

Trapped in a ‘Pitiless Zone where the Different Patriarchies Meet’! A Glimpse into the BaTonga Rural Women’s Daily Struggles Versus Gender Equality, Binga, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Freedom of any kind is very important to the full functioning of any human being in society. It allows people to make personal choices that they can be happy and proud about. But for the majority of women across the world, achieving such liberty has proved unrealistic due to a number of factors. For some, the political, economic, and social space of their everyday life is extremely stifled to accommodate the exercise of fundamental human freedoms. This paper investigated the diverse forms of barriers that hinder many baTonga rural women (Binga, Zimbabwe) from asserting their rights claims, importantly, the right to gender equality. The study is a descriptive research that was conducted through secondary data. Though substantial progress in tradition and socio-cultural practices has been achieved, the majority of the rural women are still trapped in intersecting and overlapping inequalities. While some of their sites of struggle are generic and common to all women globally, some are more specific due to their traditional and cultural beliefs. With a gross history of political and economic marginalisation in the region, access to quality education has rendered both sexes deficient of compatible skills and exposure to handle society’s contemporary challenges. Given the culturally facilitated gender imbalance in accessing formal education, rural women remain the most affected in so far as participation in politics, mainstream economy and other social platforms is concerned. Therefore, to address these and other forms of their exclusion, a holistic approach to their challenges is recommended and preferably, one that is gender responsive. A case in point would be a redress of the 1950s historical dislocation of the baTonga people to cater for the developmental needs of both the present and future generations of baTonga rural women. Thus, by building schools, clinics, and other essential public service facilities in rural areas the government should empower women to be able to respond to their needs. **Keywords;** BaTonga, women, gender equality, marginalisation, socio-cultural practices, exclusion, Binga, Zimbabwe.

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1. Introduction

Many women across the world generally lack support in many fundamental functions of human life as compared to men. They are susceptible to various forms of abuse in different spheres of their lives such as the workplace, family, and politics, resulting in their inherent association with a lower status in society globally. Albertyn, Fredman and Lober ascribe this status to patriarchy and intersectionality and further suggest this being the reason for gender-based socio-economic disadvantage and inequality.[1] Given the fact that many women around the world are not fully recognised as equals before the law as compared to men, Nussbaum also suggests the legal system as being another tool that aids to their exclusion. [2] As a result, many of them are excluded from accessing legal recourse for injustice. The intact female subordination in most societies also exacerbate the lack of appropriate acknowledgement for their labour contribution in both private and public spaces.[3] Thus, male dominance, race, nationality, and class often determine women’s economic and political power or lack thereof. [4] Within the family space, this is more pronounced in the way social structures are organised whereas, in the public sphere institutional organisation and policies critically influence the manner in which gender issues are handled.[5] It is against this background that this paper seeks to expose the long accepted socio-cultural traditions, political and economic marginalisation that enlarge the baTonga rural women’s sites of domination. This is important in mitigating the continuously widening gender gap as it creates room to initiate conversations around developing appropriate and compatible solutions to address the problem. The paper is organised as follows; 1.1 presents a brief background on baTonga rural women and gender issues, section 2 conceptualises marginalisation and specifically discusses political and economic marginalisation in the context of the study. At sections 3 and 4, I talk about the research methodology and the findings, respectively. Section 5 provides a discussion and an analysis on the effects of marginalisation and socio-cultural practices on gender equality among baTonga rural women. At part 6 and 7, I make recommendations and a conclusion based on the findings of the study, respectively.

1.1 Brief background on baTonga rural women and gender issues

Despite women constituting fifty percent of the global population, they remain underrepresented in many

