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# About the Journal

## JOURNAL PURPOSE

The purpose of the *Ngenani - Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University Journal of Community Engagement and Societal Transformation Review and Advancement*, is to provide a forum for community engagement and outreach.

## CONTRIBUTION AND READERSHIP

Sociologists, demographers, psychologists, development experts, planners, social workers, social engineers and economists, among others whose focus is on community development.

## JOURNAL SPECIFICATIONS

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## SCOPE AND FOCUS

The journal is a forum for the discussion of ideas, scholarly opinions and case studies of community outreach and engagement. Communities are both defined in terms of people found in a given locale and defined cohorts, like the children, the youth, the elderly and those living with a disability. The strongest view is that getting to know each community or sub-community is a function of their deliberate participation in matters affecting them by the community itself. The journal is produced bi-annually.

# Guidelines for Scholars for the Journal

Articles must be original contributions, not previously published and should not be under consideration for publishing elsewhere.

**Manuscript Submission:** Articles submitted to the *Ngenani - Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University Journal of Community Engagement and Societal Transformation* are reviewed using the double-blind peer review system. The author's name(s) must not be included in the main text or running heads and footers.

**A total number of words:** 5000-7000 words and set in 12-point font size width with 1.5 line spacing.

**Language:** British/UK English

**Title:** must capture the gist and scope of the article

**Names of scholars:** beginning with the first name and ending with the surname

**Affiliation of scholars:** must be footnoted, showing the department and institution or organisation.

**Abstract:** must be 200 words

**Keywords:** must be five or six containing words that are not in the title

**Body:** Where the scholars are more than three, use *et al.*,

Italicise *et al.*, *ibid.*, words that are not English, not names of people or organisations, etc. When you use several scholars confirming the same point, state the point and bracket them in one bracket and ascending order of dates and alphabetically separated by semi-colon e.g. (Falkenmark, 1989, 1990; Reddy, 2002; Dagdeviren and Robertson, 2011; Jacobsen *et al.*, 2012).

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# WIDOWS, WIDOWHOOD AND SUSTAINABLE LAND USE IN THE POST LAND REFORM ERA IN IN ZIMBABWE: CASE FOR THE MUSHANDIKE SMALLHOLDER IRRIGATION SCHEME EXCEPTIONALISM

KWASHIRAI ZVOKUOMBAI

## Abstract

*There is overwhelming evidence of the poverty-widow nexus in agrarian settings, with widows wearing, as it were, the 'face of poverty'. This study critically examines the sustainable land use through a gaze at widows' lived experiences and realities within the context of land reform in an irrigation scheme whose 'exceptional circumstances' remains a notable socio-economic outcome of the Zimbabwean land reform. Deploying the narrative inquiry as the anchor of data generation within the broad qualitative research design, guided by the eco-feminist lens, the study brings to the fore the cultural, political and economic circumstances in which women navigated their spaces and eventually broke out of the 'vicious circle of poverty'. The exceptional circumstances of widow farmers represent the treacherous but sustainable journey by those in the margins as they pursue sustainable food security and change. The study argues that sustainable transformation linked to women's experience of working on small piece of land was through support from adult 'children' through remittances, support from feminist civic organisation and the enabling political environment. As an outcome, widows in Mushandike Resettlement Scheme, become key agricultural producers who sustainably supply both local and urban markets with their products and build modern houses with electricity, water and sewage reticulation systems.*

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**Keywords:** *widowhood, land reform, inheritance, resettlement scheme, feminism.*

## INTRODUCTION

Evidence of the widow-poverty nexus in agrarian settings is overwhelming with widows and other women wearing the 'face of poverty' as echoed by the then African Union Commission Chair Dr Nkosazana Zuma at the Catholic Women's Union in South Africa ([www.africanews.com](http://www.africanews.com)). The study critically examines widows' lives within the context of land reform in the Mushandike Small-Scale Irrigation Resettlement Scheme whose 'exceptional circumstances' was a notable socio-economic outcome of the post-independence agrarian transformation in Zimbabwe. The research examines the cultural, economic and political circumstances women go through as they irk a livelihood in resettled spaces. The article is organised as follows; the first part focuses and provides the historical background to women and land in Zimbabwe and the theoretical and methodological guidelines for the study. The second part of the article delves into data presentation and analysis within the parameters of the thematic analysis that reveal the exceptional circumstances. In doing so, the study satisfies the main objective of establishing how widows navigated the socio-cultural, economic and political barriers to be outstanding farmers in an irrigation project.

