

# Gender Dynamics in the Development of the Rural and Urban Informal Sector in Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

This paper argues that the development of the informal sector has been characterized by varied degrees of dynamics which have to a greater extent shaped the gender bargaining in societies, especially amongst the Zimbabwean men and women. Men and women in the urban and Rural Zimbabwe have articulated the socio-economic and challenges offered by the informal sector differently. It is as a result of the different articulations that Zimbabwe's informal sector has seen a much viable gendered nature of the sector as a whole. Thus this current write up seeks to carry out an evaluation of the gender dynamics of the rural and urban informal economy. Special emphasis will be on the evolutionary aspect of the development since the country's independence.

**Keywords:** Gender dynamics, development, informal sector, women, economy, rural, urban.

## 1. Conceptualizing the Informal Sector

Moser (1975) sees the informal sector as the urban poor living in the slums, or squatter settlement found in the cities of the developing countries. In line with this view the informal sector thus becomes a product of poverty and marginalization especially in urban settlements. In as much as this may sound true, it is however important to note that, in contemporary societies the informality is no longer centred on the urban poor alone as the affluent as well as rural communities have also joined the bandwagon of economic informality. Arguments are also prevalent which support the view that informal activities are no longer a question of marginality. With regards to this view, Hart's (1973) popular evaluations on the informal sector entrepreneurship concepts, as well as Cubit's (1995) views, result in one concluding that, the notion of the informal sector has become more of a seedbed of economic potential than a poverty trap. Hart (2001a) argues that the informal sector has indeed become recognised as a universal feature of the modern day economy, an observation which is synonymous with the Zimbabwean situation since 1980.

From the time Zimbabwe attained independence in 1980 there has been a significant increase in the informal economic activities both in the rural and urban areas. Since the 1990s there has been evidence of burgeoning informal back yard industries both in the low and high density suburbs of the country. The emergence of the various backyard and home industries in the affluent zone of the urban Zimbabwe in the 1990s has been a response to escalating costs of running businesses in council designated areas. Thus Paradza (1999) concludes that, unwillingness and failure to adhere to the demands of the enterprise registration under the Companies Act and Assessment of productivity through government taxation contributed immensely to the emergence of the informal sector in Zimbabwe.

For Chiu (2008) the informal sector is a low productivity backwater 'sponge' absorbing those who cannot find productive employment in formal urban activity. This view is in line with the evolutionist perspective cited by Hosier (1987) who concludes that the informal sector has the ability to grow and can thus be used in the alleviation of poverty. The World Bank according Hart (2001) has promoted the informal sector as it is mandated as a formal institution to push for the alleviation of world poverty.

Despite the above views, evolutionists regard the informal sector as a system of labour exploitation which will definitely increase the inequalities between the rich and the poor. Bromley (1997) observes that, economists and civil servants have been reluctant to acknowledge the informal sector activities as anything other than a 'parasitic' unproductive form of organised unemployment which has a detrimental effect on the formally regulated activities. According to Hart (1985) Marxists also believe that the informal sector proponents mystify the essential regressive and exploitative nature of this economic zone. The Marxists prefer to refer to the sector as 'petty commodity production'. In the Zimbabwean situation it is actually the capitalists who tend to benefit from the 'petty' commodity production as many a times huge company vehicles have been seen loading furniture from the home industries such as Glenview Seven for re-branding to suit their trade name.

Synonyms for the informal sector have been highlighted by Hart (1970) and Lobsy (2002) as the underground economy, black economy, unregulated economy. Guttman (1977) refers to the informal sector as the subterranean or unfathomable economy. All these expressions allude to the fact that the informal sector operates outside the scope of regulated country activities. In Zimbabwe the informal sector is largely referred to as the black market (Chirisa and Dube, 2009).

