

AN ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC EXPERIENCES OF STAY-AT-HOME WIVES IN HARARE, ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

In the Zimbabwean society, many stay-at-home wives face many challenges. These include stereotypes that in-laws have about their sons' money being abused and the laziness of stay-at-home wives. They always think that stay-at-home wives do not contribute anything meaningful to the household, because household work is undervalued and unpaid. They are given derogatory nicknames that show that they are worthless, yet they have very important roles within the household and family as a whole. This results in poor mental health, anxiety, low self-esteem and depression among housewives. Some have failed to inherit assets from their husbands because in-laws believe that they did not contribute financially, hence, they are vulnerable to poverty upon widowhood. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of stay-at-home wives with the aim of developing strategies to reduce the challenges they face. The objectives of this study are to explore the roles of stay-at-home wives, examine the challenges they face and assess the coping mechanisms that they use to overcome these challenges. This study uses a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews with 10 stay-at-home mothers. This study also includes two focus group discussions.

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Keywords: *coping mechanisms, household work, qualitative approach*

INTRODUCTION

The domestic sphere remains a contested site of labour, identity and socio-economic value, particularly within the patriarchal structures of sub-Saharan Africa. Traditionally, the role of the housewife, often used interchangeably with that of stay-at-home mothers, has been defined by the management of the domestic household and the provision of care, which are frequently excluded from national economic indicators (Sharma *et al.*, 2018). While some scholars argue that stay-at-home wives derive a unique sense of fulfilment and happiness through the nurturance of familial bonds (Hori, 2017), contemporary gender theorists posit that the household serves as a primary apparatus for the reinforcement of restrictive gender roles and the systemic devaluation of female labour (Biswal, 2024).

The complexity of housewifery lies in its definition, it encompasses a range of responsibilities that extend beyond manual labour to include the emotional and managerial oversight of the home (Lopata, 1971, as cited in Biswal, 2024). Despite the intensive nature of these contributions, housewives often encounter context-specific psychosocial pressures distinct from those faced by their counterparts in the formal workforce (Shahin and Aytac, 2021). In Zimbabwe, shifting economic landscapes and deeply rooted cultural expectations have created a unique form of socioeconomic precarity for stay-at-home wives. This study aims to investigate this precarity by exploring the lived experiences of stay-at-home wives in Harare, examining the intersection of unpaid labour, social stigmatisation and the psychological coping mechanisms employed to navigate these challenges.

Housewives, often referred to as stay-at-home mothers (Sharma *et al.*, 2018), occupy a unique socioeconomic position. Research suggests that housewives' experiences should be studied independently of those of career-oriented women, as each group encounters context-specific challenges (Shahin and Aytac, 2021). Lopata (1971, as cited in Biswal, 2024) defines a housewife as a woman responsible for managing her home, regardless of whether she performs the labour herself or manages hired help. By contrast, employed women are more likely to seek assistance from housewives than housewives (Mo *et al.*, 2020). It is generally accepted that a working woman seeks assistance, unlike a housewife who is perceived to have excess time to perform all household tasks.

The lived experience of stay-at-home wives across sub-Saharan Africa is shaped by a complex interplay of childhood socialisation, interpersonal dynamics and cultural mothering ideologies (Akinsanya, 2023). Within these patriarchal structures, African women often experience limited bargaining power regarding family duties, yet they are frequently forced to navigate dual roles when husbands are absent because of migration or itinerant work (Onwumechili and Akpan, 2023). This absence can lead to an overwhelming division of labour, as wives manage both their own reproductive duties and the husband's traditional responsibilities, while simultaneously developing complex communication strategies to maintain marital stability against the threat of infidelity (*ibid.*). Furthermore, research on neighbouring Eswatini highlights that the feasibility of being a stay-at-home mother is often stratified by race and class. While non-African participants may find full-time domesticity more accessible due to sufficient spousal provision, many African women find the role precarious

as they are simultaneously expected to seek informal work to supplement their family income (Chikomo, 2024).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In the Zimbabwean context, housewives, particularly those in rural areas or lower-income urban settings, perform the vast majority of household chores themselves because of their inability to afford domestic help. In rural studies, the word “housewife” is occasionally used as a term for a woman who does the majority of chores within a farm’s compound, as opposed to field and livestock work (Biswal, 2024). While it is socially acceptable for working women to seek assistance, housewives are often perceived as having excess time, which leads to an accumulation of duties. Biswal (*ibid.*) posits that the term housewife is a product of the intersection between capitalism and patriarchy, where the house represents the site of private labour and the wife denotes a legal or customary status in relation to a husband. Under Zimbabwean customary law, a woman may be regarded as a wife even without a legal marriage certificate or full payment of *lobola* (dowry). Even without the payment of a *lobola* for the woman, once the couple stays together, the woman can be called a wife. Feminists and gender theorists emphasize that the household serves as a primary avenue for the reinforcement, conformity and performance of gender roles in daily life (*ibid.*). However, Hori (2017) emphasizes that general housewives report higher levels of happiness than working women because of the satisfaction that comes from fulfilling their responsibilities to their families and children.