### THE GENDERED LAND REFORM, A HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR ZIMBABWE

In the traditional Zimbabwean context, land was governed by customary laws on the basis of patriarchal principles, in which women had little control over it (Boserup, 1989; Bourdillon, 1987). Women would only access land through their husbands, fathers and brothers and women would sometimes be allocated small pieces of land called '*tseu*' the Shona concept of 'a woman's plot' for cultivating small grains like ground nuts (Gaidzanwa, 1994). With regard to the patriarchal land management in the traditional setting, Schmidt (1992) argues that

although there was element of egalitarianism in that model of land administration, the minimal 'gender fairness' was eroded by the introduction of colonial policies that were based on the Victorian gender philosophy. Thus, in a way colonialism contributed to a paradigm shattering in the gendered land relations that worsened and diminished women's access to it (Alexander, 2003). Colonialism intensified women's dependence on men especially with the introduction of the industrial cash economy in which men would seek employment in firms (Schmidt, 1992) while women provided labour on farmland. Therefore, by the time Zimbabwe gained political independence in 1980, women's land rights had already been compromised more than they were in pre-colonial times.

Literature on the Zimbabwean land reform suggests that the 'land question' has been at the centre of conflicts and struggles (Scoones *et al.*, 2010; Scoones, 2014 and Pilosof, 2012). Gaidzanwa (2011) argues that whilst the land issue attracted extensive scholarship, little focus was given to women's land rights and land ownership, including by policy makers. This position has been demonstrated by the silence of the initial land policies on women's land rights in the Land Commission of 1894, the Morris Carter Commission of 1925, the Land Apportionment Act of 1930, the Land Tenure Act of 1930 and the Land Husbandry Act of 1951 (Palmer 1977, Cheater 1987). The study therefore argues that while literature (Gaidzanwa, 2004, 2011, Alexander, 2006 Cheater, 1987; Mutopo, 2011; Chingarande, 2012; Matondi, 2012, Moore, 2005), show that women's status changed for the better in the post-colonial era, the cultural framework continues to perpetuate similar skewed land ownership patterns. The cited studies based their conclusions on statistics with less reliance on qualitative data that capture women's lived experiences. Thus, the write up sought to fill the gap by making women the fulcrum of data generation and knowledge production.



## **THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

The investigation derived its theoretical 'lenses' from the feminist perspective, the African feminist framework to explain widows' circumstances in resettlement farms. The argument raised here is that African feminism is best attuned to explain African women's experiences in the context of African land reform. African feminism is a brand of Afrocentric theories derived from Asante (2007) and Mazama (2001) frameworks centred on analysing and valuing of African and representing Africans from an African worldview. African feminism propagated by many African scholars is an offshoot of Afrocentricity theory of social changes Asante (2007) in which remedies for the African 'dislocation' come from African solutions (Asante, *ibid.*). Therefore, as an off shot of the Afro-centricity theory, the African feminist theoretical framework is best positioned to appreciate how and why women in the Mushandike irrigation project negotiated the cultural, social economic and political terrain not only to become land owners but exceptional small holder plot users in a sustainable manner. Therefore, tapping into women's lived experiences in land use the study to access valuable insights about widowhood, challenges and opportunities for women farmers. By grounding this study in women's lived experiences in Mushandike irrigation in Masvingo rural, the study produced sociological knowledge and insights that contribute to the growth of the Afrocentricity feminist paradigm that is an alternative and a critique to western feminisms (Mohanty, 1984).