governance related decision-making processes globally. [6] The abhorrent masculine dominance, economic, political, social, and psychological marginalisation further augments their non-recognition. According to Hassim and Gouws, this non-recognition has created a perception that women are economically invisible. [7] It has resulted and maintained disparities in the division of labour and the sharing of profits in law and state. [8] In countries where institutional and policy framework is still developing particularly in terms of the distribution of resources, marginalisation has restricted women from accessing opportunities and resources. [9] In the process, this has, and it continues to deprive many of them of a fundamentally dignified life as citizens and most importantly, as human beings. Equally, the experiences of rural baTonga women of Binga, Zimbabwe are not very different from the abovementioned circumstances, later alone from the rest of other women across the world. They too, are susceptible to male dominance but perhaps not racially discriminated, but they are excluded from the mainstream economy due to their tribal, cultural, and educational background, among others. Sadly, much of this has gone unabated for years despite Zimbabwe's constitutionally protected right and value of gender balance. [10] More than four decades of political and economic independence from the colonial rulership very few (if any) in this category of women enjoy the freedoms of a female human being in rural Binga District. Access to formal education is open to both sexes but the educational system is still not yet receptive of the gender difference and what it symbolises to rural baTonga women and their culture. The political space and the formal economy are some of the areas that absorbs only a few if ever, due to the multiple barriers that women are expected to navigate constantly. In essence, gender determines so much in the baTonga culture and so often, women find themselves less advantaged as men are most preferred to many developmental opportunities. This paper identifies and discusses the major sites of women's struggles and how these obstruct the majority of them from fully exercising the right to gender equality. This brings about the issue of marginalisation which I turn to discuss in the next section.

2. Conceptualizing marginalisation

To understand the present levels of underdevelopment and dependency of Africa's majority, it is important that we trace back the past social, economic, and political history that gave rise to the current status quo. Unlike the views frequently advanced by many historians that development was or is, largely as a result of male contribution, in the case of women Anunobi argues for a balanced narrative. [11] In her view and specifically in Africa, women are equally instrumental to the economic and political development of society. [12] However, due to the patriarchal dominance enhanced by the colonial system, the harmful socio-cultural practices, religion and other factors, this role has been concealed. [13] As Kainuwa and Yusuf postulate, the mantra that women's 'faces are only to be seen but their voices not to be heard' [14] seems to have crept so deep into our social values such that unlearning the resultant culture poses a huge challenge.

Mehretu and Mutambirwa, argue that certain aspects of colonialism and its remnants reversed many women's progress in African societies. [15] The colonial marginalisation of rural life denigrated the important role that women in traditional leadership positions played. Unlike the traditional societies, it is asserted that colonial masters were often less equitable in their treatment of women. [16] In some of the West African cultures for instance, Anunobi claims that women would serve as chiefs among other significant political positions. [17] However, due to the decline in the influence of traditional chiefs and other leadership positions under colonialism, most women lost their power to male dominated colonial governments. [18] This affected the traditional social, economic and political norms of society as communities needed to adjust to new ways of doing life. Against this background, it becomes important to explore the different patterns of marginalisation in order to appreciate its impact on rural black African women.

As cited by Jussila and Majoral, Mehretu *et al* classifies marginalisation into two patterns namely, contingent, and systematic marginalisation. [19] Contingent marginalisation is considered to be self-correcting and inherent in *laissez-faire* systems whose manifestation in some communities is considered accidental or temporary. [20] It is an unusual condition of social and regional inequality within the context of what is fair and equitable to society. Systematic marginalisation on the other hand, is a divided development caused by a system of inequality. [21] It operates outside the market system and it is largely dependent on homogenic orders that use formal and informal institutions to victimise weaker constituencies. [22] With the use of homogenic pressures, the political and economically elite cause the inequality that often manifests in economic, political, social and locational vulnerability. [23] Systematic marginality is more prone in societies that lack democratic governance and free markets and also, in countries with quasi revolutionary and authoritarian governments with kleptocratic tendencies. [24] For purposes of this study, focus is on systematic marginalisation and how it plays out in rural baTonga women's lives in so far as political and economic marginalisation is concerned. I now turn to discuss women's political exclusion as a form of marginalisation.

2.2.1 Political exclusion

To understand the impact of political exclusion on gender equality, it is important that we have a background knowledge of political participation. Kassa describes political participation as the active involvement and engagement of citizens in political activities, spaces and processes that affect them. [25] These include activities

that exert influence through public platforms on political leaders to obey their public service duties towards citizens. [26] It is essential for development as it allows men and women to access platforms that amplify their voices in matters of interest. As an important tool for development therefore, it is critical that it recognizes the need to involve disadvantaged segments of the population in the design and implementation of policies concerning their welfare. [27] In the case of women, this can only be achieved if their substantial representation in political decision making is promoted.