## **2. Gender and the Informal Sector**

Literature has shown that women constitute the majority of the workers in the informal sector in almost all the developing countries. According to research findings by UNRISID (2010) because of the large proportion of women in the informal sector there is often a tendency for them to be involved in erratic and often corrupt segments of the sector. The percentages of the female representation in the informal sector have been attributed to a variety of factors. Chen (2001) argues for the easy accessibility and ready availability of the sector for women as a major reason for the women's participation in the sector. Other factors forcing women into the informal sector are cultural norms, religious seclusion and illiteracy.

Research by Carr and Chen (2001) revealed that the connection between employment in the informal sector and being poor is often stronger amongst women than it is for men. According to the findings by Carr and Chen (2001), men participating in the informal sector tend to be over represented at the top segments of the sector while women are at the bottom tiers where they specialize in trading perishable items.

According to McCall (2005) as cited by Abdi, Cawo and Mohamed (2014), feminist scholars increasingly embrace informality as a way of locating women's and men's lives within the multi-layer and social structures in which they are embedded. Gender dynamics in the informal sector points to intricacies involved in the context of urban and informal sector development. Thus, McCall (2005) concluded that an evaluation of the gender dynamics is important as it helps in explaining the development and differences of the informal sector from a geographical perspective. It therefore becomes imperative to discuss the rural and urban informal sectors, appraising the gender dynamics that might have facilitated the emergence of the informal sector from 1980 to date.

## **3. Impact of the Neo-liberal Reforms on third world economies**

The promotions by the multilaterals such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) to liberalize production and markets in the southern regions were observed by Desai and Potter (2008) to have been extremely harmful to low income groups. The UNDP (2000) also argues that the economic participation in third world countries was becoming increasingly informal as a result of the after-effects of the adoption and failure of the SAPs. Countries such as Zimbabwe and Brazil have been cited as some of the countries that succumbed to the negative effects of the SAPs. Uni (2001) observes that the Economic Structural Adjustment Programmes have had more and more people entering the informal sector as a result of the failure by the formal companies to retain the multitudes of people losing jobs as a result of company closures due to lack of viability.

## **4. The impact of the ESAP on women**

Kinyanjui (2014) observes that ESAP had widespread impact on poverty and the most unfortunate outcome of the programme was that it exacerbated the suffering of women both in the rural and urban areas of the southern regions. As a strategy to lessen their suffering women and men resorted to economic informality. To give emphasis to the role of women in supplementing the family income through informal economic activities, Visvanathan (1999) highlights strategies which gathered women into solidarity groups for micro-financing taking cognizance of the fact that most women did not have any forms of collateral due to their societal status. Micro-financing has therefore been regarded as a strategy which is believed to have the propensity to increase women's self-reliance and economic empowerment that can lead to poverty alleviation.

## **5. The Informal Sector in Zimbabwe**

Time series data on Zimbabwe's informal sector has shown that the country's economy has become increasingly informal (Desai and Potter, 2008). Literature available on Zimbabwe's informal sector has shown that the increase has been an outcome of the recession and Neo Liberal economic restructuring adopted by the Zimbabwean government in an effort to align its policies with the dictates of the international community. ESAP has seen the government of Zimbabwe adopting the following policy documents: the Growth with Equity (1981), The Transitional National Development Plan (TNDP) (1981/82: 1984/5) and the Five year Development Plan (1986-1990). All these were an outcome of the realisation that the larger section of the Zimbabwean population relied on the informal sector. The over dependency on the informal sector is a result of what Hart (2005) refers to as the collapse of the state which has resulted in the whole economy becoming informal. The five year plan stated the intention by the government of Zimbabwe to formalize the informal sector by providing it with the necessary infrastructure and assistance in the hope of creating employment and alleviating poverty especially amongst women.

The main objective of helping women was explained by Brand (1982) who revealed that in the 1982 census approximately 90 000 women as compared to 20 000 men were in the informal sector. Mwalo and Batezat (1989) acknowledge the preponderance of women in the informal sector, although they emphasize the fact that women are often confined to a few economic activities associated with women's multiple gender roles. It is imperative to note that even in current times the statistics of female participation in the informal sector has

still maintained an upward trend.