## **STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

The study deployed the qualitative research design because it is best attuned and positioned to explore and give thick descriptions and portray an accurate socio-cultural, economic and political stand point of women in the context of land ownership. The qualitative approach speaks to phenomenological inquiries that examines human experiences through descriptions provided by people involved, that in this study were the 'lived experiences' (Chisaka, 2013). To get the in-

depth insights of women's lives in the irrigation scheme, the study utilised the narrative inquiry as the centrality of data generation within the qualitative research framework. The use of the narrative inquiry meant that the research participants narrated their life stories while the researcher 'explored that narrative and records it sometimes verbatim' (Marshall and Rossman, 2011, 153). The life stories gave in-depth life histories allowing participants to narrate and re-living their experiences. The deployment of the narrative inquiry as the data generation framework was based on the fact that traditional epistemologies exclude women from being agents of knowledge production. Thus, in Mushandike, the field work was centred on recording women's narratives and life stories on how they became land owners and land utilisation. The research participants were therefore targeted using purposive sampling technique that allowed for the interview of ten women as interlocutors and agents of knowledge production and three key participants.

#### **INSIDE WOMEN'S NARRATIVES IN RESETTLED AREAS**

The following narrative reflects on the practicality of women's land ownership and use, the challenges and opportunities they encountered, hence, the widows' narratives was an opportunity to re-live their lives and reveal some of the experiences for knowledge production. The extracts reflect on the inheritance rules, explore strategies deployed by widows to circumvent dispossession and how women in the small-scale irrigation plots led far better 'modest' lives than those in the traditional non-irrigation resettlement areas. The write-up identifies the widows through the age criterion title of 'Mbuya' the Shona term that denote an elderly woman in conjunction with pseudonyms for the up-hold of the ethical principle of confidentiality.

Case One: Mbuya Chinyama had become a sole land owner in Mushandike Irrigation Scheme after the husband had passed away.

Upon realising that she could lose her land through inheritance politics in the family, she lobbied one of her aunties to become the 'female husband' and neutralise the land dispossession drive from the males. She narrates:

Although this position was contested by some males of the extended family, my position sailed through because of the support from aunt. However, my circumstances did not improve until my children became adults such that sustainably utilised the plot to produce enough for consumption and sale. We went into lucrative cotton production and this marked a turning point into my families live. Since we relied on irrigation for farming, we made sure that in a year with three farming seasons, one would be devoted to cotton only on the whole land.

This was a unique case of widow inheritance by another female, a strategy deployed in line with the acceptable cultural norms of inheritance but in this context used to protect widows' land and property. The cultural practice of honorary husband is an acceptable practice in many African communities in which the 'daughters of the lineage' exert power and control in family inheritance politics (Izumi (1999: 78). This Zimbabwean case has similarities and differences with the Igbo culture of Nigeria in which the aunt exercise both tyrannical and protective roles over the surviving spouse (Oyeronke, 2000).

Case two of Mbuya Mawere: This was a similar inheritance case in which the widow was inherited by her young son. A son became an 'honorary husband' to his mother a similar arrangement with that of the female husband. This was a tactical act of balancing acceptable cultural practices and her personal interests of keeping land to herself. The interview day was a Wednesday that is regarded as *chisi* ancestral rest day. She highlighted that in the Mushandike irrigation, *chisi* day or Sunday may not be strictly be observe as in non-irrigation areas because the turn of the whole village to receive irrigation water per week may coincide with any day. Thus, *chisi* did not really matter for farmers. Regarding to life story in the small holder irrigation scheme, she said:

After the death of my husband, all evidence was there that I was going to either be dispossessed of my property and return to my natal home or be inherited to become second or third wife to one of my late husband's brothers. I hatched a plan with my mother-in-law that my teenage son becomes my 'husband' and household head in accordance to the customs of the land. Surely this saved me from losing my land and the boy really became an influential household head as he matured every day. We managed to buy cattle and modernised our homestead using proceeds from the irrigation plot.

As already explained, from an Afrocentric-negotiation theory, Izumi (1999), further argues that women's owning of land in traditional agrarian settings depend on their capacity to negotiate, manipulate rules and straddle patriarchal institutions through their manoeuvres. An aunt or a son becoming an honorary husband was tokenistic in which the widow continued to manage her affairs while her land was protected from patriarchal predatory (Tamale, 2011).

