

RE-IMAGINING WOMEN'S LIVELIHOODS: PATHWAYS TO EQUITY, SUSTAINABILITY AND RESILIENCE IN BINDURA, MASHONALAND CENTRAL

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Abstract

This paper investigates the multifaceted ways women in Bindura, Mashonaland Central, Zimbabwe, are actively redefining and restructuring their livelihoods as a direct response to intensifying socio-economic, environmental, and political pressures. The study shifts focus from mere survival to exploring alternative pathways that lead toward greater equity, sustainability, and resilience within their community. Central to this inquiry is an analysis of how deeply ingrained structural constraints and persistent gendered norms critically intersect with emergent opportunities for entrepreneurial innovation and empowerment. To gain a holistic understanding of this complex dynamic, the research employed a Systems Theory approach, viewing women's economic activities not in isolation but as deeply embedded within broader institutional, political, and ecological systems. The methodology relied on rich, in-depth qualitative interviews with 15 women engaged in various informal economic activities in the region. The core findings highlight significant tensions between traditional, often subsistence-based, livelihood strategies and the necessity of adopting new, adaptive, and market-responsive practices. These tensions manifest in challenges such as securing land, accessing capital, and dealing with arbitrary regulatory enforcement. Ultimately, the paper argues that while women demonstrate remarkable ingenuity in carving out economic spaces, sustainable change requires more than individual effort. It concludes by offering specific, actionable recommendations aimed at developing inclusive policy frameworks, strengthening local resource distribution, and

establishing robust community-based support systems that can effectively recognize and foster women's agency and resilience.

Key words: *Livelihood Strategies. Gendered Norms. Systems Theory. Informal Economy. Resilience*

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the dynamic processes through which women in Bindura are reconstructing their livelihoods in response to socio-economic decline, climate variability, and gendered exclusion. Women in peri-urban and rural areas of Bindura have long been engaged in informal economic activities, subsistence farming, and care work, sectors that are highly vulnerable to systemic shocks. This research aims to explore the alternatives women are crafting and the factors behind these efforts.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To identify current livelihood strategies employed by women in Bindura.
- To assess the resilience and sustainability of these strategies.
- To explore gendered power dynamics shaping access to economic resources.
- Recommend inclusive frameworks for enhancing women's agency and adaptive capacity.

BACKGROUND

The livelihoods of women in Bindura have been profoundly impacted by a combination of economic instability, policy shifts, climate change, and deeply-rooted patriarchal structures. In Bindura, a district once sustained by mining and commercial agriculture, the collapse of formal employment has pushed many women into precarious informal economies.

Despite various development initiatives, women's access to land, capital, markets, and decision-making power remains limited. This study focuses on re-imagining women's livelihoods, a notion that calls for transformative, equitable, and sustainable shifts in how women's work is understood and supported.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the growing body of research on women's empowerment and livelihoods in Zimbabwe, there is a significant sociological gap in understanding the lived realities of rural and peri-urban women residing in smaller towns (Bindura). The existing literature often focuses on urban centres or large-scale agricultural settings, overlooking the unique challenges, opportunities, and experiences of women in smaller towns.

These women face distinct socio-economic and cultural contexts that shape their livelihood strategies, access to resources, and overall well-being. However, their voices, perspectives, and experiences are often marginalised or absent in academic and policy discussions. This oversight limits the effectiveness of interventions aimed at promoting women's empowerment, livelihood innovation, and community development in these settings. By neglecting the specific needs and realities of rural and peri-urban women in smaller towns like Bindura, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers risk developing solutions that are not tailored to the local context, ultimately exacerbating existing inequalities and limiting the potential for sustainable development.

This study aims to address this sociological gap by exploring the lived realities, livelihood innovations, and care economies of women in Bindura, Zimbabwe, and contributing to a more nuanced understanding of their experiences and needs.

METHODOLOGICAL GAPS

Existing research on women's livelihoods and economic empowerment in Zimbabwe often employs macro-economic frameworks that prioritise aggregate data and broad trends (Kabeer, 2008; World Bank, 2019). While these approaches provide valuable insights into national or regional patterns, they frequently overlook the nuanced, localised experiences of women in specific contexts (Moser, 1993; Razavi, 2007).

