



**RURAL WOMEN AND LIVELIHOODS:  
OPTIONS FOR POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN DROUGHT  
RISK AREAS OF BIKITA DISTRICT, ZIMBABWE**

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**Abstract:**

This paper examined the role of women in livelihoods for the reduction of poverty in drought risk areas of Zimbabwe, case of ward 5, Bikita district. There is an increase of rural women's participation in economic activities to reduce poverty. The persistence of drought and economic collapse in Zimbabwe influenced the increased participation of rural women in productive activities. Rural women have become breadwinners in most households and have since adopted various livelihood activities to survive. These livelihoods should be able to cater for their daily household needs. A case study design was employed in this study. The study used questionnaires and semi-structured interviews as data collecting instruments. Livelihood activities found included seasonal farming, gardening, and money saving schemes, informal trading, and informal trading. Challenges faced contained within, persistent droughts, economic crisis, lack of economic

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opportunities, poor access to productive resources, erratic climatic changes and poor infrastructure and technological facilities.

**Keywords:** rural women, poverty alleviation, livelihood diversification, sustainable livelihoods

## 1. Introduction

Zimbabwe experienced varied challenges like persistent droughts and the 2008/9 economic failure which affected most of the rural populace (Poverty Reduction Forum Trust, (PRFT) 2013). These challenges increased poverty and resource insecurity pushing most of the people, especially men, to migrate from rural areas to urban areas with some leaving Zimbabwe in search of employment (Buckland, Eele and Mugwara, 2000). Rural women shouldered the burden of being bread winners and major decision makers in the absence of men (Muzvidziwa, 2000; PRFT, 2013). This was a major shift for many households, being patriarchal societies, women relied on men to make major decisions in the family.

Rural women became more involved in economically productive activities in form of various livelihoods such as, gardening, pottery making, cross boarder trading, irrigation farming, buying and selling and informal employment (Mushore, Muzenda and Makovere, 2013; Muzvidziwa, 2000). The various forms of livelihood activities form the pathways of attaining household basic needs such as food and help to alleviate poverty (Mathew, 2003). Rural women are contributing a lot in the rural economy through their numerous livelihood activities and their impacts manifest in providing school fees for children, food and buying household properties. It is common practice that whenever a man loses his job in town one is bound to return home and depend on the wife's income drawn from rural livelihood activities (Charmes, 1998 cited in Fonchingong, 2005).

The term "livelihood" implies ways in which people satisfy their needs, or gain a living (Scoones, 2009). In this regard Scoones (2009) view all activities involved in finding food, searching for water, shelter, clothing and all necessities required for human survival at individual and household level as livelihoods. These livelihoods should be sufficient enough in order to alleviate poverty, and preferably, increase well-being for households. Bryceson (2000) noted that in Sub Saharan Africa, rural people tend to depend on natural resource-based occupations. Rural households are dependent on both cash and subsistence income from natural resources or land-based strategies (Scoones, 2009). Allison and Ellis (2001) maintain that in developing countries rural people appear to depend mainly on agriculture as the main livelihood option. Approximately 90 % of rural households are involved in farming activities (Davis et al., 2010). In Africa, 70 % of the household income in rural areas is from farming activities, while in Asia and Latin America, 50 % of the income is from farming activities (Davis et al., 2010 cited in Bryceson, 2000). However, the profitability of agriculture has been marred by socio-

economic woes and negative climatic changes that cause poor rainfall and high temperatures both unfavourable to farming. Studies of rural household income demonstrate a shift in relying on agriculture, positing that between 40% and 60% of rural income emanates from non-natural resource based sources (Forgey et al., 2000; Bryceson, 2000). In most rural areas in developing countries, non-farm activities have become common livelihoods that people rely on as a source of income (Bryceson, 2000).

A number of people employed in informal sector is estimated from 45-85% in developing countries, rural livelihood activities included (Muzvidziwa, 2000). according to Moyle *et al.* (2006) the increasing burden of household upkeep entails that rural women should be empowered to make decisions that have a positive impact on livelihoods and well-being of families without relying too much on men. Studies by International Labour Organisation (ILO) (1998) indicated that women contribute to the economy and to poverty alleviation through numerous livelihood activities. In this sense, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995, cited in Fonchingong (2005) declared that suppression of poverty can be successfully accomplished if nations consider empowering women, especially rural women as they are the most vulnerable. In this study, the researcher aims to explore the sustainability of rural livelihoods and challenges faced by women in Bikita district. The study explored possible pathways to promote sustainable and resilient livelihoods in the long term.