Women's participation in all spheres of life has become a major issue in development discourses. Bayeh is of the view that without women's active involvement and value for their perspectives in decision-making, socio-economic development, goals of equality and peace cannot be fully achieved. [28] This assertion is correct given the fact that almost everywhere, politics which is a determining factor of power is still a male dominated enterprise where female participation is very limited. [29] In most rural Africa, the hostility associated with the political space scare many women away. [30] This has created and widened gender disparities in society's various fronts because by nature of gender differences, men and women's life experiences and interests including ways of doing politics differs. Consequently, when excluded from vital political decision-making platforms, women's concerns tend to be underrepresented, overlooked, or even unrecognised as it would have been had they been the ones articulating their needs relative to being represented by their male counterparts. [31]

In Zimbabwe, gender balance is a principle and right protected in terms of section 17 of the Constitution. [32] By its side, is also the right to freedom of cultural expression which is subject to the fundamental human rights of every citizen including women. [33] Yet, despite all these provisions, very few baTonga women in the Zimbabwean parliament or beyond, (if any at all) represent themselves. Their challenges are multifaceted to include many of the already mentioned, the masculine and violent political space that often intimidate them to shun politics altogether. According to Geisler, this has also made it difficult for most women to forge political networks for mobilisation particularly in the larger part of Southern Africa.[34] Without formal orientation and training on politics and associated issues, African rural women generally do not feel confident to represent themselves such that it becomes easier delegating this role to men. [35] Also, there is a lack of good will by other male politicians to include women in structures of political governance which increases their indifference in political participation.[36] Consequently, without political power most rural women are already disenfranchised to engage in any political engagements because without this power, access to economic resources is limited which takes me to the next discussion on economic exclusion.

2.2.2 Economic exclusion

Women may occupy a lower position in society but their contribution to the socio-economic development and survival of many households is indispensable. Apart from their domestic and maternal duties, many today also engage in other economic activities albeit largely at a subsistence level. With new opportunities though, some are making strides in commercialised economic activities such as farming, mining etc. Some are also professionals who run businesses while some are slowly marking their presence in politics and other civic space previously reserved for men. Yet, in most African countries, Boserup and Anunobi argue that this contribution is often not reflected at policy level and other vital platforms. [37]. Through systematic exclusion instigated by the commercialisation of agricultural activities by national governments, many women have eventually lost economic power.[38] Governmental initiatives that grant titles of ownership over land previously under the control of women to men, for instance signalled the taking over by the latter. It meant that families moved from subsistence (family consumption) to commercial agriculture which was more dependent on the State for credit and training.[39] This also meant that many women were frozen out of such aid because the newly introduced technologies were only taught to men. [40]

In Uganda in 1923, Anunobi claims that the then British administrator in charge of agriculture declared that cotton growing could not be exclusively left to women. [41] As a result when new cotton growing technologies were introduced only men received training. This was despite women being the first to start cotton cultivation which drove many out of employment. [42] In Senegal the Taiwanese foreign aid team on its mission to improve rice cultivation only trained men despite women having been in charge of rice cultivation for years. [43] This pattern continued in the larger parts of Africa with both government and foreign aid programmes offering credits, technologies and other assistance exclusively to men.[44] Apart from the selective training and skills development process, financial institutions continued to be biased towards men in their criteria of granting business capital until the recent years. In Zimbabwe, some banks required that a woman seeking capital for business had to have the backing of a male partner.[45] Thus, without the necessary economic infrastructure in much of rural Zimbabwe, women are automatically excluded from a wide option of formal economic opportunities. With limited access to opportunities in the formal economy, many of them have been left to find alternative livelihoods in the informal sector. Hilson *et al* claims that much of the informal economic activities that absorbs most of the excluded women such as artisanal mining is precariously dangerous, comprise of very low returns and yet manually demanding.[46] In hindsight, these are some of the infamous effects of modernisation that have exacerbated women's economic exclusion apart from the social obstacles that have enabled the situation. I now turn to discuss the socio-cultural

practices and how these impact on black African women particularly those who are still observant to culture and tradition.