Chirisa and Dube (2009) highlights that the informal economy in Zimbabwe has been in existence even in the colonial era during the 1950s when the 'Siyaso and Magaba' home industries were opened to carter for the blacks who could not be absorbed in the formal sector. It is however important to note that these home industries were mainly dominated by male activities as women then were confined to the rural areas as a result of the strict colonial rules especially the pass laws which deterred free movement into the urban areas. However, since the attainment of independence in 1980 the number of home industries have, according to Chirisa and Dube (2009) grown to include, Gazaland in Highfield and other unregulated areas such as those found in Glenview and Chitungwiza. Of importance to note, is the fact that the coming of independence also entailed the relaxation of certain laws which enabled a human influx into the urban areas.

Having been engrossed in a state of economic stagnation as a result of Neo Liberal Reforms the government of Zimbabwe adopted a dualistic economic development. However, the most unfortunate outcome as noted by Dube and Chirisa (2012) was that the government adopted polices such as Growth with Equity Development Plan and The Transitional National Plans which resulted in Government falling into financial deficit. It was from this Economic Structural Adjustment Polices (ESAP) that, the country was forced to embark on export led growth, cutting on public sector spending and devaluing of local currency. All these initiatives had an impact on the people's livelihood especially women as family care takers, eventually drawing them towards the informal sector.

Tibajuka (2005) observes that the government tried to rectify the damage caused by the adoption of ESAP by relaxing some of the colonial laws. She argues that the move was to incorporate the informal sector activities like flea markets, stalls and home industries into mainstream formal business activities. Despite having the good motive of assisting people affected by ESAP, Chirisa (2007; 2009) argues against the move as this had a detrimental effect on the formal economy. The current situation in Zimbabwe has the informal sector acting as what Kanyenze (2002) refers to as a buffer, for cyclical trends where it is providing a dumping ground for retrenched labour as well as being a waiting station for job seekers. However, despite the marked expansion in the sector, Desia and Potter (2008) conclude that with all that effort, Zimbabwe's informal sector has still failed to absorb all the people in need.

## **6. The Gendered Nature of the Informal Sector in Zimbabwe**

### **6.1 The Urban Gender Dynamics**

There has been the feminization of the cities as a result of women infiltrating into the areas formerly recognized as male domains. Also in areas like the Kaguvi Street in Harare, well known for selling automotive spare parts, women have also infiltrated the trade. This move is reinforced by Kinyanjui's (2014) observation on people (women) identifying livelihood opportunities and organizing collective action.

A closer analysis of the outcomes of ESAP reveals a new dimension of gender inequalities amongst the Zimbabwean rural and urban dwellers. According to Chesley (2011) the economic crunch and shifts resulted in pushing couples into gender atypical work and family relations. In most cases the gender dynamics become evident where women who previously had been deterred by cultural practices to engage in cross boarder economic activities started migrating to greener pastures, leaving men to look after families. Chelsey (2011) emphatically stresses that the previously, formally employed fathers, become 'at home' fathers while their women engaged in the informal economic activity to sustain the family.

The above changes save to counteract the traditional perception and gender relations in Zimbabwe which have since time immemorial been too patriarchal. The Zimbabwean state has had an idealised image of men as bread winners, thus the household heads were anchored in the gender prescriptions. From a gender dynamics perspective this outcome also becomes important as it has visibly resulted in shifts in family arrangements which promote a change towards gender equality.

In the early 1990's domestic violence in Zimbabwe was highly characterised by feuds between couples where women who would have become cross boarder traders faced challenges of being demeaned and perceived as socially deviant. However the turn of events as a result of economic hardships factored in new gender dynamics where the men's demolished economic positions has in actual fact led them to becoming less authoritative and understanding to the importance of women participating in the informal sector economy.