## **2. The objectives of the research study**

The study was guided by three research objectives:

- To find out the livelihood activities being done by rural women
- To examine the challenges being faced by rural women in their livelihood activities
- To explore the sustainability of livelihoods options and come up with an in-depth knowledge of pathways to support and improve them for poverty alleviation.

### **2.1 Statement of the problem**

Due to impending pressures of economic challenges and the persistence of droughts which expose rural households to poverty, rural women in Bikita district, Ward 5 shoulder a lot of burdens as both caregivers and breadwinners. This scenario have prompted rural women to shift from being domesticated to being industrious; they have since initiated productive activities (livelihoods), which can provide income and food for the well-being of their families (Muzvidziwa, 2000). The poor performance of agricultural activities which have always been the mainline livelihood option for rural households has increased the vulnerability of rural households to poverty and food insecurity. Their situations are worsened by the fact that Bikita district is a Lowveld area with very low rainfalls and high temperatures (Mushore, Muzenda and Makovere, 2013). This had led to diversification in household livelihood activities adopting off farm and various non-farm activities for survival. According to Ellis (2000), livelihood diversification is having multiple sources of income which may include off farm and nonfarm activities.

Livelihood diversity is an avenue for promoting rural livelihoods and reducing poverty. However, due to varied challenges such as climate change, lack of access to capital and productive resources, lack of proper infrastructure and appropriate technology, the role of women in economic production was undermined. This has also reduced their capacity to exploit the opportunities available to reduce poverty and promote development of their households and communities. This paper explores the impact of livelihood options available to rural women in Bikita and their role in alleviating poverty.

### **3. Literature review**

#### **3.1 Theoretical framework**

This article is guided by the sustainable livelihoods framework (SLF), which help to explain rural women livelihoods that targets economic empowerment in semi-arid regions of Zimbabwe.

#### **3.2 Sustainable livelihoods framework**

This paper was guided by the sustainable livelihoods framework as shown in Figure 1. According to De Stage, Holloway, Mullins, Nchabaleng and Ward (2002) sustainable livelihoods framework is a holistic asset-based framework for understanding poverty and ways to reduce poverty. The sustainable livelihoods framework presents factors that affect rural populace in production including the relationships between such factors. The sustainable livelihoods framework (SLF) depicts people as operating in a context of vulnerability, within which they have access to certain assets. Assets gain weight and value through the prevailing social, institutional and organizational environment (policies, institutions and processes). This context decisively shapes the livelihood strategies that are open to people in pursuit of their self-defined beneficial livelihood outcomes (Kollmair and Gamper, 2002). De Stage et al. (2002) view the sustainable livelihood framework as useful whenever there is need to understand rural livelihoods and their sustainability. It also helps to understand the choices households and individuals make in opting for certain strategies to survive. Thus, the researcher used this framework to comprehend rural livelihood options available for poverty alleviation and factors affecting these livelihoods in Ward 5 of Bikita district. Household reliance on multiple sources of income and survival strategies is termed as the livelihood diversity and the traits of livelihood diversity have been observed in various rural areas facing drought challenges in the sub-Saharan Africa.

In a study by Bird and Shepherd (2003) in Zimbabwean drought prone areas like Mwenezi, Gutu and Chivi, their primary livelihoods are characterised by cereal agriculture supplemented by cash cropping, animal husbandry with some remittances from migration labor. Another study of Zimbabwe's livelihood zones noted that resettled households in northern and central Zimbabwe depend on rain-fed food and cash crop cultivation (Chirau et al., 2014). These small-scale farms were allocated to settlers under the Fast Track Land Resettlement Program that started in July 2000. However, some rural

households, especially those in Bikita Semi-Intensive Communal, depend on daily work found in the Bikita mines or in nearby farms and towns (Bird and Shepherd, 2003).

