

# Gender Representation of Females in Seasonal Livelihood Programme Consultations, for Sustainable Development Goals in Rural Districts in Zimbabwe

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**Abstract:** Equal opportunities and empowerment of all women are not only an explicit goal under the 2030 Agenda in education and management but in all day-to-day activities that are happening where females exist. Gender inequality of females has not been fully addressed if their representation is still evident in most of the meetings that are held in rural areas. The purpose of this study is to examine gender representation of females in seasonal livelihood programme meetings, for sustainable development goals in rural districts in Zimbabwe. Feminist and gender theories, guided this study, as these foot of gender inequality and its rifestness. The study was premised on an interpretive paradigm and a qualitative approach that employed a case study. Interviews were carried out on forty participants. Traditional practices prescribed by chiefs detect how women in their societies should behave and are socially routinised, and walking long distance for infrastructures were the revealed causes of representation of women in meetings. The study recommends that investing in infrastructures such as roads, electrification, improved sanitation, safe drinking water, education and health care centres in each ward minimises walking long distances for women.

**Keywords:** Representation, seasonal, livelihood, sustainable, development

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## Introduction

Equal representation and the empowerment of all women and girls is not only an explicit goal under the 2030 Agenda in education and management but, also in seasonal livelihoods programme meetings consultations in rural areas. Similarly, it is a driver of sustainable development in all its scopes, from ending poverty and hunger, promoting prosperity and inclusive growth. It also extends its latitudes to building peace, justice and inclusive societies to secure the protection of the planet and its natural resources. However, where women and girls are denied rights, opportunities, progress will inevitably falter, and the 2030 Agenda as a whole will be in jeopardy. The systematic mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the implementation and monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is therefore crucial (United Nations Women, 2018). Nonetheless, females' attendance in seasonal livelihood programme consultations, for sustainable development goals in rural districts in Zimbabwe was insignificant. Making agenda 2030 difficult to achieve in those areas.

## Conceptualisation of Seasonal Livelihood Programme

Seasonal livelihood programme is a planning tool applied at the sub-national level to ensure that multi-sectoral programmes and interventions are coordinated, planned, and delivered across institutions and stakeholders. It is a consultative process that brings together communities, government, and partners to develop a shared understanding of the context and to highlight the programmes that should be implemented. It as well suggests when, for whom, by which partners and during which type of year (typical and bad) programmes can be implemented. Seasonal livelihood programme further assists to identify programme gaps and their opportunities (wfp-unhcr. 2021). It supports tailored response plans at sub-national levels by linking the national-level Integrated Context Analysis (ICA) with communities and partners to deliver complementary programmes. Thus SLP is a tool used to identify short and long-term interventions suited to a variety of contexts in different districts. It is part of a broader three-step process that strengthens the design, planning and implementation of longer-term resilience building programmes, developed in partnership and aligned to national and local priorities with gender lenses (Pakhtunkhwa, 2019). Therefore, SLP is a tool that provides an overview of seasonality, livelihoods, and programming options, refines and tailors the findings to district/community levels, targeting on food security and vulnerability by combining humanitarian and development actions to identify interventions for short and long-term plans of action in an inclusive way.

## Background of the Problem and Literature

Looking towards 2030, UNICEF has issued a new Gender Policy, which reflects current realities and the evolving gender equality in programmes. Aligned to the Sustainable Development Goals and United Nations Reform, committing to a bolder and more ambitious vision for gender equality and the empowerment of all

children, adolescents, and women is unavoidable and its mandate goes beyond simply responding to the manifestations of inequality, and working actively to remove the underlying structural barriers (UNICEF, 2021). To advance progress towards all of its goals, including a more gender-equal world, UNICEF aims to ensure that its programme meets or exceeds minimum standards for evidence-informed programme design and implementation. As reflected in the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025. Its key actions are for the integration of gender equality throughout the life course are incorporated in all five Goal Areas (UN, 2021). Despite all these efforts to eradicate gender inequality in all programmes, females continue to be under represented in seasonal livelihood programme consultations in rural areas of Zimbabwe.

In Asia, violence against women remains high; global health, climate, and humanitarian crises have further increased risks of violence, especially for the most vulnerable women and girls; and women feel more unsafe than they did before COVID-19 pandemic (UN, 2022). Women's representation in meetings, positions of power and decision-making remains below parity. Only 47 per cent of data required to track progress on SDG 5 are currently available, rendering women and girls effectively invisible (UN Women, 2022). Over two years after the pandemic, most activities have reopened but insignificant number of females attending development meetings remain evident, including among marginalised and vulnerable groups of girls in rural Pakistan (UN, 2022).