Moreover, the dominant macro-economic lenses tend to neglect gendered perspectives, failing to account for the complex interplay between gender, power, and economic agency in women's lives (Agarwal, 1997; Kabeer, 2000). This oversight results in a lack of understanding of the ways in which women navigate and negotiate economic opportunities and challenges in their daily lives (Chant, 2007).

Furthermore, previous studies often rely on quantitative methods that capture numerical data but neglect the rich, qualitative insights that can be gained from women's own narratives and experiences (Reinharz, 1992; Mayoux, 2006). This methodological limitation restricts the depth and richness of the data, leading to incomplete or inaccurate representations of women's realities.

This study addresses these methodological gaps by adopting a localised, gendered perspective that prioritises women's voices, experiences, and agency. By employing qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of women's livelihoods, care economies, and economic empowerment in the specific context of Bindura, Zimbabwe.

PHILOSOPHICAL GAPS

Dominant neoliberal development models often prioritise economic growth and efficiency over social and environmental concerns, neglecting the intersectional and ecological dimensions of women's livelihoods (Mies and Shiva, 1993; Escobar, 2012). These models fail to account for the complex interplay between gender, class, race, and other forms of social difference that shape women's experiences and opportunities (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000).

Furthermore, neoliberal development approaches often overlook the ecological dimensions of women's livelihoods, ignoring the critical role that women play in managing natural resources and maintaining environmental sustainability (Shiva, 1988; Rocheleau *et al.*, 1996). This oversight can lead to development interventions that exacerbate environmental degradation and undermine women's livelihoods.

This research addresses these philosophical gaps by centring women's voices and emphasizing locally grounded, systems-aware approaches. By prioritising the perspectives and experiences of women in Bindura, Zimbabwe, this study seeks to develop a more nuanced understanding of the intersectional and ecological dimensions of women's livelihoods. The four principles guiding this research are: Intersectionality where the multiple forms of social difference that shape women's experiences and opportunities are recognised (Crenshaw, 1991); Ecological Sustainability where priority is given to environmental sustainability and recognising the critical role that women play in managing natural resources (Shiva, 1988); Locally Grounded emphasises the importance of local context and perspectives in development research and practice (Chambers, 1997); and Systems-Aware recognises the complex interconnections between social, economic, and environmental systems (Meadows, 2008).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE SYSTEMS THEORY

This study employs the Systems Theory as its primary theoretical framework, recognising that individuals, communities, and institutions function within interconnected systems – ecological, economic, cultural, and political (Bertalanffy, 1968; Luhmann, 1995). The theory provides a holistic approach to understanding complex phenomena, emphasizing the interdependencies and relationships between different components of a system (Capra, 1996).

In the context of women's livelihoods, it is particularly relevant for understanding how women's strategies are shaped, not only by immediate economic choices, but also by broader social, institutional, and environmental systems (Leach, 2007). This approach acknowledges that women's lives are influenced by multiple systems, including household, community, and state structures, as well as formal and informal institutions (Meadows, 2008).

JUSTIFICATION FOR USE

The Systems Theory enables multi-layered analysis, capturing how women navigate between different systems and structures (Midgley, 2000). It moves beyond linear cause-effect explanations, recognising feedback loops and adaptation in the face of systemic crises (Holling, 2001). This is particularly relevant in contexts like Bindura, where formal and informal systems intersect in complex ways.

The Systems Theory recognises the complexity of women's lives, acknowledging the multiple systems and structures that shape their experiences (Byrne, 1998) and identify feedback loops. This approach can identify feedback loops and adaptation mechanisms that women use to cope with systemic crises (Holling, 2001). The theory also emphasizes relationships. It emphasizes the relationships between different components of a system, highlighting the interdependencies and interactions that shape women's livelihoods (Capra, 1996).

INTEGRATING FEMINIST AND POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUES

To improve the theoretical framework, this study integrates feminist and postcolonial critiques, which expose power dynamics and epistemic exclusions within conventional development thinking (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988). These critiques highlight the need to centre women's voices. Feminist critiques emphasize the importance of centring women's voices and experiences in development research and practice (Agarwal, 1997). Post-colonial critiques challenge dominant narratives and power structures, recognising the need for decolonised and inclusive approaches to development (Escobar, 2012). By integrating these critiques, this study aims to develop a more nuanced understanding of women's livelihoods, recognising the complex interplay between systems, power dynamics, and epistemic exclusions.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative case study design. A total of 15 women participants were purposively selected based on their involvement in livelihood activities such as market gardening, vending, artisanal mining, and home-based enterprises Bindura, Zimbabwe. Table 1 shows the composition of the participants.