Premised on the negative behavioural tendencies of some female traders, the development of the informal sector may to a greater extent be perceived with a negative eye given the fact that some of the female participants in the informal sector economy adopted behavioural tendencies which often clashed with culturally prescribed norms and values. This view has been emphasized by Boyle and Ali (2005) who conclude that the interactions women have during cross boarder trading often challenge the patriarchal gender arrangements in the Zimbabwean African tradition. Boyle and Ali (2005) observe that, migrant acculturation theories are quite applicable to the urban migrant as well. This has also been observed to be true of the Zimbabwean migrant situation. A lot of women who migrated into the urban areas often come into contact with new avenues and

opportunities as well as new institutions, which had a bearing on the new urban culture informing changes on individual personalities as well as them becoming acculturated thus compromising the patriarchal status of the Zimbabwean men.

Shifting material conditions have been observed by Abid (2014) to affect people's normative gender arrangements. Men construe challenges to their breadwinner roles as challenges to Patriarchy. Abid (2014) argues that women's operations in the informal sector have been perceived as a threat to patriarchy. This has been observed in the Zimbabwean informal sector male-female relationships, where men especially in the early 1980s and mid 1990s tended to frustrate women's endeavours to migrate even for short periods because of their insecurities. Thus the gender dynamics at this point and time favoured the male decision making position despite the fact that it was the women who suffered the most when the family livelihoods were threatened.

In the worst case scenarios, where women succeeded to engage in cross boarder trading, they often had their fruits fearlessly squandered by men. For instance Seabrook (2007) observes that due to the impact of being unemployed, there has been the profligacy and idleness of the poor 'men'. In the Zimbabwe context, this situation has been rife since 1980, and especially after the 2008 economic crunch, the Zimbabwean men have become the improvident poor. According to Seabrook (2007) such outcomes can be evidenced by prevalence of gangs of men who have become typically addicted to drink and have an extremely high propensity towards criminality. A transit walk in the high density suburbs of Harare would depict a clear picture of informality, where men are inclined to wasting hard earned money on immediate comforts rather than saving their scanty income for important purpose. The results have often pointed to complete immersion of women into the informal sector to cater for their needs as well as those of their children.

Women informal traders have found it difficult to legitimise their economic activities as compared to their male counterparts in Zimbabwe's urban lives. They have often encountered what Desai and Potter (2008) refers to as prohibitive costs and convoluted bureaucratic procedures, which have usually disbanded them from legalising their activities through acquiring hawker's licenses.

Observation of what has been happening in Harare's informal sector serves to reinforce Rai (2008)'s view on how female vendors are often harassed by municipal police due to their failure to subscribe to the 'petty' corruption which by any standards has become endemic in Zimbabwe's informal sector. Despite the fact that both men and women face the same challenges of having to pay bribes to the police, the gender dynamism became skewed towards women because of the inferior material they trade which may not fetch them much to adhere to the bribes subjecting them to more police harassment.

With reference to Zimbabwe's urban informality, women have faced a number of constraints as compared to their male counterparts. Desai and Potter (2008) argue that the saturation of the informal sector is often argued to have negatively impacted on women. In line with this view, Desai and Potter (2008) allude to lack of working capital through limited access to mainstream financial institutions, as well as concentration in high competitive low income markets like vegetable vending. Desai and Potter (2008) has concluded that, aside from women's heavy representation in the informal sector, their limited skills and resources confine them to the lowest tiers of informal activities which is very typical of the Zimbabwean informal sector situation where women are concentrated in what Mwalo and Batezat (1989) refer to as the 'low circuit' economic activities that are labour intensive and have very little dependence on the overhead capital.

## **6.2 Rural Gender Dynamics of Zimbabwe's Informal Sector.**

Culturally it is a known fact that Zimbabwean women in the rural areas suffer from deprived status and often endure long periods of subjection to older women and men. It is a result of such dynamics that most young and disadvantaged women in rural Zimbabwe have seen the urban areas as an escape from subordination. Research findings by Rai (2008) conclude that the urban centres often become free areas to be independent and to get away from the rule of the people at home. For most women who migrate to the urban areas they are ensured of earning money, lodging and acquiring property regardless of sex, seniority or marital status. Access to such material goods by women as a result of engaging in informal activities, informs the changing nature of resource ownership. Such developments often end up challenging the women's inferior rural status which since time immemorial had been ascribed to them. Thus under such circumstances the gender dynamics in the informal sector become apparent.