A field survey conducted in Chivi district of Masvingo revealed that the majority of rural women were involved rain-fed subsistence farming and horticultural production although these livelihoods are not all that sustainable considering that Chivi is in ecological region 4 and 5 experiencing droughts most of the seasons (Matthew, 2003). Some women who were also interviewed in Zhara village of Chivi indicated that they were into pottery and were even seen packing their clay pots (*hari*) at Sese bus stop waiting to deliver them to South Africa, a foreign market (Chirau, Nkambule and Mupambwa, 2014). In a different survey conducted in Nyanyadzi area of Manicaland, Zimbabwe most of the rural women proved that they sell baskets and roasted birds (*zvishiri*) (PRFT, 2013). Most nations are recognising informal trading, to which rural livelihood activities fall, as taking a stake in the economic cycle.

The Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Committee (ZimVAC) has adopted the application of livelihoods analysis as an approach to strengthen its analysis of household vulnerability (Rigg, 2006). In November 2009, the ZimVAC conducted a livelihood rezoning exercise in all the livelihood zones in Zimbabwe (Rigg, 2006). Livelihoods in low lying areas and some mountains part of Matobo, Gwanda and Mberengwa district were found to be characterised by mainly animal husbandry and rain-fed cultivation of maize (Bryceson, 2002). It was also noted that poor rural households subsist partly on their own crop production but more importantly on cash income earned from local and cross boarder employment (Cephas and Bernard, 2012). Another study by Chirau et al. (2014), in Mutorashanga area observed that most rural households carry out informal chrome mining supplemented by gold panning, on-farm casual work, petty trade and small-scale cultivation of maize which is consumed as green cobs. According to Perret (2003) in some rural areas of South Africa most rural people work in agriculture, as farmers or farm workers, or get non-farm job opportunities seasonally and often part time. In addition, some individuals and households in rural South Africa depend on temporary employment, trading or transfers of grants and remittances as their livelihoods options (Perret, 2003; Rigg, 2006). In a different study conducted by Contributors Catholic Relief Services (CCRS) (2010) in Malawi, it was noted that major livelihood activities undertaken by people living in Juma district include farming, Informal "*Ganyu*" labour, fishing and various income-generating activities such as bicycle hire, mat-making, and petty trade. In support, Gill (2003), finds out that most of the poor households in rural Malawi depend on *Ganyu* labour as their chief source of income. Seasonal labour migration can result from both high levels of poverty and food insecurity, a push factor and seasonal employment opportunities outside of the community/region which is a pull factor (Gill, 2003). All these diversified livelihood strategies aim at reducing poverty and promote household well-being by providing pathways for income generation and access to basic resources. Livelihood diversification is more so important for rural women who are the main managers of resources in the household and their role as caregivers.

### **3.3 Gender and livelihoods**

Gender refers to culturally defined ways of acting as a man or woman that becomes part of an individual's personal sense of self (Gandari, Chaminuka and Mafumbate, 2010). An investigation of livelihoods in gender context advises that different tasks are shared according to socially constructed gender roles (Fuwa, 2004). Studies revealed that different socially prearranged gender roles pushes men and women to have different options and responsibilities affecting their livelihood choices (Niehof, 2004). Gender therefore affects one's ability to access income opportunities and productive resources (Valdiva and Gilles, 2001).

Valdiva and Gilles (2001) noted a clear gender division in livelihood activities in most African traditional societies where men are more involved in productive labour while women are more involved in reproductive labour. Production and reproduction are divisions between monetary "productive" economy and non-monetary "reproductive" (Pearson, 2000). Reproductive labour includes housework or domestic labour like childcare, and care of the sick and elderly while productive labour includes paid work, self-employment and subsistence production. According to Khun (2006), reproductive work that women and girls perform include fetching water and fuel, laundry, shopping, preparing food, cleaning the home and taking care of children and other family members. Men are involved in some reproductive roles such as making repairs to the home and collecting wood and water via scotch carts or wheelbarrows (USAID/Zimbabwe, 2012). These differences are borrowed from the idea of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels who vitalized the necessity of reproductive labour in maintaining productive labour (Khun, 2006).