The unequal representation between women and men and between families and societies more broadly, is a key source of economic disadvantage for women. Women devote on average around three times more hours per day to unpaid domestic work than men. Owing to the resulting time constraints, women are less in development meetings as compared with men and, when they do engage, they are more likely to be harassed by men and their voice will not be heard (Jinia & Asaduzzaman, 2021).

Women have limited time remaining for development meetings, rest and leisure because of the combined responsibility of their homes, as recognized at the sixty-third session of the commission on the status of women, the inadequate provisioning of public services and sustainable infrastructure further intensifies the constraints on women's income and time. For poor women, girls, and those belonging to marginalised groups, the deprivation of access to public services and infrastructure is particularly acute (United Nations, 2022). Biased gender norms and stereotypes, embedded in the rural societies derail women's choices of what to do, which meetings to attend, their voices and opportunities as adults (UNESCO, 2024). About 70% of the world's poor population are concentrated in rural communities. These are communities that rely on agriculture, forestry, fisheries and livestock to make a living. Within these communities, the poorest of the poor are often women and young girls who lack regular and decent employment, and who may face hunger and/or malnutrition, and poor access to health, education and productive assets (United Nations, 2022). Although gender inequality varies considerably across regions and sectors, there is evidence that, globally, women benefit less from rural employment, whether in self- or wage-employment, than men do (International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2019).

In Africa, poverty remains mainly a rural challenge that is affecting women, about 80% of people in poverty live in rural areas. A significant size of rural population, approximately 18% of residents lived in extreme poverty in 2021, compared to around 5% of urban residents. Much like national poverty rates, rural poverty rates are the highest in sub-Saharan Africa, where more than 50% of the rural population live in extreme poverty, makes it difficult for the women to attend meetings, as most of their times are spent in search of food and other necessary amenities for their families' survival (Iranmanesh et al., 2022). In Somalia the situation of females not attending meetings in rural areas is made worse by inadequate access to public services, infrastructure and social protection. Since the COVID-19 pandemic has compounded their already vulnerable position by reducing incomes, limiting mobility and undermining food security (UN, 2021). Despite the persistence of rural disadvantage, poverty is declining faster in rural than in urban. About 19 countries where the rate of rural poverty reduction was higher than that of urban, most of them have developed because of the migration of people because of the land issues. However, the representation of females in development meetings in rural areas remains higher as compared to the urban areas. Over the past 30 years, developing countries have made little progress in raising gender equality in rural areas as compared to urban (Ravallion, 2016a).

Women are disproportionately considered in political positions where most of the rules and laws of the rural communities are passed, in which their rights are not adequately respected and their social protection is limited. As a reason they remain in their homes even during the development meetings that are held in rural areas (ILO, 2019). Thus, most African women in rural areas are casual labourers, around 25% of them to be more precise. That doesn't mean they work less, on the contrary. However, the problem is that much of the work they do is not valued and remunerated accordingly. In fact, most rural women are unpaid family members; this does not only lower their labour income but also increases their stress and fatigue. Hence, their representation in seasonal livelihood programme meetings, for sustainable development goals in rural districts.

Financial crisis is another reason why females do not attend meetings in rural areas in developing countries. This acts as the main cause of rural hardships because of the need of food, school fees and many

other expenses that a living human cannot avoid even in rural areas (ILO, 2019). For these reasons, it is hard to quantify the impact of the current crisis in terms of gender equality, but certain trends can be predicted. For example, it is plausible to anticipate that in Botswana, Namibia and other parts South African countries women are expected to assume the primary responsibility for acting as safety nets of last resort and for ensuring that their families survive. Hence, their time to attend meetings become limited. In the African continent, rural women's unpaid work burdens are likely to intensify, especially in low-income households and especially when State-run facilities (even the few that actually reached rural areas) are cut as part of austerity measures (Iranmanesh, Ghobakhloo, Nilashi, Tseng, Senali, Abbasi, 2022). This further increases their stress and fatigue that affects their attendance for their programmes that would be discussed in development meetings, hence, their representation in seasonal livelihoods programme becomes elaborated.

