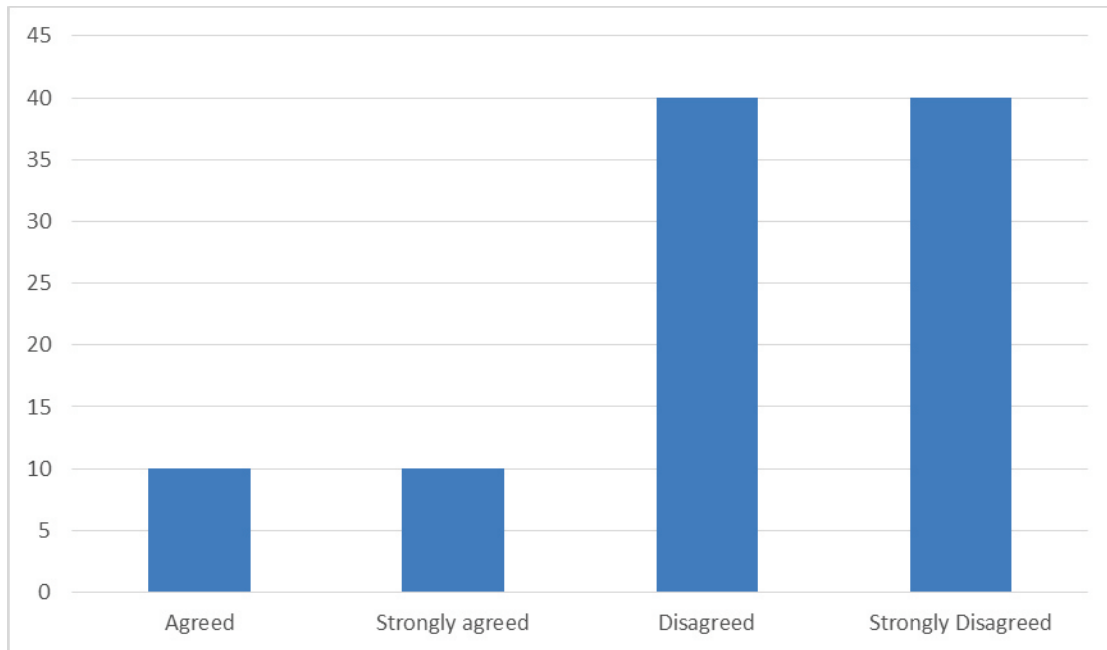


Fig 3 Respondents' views on culture and poverty
(Source: Primary data)

6.2 Women and ownership of resources

Seventy one percent of the respondents believed that Xangani women had no control over economic resources in their community. This also tallies with authors' observation. At Chikombedzi business centre only 2 of the 12 business entities were owned by women.

The bar graph below shows the findings on respondents' views on ownership of resources in the Xangani community:

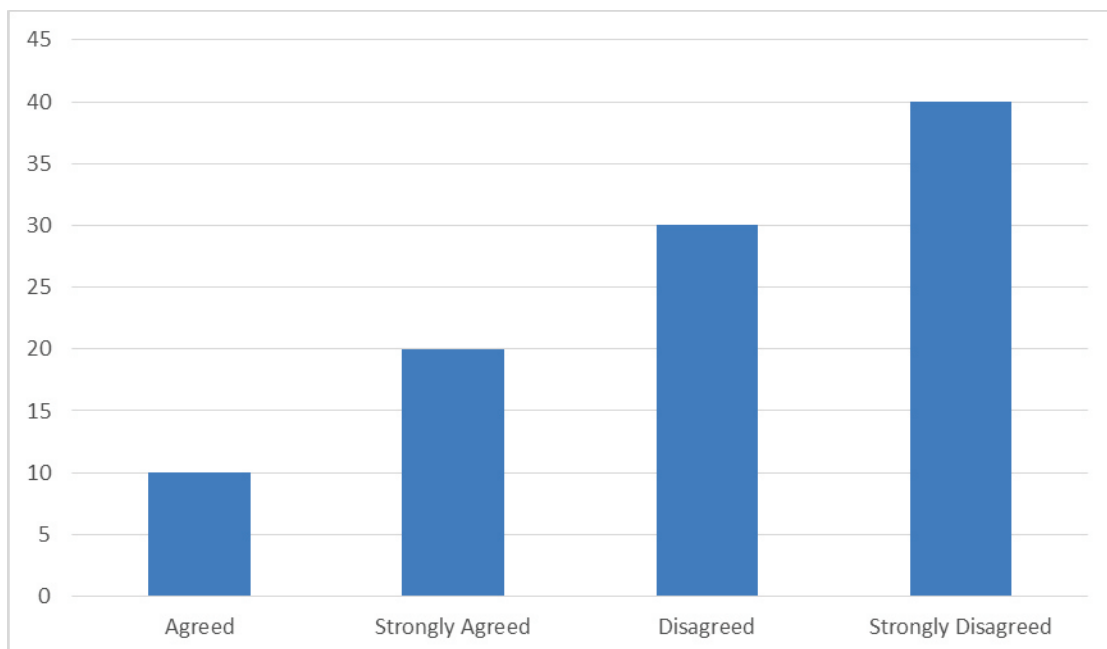


Fig 4 Respondents' views on ownership of resources
(Source: Primary data)

7. Recommendations

In light of the findings of this research, the researcher makes the following recommendations:

- more government resources should be channelled towards women emancipation and empowerment programmes in the Xangani area;
- education programmes that target girls and women to promote basic skills of reading and writing since most women in Chikomedzi lack such skills;
- women in Chikomedzi need to organise themselves into a women organisation advocating for women rights in their communities, making more engagement with the ministry that deals with women's affairs to promote women empowerment;
- civil society should come up with advocacy programmes that target both women and men so as to change the mind-set of the whole community on how they view women; and
- there is need for the alignment of traditional leadership with the rights of women as enshrined in the constitution of Zimbabwe and other global agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

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