Despite the foundational role that stay-at-home wives play in maintaining family stability and performing essential

reproductive labour, their contributions remain largely invisible within both the national economic discourse and the immediate familial hierarchy in Zimbabwe. There is a pervasive societal perception that domestic work is unproductive, because it does not generate direct liquid income (Choong, 2021). This devaluation manifests in the systemic stigmatisation of housewives, frequently labelled as lazy or parasitic by in-laws and society at large. Such derogatory labelling and lack of financial autonomy create an environment of socio-economic precarity that leaves women highly vulnerable to emotional abuse, financial exclusion and asset stripping, particularly in instances of widowhood or divorce (Onwumechili and Akpan, 2023).

Furthermore, the relentless nature of unpaid domestic work, coupled with social isolation and identity loss associated with full-time housewives, has led to a significant but under-researched crisis in mental health among women in Harare. While existing literature often focuses on the double burden of working mothers, the specific psychosocial distress of non-working wives, characterised by anxiety, depression and low self-esteem, is frequently overlooked (Kaplan, 2021a). There is urgent need to investigate how these women navigate these stressors and to identify the coping mechanisms they employ to survive in a patriarchal system that simultaneously demands labour while denying its value.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ROLES OF STAY-AT-HOME WIVES

The role of married women as housewives is to perform domestic labour in the home without being paid in terms of leave or rest to

keep themselves decompressed from assigned gender roles (Biswal, 2024). Women are socialised to accept household roles as part of their daily duties, which do not attract any form of payment or recognition. The burden of these household chores leads to them being the first to get up and last to go to bed.

In Francis Bacon's essay 'Of Marriage and Single Life', the other roles of housewives are being men's mistresses, companions for middle-aged and old men and nurses (Biswal, 2024). Housewives are responsible for caring for the sick, even those who are no longer able to visit the toilet. They clean up the mess.

Vizard (2019) posits that irrespective of their employment status, women are compelled to assume this role, especially in patriarchal societies, wherein they are expected to exhibit passive, emotional, obedient and self-sacrificing behaviours. Housewives sacrifice time and energy for their families. They are supposed to be obedient to their in-laws and husbands as they perform these duties. Although housework is often perceived as simple and trivial, owing to its familiarity and routine nature, in reality, the responsibility of a housewife is highly complex and demanding. This complexity comes from the fact that housewives perform all productive, reproductive (social and biological) and community management roles. Wuluntami (2018) posits that repeated routines contribute to boredom and emotional fatigue.

Housewives are responsible for planning and serving family meals. Biswal (2024) notes that the kitchen has traditionally been designated as a gendered domain reserved for women's engagement in activities related to food preparation, serving and maintenance. Meal planning is a challenge, especially in poor

families, where housewives sometimes have to do piece jobs to put food on the table or travel long distances to gather vegetables. Sometimes, they are also responsible for sourcing food from the market or gardens and fields. These chores cause housewives to face physical and mental stress (Sharma *et al.*, 2018).

Housewives are overburdened by the caregiving roles expected of the entire family. Ancel (2017) argues that caregiving responsibility typically involves ensuring the well-being of family members, including health development, aiding recovery from illness or accidents and caring for disabled or ill individuals within the family. In Zimbabwe, housewives take care of the elderly up to the point of death, without training. Historically, in the Indian cultural context, women have been seen as family (Sharma, 2018). They take care of the sick without preventative materials, such as gloves and effective detergents. To fulfil their care duties, housewives are tasked with maintaining order and cleanliness (Biswal, 2024) and even cleaning after an adult has intentionally messed up. Sharma *et al.* (2018) state that from the ancient period, women's roles were confined to the family as homemakers and even working women had dual roles as working women and homemakers.

Taking care of their children is another major role for housewives. According to Nabilah and Norma (2022), in Malaysia, there is a notable trend in the withdrawal of highly educated women from the workforce after marriage during the early childhood years. Some husbands even force their wives to stop working and become full-time housewives for childbearing and nurturing. In Malaysia, 62% of women who are not in the labour force take household chores and family responsibilities as their primary

reason for not working (Department of Statistics of Malaysia, 2023). Due to patriarchy, husbands do not stop their professions because they get married; it is always women who are obliged to put on hold their professions. Maids are regarded as having poor nurturing skills and Momani (2025) states that the decision to be a housewife is frequently motivated by the desire to provide direct care, ensure their children's optimal development, maintain cultural or personal values related to motherhood and family related to motherhood and family responsibilities. However, the Khazanah Research Institute (2020) states that housewives in Malaysia were reported to have high blood pressure levels and Ermasuriaty, Golonggomo, and Hasanati, (2025) argue that this may be due to unhealthy lifestyles, unbalanced diets and poor stress management.