Assets and the forms of capital essential to survival approaches and livelihood seem to be gendered (Valdiva and Giles, 2001 in Carpenter, 2011). Those five asset classifications defined in the sustainable livelihoods framework namely; human, natural, financial, social and physical capital are achieved through investment of time and resources by individual household members. Mostly, men have greater access to each form of capital, predominantly natural, financial and physical forms of capital (Carpenter, 2011). Such a scenario rises men's ability to diversify their livelihoods. Studies show that increasing women's economic empowerment through livelihoods and paid employment help them to effectively care for their families (Khun, 2011; Smith et al., 2003). It was also noted in a study that household well-being can be increased by promoting livelihoods of women (Carpenter, 2012).

### **3.4 Household decision making and livelihoods**

Decision making in the household is an important aspect of gender equality and livelihoods choice (Khun, 2006). Household decision-making has an influence on development and reduction of poverty. (Valdiva and Gilles, 2001). Various United Nations policy documents have called for the development of programmes to address unequal decision-making power within families, and to support women's and men's joint control of household assets and joint household decision-making (United Nations, 2011).

Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZimAsset) 2013–2018 focuses on improving gender equality and equity through encouraging women’s participation in economic decision making and politics. However, it does not directly address the issues of rural women. Women do not have the same decision-making authority over access and ownership of assets as men. In general, men control the majority of the following resources and services used in performing productive activities: land, most tools and equipment, income and savings, raw material, transportation, most livestock, training and extension, farming inputs and technical agricultural information (Khun, 2006). In a typical household, husbands commonly consult with wives in making decisions on resources and benefits, but men have the final say (Khun, 2006). Within the household, women control reproductive resources such as household utensils and kitchenware.

Ministry of Agriculture, Mechanization and Irrigation Development (MAMID) (2013) noted that men in Zimbabwe make decisions on crops grown and marketed while women are responsible for ensuring food security at the household level. Although the Government of Zimbabwe acknowledges the role of women in food production, there has been no data on the gender dynamics in crops production. Men make decisions on the use of veterinary technologies associated with large livestock and they put more man-hours in the production of these livestock than women and children (Nyikahadzo and Mugabe, 2015); while women have ownership and make decisions on smaller livestock such as chickens (Valdiva and Gilles, 2001). In rural areas, most livestock are sold to meet emergency household needs such as buying food and meeting medical bills. Valdiva and Gilles (2001) find out that decisions regarding where and when to sell cattle and goats and use of the proceeds are mostly joint between the men and women of the household. However, women dominate similar decisions when it comes to the sale of chicken and other income sources such as livestock and crop production, but their decisions are made within the context of their restricted mobility (Nyikahadzo and Mugabe, 2015). In African societies the male household head makes decisions on disposal or acquisition of additional livestock (Freeman, Kaitibie, Moyo and Perry, 2008). It is believed that women are not able to make such decisions as they always wanted to refer back to their spouses for confirmation of decisions. This has increased women and children’s vulnerability to poverty and food insecurity (Freeman et al., 2008).

### **3.5 Livelihood diversity**

Livelihood diversity is a variety of portfolio of activities done by household members in order to improve their standards of living (Ellis, 2000). Rural livelihoods may become unsuitable as a result households may be forced to look for alternative sources of income in order to reduce vulnerability to various livelihood shocks (Khatun and Roy, 2012). A recent study by Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) on farming systems and poverty has suggested that diversification is the most important source of poverty reduction for small farmers in South and South-East Asia (FAO and World Bank, 2001). Diversification of livelihoods can be affected by a number of factors including family size,

asset value, availability of land, access and availability of irrigation facility, access to credit and ability to borrow, distance from town, training/skill development and creation of social groups.

### **3.5.1 Family size**

It affects the ability of a household to supply labour to the farm (Niehof, 2004). In support of this viewpoint Ellis (2000) asserts that the larger the family the more the chances of livelihood diversification and vice versa.

### **3.5.2 Assets value**

Household assets promote diversification of livelihood activities. Asset building is an accumulation of wealth which provide an opportunity for the asset holder to invest in alternative enterprises (Khatun and Roy, 2012). In contrary, lack of asset base creates an entry barrier for the resource-poor households in diversifying their livelihood choices (Ellis, 2000).