Table 1: Composition of Participants

Age	Women aged 25-55 years old, with a mix of younger and older women to capture different life stages and experiences.
Livelihood activities	Women engaged in various livelihood activities, including: -Market gardening (4 women) -Vending (3 women) -Artisanal mining (4 women) -Home-based enterprises (4 women)
Marital status	A combination of married, single, divorced, and widowed women to capture different household and family structures.
Education level	Women with varying levels of education, including those with formal education and those with informal or traditional skills training
Residence	Women residing in different parts of Bindura, including peri-urban and rural areas, to capture different environmental and

	socio-economic contexts
Socio-economic status	Women from different socio-economic backgrounds, including those living in poverty and those with relatively more stable economic situations

JUSTIFICATION OF SELECTION

- Actively engaged in livelihood activities for at least 2 years.
- Residing in Bindura's high-density suburbs and rural periphery.

Tools used

Semi-structured interviews: Conducted twice with each participant over three months.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Two sessions with 6-8 participants each to explore communal and systemic issues.

OBSERVATION AND FIELD NOTES

Supplemented interviews for richer contextual insight.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Local development plans, NGO reports and relevant academic literature. This multi-method approach allowed triangulation of data and deepened understanding of both subjective experiences and systemic patterns.

GENDERED BARRIERS AND INFORMAL ECONOMIES

Despite ingenuity, women face persistent barriers that include harassment by authorities, a lack of capital, and exclusion from decision-making. The informal economy, while providing space, also reinforces precarity, where respondents reveal that the council always chases them away from the only place where they can feed their children.

EMERGING COLLECTIVES AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Some women are forming savings groups, cooperative gardens that bring resourcefulness and solidarity among women in Bindura, Zimbabwe, as they form informal networks and groups to support each other in their livelihood activities. These localised forms of innovation and care economies demonstrate the women's agency and capacity for collective action. Through savings groups, women pool their resources to access credit, savings, and financial support and work together to cultivate and manage gardens, sharing knowledge, labour, and resources.

Women use mobile technology to share market information, prices, and alerts, enabling them to make informed decisions and stay competitive. These practices reflect the women's ability to adapt and innovate in response to challenges, leveraging their social networks and collective knowledge to improve their livelihoods. Women reveal that they survive together by illustrating the sense of solidarity and mutual support among the women, highlighting the importance of peer learning, and collective problem-solving. Women work together to overcome challenges and find solutions, and social support. These localised forms of innovation and care economies demonstrate the potential for community-led initiatives to drive positive change and improve women's livelihoods.

INTERPRETATION

These findings show how women are active agents of adaptation and innovation, yet remain constrained by structural gender inequalities and weak institutional support. Sustainability and resilience cannot be achieved without addressing these root causes.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The findings are organised around three core themes:

- Livelihood Diversification as Resilience Strategy

- Gendered Barriers and Informal Economies
- Emerging Collectives and Knowledge Sharing

Most participants had more than one income source – for example, combining vending with poultry rearing or informal mining. This was seen as a buffer against shocks such as currency fluctuations, droughts, or police raids. Women vendors responded that if tomatoes did not sell, they switch to sweets or airtime recharge cards. This positions them ahead of a demanding situation.

LIVELIHOOD DIVERSIFICATION

- Twelve out of 15 (80%) participants had multiple income sources, combining activities like vending, poultry rearing, and informal mining.
- This diversification helped them cope with shocks like currency fluctuations (60%, 9/15), droughts (40%, 6/15), and police raids (20%, 3/15).