CHALLENGES FACED BY STAY-AT-HOME WIVES

Biswal (2024) asserts that being a housewife is a significant risk factor for poor mental health and Kaplan (2021a) states that housewifery emerges as a predominant gender role imposed on women, often leading to mental health issues. Housewives rarely have time to rest or interact with others. Some are alone most of the time, the home, where the husband and the children are at work and school, respectively, which leads to loneliness. Kaplan (2021b) asserts that within the context of housewives' daily lives, this existential vacuum manifests as severe mental health issues, including stress, low self-esteem, obsessive thoughts, perfectionism, denial, burnout, loneliness, sexual problems and an exaggerated sense of responsibility. These effects are not taken seriously by family members and some of the challenges, such as sexual problems, can lead to husbands experiencing extramarital affairs and divorce. Ahmad and Khan (2018) reveal that they have poor

mental health and low self-esteem because of their limited social networks. They do not have the time to attend these social networks.

Due to time constraints, housewives are more likely to suffer from metabolic syndrome diseases such as obesity and overweight as a result of a sedentary lifestyle and work (Hamid Jan *et al*, 2023). These women do not have the time to go to the gym or aerobics to exercise. Even in situations where the gym is in-house, housewives face time constraints due to time-poverty. Tan and Yim (2010) state that a lack of time, motivation, support and sports skills hinders housewives from participating in physical activities. Families rarely share household chores with housewives. These ongoing and often unshared duties gradually lead women to become co-dependent individuals (Ancel, 2017). Biswal (2024) states that co-dependency is characterised by neglecting one's needs, excessive emotions and deriving satisfaction mainly from relationships with others. Co-dependency then leads housewives to neglect their personal care and sometimes look older than their own age. Some stop wearing nice clothes or bathing in the morning, because they are always at home. Unal (2012) and Damanik (2016) state that housewives do not have time for themselves, whether to maintain their health or personal appearance. Co-dependency is common among women (Orbon *et al.*, 2021) and even worse among housewives. They are more concerned about the appearance of their husbands and children, making sure that their clothes are clean, ironed, mended and in good condition. Chmielewska (2012) argues that co-dependency can contribute to mental health issues and Simha (2017) notes that traditional roles associated with domestic and home care responsibilities are recognised as particularly stressful.

Due to multiple roles and a lack of exposure to technology, housewives face challenges in helping their children with homework. Khan *et al.* (2022) argue that the major problems housewives face with online learning are unawareness of the technological platforms and that supervising children during remote learning, along with other tasks and roles, is really hard. Because of these issues, they feel inferior to their husbands, teachers and educated women within the household.

According to Illa Nursalida, *et al.* (2021), transitioning to full-time housewives has its own challenges. For highly educated housewives, the transition from professional careers to full-time domestic roles can lead to unique psychological and social challenges, including identity loss, intellectual stagnation, physical exhaustion, emotional stress and social isolation. This is because housewives have poor social networks and rarely have time to rest.

According to Choong (2021), domestic unpaid labour is devalued and regarded as economically unproductive and thus socially insignificant. Many housewives experience a diminished sense of self-worth compared to career women, who are seen as performing a more valuable and professional role (Tomesu-Dubrow *et al.*, 2019). Housewives often feel inferior and belittled when they encounter professional women. Amran, Saari and Talhah (2025) state that they feel isolated, powerless, fearful and lack personal identity. Sometimes, they lack the confidence to express themselves within their family and society at large. A study by Choong (2021) reveals that housewives reported feeling social stigma and undervalued because society frequently fails to

recognise the legitimacy of their role, perceiving it as lacking material rewards or economic contributions.

Housewives face GBV from their husbands and mothers-in-law (Sharma *et al.*, 2018). Husbands and mothers-in-law have expectations that may be beyond the physical strength of daughters-in-law, causing conflict when the daughter-in-law is always regarded as being faulty. They may also face economic violence from their husbands when controlling all sources of income.

Friedan, a radical feminist, argues that housewives lack identity and self-determination, preventing them from finding happiness and psychological well-being (Amran, Saari and Talhah 2025). The challenge that housewives face is that there are no financial rewards for household work. According to Friedan, homemaking does not generate direct financial income and is a form of oppression and discrimination against women (*ibid*).

COPING MECHANISMS

Henderson, Stalnaker and Taylor (1988) states that engaging in leisure activities can help women develop self-value and confidence as individuals, as this can give them a sense of liberation from restrictive gender roles and contribute to their empowerment, self-value and confidence. Housewives must create time for leisure through timetabling of duties, so that not every task can be performed daily. This can reduce the risk of depression.

Support from spouses can greatly improve housewives' mental health. Choudhary and Ahmad (2017) report that housewives'

psychological well-being improved significantly when their spouses actively supported them in managing their household chores. However, in most Zimbabwean households, it is considered taboo for men to perform household work. The wife will be accused of using a love potion to control the husband, which is not acceptable in Zimbabwean society.

Recognition from society can go a long way in making housewives feel appreciated and improving their self-esteem. Amran, Saari and Talhah. (2025) reveal that recognition and appreciation from the community can also help people feel better about themselves and their social standing. This can be done at religious gatherings, such as churches, and it also helps in socialising children to appreciate the work they perform to support the family.

Housewives must interact with one another. Amran, Saari and Talhah. (*ibid.*) advocate programmes that promote physical and emotional well-being, encourage social interactions and provide mental health support.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a qualitative research design, based on an interpretivist paradigm. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences, meanings and social realities of stay-at-home wives in Harare. By prioritising the voices of the participants, the qualitative framework allowed for an exploration of the nuances of domestic life that are often obscured by quantitative metrics (May and Perry, 2022).