Case three of Mbuya Magombo: The following two narratives show the connections between women's land inheritance and the vulnerabilities brought by HIV&AIDS to the surviving widows. Mbuya Magombo's narrative demonstrates confusion that communities had about HIV&AIDS in the early phase of the pandemic and how it impacted her life in the resettlement area of Mushandike. In her own words:

My first husband passed away in 1998 and as per tradition and customs the family council made a decision that I was to be inherited by my late husband's elder brother. His original wife did not like and started accusing me of having caused the death of husband through witchcraft. The second husband passed away once more and widowhood followed me again but this time with accusations of being a witch.

With only one son from her first marriage, she remained on her land and shared the space with her newly married son. The son equally died in a car accident in South Africa when he went to look for employment and left a young wife for a widow, hence, the

widowhood of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. These successive death strengthened the suspicion of witchcraft and these women were deemed to be 'untouchables' in terms of inheritance due to witchcraft. Mbuya Magombo was accused of having caused the death of all these men including her son who died in a car accident reflecting on the lack of knowledge of HIV&AIDS. Hall and Mpedziswa (1995) argue that the 1990s was an era of denial and ignorance of the existence of HIV&AIDS. People believed that it was a problem affecting 'prostitutes' in urban settings.

Lack of knowledge of HIV&AIDS issues was very high in the resettlement areas too and in case of Mbuya Magombo Similar positions were raised by the FAO (2006) report in which women in the farms who would be accused of witchcraft after the death of the husband due to HIV&AIDS. The accusations were sometimes unfounded, sometimes coming from lack of knowledge and used to justify dispossessing the widow of her land (Zvokuomba, 2018). Misconceptions about HIV&AIDS and witchcraft accusations on parties involved in inheritance matters as noted in the Mushandike Irrigation Scheme resemble those in Malawi and Uganda as observe by Okuro (2007) respectively in which witchcraft was used as cultural mechanism to outdo each other in inheritance matters.

In Mushandike, Mbuya Magombo experienced double widowhood as she lost her original husband and the second husband through HIV&AIDS and found herself sharing a life with widowed daughter-in-law. However, despite all these setbacks, she did not only retain her land and other property but managed socially marginalisation through utilising her land successfully with her daughter-in-law to become key suppliers of fresh horticultural products to the Masvingo market and beyond. By the time of the field visit, informal conversations with other members of the community indicated that the two widows were regarded as '*varume chaivo*' (men on their own right) on the basis of

their great exploits in agricultural production. Mbuya Magombo had shared that upon her death, her daughter-in-law was to take over the ownership of the land as she was not only capable of sustainably managing the land but was a face of women emancipation in farms.

Case four and five: Mbuya Gondo who was in the 'league' of the oldest women in the resettlement scheme aged 78 at the time of data collection in 2017 had this to say about her life in Mushandike Irrigation Scheme: The following is her narration:

I fell into widowhood and eventually become the sole owner of this land after my husband passed away. But for some reason, I did not experience any difficulties from my in-laws. Everyone felt I was ok with my children on the land. My circumstances took a turning point when one of my children became an academic in South Africa and supported my entrepreneurial agricultural activities here.

The late Mr Gondo was a school teacher in the same surroundings and had eventually resettled in village 15 just next to the Masvingo-Beitbridge Road near Bhuka Rural Business Centre. Through remittance from her children Mbuya Gondo managed to mechanise her agriculture through purchase of a tractor, drilled a borehole for complementing the communal and public irrigation system that was sometimes compromised by low water levels in the dam and modernised her homestead by electrifying, installing water and sewage reticulation systems. Because of working the land despite her age, Mbuya Gondo became an example of how experience, hard work, support from adult children and utilisation of irrigation services as common good transformed rural life. Much of the field work in the plot was done by casual workers to qualify what Bernstein (2010) and Cousin (2013) regard as accumulation from . She further explained:

My children have helped me drill a borehole at the home and set up a septic tank that we have in-build toilet system. My child, I thank God for the land reform because it contributed to positive transformation of my life. All these things came because I am working on this land

While women did acquire land in their own in the early days of the land reform, those who managed to get it through inheritance especially in the irrigations proved that 'women were the backbone of food security' in concurrence with (FAO 2006). The narratives support the view that when women have access and control over land, they utilise it to the maximum and improve the stand of life of the community.

