

## **Traditional Gender Roles of Men and Women in Natural Resource Conservation among the Vhavenda People in Zimbabwe: Implications for Sustainable Development**

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### **Abstract**

*The study interrogated the traditional gender roles of men and women in the conservation of natural resources. African feminism and post- colonial theory were used as theoretical frameworks to analyze the practices. The Harvard analytic framework and the social relation approach to gender analysis were used as tools of analysis to map the gender roles in the conservation activities. The research used phenomenological research approach as the intention was to understand the gender roles of men and women from the point of view of men and women who had lived the experience. Sampling was purposive and judgemental. In-depth interviews were conducted with respondents aged seventy (70) years and above. Five females and three males were interviewed at Msane area in Beit-Bridge district in the south west of Zimbabwe under Matabeleland South province. The research revealed that the type of resources that were of concern included soil (land), water, and certain plant species that were sources of firewood ,timber and food(fruit trees),timber ashes for preservation of seeds as well as good sources of firewood .Animal species conservation depended on availability importance and use .The study also revealed that although women and men had different uses and benefits from natural resource, there was an ethic of cooperation ,dialogue and collaboration among men and women when it comes to resource conservation. The study recommends that for natural resource conservation initiatives that are geared to achieve sustainable development, they need to embrace some of the practices of the vhavenda among which are complementarity, cooperation, inclusiveness, dialogue and negotiation between men and women so as to ensure that men and women participate equal in the initiatives by the end of the day as this will help to disentangle some of the constraints of participation especially unequal gender relations that cause gendered subordination.*

**Keyword:** traditional gender roles, natural resources, conservation, sustainable development

### **Introduction**

Prospects of a sustainable future are arguably embedded in natural resources and ecological systems which are themselves dependent on soil formation, nutrient cycling and availability of water. Natural resources conservation is necessary as environmental issues are at the forefront of development (Nziramanga 1999). Proper management of soil for example means improved food security which is a sustainability issue, while conservation of plants will reduce climate change and reduce environmental degradation. The world commission on environment and development (WCED, 1987) explained that sustainable development requires balancing economic growth with environmental protection and social wellbeing. Ansell (2002) argues that any serious consideration of relevance of any discussion of sustainable development is the role of gender. An analysis of gender interactions in relation to environmental management is therefore imperative for sustainable development. To mark out the contours of this discussion the paper will open and create space for a clear understanding of the key concepts in this study, followed by a reader on related extant literature and the silences that still exist which motivated the study. This will be followed by an explication of the theoretical and methodology of the study, which will culminate in reporting of the findings and the implications of the findings that could be gleaned for the benefit of sustainable development.