In Zimbabwe, the constitution, in particular Sections 17 and 56 provide for gender equality and equity among all citizens and the provision was made for non-discrimination based on gender considerations. Zimbabwe has a Revised National Gender Policy (2017) that places strong emphasis on gender equality and equity and envisions a gender-just society in which men and women enjoy equity, and benefit as equal partners in the development of the country. The Zimbabwean Government also put in place a broad-based Women Economic Empowerment Framework that was revised and adopted in 2011, that seeks to channel strategic interventions in four pillars that includes: women business ownership/entrepreneurship; women in key economic decision-making positions; employment equity and women from disadvantaged backgrounds operating viable informal and formal livelihood activities. It further catalysed the process through creating a conducive business and policy environment, vibrant and supportive institutions, partnerships and coalitions and enhancing women's competencies. Despite all efforts that were put in place to eliminate gender disparity, gender inequality of women in seasonal livelihood programme meetings, for sustainable development goals in rural districts in Zimbabwe still manifests itself as witnessed by Seasonal Livelihood Programme register in Chiredzi Rural Report (2022), there were 14 females attended the meeting compared to 34 males. For the same programme in Mbire Rural District Report (2022), females were underrepresented, as they were 11 females and 28 males. From Zvishavane Rural Report (2023), females were 8 as compared to 23 males who attended the Seasonal Livelihood Programme meeting. In addition, the same meeting was carried out in Masvingo Rural, still females were underrepresented compared to their male counterparts. It is therefore, for this reason that the study focussing on the representation of females at seasonal livelihood programme meetings, for sustainable development goals in rural districts in Zimbabwe has been carried out.

### **Objectives**

The article was guided by the following research objectives:

- (a) Examine reasons of representation of female in seasonal livelihood programme meetings, for sustainable development in rural districts in Zimbabwe.
- (b) Establish strategies to be employed to improve female participation in seasonal livelihood programme consultations for sustainable development in rural districts in Zimbabwe.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Feminist theory and gender theory, guided this study, as the footing of gender inequality, its rifeness and the different feminist political remedies are based on these theories. Where gender theory advocates for gender balance or equal numbers in participation of both men and women (UNDP & UN Women, 2016). On the other hand, feminist theory does not subscribe to the power of oppression instead it encourages the creation of gender equality environments in advance to consider barriers that may interrupt the smooth running of the meeting (Earles, 2017). Their perspectives made significant contributions to civilizing women's standpoints (Gurung, 2021). Feminists have stressed on gender inequality not an individual matter, but a deep-seated structure of societies. Gender inequality is built into the families, politics, religions, the arts, other cultural productions and the very language we speak (Eagle & Wood, 2012). To this extent, making women and men equal necessitates socially based and not individually based solutions (Carlson, 2013). Thus, gender dissimilarity is observed in homes and outside through ethnic norms and values that spread it to choices of consultation to and not to attend, with reference to females' attendance in Seasonal livelihood programme meetings for sustainable development in rural areas of Zimbabwe. Hence, the knowledge of inequality facilitates the awareness of how gender and its remains develop and cultivates a wide range of questions about societies that are intended to provide insight on gender roles, accountabilities and gaps that exist in seasonal livelihood programme consultations, for sustainable development goals in rural districts in Zimbabwe.

### Methodology

The current study engaged the interpretive paradigm. The paradigm considers that there are numerous realities or interpretations to a single event. Where reality is subjective and socially constructed (Mhlanga, Mushoriwa & Mavuso, 2021). Given the above sentiments, in this study the fact that the participants involved would see and interpret gender inequality of females in seasonal livelihood programme consultations for sustainable development in rural areas of Zimbabwe differently, however, their ideas put together give us insights on realities on the ground. The interpretive paradigm was chosen as it stresses the idea of truth that is socially constructed by the participants and allows researchers to probe into subtle issues expressed by the participants (Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Anderson, 2014; Argyris, Putnam & Smith 2015). The interpretive paradigm was thus appropriate for the current study because it assisted the researcher to understand the views of the participants from individual perspectives. The study adopted a qualitative approach, which was primarily exploratory and it was aligned well with the interpretive paradigm in using non-quantifiable data that was appropriate in gaining an understanding of underlying causes, opinions, and motivations that female participants had regarding the problem of why they are under represented in seasonal livelihood programme meetings. A descriptive case study, which has a significant impact on the reliability of the results given its concentration on few cases, was employed. A sample of six males and four females were purposively selected and interviewed from the four districts where the meetings were held. For Creswell (2008), careful sampling improves the validity of research results and enhances the credibility of research results.