### **3.5.3 Availability of land**

Availability of land is central to rural livelihoods (Ellis, 2000). Khatun and Roy (2012) maintain that land is an asset for agriculture, for building of houses and also as a base for non-farm activities and small-scale businesses.

### **3.5.4 Access to credit and ability to borrow**

As rural households have access to credit and have the ability to obtain loans, they can diversify their livelihoods (Niehof, 2004). Access to credit is advantageous to a household as this provides enough capital to start up a new business or to acquire assets that can be used to advance a livelihood.

### **3.5.5 Distance from town**

Proximity to town is also a factor which affects livelihood diversification. Ellis (2000) argue that those rural households close to town are able to source markets for their produce. They also have greater chances of accessing credit facilities and loans that can further develop their livelihoods (Ellis, 2000). This entails that access to town also means access to non-farm activities and skills that can be useful to households.

### **3.5.6 Training /skill development**

Human capacity is needed in order for households to diversify livelihood activities (Khatun and Roy, 2012; Barbier and Hochard, 2014) skills development enables individuals to venture into different productive activities, widening their ability to increase income and support their families (Khatun and Roy, 2012).

### **3.5.7 Social groups**

social groups within the community is one way of creating social networks (Barbier and Hochard, 2014). These networks are beneficial in obtaining knowledge that can be used to further livelihoods. According to Ellis (2000), social clubs have also been used in developing countries as ways of obtaining credit loans and as training grounds in skills that are necessary in livelihood diversification and improvement for communities in rural areas.

### **3.5 Description of study area**

The study was done in Bikita District of Masvingo Province, which is located about 80 kilometres east of Masvingo in Zimbabwe. The district is considered one of the driest in Masvingo Province with very low rainfalls and high temperatures. The district has a population of 162, 356 distributed across 12 constitutional wards. The study was held in ward 5, which is in a rural setup inhabited by smallholder farmers. Land tenure in the communal areas is state owned and under the custody of traditional leadership with the rights to distribute land to people. The district has predominantly sandy soils. Subsistence farming is considered as the main livelihood option for most rural households. The main crops grown in the area are mainly maize, groundnuts and finger millet.

## **4. Methodology**

The study triangulated qualitative and quantitative approaches, to gather data. This paper adopts a qualitative research approach based on in-depth interviews to gather data on rural livelihoods, challenges faced and measures that women employ to manage the situation thereof. Quantitatively, a questionnaire was also distributed to gather data on the livelihood activities done for the selected households. Cresswell (2003) argues that qualitative studies include the various methods of inquiry such as case studies, ethnography and observations thus they are subjective. Leedy and Omrod (2013) suggest that use of triangulated methods allows the researchers to tackle problems holistically. Purposive sampling was used to select a sample of 40 households out of a total of 409 households in Ward 5. Questionnaires were distributed at Pfupajena, Ward 5 Centre where all the households were gathered for a Care International food aid meeting. Interviews were conducted at the selected respondents' households.

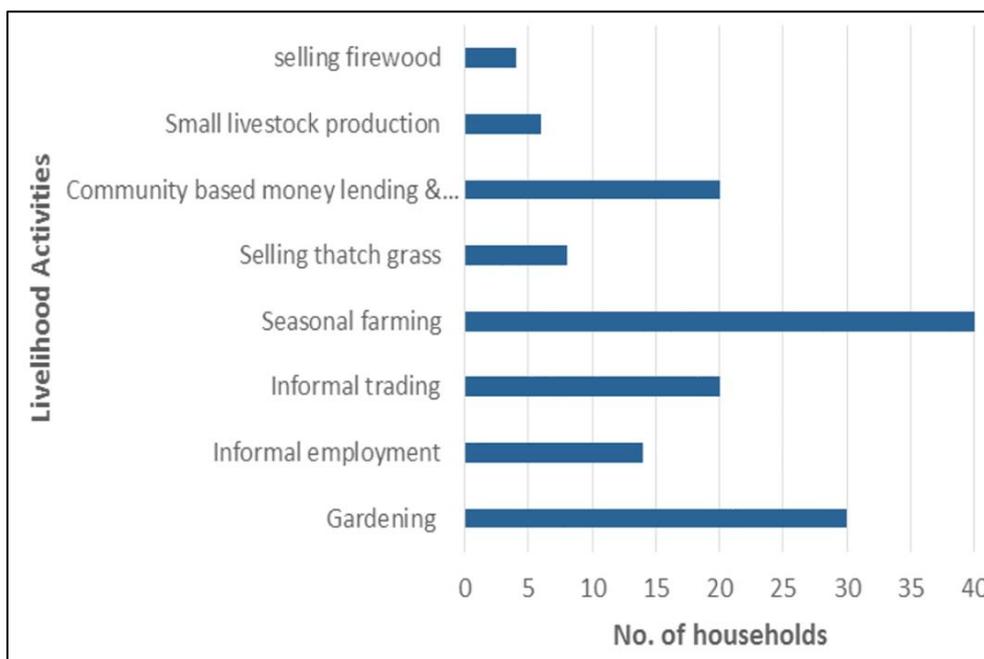
The qualitative data was analysed thematically while quantitative data was analysed using the Statistic Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software and presented using diagrams. Data was presented to answer the major questions of the study. The researchers also observed ethical issues such as confidentiality, informed consent and voluntary participation.