PARTICIPANT SELECTION AND SAMPLING

The study used purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants. The primary inclusion criteria were as follows: (i) the participant must be a legally or customarily married woman; (ii) she must reside in Harare; and (iii) she must have been a full-time stay-at-home wife for a minimum of two consecutive years. Ten (10) stay-at-home mothers were selected for in-depth interviews. Additionally, two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted, each consisting of six (6) participants, to capture collective sentiments and shared social challenges. To obtain a holistic perspective, five (5) husbands of stay-at-home wives were interviewed.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

The primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This format provided flexibility to probe deeper into emerging themes while ensuring that key research questions regarding roles, challenges and coping mechanisms were addressed. The individual interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, while the FGDs lasted approximately 90 minutes. All sessions were conducted in Shona and English, depending on the participant's preference and audio-recorded with explicit consent.

DATA ANALYSIS

The recorded data were transcribed verbatim and translated into English where necessary. The data analysis followed the thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2017). This involved:

- Familiarisation: Immersing in the data through repeated reading of transcripts.

- Coding: Generating initial codes for salient features across the data set.
- Theme Identification: Collating codes into potential overarching themes.
- Reviewing Themes: Refining themes to ensure they accurately reflected the coded extracts.
- Defining and Naming: Finalising the specifics of each theme.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines. This study was approved by the School of Social Work Research and Ethics Committee at the Women's University in Africa (WUA-SWREC-2025-008). Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Pseudonyms (e.g., HW1 and HW2) were used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalties. Written consent to participate in the study and to publish the data were obtained from the study participants.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

To contextualise the qualitative findings, the configurations of the participants are presented below. Table 1 outlines the characteristics of the ten (10) stay-at-home wives, while Table 2 outlines the profiles of the five (5) husbands interviewed. To maintain pairing transparency, husband pseudonyms correspond directly to their wives' identifiers (e.g., H3 is married to HW3).

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Table 1: Profiles of stay-at-home wives ($n=10$)

Participant Pseudonym	Age (Years)	Level of Education	Duration of Marriage (Years)	Number of Children	Residential Suburb (Harare)	Supplementary Income Activity
HW1	34	Ordinary Level	12	3	Highfield	None
HW2	41	Advanced Level	18	4	Mabvuku	None
HW3	38	Diploma in Education	15	3	Epworth	Vegetable Vending (Garden)
HW4	29	Ordinary Level	6	2	Chitungwiza	None
HW5	35	National Diploma	10	3	Warren Park	Tailoring (Informal)
HW6	45	Primary School	22	5	Mbare	Petty Trading
HW7	26	Advanced Level	4	1	Budiriro	None
HW8	32	Ordinary Level	9	2	Glen Norah	None
HW9	48	Bachelor's Degree	25	4	Borrowdale	None
HW10	30	Bachelor's Degree	7	2	Westgate	Freelance Writing

Table 2: Profiles of husband participants ($n=5$)

Participant Pseudonym	Age (Years)	Occupation	Level of Education	Corresponding Spouse	Residential Suburb
H1	40	Informal Trader	Ordinary Level	HW1	Highfield
H2	46	Civil Servant	National Diploma	HW2	Mabvuku
H3	43	Auto Mechanic	Class One Journeyman	HW3	Epworth
H4	35	Construction Builder	Ordinary Level	HW4	Chitungwiza
H7	38	Local Councillor / Politician	Bachelor's Degree	HW7	Budiriro

ROLES OF STAY-AT-HOME WIVES

In the African context, housewives perform household work, including farm work and gardening. There is no demarcation between household work and farm work. They perform all the tasks. In contrast to Biswal (2024), who argues that in rural studies, the word “housewife” is occasionally used as a term for a woman who does the majority of chores within a farm’s compound, as opposed to field and livestock work. They perform masculine tasks such as farming. Many housewives mentioned that they had other tasks outside the house.

HW1 and HW3 mentioned that,

‘most housewives have the role of performing household work like cleaning, cooking, laundry, taking care of the children, gardening and even farming in small urban plots and attending funerals and church gatherings where we also cook and wash dishes.’

Housewives have a healthcare burden that is rarely recognised and undervalued. Where nurse aids are hired, they are paid. However, when housewives perform these tasks, they are not paid. It is regarded as part of household chores. They even take care of their mothers-in-laws. Similarly, Ancel (2017) argues that caregiving responsibility typically involves ensuring the well-being of family members, including health development, aiding recovery from illness or accidents and caring for the disabled or ill individuals within the family. As expressed by HW3, an extension of housewives’ domestic chores is as follows:

‘Besides household work, I also take care of my sick mother in-law, she wears pampers and she is on a wheel chair, so you can imagine the burden that I have. Relatives are constantly coming to see her and I host them, then they just leave without cleaning the dishes. I also take care of my husband, making sure he has clean clothes and

preparing the lunch box just like the kids. There is no time to rest, I am the first to wake up and the last to sleep. I also sell vegetables from my garden to supplement my husband's income.'