### Findings and Discussion

The study revealed that representation of females in seasonal livelihood programme consultations for sustainable development goals in rural districts of Zimbabwe are results of traditions, customs and social norms. During interviews of the participants pointed out that:

*“Traditional and cultural practices prescribed by men in their gatherings with chiefs dictate how our behaviour as women in the society should be, and these behaviours are socially routinized in such a manner that all women in that area practices them. We are told that meetings are for men only while females are expected to be doing house chores”.*

The findings suggest that the representation of females in seasonal livelihood programme meetings for sustainable development goals in rural districts of Zimbabwe are caused by socialisation that women went through in their families. These inferred long-established beliefs, practices and customs were passed down through generations. They have existed for a long time without changing and have specific practice or behaviour that are common within a particular society or group and are prehistoric, with lost or arcane origins, existing from time immersed by perceptions of common behaviour of women (Shteynberg, Gelfand, & Kim, 2009; Stephan & Uhlaner, 2010). These findings further reveal that political influences discriminate females as they are not empowered in rural areas. Thus, the political influences administer the complicated operational environments of rural societies and they turn to be restricting females' accomplishments, and limit their capability to participate on a smooth equilibrium environment with males. In line with that, democratic societies in which gender equality is legally mandated, gender discrimination occurs in political spheres in rural areas, both in regards to presumptions about political allegiances that fall along gender lines, and disparate gender representation within representative democracies (Manon, 2007). Contrary, the active participation of women, on equal terms with men, at all levels of decision-making and political involvement is essential to the achievement of equality, sustainable development, peace and democracy and the inclusion of their perspectives and experiences into the decision-making processes (Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019).

The study also made known that females' attendance in rural meetings remains low because most of the females' work remain unseen, unrecognized and undervalued. Women's presence in rural meetings and employment remains low, leading to lack of voice and representation. The study also revealed that in rural areas at school level girls are considered as liabilities because of the viewpoint that male children are assets. One of the participants said that:

*The issue of undermining girls at school is carried on to women in our society. This is the reason why male members are rendered more important than females. They attend decision-making meetings in the area and given leadership positions while females are left home.*

This proposes that in rural areas, males are rendered useful as compared to their female counterparts; hence, they are given the opportunities to organise and attend the development meetings and are able to contribute in development of analytical, leadership, decision-making, critical-thinking, problem-solving and intellectual skills. Concurring with the above findings, Kapur (2022) alludes that in some of the rural households and among disadvantaged sections of the society, there has been prevalence of the viewpoint that males are

assets and what they contribute in meetings develop the community, while females are liabilities and their work remains unseen, unrecognized and undervalued.

The study found out that poverty remains mainly a rural challenge that is affecting women in Zimbabwe. Instead of attending meetings, most women in rural areas will be searching for food and involved in casual labour. It was also found out that the situation of the rural poverty is made worse by inadequate access to public services, infrastructure and social protection. The COVID-19 pandemic compounded their already vulnerable position by reducing incomes, limiting mobility and undermining food security. The study also revealed that some females have gardens where they grow vegetables for their families and fees payment. One male participant said that:

*“Most women in this area are widows who are taking care of orphans. As long as the seasonal livelihood-programme meeting do not give people sitting allowances, it will be difficult for more women to attend.”*

The above assertions suggest that a larger number of people in poverty live in rural areas as compared to those in urban areas as a result women have to search for food for their families as COVID-19 affected a lot of resources. The findings also suggest that the districts do not have public facilities for social protection, therefore females have to travel long distances to get necessary services, making it difficult to attend meetings. In line with the above findings and in many developing countries, a large size of rural population or rural residents live in extreme poverty, compared to around to those who are in urban areas (Iranmanesh et. al, 2022). Contrary, over the past 30 years, developing countries have made little progress in raising the level of consumption of the poorest, however the rate of rural poverty has been higher than that of urban poverty in all countries and reaching the very poorest remains challenging, in that regards they have been left behind (Ravallion, 2016a).

The findings made known that the culture and the way women are socialised has a bearing in the way they participate /attend community gatherings as a result, they attend meetings where they are free to participate. It was also revealed that patriarchal attitudes from home are carried to the meetings, as the males at home always criticise their behaviour in the meetings. The cultural barriers shaped by patriarchal discourse become vital structural factors in determining the level of women’s representation in development meetings. Women have to negotiate their entry into and claim public space according to the broad, cultural and material opportunities available to them in a given cultural and rural context. Although gender role ideology is not static, rather it is in flux due to its constant intersection with ever-changing economic, social and political systems – women continue to be defined as private beings in dominant cultural discourses, which results in creating structural barriers to women’s representation in development meetings (PandayWright, & Moynihan, 2008).