## 5. Findings

The researchers grouped the findings according to the themes drawn from the research questions. The paper presents data in three themes which are, livelihoods activities of women in Bikita, the challenges being faced by these women on rural livelihood options and implementation and finally the measures that can be done to ensure rural livelihoods are more productive resilient and sustainable. The ultimate purpose is to create sustainable and resilient livelihoods that can act as pathways out of poverty for rural women and may enhance women empowerment. The paper identified various challenges and prospects and these have been discussed below.

### 5.1 Rural Livelihoods

The study find out that the dominant livelihood options for rural women in Bikita district include seasonal farming, selling of firewood, gardening, small livestock production, community based money lending and saving schemes, selling of thatch grass, informal trading which includes selling of second hand wares (*mabhero*) and cross-border trading, informal employment such as piece jobs (*maricho*) and food for work schemes (*sadza basa*). These livelihood options play a vital role in ensuring the well-being and provision of most people in Ward 5 of Bikita district.



**Figure 1:** Livelihood activities for rural women in Ward 5

Findings noted that 40 households of rural women who responded to the questions depend on rain-fed subsistence farming where they grow crops like maize, groundnuts and cowpeas mainly for household consumption and for sell if they get more that they need for consumption. In an interview one respondent said:

*"I prefer to plant maize and the groundnuts for consumption, maize meal (Sadza) constitutes a part of every meal in my house. Groundnuts make peanut butter used instead of cooking oil and makes porridge in the morning very nutritious. When rains are bountiful we get surplus groundnuts which we sell for peanut butter or as salted nuts (mutetenegwa) by the roadside to passers-by."* (Female Interviewee).

Subsistence farming in the area is seasonal and relies heavily on the amount of rains received each year. An in-depth interview with some of these women it was revealed that due to persistent drought they have not been getting good harvests.

Community based money lending and saving schemes (*fushai*) was also acknowledged by 20 households as a livelihood activity for rural women in the ward. Those who were interviewed pointed out that they formed groups in various Village Development Committees (VIDCOs) in which group members contribute equal amount of money and lend the money at 10% interest. In an interview one respondent said:

*"Fushai is a suggested activity taught to us by a Non-Governmental Organisations. These schemes are quite helpful in times of need they are friendly groups where we agree to give one person a stipulated amount of money weekly or monthly (mukando) and the round goes until the last person has been given. We have also included buying household utensils for each other or even basic groceries for each other. These schemes push us to save and to buy things that are important."* (Female Interviewee)

However, the money is only borrowed by group members and strictly they make sure that they take turns to borrow the money and those who do not have enough money to join the groups they remain unable to benefit.

In addition, 20 households indicated they practise informal trading. The study found out that these women sell a variety of things like vegetables, fruits, second hand clothes with some selling their goods as far as South Africa and Botswana. One respondent said:

*"Successive years of receiving poor rainfall and having very poor yields has made us to look for other things to raise money from. I buy second hand clothes from Mutare for resell in my community. I am not strict on modes of payment be it barter exchange or money all is well as long as I get something."* (Female Interviewee).