In the 1980s; it was highly characteristic for Zimbabwe's communal system to have been biased towards men. The pattern of land holding often resulted in men owning and controlling considerable proportion of total land while the female counterparts have had very little hope of any importance in their lives. This has been emphasized by Rai (2008) who observes that under the communal land tenure system women cannot inherit land although widows may at times retain the use of their deceased husband's field as de-facto household heads. In some cases transfer of land to unmarried women e.g. daughters with illegitimate children was frowned upon by the cultural authorities. Therefore, one may conclude that Zimbabwe as a state has been found wanting in the area of social transformation despite policies adopted such as the Land Reform Programme (LRP). Chingarande

(2000) concludes that the LRP in itself did not eliminate the exploitation of women; neither did it create greater equity based on egalitarian ethics. It is therefore a result of such unfair treatment that urban areas and informal sector employment become secure zones for the vulnerable rural woman in particular.

Another striking feature of Zimbabwe's rural agrarian economy after independence has been, according to Chingarande (2000), the relative scarcity of cultivable land which impacted negatively on women. Women were systematically denied access and control of the land resources due to the patriarchal tendencies of maintaining male status quo and exacting authority over women. With very little hope of improvement in their lives, women opted to migrate into the urban areas, where hawking became a way of life. Rai (2008) refers to the business of hawking as extremely gendered. Amongst the city traders, it is the women who carry out the actual selling of goods while men act as suppliers who travel to various destinations to source for an assortment of trading commodities. This view is also in line with ILO's (2000) conclusion that women spectrum ranges from self-employment, unpaid family labour street vending to collection of junk for recycling.

For those who despite the economic hardship choose to stay put in the rural areas, they have joined informal sector through the help of Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs). According to Seabroak (2002) NGOs have come up with income generating schemes especially for women creating a division between men and women. The period starting from 2000 to date most Zimbabwean rural areas have seen an increase in the extension of micro-credit schemes especially to groups of women who are often excluded from the formal banking system. This has seen the emergence of women organisations such as the Indigenous Business Women's Organization (IBWO) as well as other micro finance credit schemes all meant to assist women to develop their entrepreneurial schemes.

It is also important to note that the activities in the informal sector have adopted a new twist in contemporary times as has been witnessed by the two way movement of the informal actors from the rural to urban and urban to rural respectively. Desia and Potter (2005) illustrate the possibilities that the human flows can work either direction in the rural and urban informal sector. For instance the 2008 Zimbabwe economic meltdown witnessed multitudes of both men and women travelling to and from the urban and rural areas in search of staple food for trading.

Despite the challenges of the informal sector, the gender dynamics that become apparent are that both rural and urban women have often emerged from the informal sector participation empowered. Moser (2001) supports the above view by observing that women invented new ways of making money for their families to survive through aggressively participating in the informal sector. Again for Moser (2001) women as a category of informal actors, often travel over long distances where they have developed commercial networks e.g. Women's Round Table in Zimbabwe which has seen women flying to faraway places such as China, Dubai etc to acquire trading commodities. Kinyanjui (2004) also supports the view by Moser by acknowledging that through the informal sector activities women just like men can now travel across borders and this morbidity has been transformative and liberating for women thus bringing about an important gender dynamic in the Zimbabwe context which is quite contrary to the patriarchal tendencies of female subordination and confinement to the private sphere.

## 7. Conclusion

The write up has shown that the Zimbabwe's informal sector has been progressing at an alarming rate since 1980. This has had both positive and negative impacts as shown by the emergence of gender dynamics which from a cultural perspective have the impact of undermining the patriarchal status quo hence compromising the prevalent Zimbabwean power relations. However on the other hand the development of the sector has been applauded for having the positive results of having women empowered in their own right to the extent that they have been able to live sustainable livelihoods. Thus one can conclude that indeed the development of the informal sector has been influential in the emergence of varied gender dynamics.

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