2.2.3 Harmful socio-cultural practices

As humanity evolves, tradition and culture must also align with the needs of those it purports to serve. As a product of human creation, the two cannot remain static, and neither can they be applied with absolute universality to all because their subjects are from diverse backgrounds. However, although diverse, society can be unified by certain practices whether good or bad, due to among others, a common race, religious background, or geographical location. In the black African society these include the forced and early child marriages of young girls. The practice may be known by different names in different languages and countries, but the pattern is the same. It is rooted in the commodification of a girl child as a source of wealth. [47] A means by which poor families could navigate poverty by marrying her off to a rich man, often way older than her and against her consent for her family's financial or some other form of material gain. [48] In the past, this led to many baTonga parents prioritising domestic duty training for their girl children over formal education. It was believed to be a way of preparing them for marriage life as the latter and its associated career prospects had very little influence in their traditional day to day lives. For this reason, formal education was not really seen as a priority and neither was it considered a tool of empowerment that one would aggressively advocate for. This has shaped the way in which the traditional division of labour has been structured. With little to no competitive skills or knowledge to engage in the public space, women often fall prey to being relegated for domestic chores in the private space while men dominated the public civic space.[49]

With an established presence in the civic space men have mastered many skills and networks in many areas of life which gives them a competitive advantage over women. As a result, upon the introduction of progressive laws calling upon the incorporation of women in the public space the latter still find themselves discriminated against because the laws in place often do not address the influence of certain socio-cultural practices. A case in point, is the cultural inability of most black rural African women to address men especially in the public as it is considered a taboo.[50] In community engagement consultations for instance, many rural women find it challenging to put their points across in a space full of men.[51] Consequently, women's concerns have been concealed in collective terms such as the 'people', the 'community' and not really defined with much specificity such as childcare, maternity and so forth, as these relate directly to women. [52] Besides, the very fact that most women still believe that their marital status in a home can only be cemented by giving birth to a male child tends to be problematic. It has a psychological effect that relegates them to subservient roles in development matters even beyond the private space.[53] It affects their self-esteem, confidence and takes away the zeal to take charge of issues that are of interest to them. More so, it promotes a high level of male dominance even in places where men should not even be involved as well as cultivating a conducive environment for domestic violence and the abuse of women and children.

The above and many other gender based socio-cultural practices place a high amount of pressure and social expectations on the girl child/women at the expense of her personal interests and choices. The fact that she bears much of the shame as compared to her male partner during teenage pregnancy or attaining a child out of wedlock is problematic. As Beauvoir postulates, it reflects on how society is male oriented to function through the lens of a male person as the model or standard of measure for everything. [54] In that sense, instead of seeing her as a human being who is subject to any other factors that affect all human beings, a subhuman defined as 'the other sex' is created. [55] She has her own 'place' designed for her which she is expected to fit into it without question. [56]. Consequently, by depriving girls/women access to public platforms that enhance their leadership skills, their potential human capabilities are suspended. Without these, women lack the capacity and skill to change their discomforts which reinforces male domination and female subordination. Thus, until this circle is broken most women will remain entangled in a web of oppression which does not only negate their economic contribution but also slows down economic development.

3. Research Methodology; The study of Binga

This study was conducted by way of a qualitative research method. Data was collected from secondary sources mainly journal articles, government and non-governmental reports, books, among others. Due to scant resources to support an empirical study, secondary research was preferred because it is based on data sources that already exist. This gave the researcher an opportunity to explore and evaluate whether the available data still confirms the current circumstances in terms of the interwoven forms of disadvantage and inequality among the baTonga rural women and their society in general.

4. Research findings and Discussion.

Despite the tempting disposition to treat all women as a unified group, Anunobi contends that they often do not represent a monolithic cluster that has identical problems.[57] They come from diverse national backgrounds with different historical experiences and developmental levels within their countries.[58] This means that their needs,

interests and priorities also vary, however, regardless of their differences, their subordinate status often serves as a common denominator. [59] They are the least powerful and comprise mainly of the poorest population throughout the world. [60] Likewise, the baTonga rural women with their long-standing history of political and economic exclusion, both by the colonial and post-independence governments the majority of them find themselves in what Romany describes as a ‘pitiless zone where the different patriarchies meet’. [61] They are a tribe whose cultural underpinnings strongly reinforce a patriarchal tradition in almost all spheres of their lives. The belief that they are born naturally subordinate to men is culturally accepted and more often, this is expressed in their day to day traditional and religious beliefs. As a result, such beliefs infiltrate other sectors of their lives such as the education system, the market, and the workplace. This has rendered them subject to multiple and overlapping forms of inequality popularly protected in the name of culture or religion. In the following section I discuss the effects of the three cities of rural baTonga women’s struggles which are political and economic marginalisation as well as the harmful socio-cultural practices.