The study noted, 30 households showed that they did gardening producing of fresh vegetables such as tomatoes, beans and green leafy vegetables for sale and household consumption. Most of the women in Ward 5 have their small gardening along the rivers like Tugwi, Mujiche and Chinyika. Some also indicated that they have their portions in Shato and Shuro garden projects funded by a Non-Governmental Organisation, Care International, where they grow vegetables for sale. In an interview one woman revealed that, gardens are the major sources of their relish for maize meal. In

most cases they sell vegetables in the nearby growth point and schools to raise income for various needs such as sending children to school, clothes and health purposes. The majority of women confirmed that the success of gardens also relied heavily on the annual rainfall quantity. Most of these gardens rely on small rivers that may dry up if there are fewer rains. The image below shows the community garden in Bikita.



**Image 1:** Community garden in Bikita.  
(Source: Authors' 2018)

It was also noted during the study that 14 households get informal and temporary employment (*maricho*) to raise income. There are different types of piece jobs that are taken according to seasons of the year and get paid in cash or goods especially groceries. During the farming season people work in other people's farms they plough, weed and harvest for payment in cash or goods. During off season time people may continue to work for other people doing some menial jobs such as digging contours, spreading of manure in the fields and also preparing land for the next planting season. Some women reported they took up household chores such as washing, cleaning and caregiving for children for people with formal jobs at the growth point and surrounding schools.

There are, 8 households which that reportedly sell thatch grass. Furthermore 6 households keep broiler chickens, while 4 households earn their living from selling firewood. These are relevant forms of livelihoods and the reason why a few women choose them is because of the intense labour involved which requires both time and physical fitness for selling of firewood and thatch grass. Broiler production requires capital which most households cannot afford. One woman alluded that:

*"Broiler chicken production requires funding for inputs. The chicken project needs equipment for feeding and water, vaccinations, and chickenfeed, some of which, is very expensive for many of us and can only be done by those who have regular and reliable sources of income."* (Female Interviewee).

The study found out that though seasonal farming is by far the most relied on source of income in the district, women have diversified their livelihoods in order to raise enough income for their needs.

## **5.2 Livelihood challenges and ways to eradicate the challenges**

A number of factors affect rural livelihoods in Bikita district Ward 5 included (Mushore, Muzenda and Makovere, 2013). Such factors include, climate change and drought, economic crisis, access to credit facilities, siltation and poor soils.

### **5.2.1 Climate change and drought**

The study noted that seasonal farming in Ward 5 of Bikita district is negatively affected by climate change. Climate change and unpredictable weather conditions pose some pressures to seasonal farming which leads to droughts as a result of high temperatures and low rainfalls. One women had this to say in an in-depth interview:

*“Our subsistence farming is extremely vulnerable to drought; we usually experience higher temperatures which eventually reduce yields of most desirable crops like maize, groundnuts and cowpeas.”* (Female Interviewee)

In a different interview an old women lamented that:

*“Things have since changed in our area. When we grew up around 1940s we used to receive a lot of rainfall and have bumper harvests. But now the rainfall is erratic and poorly distributed resulting in poor yields.”* (Female Interviewee)

The findings of this study revealed that efforts should be made to effectively reduce the effects of droughts. Growing of drought resistant crops like sorghum and millet is an effective way of eradicating the effects of drought ((Mano & Nhemachena 2007; Mukarumbwa & Mushunje 2010). These crops can assure better yields for households even under high temperatures and low rainfall although they are not popular source of food for most households in Bikita district.

Furthermore, investments could be made for construction of dams and drilling of more boreholes as a way of providing reliable sources of water for farming in dry areas (Makhado, Saidi & Tshikhudo 2014). Dams and boreholes will provide water for irrigation where rural women will have to grow crops throughout the year rather than depending of rainfall which is even unpredictable given that the Bikita district is a semi-arid region.