H4 narrated that,

'when my wife goes to the rural areas, there is more household work, including fetching water and firewood, going to the grinding mill and shopping. They travel long distances.'

Housewives are also responsible for managing food stocks and budgeting, as stated by the key informants below:

HW4 mentioned that,

'besides household work, I also manage household finances and food stock and I make sure everything is in order. I am the one who does the monthly budget, including school fees and daily financial needs.'

There has been a paradigm shift in household work to include assisting children with their homework and accompanying students to school, called school runs and this has to be balanced with household work. Homework requires housewives to be well versed with current issues and, in some cases, asking for assistance from neighbours and teachers, exacerbating the inferiority complex. Similarly, Khan, *et al*, (2022) argue that major problems housewives face with online learning are unawareness of technological platforms and supervising children during remote learning, along with other tasks and roles. It is really hard.

HW5 confirmed this through the following narration:

'am the one responsible for school visits and consultations. I accompany the children to school every day. I also help them with their homework; I sometimes ask for help from neighbours if its challenging. Teachers sometimes look down upon housewives; they just think that we are uneducated and they do not value our contributions during meetings.'

Taking care of the baby is not an easy task as babies require attention, as narrated by HW7:

‘the society just thinks taking care of the kids is easy, it’s a mammoth task that includes changing diapers, feeding and washing baby clothes and men take this for granted.’

Housewives are also important in political activities, thus contributing to the development of their constituencies, as narrated by the politician below:

H7 narrated that,

‘House wives are always available to support political activities. As a politician, I get a lot of support from housewives, that’s why I support their income-generating projects.’

CHALLENGES FACED BY STAY-AT-HOME WIVES

Housewives experience inferiority complex, loneliness and isolation. This is reinforced by derogatory names that they receive from society, revealing their worthlessness. Similarly, Kaplan (2021b) asserts that within the context of housewives’ daily lives, this existential vacuum manifests as severe mental health issues, including stress, low self-esteem, obsessive thoughts, perfectionism, denial, burnout, loneliness, sexual problems and an exaggerated sense of responsibility. Damanik (2016) states that housewives do not have time for themselves to maintain their health or personal appearance. Consequently, they may look older than their working counterparts. This is confirmed by the following narratives:

HW2 mentioned that,

‘when my children ask me for something that needs money and I tell them to wait for their father. I feel worthless because I cannot solve their financial needs.’

HW9 said that,

‘there is loneliness and isolation associated with being a housewife because you spend most of the time alone at home.’

H1 and FGD 1 narrated that,

‘When we go to family gatherings where there will be working women, I realise that my wife feels isolated as these working relatives start talking about their jobs. Sometimes they give derogatory names to my wife by calling her a permanent home defender or wardrobe.’

H3 narrated that,

‘I married a woman who was not working and my parents never accepted. When I introduced her to them, they asked about her profession. Since then, they have neglected her. They call her a tick (one that sucks blood) because my mother and sisters go to work.’

Failure to value housework has led to frustration among housewives. Society fails to realise that maids are hired to perform the same tasks that are performed for free by housewives. Similarly, according to Choong (2021), domestic unpaid labour is devalued and regarded as economically unproductive and thus socially insignificant. This is also narrated by HW1, as follows:

‘The main problem is that household work is not valued, hence we are not valued in the household. My husband’s relatives always accuse me of misusing their son’s money and they say everything belongs to my husband, even my husband sometimes says you do not know how to spend money wisely because you do not go to work.’

H2 stated that,

‘as a husband, I do not value financial advice from a housewife, I married a working wife because my mother was a housewife and my father struggled financially, we did not have enough resources as children. My father was overburdened.’

Many husbands want their wives to conform to their standards of gender roles to the extent of conforming to their level of cleanliness. Housewives are questioned if they fail to meet these standards. Similarly, feminists and gender theorists emphasize that households serve as a primary avenue for the reinforcement,

conformity and performance of gender roles in daily life (Biswal, 2024). This was confirmed by the following key informant:

HW4 mentioned that,

‘I suffer from time poverty, I rarely rest because my husband expects everything to be sparkling clean, if I fail, he asks me what I was doing the whole day and threatens to report me to my aunties for reprimand. Sometimes I feel he does not appreciate my efforts.’

Housewives suffer from patriarchy and the insubordination of their mothers. Husbands receive instructions from their mothers to extend their domestic chores to their wives. Some housewives go to rural areas to work on farms until harvest times and return to urban areas to continue with household work. They are expected to be passive and obedient, as mentioned by Vizard (2019), who posits that irrespective of their employment status, women are compelled to assume this role, especially in patriarchal societies, wherein they are expected to exhibit passive, emotional, obedient and self-sacrificing behaviours. The statement below confirms the patriarchy and insubordination of housewives:

H4 narrated that,

‘My mother who is in the rural areas always summons my wife for farming when the rains come and I am compelled to let her go because I do not want to disappoint my mother. My wife does not like it because there is too much work in the farms and this includes household work.’