4.1 The political and economic exclusion of the baTonga people of Binga.

As the supreme law of the country, the Zimbabwean Constitution provides for the promotion and protection of gender equality. [62] Section 4.28 provides that all traditions, customs, and cultural practices that infringe on women’s rights should be deemed void. In theory, this means that the rights of women and their access to equal opportunities in politics, social, economic, and cultural spheres is guaranteed. By this, I suppose the legislature’s intention was to compel the state to ensure that gender balance and a fair representation and participation of women in society is protected. Yet, in practice this has not been the case particularly among the rural baTonga women. Their tribal and cultural orientation, educational background is among the many issues that continue to expose them to a myriad of challenges in many respects. Some of these emanate from their poorly documented history around their forced dislocation the Zambezi River banks.

Following the 1950s construction of the World Bank’s sponsored hydro-electric power dam, the baTonga people were politically, economically, and socially disempowered. According to Colson, Cumanzala and Mashingaidze, they lost their livestock and fertile land to pave way for the building of the Kariba dam. [63] Dependent on subsistence agriculture and small-scale animal husbandry, land was everything to them. [64] But without consultation from the then governmental departments, uncompensated and under forced dislocation, they lost their economic power to a project that they never consented to, later alone benefitted from. [65] Unlike in their former Zambezi Valley riverbanks, the land of resettlement was agriculturally unproductive with infertile soils, waterless and tsetse fly infested. [66] This meant that at their newly settled uplands, they had to adapt to new ways of survival such as growing drought resistant crops and surviving on the extremely minimal benefits of commercialised fishing and other tourist related activities under the monopoly of the white minority. [67]

There was no proper environmental or social and economic impact assessment conducted before the hasty relocations to the arid and animal infested upland plateaus, which forced many to fend for themselves. [68] As mothers, wives, nurturers, and other family care duties that women do, they were the most affected because some of the ‘new’ economic activities did not accommodate their domestic roles. [69] In the absence of meaningful benefits from the constructed hydro-power system, they needed to confront the chronic water shortages, threatened livelihoods through drought and wild animals as well as other scarce energy sources such as firewood. [70] Economic activities such as fishing, safaris, and national game parks as well as related opportunities began to be commercialised. Thus, to earn a decent living in any of them, the indigenous people required trading permits or licenses. [71] But, with a marginal influence in the country’s power relations and resource distribution networks, the indigenous baTonga people were restricted from accessing their natural resources. Besides, these opportunities were often more appealing to men as they were the readily available pool of prospective employees in subservient roles under the few wealth owners of the tourist companies in the region to the exclusion of the majority of women and those in rural areas in particular. Mashingaidze postulates that this situation persisted post-independence except that a few well-connected Shona and Ndebele people increasingly substituted white people as the major beneficiaries in the exploitation of Zambezi Valley’s natural wealth at the expense of the local people. [72] As a result, the untold suffering and oppression of the baTonga people and to a larger extent, rural women continued unabated to this day. [73]

Politics and the economy cannot be neatly separated or be discussed independently as they are mutually dependent on each other. For any economic development to successfully take off in any community the political environment must be permissive of such. Therefore, obscured in the above historic marginalisation, is the collective sense of political and economic exclusion of both the colonial and post-independence government to deprive the baTonga people of their basic human rights.[74] Today, the region still lacks proper transport and communication infrastructure, well equipped financial services such as banks, well-resourced health care and educational services, among others. [75] Although these affect both men and women, including non-Tonga speaking people in the region, rural women are the most affected as demonstrated in the section below.