Corroboration narratives also came from Mbuya Havazvidi who had lost her husband too. She managed to improve her life after the death of her husband Mr Havazvidi who used to work in the Department of Lands, hence, the capacity to secure land. She said:

It was easy for us to get land in the irrigations because of my husband's position in the Department responsible for land reform. However, he passed away before we were established in the farming business in the resettlements; children were still young and school going. In terms of land inheritance, I did not experience problems because the Department of Rural Development helped me to have become a bona fide land owner as a surviving spouse of their former employee

Similar to the case of Mbuya Gondo, Mbuya Havazvidi's success were linked to a number factors including the fact that the husband used to work in the Department of Rural Development where land allocations were done. As such, she was located at a favourable space in terms of receiving flow of water through the irrigation system, she received a pension from government, her adult children equally helped her financially, materially and in managing the agricultural enterprise. The cases demonstrated many fundamental issues in the gendered land reform, that is, the influence of the husbands who were professional in getting the prime land not only in the irrigated fields but near the main road strategically good for marketing. The enhanced performance of widow farmers enjoyed support from the late husband's pensions and remittance from adult 'children' working in urban areas. This case also demonstrated that not only situations of managing the estate of the deceased husband in the old resettlements had problems of

inheritance; some families did not have such an issue. Mbuya Havazvid's life story in the farms and that of many others particularly in the irrigation sector showed that despite the advancement in age, these widows were doing well in terms agricultural productivity and general upgrade of standard of rural life as exhibited by the type houses built, the use of both conventional and solar electricity and the installation of water-sewage reticulation system. With these they qualified to be part of the rural 'elite' despite the fact that they were widows.

Case six: Widowhood and political patronage. Mbuya Chikuni born in the early 1950s also fell into widowhood due to death of a husband, however, the husband died when she was still young that attracted much completion for wife inheritance. Relatives of the late husband felt that it was not prudent to have a young daughter-in-law by herself in unfamiliar territories in the resettlement areas away from the social networks in the original home area that provided social capital. Pressure was that she returns to the village of origin and give way for males to take small-holder plot under irrigation in Mushandike. Her narration flows as follows:

I joined the ruling party ZANU-PF Women's League wing at cell level and became the organising secretary. I eventually rose to become a Councillor hence I went off the hook of the inheritance matrix. Politically, family members who wanted to dispossess me of my land could not dare engage the ruling party on this matter. Because I managed to retain my farm, my life has transformed so much that I managed to send children to school, one is a police officer another one is a teacher and we have built modest houses just like others in the resettlement. Although other children failed 'O' Level, they are benefiting from farming here at home. I am now a Ward Councillor here.

'Kugara nhaka' remains a practiced cultural practice in Zimbabwe today although with variations because it has patriarchal dividend (Schmidt, 1992). Mbuya Chikuni's narrative revealed that although she experienced difficulties and marginalisation from males in the village



in the early phase of life in the resettlement, the situation had changed as the community now respected her because of her resilience and involvement in political party politics that qualified to be an example of deployment of politics of patronage. As the community started to respect her political and public offices, she managed to handle her life including the farming enterprise productively. As such she was also elected to be part of the local School Development Association (SDA). She talked passionately about women taking their stand in politics to progress. This narrative helped the study to conclude that traditions and customs that marginalise women were still prevalent in society but women in Mushandike Irrigation Scheme negotiated their way out of the problems and deployed the same cultural, law and political mechanisms to protect their interests. Participation in party politics became grassroots mechanisms and political capital for survival regarded by Bernstein (2010) as partisan accumulation. This narrative of a woman getting land through negotiations. As such, Mbuya Chikuni received agricultural inputs every year they were distributed to rural farmers in the web of political party patronage system.