### ***Definition of Terms***

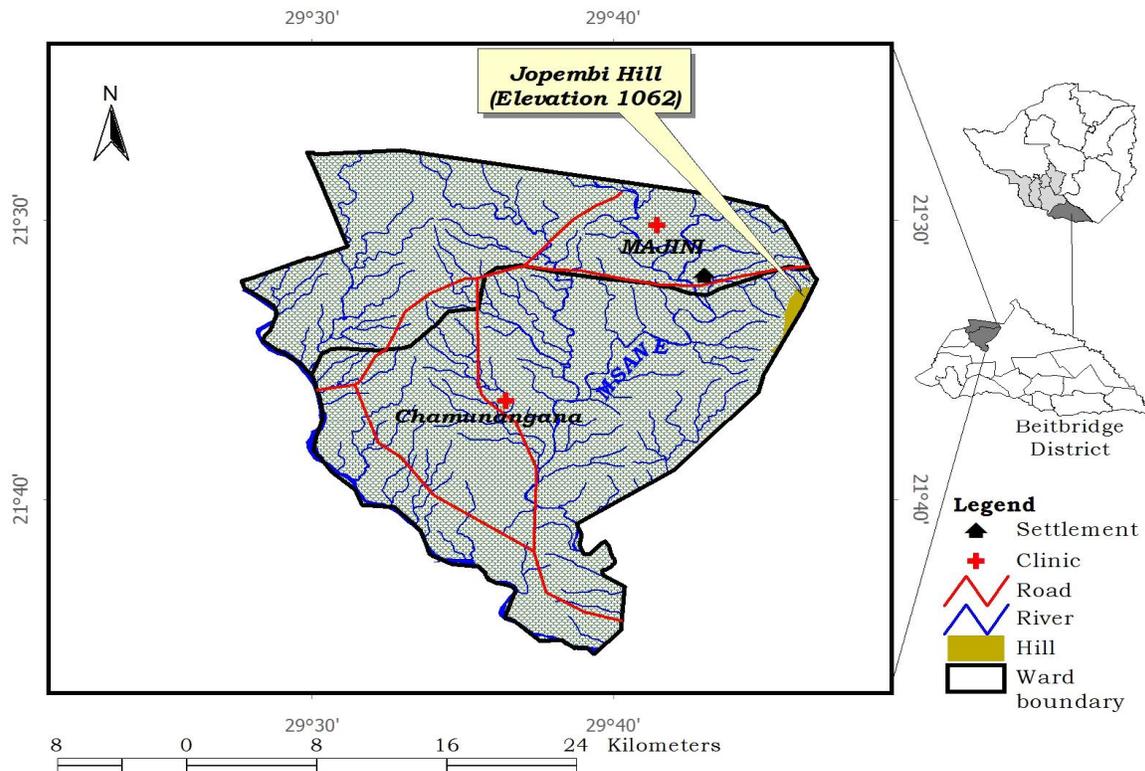
The term sustainable development emerged in the 1980s when it was realized that there is need to balance economic growth and social progress with environmental concerns. According to the world commission on environment and development (WEED) (1987:43), sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of present without compromising future generations to meet their needs. This definition makes the human element the center stage of development. The goal of sustainable development is seen as to create and sustain prosperous social, economic and ecological systems. This goal can only be achieved if ecosystems are well maintained because people rely on ecosystem services for their livelihood. Destruction of plants, soil, watercourses can have serious implications on human livelihoods especially women who bear the brunt of environment degradation thereby threatening the achievement of sustainable development. This can be achieved through conservation which entails the wise use of the natural resources, to maintain the life support systems. Natural resources on the other hand refer to the natural occurring resources like water, soil, animals and plants. Traditional gender roles on the other hand refer to normal and culturally defined and prescribed duties of men and women in the conservation of natural resources in societies prior to the arrival of colonialism and its legacies.

### ***Literature Review***

Studies on indigenous people's conservation methods and technology as it relates to natural resources have been widely carried out. Cunningham and Zondi (1991) focused on Zulu cultural beliefs as it relates to use of animal parts in traditional medicines. Moganane and Walker (1995) researched the culture of Tswana speaking people in the Northwest province of South Africa. Garibaldi (1995) also looked at indigenous knowledge systems in natural resource management in southern Africa. Studies have also been done specifically on the Venda culture, for instance. Mabogo (1990) looked at the ethno botany of the Vhavenda, while Khorombi (2001) looked at the role of Venda culture in nature conservation and natural resource management in South Africa. Tshiguvho (2008), documented the sacred traditions of the Vhavenda and biodiversity conservation in the forest Montane region. In (2010) Mutshinyalo and Siebert also looked at myths as a biodiversity conservation strategy for the Venda in South Africa. More recently in 2013, Semenya, Potgieter and Tshisikhawe looked at the use and conservation of ethno medicinal plants of Matebele village in the Limpopo province in South Africa. Collectively these studies announce a point of departure for a fuller exploration of the Venda culture on conservations with a gender tint. All mentioned studies were silent to issues of gender, a gap that this study seeks to contribute to. To contribute to this discussion, the study was guided by the question: What roles did men and women play in natural resources? What can be emulated by modern sustainable development initiatives?

### ***Description and Map of the Study Area***

Beitbridge lies to the south of the Save-Limpopo Eco region which covers 78,15km<sup>2</sup> in the south-eastern part of Zimbabwe. This Eco region, which at 20% is the second largest after the Central region, (Zimbabwe has 5 Eco regions), is drained by the Save and Limpopo basins. The average altitude of this Eco region is 300-900m above sea level. This Eco region has the lowest altitude in the country at the confluence of Save and Limpopo rivers. The dominant group of people inhabiting this part of Zimbabwe is the Vhavenda, with some Sotho and Shangaan groups.