5. Discussion of findings

5.1 Effects of the political and economic marginalisation on baTonga rural women

Among the multiple challenges caused by marginalisation in rural Binga District, access to quality formal education for the majority of children remains a big problem.[76] Given the fact that education can serve as a window through which young people can dream and visualise the future, for many young girls, the lack of modern infrastructure and services that speaks to their needs in a changing world, renders such to be of little use to many of them. With little exposure and limited career guidance options, chances of imagining life beyond their immediate circumstance become impossible. The prolonged economic melt-down has led to the few emerging role models to shun the villages for greener pastures in urban areas or neighbouring countries. This paints a bleak future for many 'un-exposed' young girls and women as they cannot see any other way out of their circumstances. This situation is aggravated by the lack of institutions of higher learning in the region. Binga District ranks top in Zimbabwe's provincial regions that lack institutions of higher learning such as Universities, technical colleges, nursing schools etc.[77] This makes efforts of bridging the gender gap very difficult as it reduces chances of women's economic empowerment. Thus, compounded by high competition in the few available institutions in neighbouring provinces, sometimes young people are forced to enrol in programmes that are irrelevant to their community's needs or their own personal career choices. For young girls/women this becomes a systematic barrier that hinders many of them from breaking out of poverty and forced and early child marriages. Importantly, it restricts them from obtaining skills that can enable them to empower other women in their communities in order to close the gender inequality gap. Consequently, changing the discomforts of such a nature becomes a pipeline dream as it dampens the hopes pegged upon those with potential to bring about change and in this case, it is the young girls.

In the health sector, the growing population and under resourced health care services puts strain on the already constrained public service facilities to offer specialised health care to women. As primary care givers living without a stable income or livelihood women are affected both physically and psychologically as they worry about their children's health care and other basic amenities of life. With a relatively high number of child headed homes due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, they often take up the responsibility of taking care of the deceased relatives' children. [78] This is besides the elderly, the disabled and other members of society who are supposed to be under the care or support of the government's social services departments. It is even more challenging now with the Covid-19 pandemic considering the burden that they already had prior to the deadly disease. Without access to safe and clean water, sanitation, and well-equipped health care services one wonders how rural women are expected to manage under the circumstances. In mitigating some of these challenges, some of them have participated in economic empowerment project initiatives albeit the efforts have also been without challenges. [79] Among these are transport and communication networks and platforms that can enable them to access markets for their products.[80]

As one of the highly marginalised districts, Binga District has poor road networks which become worse during the rainy seasons.[81] This limits the dissemination of information, slows down trade initiatives and relations and most of all, reduces the appetite for investments to create economic activities for both sexes. This qualifies as a gender issue because it is often women that are restricted in mobility due to their family commitments which do not always allow them to make impulsive decisions in terms of relocation as compared to men. Thus, if change is to come, it important that women's social and legal status improves to enable them to have greater influence on social, economic, and political issues related to their needs. One way of doing this is to start by addressing the day to day socio-cultural barriers that have been permitted to thrive for too long. In the next section I discuss how some of the socio-cultural practices have had a negative effect on baTonga rural women. .

5.2 Harmful Socio-cultural practices

The baTonga people have many socio-cultural practices that define them but in identifying those that are relevant to this study, it was important to take an objective position. According to Mumpande *et al*, [82] it is culturally accepted in the Tonga culture for a man to prioritise the welfare of his nieces and nephews because a child belongs to the maternal relatives. This allows the father to prioritise the needs of his sister's over his own children especially if the latter's children are male. Left with a double duty of care as though they were single mothers, many women in the baTonga culture used to and perhaps still do, witness their husbands taking care of their nieces and nephews. Although supportive of the other woman on one end, this custom also discriminates against other women (rightful dependents) on the other end. A male child was prioritised for formal education due to the prospects of him being able to take over the reins of the family in the future. It was different for a girl child for the fact that upon marriage her family's efforts would benefit her husband's family which would not be beneficial to them and therefore, warranted little support in investing in her education.

Another thing, the Tonga culture is very conservative in the way they show respect for one another. Socialisation between different sexes is prohibited and there is also an approved dress code for married women.[83] This affects interaction of boys and girls as they grow, leading to difficulties with teamwork at formal learning

institutions especially for children coming from backgrounds with limited socialisation exposure. [84] Without conducive platforms of socialisation girls miss opportunities to learn leadership skills as well as ways of standing up for themselves. Most importantly, it hinders openness about reproductive issues which expose many of them to teenage pregnancies because platforms of knowledge sharing are closed. Stereotypes around dress code also deprive girls of opportunities to learn how to express themselves emotionally and psychologically. Tight fitting clothes, pants, short skirts, or dresses are associated with women of loose morals.[85] Therefore, to be accepted by the standards of community, elderly women are compelled to put on *muceka and nduku* (dooke) as a sign of respect. This is also protected as part of their culture, '*tunsiansia twesu*' as they normally defend it meaning our tradition or way of doing things. [86] Based on the author's observations during her two years of rural temporal teaching, young girls feel compelled to wear skirts or dresses on top of appropriate sporting attire such as shorts during sporting activities. [87] While this may seem like just any other dress code issue, in a broader sense it actually speaks to the ability of girls/women to freely express themselves in a strictly disapproving and stereotyped society which affects their choices, confidence and self-esteem. The stigma associated with those that choose to break away from the culture and ethos of the community is unbearable for some such that many learn to live with discomfort just to be a fit in society.