### **Strategies for promoting Females’ Attendance in Rural Seasonal Livelihood Programme consultations for Sustainable Development**

The findings revealed that providing the rural areas with necessary infrastructure and social services can help to reduce the under representation of females that is prevalent in rural seasonal livelihoods programme meetings. It was also found out that if all the facilities are availed, females’ travelling to search for services will be reduced and they may attend to planning meetings being held in the district. One of the participant said that:

*“To balance the representation of females and males in seasonal livelihood programme meetings, invest in infrastructure such as usable roads, electrification, improved sanitation, safe drinking water, education, health care and many more in each ward so that walking long distances is minimised.”*

The above findings imply that there is need to improve access of all public service centres in each and every ward to minimise the obstacles that women face in rural areas where they have to search for the services from distant areas within the district. Infrastructure is the backbone of any country that plays a very important role in supporting a nation’s economic growth, gender inequality and poverty alleviation, by promoting the quality of life in rural areas. It is pertinent to understand the concept of development as a way of reducing burden on women in rural areas and enabling the planning authorities to be actively involved in providing sufficient basic facilities that could improve the rural communities’ state of wellbeing (Manggat, Zain, & Jamaluddin, 2018). Reducing poverty and increase equal of participation and the quality of life of the rural poor can be achieved by introducing various major and minor schemes and programmes related to rural infrastructure. Thus, improving social protection coverage in rural areas, as it is generally lower than in urban areas, helps to relieve people living in rural areas from hardships and gender discrimination of women (ILO & FAO, 2021).

The study discovered that, ending all forms of discrimination and patriarchal way of life as a persistent driver of inequality in rural areas is in the form of females submitting to their husbands. It also came out that because of the systematic exclusion of women by the fore fathers has been carried to today’s life, women and girls, the benefits of rural growth are likely to be unevenly distributed, unless swift action is taken to promote their inclusion by addressing prejudice and discrimination. Another participant remarked:

*“Training both boys and girls on the issues of equal participation from the stage of early childhood, in terms of implementation of household responsibilities and taking care of the needs and requirements of family members. Females must always be encouraged to implement all methodologies that promote their empowerment at household level and this will always be regarded as one of the critical causes of gender inequality hence their participation in meetings.”*

From the above assertions, eradicating all forms of gender discrimination, patriarchal way of life, gender roles and stereotyping that perpetuate in rural areas in the form of women being submissive to their husband. People in rural areas should be trained on gender responsiveness that promotes gender equity and equality. Coordination and gender mainstreaming of national and regional strategies such as ensuring out-reach to women as beneficiaries of the services and programmes that support them in small-scale farming to encourage them to attend meetings. The initiatives to form local self-help groups of women to identify and address community needs as well as assist to boost their attendance in meetings (UN Women, 2016).

### Conclusion

The study concludes that traditional cultural practices that are prescribed by men in their gatherings with chiefs dictate how women's behaviour in the society should be, and these behaviours are socially routinized in such a manner that all women in that area practice them. The enquiry also concludes that the inferred long-established beliefs, practices and customs were passed on generations, all forms of discrimination and patriarchal way of life as a persistent driver of inequality in rural areas in the form of submission contributes to representation of females in seasonal livelihoods programme meetings. There is need to improve access of all public service centres in every ward to minimise the burden that women carry in rural areas where they have to search for the services from distant sources. Reducing poverty and increasing equal participation and the quality of life of the rural poor can be achieved by introducing various major and minor schemes and programmes related to rural infrastructure goes a long way in reducing gender inequality in SLP gatherings. The study also concludes that there is need to motivate the participants by giving them sitting allowance.

### Recommendations

- The study recommends that the local leaders have to eliminate all forms of discrimination and gender stereotyping for the women to be able to attend all scheduled meetings in their areas by being gender responsive.
- It is also recommended that the wards should be provided with public services by the government to reduce burden to women of travelling long distances in search of facilities.
- The study further recommends that meeting invitations should be sent by responsible authorities to the participants early so that they can prepare to attend by scheduling their programmes well.
- It is also recommended that the organisers of SLP should consider giving the participants certificates and sitting allowances

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