Housewives do not have time for general upkeep, including exercise. As a result, some become obese and succumb to weight gain-related diseases, such as hypertension and sugar diabetes. Similarly, Hamid Jan *et al.* (2023) note that, due to time constraints, housewives are more likely to suffer from metabolic syndrome

diseases such as obesity as a result of a sedentary lifestyle and work. The following key informants confirmed this:

HW5 said that,

‘I am gaining weight but I do not have time to visit the gym or walk during the morning because of household chores.’

H7 narrated that,

‘when my wife lost her job and became a housewife, she deteriorated, she did not have time for her upkeep and she is always wearing oversized clothes and only dresses up when going out. She says bigger clothes are flexible when doing household work. She bathes in the evening when am about to come and says there is no point in bathing in the morning when she will sweat due to household chores. She no longer puts [on] make up but she looks beautiful in makeup.’

When housewives meet working women, they are often viewed as maids. They are assigned tiresome tasks, while working women are seen performing trivial tasks. As a result, housewives do not enjoy social gatherings because they have the duty to serve people and wash dishes. Society has normalised that professional women are always busy and deserve to rest, yet housewives deserve more rest due to the tedious nature of household work. Similarly, Tomesu-Dubrow *et al.* (2019) note that many housewives experience a diminished sense of self-worth when compared to career women, who are seen as performing a more valuable and professional. H6 confirmed by saying the following:

‘my wife is overburdened with work at church, family gatherings and funerals because she does not go to work, she is always available. Those women who go to work expect her to do all the work whilst they are seated or doing small tasks, for example, she will be cooking using large pots whilst they are just cutting vegetables.’

The lack of financial contribution has led to many housewives being deprived of luxuries such as clothes and cosmetics by their

husbands, yet these requirements have much value in a woman's life. Their financial advice is not valued, because they do not contribute financially. This lack of financial contribution makes them vulnerable to divorce and poor widowhood, as relatives strip them of valuable assets deemed to belong to their son. Similarly, a study by Choong (2021) reveals that housewives reported feeling social stigma and undervalued because society frequently fails to recognise the legitimacy of their role, perceiving it as lacking material rewards or economic contributions. The key informant HW6 narrated that,

'my husband does not include me in financial decisions. He even bought a house without my consent because I do not contribute anything.'

FGD1 mentioned that,

'They [housewives] are also seen as people who do not understand financial issues by their husbands.'

HW10 narrated that,

'financial dependency on my husband is quite stressful and if you become a widow, your husband's relatives can take valuable assets because you did not contribute anything. Upon divorce, you can also walk out with nothing.'

FGD1 mentioned that,

'Housewives are rarely given money to buy clothes or cosmetics. Husbands see it as a waste of money. They are also seen as people who do not understand financial issues. Housewives are not given money to support their maternal family hence they are regarded as useless by their own parents. Those who are clever will still from their husbands to support their parents.'

Housewives experience mental health issues that are rarely diagnosed and treated. Balancing household chores with productive and community management roles can be challenging. The stress that they experience can be ignored by family members

because the household has been normalised to be a woman's work and she is supposed to manage. Similarly, Sharma *et al.* (2018) note that these chores cause housewives to face physical and mental stress.

H9 said that,

'as a psychologist I have realised that there is loss of identity, inferiority complex and mental health issues associated with being a housewife.'

HW7 mentioned that,

'sometimes I get depressed by just being at home doing nothing or being overburdened by household work, I am isolated.'

HW8 mentioned that,

'there is boredom, fatigue and chest pains associated with being a housewife. Due to carrying water, the chest feels heavy.'

The violence that housewives experience has aggravated mental health issues. Kaplan (2021a) states that housewifery emerges as the predominant gender role imposed on women, often leading to mental health issues. Sharma *et al.* (2018) also confirms that housewives face GBV from husbands and mothers-in-law and when they go through this violence, they do not seek counselling because some of the violence has been normalised by cultural norms. The violence was revealed by FGD1 as follows:

'there is gender-based violence [is] associated with being a housewife ranging from verbal, emotional, financial and physical violence. Housewives may not be aware of some of these violence and may have normalised them. Landlords also abuse housewives by constantly asking them to repeat cleaning chores.'

COPING MECHANISM

Economic independence has been mentioned as a strategy for reducing the burden on housewives. They can buy labour-saving machinery to save time spent doing manual work. The

government can also support women's income-generating projects, as stated by H3 that,

'gone are the days when housewives' sole role is household work. They should do income-generating projects like online businesses and poultry because the Zimbabwean economy is hard. In some areas, the government gives free chicks to housewives so that they can have a source of income.'

H4 said,

'if finances permit, husbands must buy labour saving machines like washing machines, dishwashers and gas stoves in rural areas.'

Educating a girl can also help in creating career opportunities and reducing the burden that women face as housewives. Key informants, H2 and FGD1, confirmed by mentioning that,

'parents should educate their female children so that they do not face financial challenges in their marriages. Even those that are not gifted academically, they can be trained in skill they can give them an income.'

There should be campaigns designed to provide value to the work performed by housewives.

H1 and HW7 narrated that,

'there should be campaigns like housewives' matter, so that the roles of housewives can be valued. Housewives should also create their own networks to get advice and support on income generating projects.'

H6 and FGD 1stated that,

'Men Forums like Padare should educate husbands to value housewives because we have an important role to perform in their lives.'