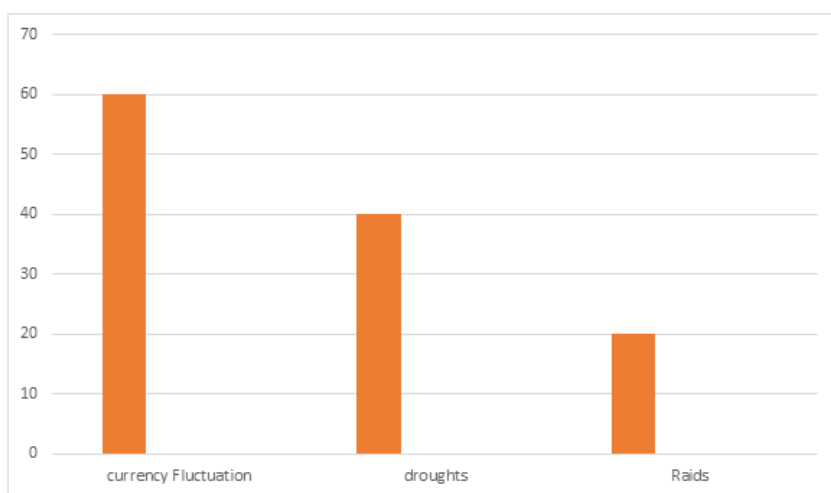


Figure 1: Diversification participants

GENDERED BARRIERS AND INFORMAL ECONOMIES

Despite their resourcefulness, women in the informal economy face significant, systemic barriers, including frequent harassment by authorities like council police who displace them from their vending locations, a fundamental lack of capital, and exclusion from relevant decision-making processes. Although the informal economy provides them a necessary avenue for earning, it also perpetuates precarious conditions, a reality starkly reflected in the data: 90% of participants reported experiencing at least one of these major barriers, and 70% specifically identified police harassment as a dominant challenge in their daily operations.

EMERGING COLLECTIVES AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Some women are forming savings groups, cooperative gardens, and WhatsApp networks for market alerts and peer support. These practices reflect localised forms of innovation and care economies. Sixty percent (60%) of participants (9/15) were part of savings groups, cooperative gardens, or WhatsApp networks. These collectives enabled knowledge sharing, peer support, and access to market information.

INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

These findings show how women are active agents of adaptation and innovation, yet remain constrained by structural gender inequalities and weak institutional support. Sustainability and resilience cannot be achieved without addressing these root causes.

CONCLUSION

Women in Bindura demonstrate remarkable agency and resilience in the face of economic and environmental decline. They are re-imagining livelihoods by adapting and innovating to cope with challenges, diversifying their income sources, and exploring new opportunities.

Women are developing strategies that combine resilience, community care, and innovation, often relying on social networks and collective action. Women prioritise community care, supporting each other and fostering solidarity in the face of adversity. Despite their agency and resilience, women in Bindura face significant structural barriers, including:

- *Gender inequality:* Women face gender-based discrimination, harassment, and exclusion from decision-making processes.
- *Class and economic inequality:* Women from lower-income backgrounds face greater challenges in accessing resources, markets, and opportunities.
- *Inadequate policies and a lack of support from authorities* exacerbate the challenges women face, undermining their efforts to build resilient livelihoods.

IMPLICATIONS

The experiences of women in Bindura highlight the need for:

- Inclusive policies that recognise and support women's agency, addressing gender and class inequalities.
- Community-led initiatives that empower women and support their collective action, fostering community care and solidarity.

Sustained efforts to dismantle structural barriers and address the root causes of systemic inequality and policy shortcomings are essential to enable women to establish sustainable livelihoods. By formally acknowledging and supporting women's agency while simultaneously implementing targeted interventions to alleviate these structural constraints, developmental outcomes can be significantly enhanced, thereby fostering a more equitable and resilient socioeconomic environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Supporting women's economic empowerment in urban and peri-urban contexts requires a multi-faceted approach centred on five key pillars. First, fostering strong women's collectives is crucial for securing funding, training, and legal recognition for savings groups and cooperatives, enabling them to operate more effectively and with greater formal support. Secondly, gender-sensitive policy reform is essential, compelling local authorities to enact inclusive urban planning and vending policies that specifically address and support the unique needs of women entrepreneurs. Furthermore, ensuring access to land and water by allocating secure plots with reliable water infrastructure is fundamental for smallholder women farmers, providing them with the stability needed to enhance their agricultural productivity. The fourth pillar, capacity building, must offer targeted training in areas such as financial literacy, climate adaptation strategies, and digital market access, equipping women with the skills necessary to thrive in a changing economy. Finally, creating inclusive dialogue spaces is vital to ensure women are meaningfully engaged in local governance and development planning, allowing their perspectives and priorities to shape policies that directly affect their lives. These interconnected strategies collectively work to dismantle systemic barriers and create a more equitable environment for women's economic participation

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