### **5.2.2 Economic crisis**

From this study it has been noted that sustainability of rural livelihoods is hampered much by economic crisis in the country hindering people to get enough capital to expand

or diversify their livelihoods. Respondents indicated that they had financial challenges. One women exposed this when she said;

*“Cash is a problem due the economic challenges faced in the country which cause inconsistencies in payments of goods and services.”* (Female Interviewee)

### **5.2.3 Lack of capital**

Most rural women lack capital to start sustainable or to expand the already existing livelihoods. The study noted that most rural women have no access to credit facilities which can provide them with adequate capital to start or boost their intended businesses. It has been realised that credits and credit facilities may be offered by banks like Agricultural Bank of Zimbabwe but women may lack collateral security required to access these credit facilities. One woman said:

*“Access to Capital is a major problem. We cannot get loans from either banks or finance houses because we don’t have property to present as collateral security or formal jobs with stable salaries.”* (Female Interviewee)

In addition, the study finds out that women lack decision making powers in the home which is a great challenge as far as accessing credit facilities is concerned, they have to seek their husbands’ approval first. This is strengthen by the fact that most rural women have no property ownership like land ownership which may be required as collateral security. According to Bentley (2004), there is need for empowering women economically and increase their decision-making power in their households and in the community. Rural women should be accorded land ownership rights as well as property right, to promote and support their productive activities (Ogunlela & Mukhtar, 2009). This promotes access credit facilities to fund their businesses.

### **5.2.4 Poor soils and poor farming methods**

Majority of rural women in Ward 5 rely on subsistence farming as their source of livelihood. Some areas like Muziri, Nhodovari and Majeche villages reportedly have sandy soils. This type of soil requires fertilizers in order to get better yields. Respondents lamented that they cannot afford the costs of buying fertilizers which leads to poor yields. This challenge was pointed out by one woman who said:

*“Our soils are very poor we can hardly get enough yields unless we use fertilizers or cattle manure. We cannot afford to buy fertilizers. The fertilizers donated by the government input scheme are not sufficient. Most of us do not own cattle hence we do not have access to cattle manure.”* (Female Interviewee).

Respondents also highlighted the issue of poor farming methods by most rural farmers as threatening their livelihoods. The study finds out that some households have

their gardens near river banks while some people are ploughing upstream which exposes the soil to agents of erosion and consequently leading to siltation of rivers which are potential sources of water for gardening. The major rivers like Tugwi and Mujiche which used to supply water for gardening have been filled with sand and water is now scarce. This was exposed by a prominent vegetable vendor when she said;

*“Growing of vegetables in our gardens has been affected by lack of water for irrigation. The rivers used have been silted due to stream bank cultivation by some people in a bid to reduce the burden of carrying water for a long distance. Tugwi River is now covered with sand and we are forced to dig riverbed shallow wells to fetch water for our gardens. This has led to reduction of plot sizes and overall yields.”* (Female Interviewee)

Therefore, there is need for increasing investments in programmes to educate farmers on better and conservative farming methods. Conservative farming methods may help to improve soil structure as well as conserving our sources of water since siltation will be reduced to minimum (Giller, Witter, Corbeels & Tittonell, 2009). The community should be equipped with knowledge on good farming practices.

## **6. Conclusion**

Women make a contribution in the provision of basic needs needed by the households for survival. They play a role in both productive and reproductive work, and have shifted from being caregivers to providers of household needs as breadwinners. However, their contribution is marred by poor access to resources and lack of an enabling environment to make independent decisions. The majority of women depend on rain-fed subsistence farming. Diversification to other livelihood options has been necessitated by persistent droughts that have led to adoption of other livelihood and income generating activities such as informal trading, group saving schemes, temporary work and small-scale gardening. These rural livelihood activities have become their sources of income for their daily basic needs. The livelihoods are not sustainable and have little effect on eradicating poverty because of various challenges being faced. Women in Ward 5 faced challenges emanating from climate change and drought, economic crisis, lack of capital and poor soils and poor farming methods in their livelihoods. These challenges hindered rural women from producing and providing for their families.

### **6.1 Recommendations**

Women should be empowered to make decisions and promote rural women’s participation in leadership. Rural women’s access to productive resources such as, land, capital, improved technology and agricultural innovations should be promoted. The rural farmers should be well informed on the advantages of using drought resistant crops in Ward 5 to reduce the impact of drought. The government should empower rural women economically so that they can access credit facilities and loans from banks to have

capital for diversification and to boost the already existing livelihoods. There is need to educate farmers in rural areas on ways to improve their soil fertility with the aim of improving crop yields. Rural subsistence farmers should be educated on good farming practices like conservation farming and avoid stream bank cultivation.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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