### Theoretical Framework

Study is founded in the post-colonial theory and African feminism. Post-colonial theory is about the colonized announcing their presence, identity and claiming their lost or distorted past (Mapara, 2009). Subedi and Daza in Mhlauli and Muchado (2013), acknowledge that post-colonial theory advocates for the decolonization of knowledge and production of transformative knowledge. This resonates well with the thrust of this paper, which seeks to interrogate traditional gender roles of women and men in natural resource conservation and see what could be filtered for the benefit of sustainable development, a buzzword of many initiatives and projects of the day? Post-colonial theory presents the West as unappreciative of past achievements and traditional ways of doing things by the formerly colonized. This paper by bringing attention to the positive aspects of the past that could be smuggled into sustainable development efforts and initiatives related to natural resource conservation is an attempt to push the international community to realize the need to merge indigenous and conventional methods of natural resource conservation so as to enlist sustainable development at the end of the day. As the study is located in an African context, African feminism was also adopted to root the study within the realities of African worldviews and environmental context. Feminism in Africa is a struggle against western hegemony as well as the legacy that Western imperialism left within the African culture. African feminism uphold the notion that lack of women's power in Africa is caused by the intrusion of foreign systems with different gender orientation and new paradigms of power organisation (Mohanty 2003, Arndt 2002, Kolawole 1997, Mikell 1997, Narayan 1997, Oyewumi 1997 and Amadiumbe 1987). They acknowledge that gender hierarchy though evident in traditional Africa, it become more pronounced during the colonial rule. This implies that African feminist thought is preoccupied with a web of power struggles caused by patriarchy on the one hand and other oppressions as a result of colonization, thus making post-colonial theory a more fitting theory for this study.

The study is located in Zimbabwe, a former British colony thus the study speaks across the divide between pre-colonial and post-colonial practices of vhavenda people, to argue for a more enabling reading of the practices and sift the positives that can have a bearing on sustainable development today.

Oyewumi (1997) notes that colonial rule left a legacy of a patriarchal state, a system that African male political leaders adopted at independence. Using a hybrid of African feminism and post-colonial theory in this study, it helped to unpack how patriarchy (which determines the gender relations and division of gender roles) as well as the legacy of colonialism has shaped and influenced the traditional gender roles of men and women in the natural resource conservation "spaces" and practices to bring to the fore a more nuanced understanding of traditional practices and how they can be of help to sustainable development. Use of African feminism and post-colonial theory as theoretical lenses gives an African reality to the study. According to Nnaemeka (1998:11) African feminism believes in accessing power not in absolute but in relative terms of power sharing and power "ebbs and flows". It seeks gender equality and power in a continuum of sharing, interdependence and complementarity where men and women are involved the process of advancing women's independence. Equal relevant is challenging patriarchy through negotiation, compromise, inclusiveness and collaboration (Arndt, 2002). African feminism is therefore not opposed to men but challenges them to be critical of the cultural practices and structures that oppress women. Unlike Western feminism, African feminism does not confront (Amadiumbe 1987, Arndt 2002, Nnaemeka 2005 and Steady 1981), instead it emphasize on complementarity (Achalomu, 1995) and negotiation (Nnaemeka 2004).

To emphasize on negotiation Nnaemeka talks of *nego-feminism*, a feminism of negotiation that eschews ego. This is borrowed from the foundation of shared values of negotiation, give or take, compromise and balance found in many African cultures (Nnaemeka, 2004). This view consolidates an earlier view by Ama Ata Aidoo in Nfah-Abbenyi (1997:10) where she emphasized that "African women struggling both on behalf of themselves and on behalf of the wider community, very much part of our heritage" This is founded in the African principle of communalism and holism where the community is bigger than an individual communalism and the community (holism). According to Sofala (1998) African feminism is about co-ruler ship and Steady (1981) sees it as a struggle because to liberate all African people including men. According to Steady (1981), men should be involved in the struggle because if African feminism is to succeed as a human reformation project, it cannot accept separatism from the opposite sex hence, it eschews male exclusion. The sentiments are equally shared by Ogunyemi (1985) in her attempt to advance womanism as the best word to represent African feminism which according to her must address the otherwise separatist nature of western feminism by recognizing men as partners rather than foes.