Case seven: A widow takes back her land. Mbuya Mhute had her small-holder farm taken in Mushandike after the death of her husband when she was a young widow. The land was taken by a brother to the deceased husband in accordance to the cultural and traditional laws. Like in the previous case, the family council agreed that a young widow she be relieved from family land as could remarry. This was done to avoid family land eventually ending up in the custody of another man of a different lineage. Therefore, having it taken by the brother was in a way keeping the land within the family circle. However, the surviving spouse whose wishes and interests were not consulted did not agree to the arrangement but could not do anything. She went back to her natal home with her children leaving her late husband's brother on the land until at some time when the children were grown up. The children together with the mother made a follow

up in government offices about the estate of their departed father and husband. At some point after attending a 'Women and Land Ownership' workshop organised by a non-governmental organisation that dealt with women's rights and other consultations with the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Mbuya Mhute approached the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement and was assisted to get back her land in line with the country's laws of the country pertaining to land inheritance. In the context of this study, this was one of the exceptional cases that depicted the vulnerability of widows after their spouses pass on in rural communities.

It is evidence of lack of knowledge of the law that govern land governance in agrarian settings. In that mired mix of lack of knowledge, patriarchy takes advantage and makes decisions that favour men and disproportionately disempowers women. It also shows the important responsibility and role of children in protection of their widowed mother beyond financial and material support. During the field visits to Mushandike Irrigation Scheme, Mbuya Mhute and her family were busy rebuilding their livelihoods on the land they had taken back. The narrative made land mark on land inheritance management for the Department of Lands and the Mushandike community at large. Sustainable land management in resettlement areas has to be consultative of parties convened and involvement of the respective government departments for the upholding of the laws and policies.

#### **SHIFT PARADIGM AND SUSTAINABLE SMALL HOLDER FARMS MANAGEMENT**

The article has shown exceptionality of widowhood in Mushandike Irrigation Scheme, how they manoeuvred the cultural political social and economic terrain to be farmers to note. It is a representation of the paradigm shift in women's lives in smallholder farms under irrigation. Zvokuomba (2018) discusses about a shift to '*kuma irrigation kubasa*'

translated to 'farming in the irrigation plots is' business' however, in this context, being practiced by widows despite the marginalisation. The origins of the '*kuma irrigation kubasa*' came from the 1980s Government of Zimbabwe (1982) Transition National Development Plan on land redistribution, that advocated that land in small holder irrigation plots was to be allocated to full-time farmers, not part timers who engaged to some form of employment elsewhere in urban areas. Therefore, owning a plot under irrigation was viewed as a form of employment. On the basis of the mantra, widows and the wide inheritance matrix was being tested and changed to accommodate and allow women farm owners tearing down the customs and traditions of male leadership on governance under the theory of moral economy (Mauritz, 2014) .

The irrigation system in Mushandike also introduced a new normal of farming all year round in an area characterised by low rainfall and droughts in agro-region four. Through the process of land inheritance, women became land owners and became active participants in agro-business activities such as budgeting, cash flow analysis, basic accounting, record keeping and marketing in under irrigation farming. Widows and women in general took advantage of their experience and knowledge of farming to improve the farm enterprise and equally relied on adult children for technical farm management. The Mbuya Mhute case set the stage for further interrogation of women's land rights and land inheritance management in which previous dispossessions may be revisited. New farming ethics and all year-round agricultural systems different from the traditional communal areas also contributed to the paradigm shift in Mushandike resettlement. Therefore, cultural and religious rites for example 'chisi', the ancestry rest-day, were not observe by farmers thus the roles of traditional leaders remain low in the irrigation schemes. Farmers cannot observe rest days like 'chisi' because they are allocated days to irrigate their fields by the Department of Water and the watering

schedule disregard rest days including the Sabbath days. Observance of 'chisi' or Sabbath days could mean failure to irrigate plants during that week that could result in crop moisture strain and poor yielding. These changes contributed to society softening its stance towards women's land ownership.