In light of the above therefore, while humanity has a disposition to survive under various conditions, the extent of the survival and the quality of life is very important. The baTonga rural women may have survived many oppressive conditions for years and perhaps, to an extent of defending same in the name of tradition and culture. However, among them there could be some that find male domination dehumanising and belittling of their dignity as human beings. But because, the tradition has been in practise for years and most likely without ideological contestation, the majority of women may be uncomfortable challenging it against the human rights vision of gender equality. Obviously, looking at what women could possibly achieve in material terms and their well- being had they been given equal freedoms with men, it is clear that their capabilities are confined. Thus, drawing on Sen Amartya's capabilities approach, inequality should not be measured exclusively based on income terms.[88] This is because while income is crucial for making normative evaluations, there are some valuable things in life that are not always quantified in financial terms. As a result, the capabilities approach argues for the incorporation of real freedoms that people have to lead valuable lives based on their capabilities.[89] In that regard, the baTonga rural women should be able to undertake activities that bring meaning to their lives such as being politically active, being literate etc. To achieve this, politics, the economy and socio-cultural factors should be liberating for them to explore their capabilities because in the absence of such, the exercise of gender equality and other freedoms cannot be achieved. If it cannot be so for all women, at least to accommodate those that may want to live their lives otherwise. In the next section, I present possible recommendations that can be adopted towards supporting baTonga rural women in achieving this goal.

6. Recommendations

Many rural households in Sub-Saharan Africa are under the anchor of women. [90] They bear the higher portion of the burden of subsistence and reproduction of the family but sadly, much of the assumed roles and positions tend to expose them to extreme vulnerability as well.[91] Except for the differences in culture, religion, economic and political space, most of the rural baTonga women are not any different from the other women across rural Africa. They too, play a pivotal role in the raising of families and other manually demanding domestic duties that are typical of all underdeveloped rural settings. Their subservient position to men that has been permitted, accepted, and gone partially unchallenged for the larger part of their history and will take some time to unlearn. Therefore, to advance the cause for gender equality concerns such as marginalisation, culture and other oppressive traditions can never be left to evolve on their own without confrontation. Below are some of the identified interventions that can be adopted as recommendations.

- i) As a precursor cause to the major socio-economic challenges experienced by all baTonga people in the region, marginalisation must be tackled at all levels of government. A sincere acknowledgement of the historical and wrongful dislocation of the baTonga people by the government in power is necessary. This will create a platform for the apportionment of responsibility to allow those accountable to initiate appropriate redress. For rural women, this will create an opportunity for a proper recognition of identities that will allow them to be recognised in their own capacities rather than in collective terms. That way, specific challenges applicable to them will be identified allowing for appropriate measures of redress.
- ii) The majority of community empowerment projects in rural Binga District such as irrigation schemes in Kariangwe, Siabuwa, Bulawayo Kraal comprise of women. [92] It is recommended that the government facilitate the development of public service infrastructure and facilities. Financial institutions, transport and communication networks should be upgraded to meet the standards that enhance healthy economic trade relations in rural areas. Where it lacks capacity, partnerships with civil society organisations and the private sector operating in the region can be incentivised to and

- come on board and support women related economic empowerment activities.
- iii) More and well-equipped educational facilities at primary, secondary as well as higher learning institutions should be prioritised. At the centre of these institutions' vision must be the needs of their communities and gender issues, should be at the top of the list. Conscientizing gender equality at all levels and platforms of society will empower both men and women to be ambassadors of their own cultural, political, and economic needs. Very importantly, school governing bodies can create partnerships with former students to mentor the young girls and boys in their career choices.
 - iv) The legal framework aimed at gender transformation must not be a mere rhetoric by those with the political power and influence. The laws must be implemented accordingly, and justice must be seen to be done by everybody including the government itself. Where necessary, the introduction of the quota system to boost female representation and participation must be incorporated in national legislation and be implemented.
 - v) Harmful socio-cultural practises repugnant to the Constitution should be addressed decisively to protect vulnerable girls/women. Through the incorporation of a rights-based educational curriculum in schools, capacity building at local traditional leadership level, the government must establish specialised and well-equipped monitoring and evaluation institutional framework that is independently authorised to oversee compliance of these issues.
 - vi) As an arena of power, the political space must be democratic and supportive of the participation of rural baTonga women both at local and national level. The government should allocate the necessary resources required to achieve this goal.