There is need for gender-sensitive socialisation at the household level. This will ensure that boys normalise performing household work and eventually help their wives as husbands. Choudhary

and Ahmad (2017) report that housewives' psychological well-being improved significantly when their spouses actively supported them in managing their household chores. HW 5 confirmed the following:

'male children should be taught household chores so that they can help their wives when they become husbands. The curriculum should also be gender sensitive.'

Timetabling house chores can also help in reducing the burden that housewives carry, which will create time for resting and for their upkeep, as narrated below:

HW7 advised that,

'I use a house chores timetable so that I do not repeat the same task every day and have time to rest.'

Development partners and the government can also assist in drilling boreholes to shorten the distance to fetch water.

Once again, HW7 advises that,

'Development partners and the government can drill boreholes so that water is available nearer. Fetching water is the most tiresome task.'

Online self-care programmes can go a long time in beauty maintenance, as FGD1 mentioned,

'there is need for self-care programmes meant for housewives so that they do not look older than their actual age.'

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

THE MULTI-DIMENSIONAL FLUIDITY OF DOMESTIC ROLES

Empirical findings from this study demonstrate that in contemporary urban Harare, the boundaries of domestic housewifery are highly fluid, consistently traversing the domestic

threshold to encompass physical, agricultural and socio-political labours. Unlike Western paradigms that construct "housework" as a localised and strictly indoor endeavour, participants in this study reported performing gruelling physical tasks, such as urban plot cultivation and civic organisation, alongside reproductive work. This reality challenges Biswal's (2024) observation that rural studies tend to demarcate housewifery away from field and livestock work. In peri-urban and high-density Harare, stay-at-home wives actively engage in intensive agricultural labour (as voiced by HW1 and HW3) and manage complex eldercare systems under conditions of extreme institutional and structural fragility (HW3, HW4). This multi-dimensional expansion of labour is structurally uncompensated and, as Sharma *et al.* (2018) argue, this systematic expansion of obligations results in severe physical and emotional exhaustion, keeping women in a state of perpetual time poverty. The traditional African mothering ideologies and socialisation processes highlighted by Akinsanya (2023) effectively condition these women to accept these multiple, overlapping roles as natural, customary obligations rather than demanding labour.

INSTITUTIONALISED DEVALUATION, FINANCIAL HEGEMONY AND FAMILY STIGMATISATION

A core finding of this study is the intensive psychological and social toll inflicted by the institutionalised devaluation of unpaid domestic labour. Because domestic and reproductive work does not generate direct liquid income within the capitalist economy, husbands and wider networks of in-laws systematically label housewives as lazy or economically dependent. This structural reality is exemplified by the derogatory Shona slang terms used by families to label the wives such as "permanent home defender"

(implying inactivity), "wardrobe" (suggesting passive, stationary placement) and "tick" (implying parasitic drainage of spousal income). This systematic dehumanisation confirms the assertions of Choong (2021), who argues that unpaid domestic labour is treated as economically unproductive and thus socially insignificant. Furthermore, this lack of financial autonomy translates into extreme domestic power asymmetries, leaving housewives vulnerable to emotional abuse and financial isolation (as shared by HW1, HW2 and H3). This dynamic aligns directly with early feminist theories, such as those of Betty Friedan (as cited in Amran, Saari and Talhah 2025), which posit that full-time homemaking without financial reward is a core mechanism of structural oppression, stripping women of their self-determination and creating deep-seated feelings of intellectual and social inferiority when compared to career-oriented counterparts (Tomesu-Dubrow *et al.*, 2019).

MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS, DOMESTIC ISOLATION AND THE 'EXISTENTIAL VACUUM'

The lived experiences of Harare's stay-at-home wives highlight a significant but largely silent mental health crisis characterised by high rates of clinical anxiety, low self-esteem and chronic loneliness. The empirical data reveals that the isolation of the domestic space, particularly during hours when spouses and children are away, fosters acute social detachment (HW9). This state of confinement is identified by Kaplan (2021) as an "existential vacuum" a state of chronic monotony where housewives attempt to resolve their existential distress through obsessive cleaning, perfectionism, or co-dependency. In this study, the lack of external validation within familial structures directly translates into feelings of worthlessness (HW2) and acute

marginalisation during social gatherings (H1). As Ahmad and Khan (2018) observe, the severely restricted social networks available to full-time housewives actively block them from establishing support networks that could validate their identities outside of domestic servitude. For highly educated stay-at-home wives, such as HW9 and HW10, who possess undergraduate degrees, this sudden contraction of social space and shift from a professional sphere to a domestic role results in severe identity loss, cognitive stagnation and profound emotional fatigue, mirroring patterns identified by Nursalida *et al.* (2021) in transition studies.