What also came out of these narratives is the age factor. Most widows lost their spouse in the 1980s and 1990s such that by the time of carrying out the fieldwork, the widows were the village and community connoisseurs, in concurrence with Fontein's (2006) conceptualisation. While many women land owners were still struggling in poverty in non-irrigation plots, a good percentage of widows in the irrigation scheme experienced upward mobility from being peasants and semi-peasants to middle class farmers (Zvokuomba and Batisai forthcoming). Evidently, widows in Mushandike commanded much respect not only because being the eldest but because of having material resources and level of modernising of their homesteads. This is clearly understandable from a gender development life-cycle model derived from the natural sciences that confirms that the current stage has to mature enough for it to move to the next more defined form (Davison 1997). Thus, in this context, an individual woman is perceived to be moving from one precarious state of being a foreigner to being non foreigner, '...when gender identity... becomes ritually and socially recognised' Davison (1997: 41) to a stage when gender distinctions gradually drop away. This is the transitions in which widows in Mushandike found themselves in as they initially risked losing their property when husbands died but eventually grow older to becoming respectable members of family clan or lineage responsible for socio-cultural and religious reproduction. The widows took up a new a new status and position of being source of knowledge of the in terms of family, clan and lineage. At that stage the gender distinction between men and women drop (Oyeronke 2000) Ultimately, the age factor of widows in

Mushandike Irrigation Scheme worked for ushering a gender sensitive and sustainable land management in which land ownership by the next generation was discussed.

#### **MUSHANDIKE IRRIGATION PLOTS THROUGH THE AFRICAN FEMINIST LENS**

The article showed that wife inheritance arrangements were mere honorary in the Mushandike research site that raised similarities with what was observe by Ampofo *et al.* (2004) who postulated that the 'female husband' relationship would be nonsexual but a socio-cultural arrangement meant for maintaining family sustainability and stability during difficult times. However, in some special circumstances, a 'secret' arrangement would be available in which the same widow would have intimate sexual relationship with an 'anonymous' man as mechanisms to carter for intimate needs of the widow (Ampofo *et al.*, 2004). While this position did not come from the research participants during data collection, it emerged from informal discussion with other community members. Mohanty (1984) argues that Western feminism fail to explain some of these dimensions that arise in rural Africa because African and Western women's lives are. This position is further strengthened by Oyeronke (1997) who argues that even the concept 'woman' was not applicable to all pre-colonial African settings since it was foundational in western gender discourse. It is in the Western literature that male and female were dichotomised however with the male as the dominator (Oyeronke (*ibid.*)). Thus, this argument about African feminism justifies why it was deployed in this study as it is best attuned to explain all that was happening to women in the farms. Therefore, these narratives show that land ownership for women is not a 'strait- jacket case of universalising and homogenising women (Mohanty, 1984). Field based evidence has shown that women in general and widows in particular manipulate the same culture to their advantage and use it to protect their interests including land rights. Widows deployed a plethora of mechanisms including

patronage politics networks, honorary husband practices, to be land owners and worked hard on the land to become successful farmers with the help from adult children materially, culturally, socially and financially. Therefore, chapter argues that while widowhood normally come as a trigger for sliding into the margins, those in Mushandike took advantage of a number factors including water for irrigation to change the assumed direction of a widows live to become successful middle-class farmers.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Women's narratives in this represent two critical aspects about land ownership and governance in the rural enclave. Within the confirms of the laws and traditions of patriarchy governed by patriarchal ideology, when a husband passes away, a woman risks losing most of her belongs especially asserts like land because culturally these things are believed to belong to patriarchal line. Therefore, the major theme that thread the narratives is that of women risking or losing their land upon the death of the husband. Case after case have shown how the widow exceptionally the scourge of being dispossessed of their land. The narrative showed how women manoeuvred the cultural practices in defence of their property, land and interests through cultural practices, for example, deploying the honorary husband idiom, patronage politics, idiom of hard work to till the land and turn the direction of their lives. The second critical aspect about Widows in Mushandike is that despite the mulfarious reasons against them, they became successful farmers taking advantage of the irrigated land to become agro-entrepreneurs, social networks, family connections, politics and everything at their disposal to become successful farmers in a semi-arid region of Masvingo. The article has demonstrated women's capacity not only to pursue customary mechanisms to own land but pursue land policy and political means to protect their land ownership interests and ultimately become successful farmers. The article concludes that successful farmers particularly elderly widows

combined their farming experiences and expertise, support from their 'adult children' and other networks due to their respectability to the become rural elite farmers with a share in local, city and external markets sometimes to surpass households headed by males.

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