Conclusion

While Zimbabwe may have shown commitment to protect the principles of gender equality by domesticating some of the international human rights instruments in its national laws, for the majority of rural baTonga women this has not translated into much human freedoms. Based on this study, it is clear that the goal of achieving gender equality in the region is still a pipeline dream that may never materialise in the near future for many. The major challenge lies in the complex nature of rural women's disadvantage which is compounded by multiple and overlapping cleavages of inequality ranging from culture and tradition, politics, and economic exclusion etc. Some of the challenges are within the concerned women's ability to change them, however, their day to day environment often does not allow for such change. Besides, learning a culture that will undo gender inequality in a patriarchally entrenched society may take a great amount of effort; a conversation and space which the majority of baTonga people may not be ready to enter and engage. Given the way women's struggles are interlocked, no single matrix of solution can be relied upon for all the challenges. Instead, a holistic assessment into the rural women's day to day issues will be appropriate starting with the political and economic marginalisation. This restricts access to quality formal education due to a lack of necessary resources and infrastructure. With limited quality education, women lack the necessary skills to enter public platforms of influence and as such, they are highly unable to change their socio-economic circumstances and later alone, to challenge patriarchal dominance. Moreover, without the political and economic power coupled with low levels of competitive skills, women cannot defend themselves against the gender biased traditional division of labour. Often, they are automatically relegated to unremunerated domestic duties such as raising families, taking care of households among others, and these deprive them of the time and means to meaningfully participate in other economic activities.

Marginalisation has not only side-lined baTonga women from participating in the civic space, it has also reinforced oppressive systems in the private sphere. The lack of accountability and deafening silence on their unlawful and forced removal from the Zambezi Riverbanks in the 1950s is problematic. None of the seating governments of the country has taken responsibility or initiatives to shade light on what could have happened to the World Bank's compensatory package that was meant for the victims. This is in consideration of the fact it is believed that their Zambian counterparts who suffered the same fate received their share although minimal. [93] As a result, the baTonga women's loss of economic and political power cannot only be imputed on the current issues without tracing back on their history. To build a future with a solid foundation, the historical wrongs must be corrected. The livelihoods that baTonga people lost due to the forced removals should be put back on the political and economic agenda of the Zimbabwean government. As indicated above, this will allow for a proper recognition of identities that will enable women to be appropriately recognised and rewarded. When women are democratically incorporated in national dialogues, a sense of belonging will be cultivated and rightfully so, this will enable them to mark their presence in matters of interest and freely assert their rights claims.

In conclusion therefore, the major areas of male dominance that have enhanced rural baTonga women's disadvantages lie in the harmful socio-cultural practises. These are practices aimed at suffocating progressive thinking and the development of women in the name of preserving a culture and heritage that has long lost its place in a human rights dispensation. Political and economic marginalisation based on tribal lines have also reversed the gains of political independence more than forty years after the country's freedom from white minority rule. The

slow and scattered pace at which some of Zimbabwe's provincial public infrastructure and services is developing is mind boggling. Some places within the same country are doing fairly well in terms of access to resources, road and transport networks as compared to Binga District. A practical example is the establishment of universities, teaching and nursing colleges among other skill development entities. This kind of selective development halts baTonga rural women's chances of progress in life which affects a constitutionally protected vision of a gender balanced society. Due to the above concerns therefore, the majority of rural baTonga women have not featured in the political space to represent themselves in matters that are of utmost interest especially at national level. This is because as the only foundation for progressive change, the education system may have opened doors for both genders, but it has done so within a closed culture and economy. One that is not open to liberal ideas and diversity particularly towards the advancement of women because it has failed to acknowledge and treat women's past socio-cultural, political, and economic disadvantages as a matter of urgency in modern developmental discourses. Therefore, if inclusive development is to be achieved, a new approach centred on gender responsive solutions should be considered.

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