PHYSICAL DECONDITIONING, CO-DEPENDENCY AND SYSTEMIC TIME POVERTY

This study highlights a direct correlation between the intensive, unshared nature of domestic duties and the systemic deterioration of the physical well-being of housewives. Due to relentless time poverty and the rigid standards of domestic perfection demanded by patriarchal spouses (HW4), stay-at-home wives are forced to prioritise the health, nutrition and domestic presentation of their families at the complete expense of their own physical care (HW7). This behavioural pattern is conceptualised by Ancel (2017) as domestic co-dependency, where individuals derive their entire self-worth from sacrificing their personal needs to serve others. In this study, the relentless physical demands of managing large, low-income households prevent wives from participating in leisure, self-care, or physical exercise, even when resources are theoretically available. Consequently, as Tan and Yim (2010) and Hamid Jan *et al.* (2023) argue, this forced sedentary cycle significantly elevates their susceptibility to lifestyle-related conditions, such as metabolic syndrome, cardiovascular disease

and hypertension. The physical wear of this constant labour is exacerbated by a lack of basic protective equipment (such as medical gloves and sanitisers) when caring for sick or elderly relatives (HW3), creating a dangerous loop where systemic gendered oppression directly translates into bodily vulnerability and physiological illness.

MODERN TECHNOLOGICAL DEMANDS, EDUCATIONAL LABOUR AND CULTURAL COPING TABOOS

Finally, the findings highlight how the modern expectations of urban motherhood have evolved to incorporate complex educational and technological labour, complicating the housewives' daily burden. Stay-at-home wives in Harare are now tasked with managing children's academic performance and online educational platforms, commonly referred to as "school runs" and homework supervision (HW5). This structural demand requires housewives to remain highly literate and technologically capable, yet many feel intellectually marginalised and excluded. This dynamic supports the findings of Khan *et al.* (2022), who note that housewives face extreme psychological stress and inferiority when forced to supervise complex modern learning curricula without training.

Furthermore, when seeking to mitigate these multifaceted stressors, stay-at-home wives face severe cultural and systemic barriers. While active spousal division of labour has been proven to significantly improve maternal mental health (Choudhary and Ahmad, 2017), Shona cultural frameworks heavily stigmatise male participation in domestic chores. Husbands who perform domestic tasks are socially accused of having succumbed to supernatural spousal control (*mupfuhwira* or love potions), which

acts as a powerful deterrent preventing supportive husbands from sharing domestic tasks (H1, FGD1). Consequently, housewives are forced to rely heavily on religious spaces (such as church fellowships) for validation, which, as Amran, Saari and Talhah (2025) argue, represents one of the few socially acceptable avenues where their labour is publicly recognised and validated.

CONCLUSION

This study illuminates the complex and often precarious socioeconomic realities of stay-at-home wives in Harare, Zimbabwe. The findings suggest that the domestic sphere is not merely a site of nurturance but a contested domain in which patriarchal ideologies and economic structures converge to marginalise female labour. Despite the diverse and essential roles that these women play, ranging from traditional caregiving to urban farming and educational support, their contributions remain systematically devalued. This devaluation manifests in harmful, derogatory labelling and a lack of financial autonomy which, in turn, precipitates a psychosocial crisis characterised by social isolation, low self-esteem and significant mental health challenges. Addressing the plight of stay-at-home wives in Harare requires a multi-pronged approach that includes legislative reform for asset protection, community-led advocacy to rebrand domestic labour and the promotion of spousal support systems that challenge traditional gender norms. By recognising the kitchen and household as productive economic spaces, Zimbabwean society can begin to alleviate the psychosocial and socio-economic burdens that currently define the lives of its housewives. Future research should consider longitudinal approaches to evaluate the long-term impact of small-scale

income-generating projects on the mental health and health status of stay-at-home wives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following interventions are recommended:

Combating Derogatory Labelling (The Dignity Campaign): Community-based advocacy programmes should target in-laws and relatives to deconstruct terms such as “permanent home defenders”, “wardrobe” or “ticks”. Highlighting the economic replacement cost of domestic work is essential to shifting the narrative from dependency to contribution.

Mitigating Caregiving Burnout: Recognising the heavy burden placed on wives caring for the elderly (as seen in HW3's case), the Ministry of Health and Child Care should facilitate community-based support groups or mobile respite care services to prevent psychological deterioration and time-poverty.

Legal Literacy and Asset Protection: Given the fear of asset stripping expressed by participants (HW10), legal aid organisations should conduct workshops on the importance of civil marriage registration and the drafting of wills, ensuring that stay-at-home wives are protected in the event of widowhood or divorce.

Addressing Technological Inferiority in Education: Schools in Harare should initiate inclusive digital literacy programmes for parents. This addresses homework anxiety (HW5) and ensures that housewives are not marginalised by modern curriculum changes.

Infrastructural Relief for Domestic Labour: Local municipalities must prioritise water accessibility. As identified in the findings, piece jobs and fetching water are tiresome tasks that exacerbate physical deterioration (H7). Boreholes in residential areas would significantly reduce time-poverty.

Psychosocial Support for Identity Loss: Counselling centres should develop specific modules for housewives dealing with existential vacuum and social isolation. Establishing safe spaces for stay-at-home wives to network and share coping strategies can mitigate their low self-esteem.

Promotion of Shared Domesticity: To counter the stigma associated with husbands helping at home, media campaigns should normalise partnership parenting, framing male participation as an act of familial leadership rather than a sign of being "under a spell".

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