In addition to use as a theoretical lens in this study, African feminism also formed the basis for methodology in this study as outlined below. The perspective offers a foundation for non-hierarchical personal sharing of power, ideas and experiences. To ensure that in this study, I used a subjective method of data collection. That is, in-depth unstructured interviews to collect data. This method allowed participants to air out their views freely without the researcher dominating participants. This helped to alleviate hierarchical relations between me as the researcher and the participants, thus, prioritizing the voice of participants, both men and women. African feminism also recognizes interdependence, negotiation and collaboration, thus allowing for the voices of all participants to be heard. Basing on this data was sourced from all stakeholders, men and women were involved in the study. This ensured interdependence and collaboration in knowledge construction (Cook and Fonow, 2005). In recognizing wholeness and interconnection from African feminism traditional gender roles of women were studied not in isolation but as an interactive process between men and women in that the study equal valued the stand point and experiences of both men and women in mapping out the roles of both men and women unlike western feminist research (Fawcett and Hearn, 2004) which emphasize prioritization of women's stand points at the expense of men. In an African set up, because of the way of life, feminist research becomes more of a gender research than a feminist research where both the standpoints and experiences of men and women are equally valued. The Harvard analytical framework and the social relations approach to gender analysis were used as tools of analysis. The Harvard analytic tool helps to look at the gendered nature of the activities. The Harvard analytical tool makes visible the gendered activities that were done by men and women in natural resource conservation. The Harvard analytic tool was limited in the study as it cannot expose the interconnections and cooperations between men and women in natural resource conservation, hence it was used in conjunction with the social relations approach to bring to the fore the cooperations and bargaining that took place between men and women in natural resource conservation among the Vhavenda people.

### **Methodology**

The study was informed by post-colonial theory and African feminism. The research design was purely qualitative; as the study sought to understand the traditional gender roles of men and women, hence, use of qualitative research design paved way for men and women to make sense of their experiences and the world in which they lived (Holloway 1997). It facilitated the analysis of the social practices and relationships that took place in traditional natural resource conservations from the participants points of view and this enabled an understanding of the phenomenon of traditional gender roles in their natural context in greater depth (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). Qualitative research design also resonates with African feminism as both emphasize on the importance of social context and wholeness, that allow individuals to be studied not cut off from interactions and relationship with other people (Fine and Gordon, 1989). This facilitated an in-depth mapping of the roles that exposed even the bargaining and negotiations between men and women, involved in natural resource conservation among the Vhavenda people. Qualitative research also brings to the surface voices which are often silenced (Frisby, Maguire and Reid, 2009), thus enabling even women who have long been subordinated and marginalized from knowledge construction and public spheres to air out their experiences and feelings freely in this study. Phenomenological qualitative research design was specifically used as the intent was to understand the traditional gender roles of men and women from the point of view of men and women who lived the experience. In order to reach this special group which included the marginalized, in this case women, purposive and judgemental sampling was used to identify the primary participants. To sample participants in the community, I used my understanding that sampling methods in feminist research are ethically chosen on the basis that populations of interest are often marginalized and difficult to locate (Liamputong, 2007). As such I ensured that women participate in the study, by using purposive sampling to identify the primary participants. The sample was selected based on my judgment targeting men and women who were 70 years and above of age. This age group was selected as researcher considered them old enough and chances of them having lived the experience of traditional methods of conservation were high. Snowballing or network referencing was used to trace additional participants by asking the primary participants to identify and recommend other elderly members of the community for interviewing. Interviews were conducted with a total of eight participants (5 females and 3 males). Data was collected between December 2013 and January 2014. In-depth unstructured interviews were used to collect data. Unstructured interviews were suitable in understanding the traditional gender roles of men and women in natural resource conservation because they are receptive to unexpected information from the participants, thereby giving women and men the freedom and opportunity to articulate their subjective experiences (Cohen et al, 2007). Unstructured interviews also allowed participants to voice their experiences, unconstrained by the researcher, thus decreasing the power differences between the participants and I. This type of interviewing also ensured that participants are not objectified or placed in a passive role but play an active part (Letherby, 2003).

### **Findings, Discussions and Conclusions**

Findings revealed that the Vhavenda people were concerned with maintenance of soil, plants, water and animals. There were differences in the use of plants species by men and women. Certain plants species such as Mupani (Mopani tree-English and *colophospermum*-scientific name), *Mukwiriri* (bush willow-English and *combretum zeyheri*-scientific name) and *Muthwari* (olive tree-English name and *olea europaea subsp Africana*-Scientific name) were important for timber as well as sources of fuel, hence, were of interest to both men and women as it enabled them to satisfy their day to day practical gender needs in construction, as fuel for food preparation. *Mudzwiri* (*combretum imberbe* -scientific name) was another special tree of interest conserved as a source of ashes for preservation purposes. Men were prohibited from cutting trees especially very large trees and women were to report men to the kraal head/headman for cutting large trees. Myths and taboos were also used to conserve some sacred species of plants. For example a tree called *Mufhanda* (*African rain tree*-English and *lonchocarpus capassa*-the scientific name) a rare and sacred species was not used for fuel because of the belief that burning it in a homestead can lead to the dissolution of marriage and because of the need to preserve marriages, the tree was not used hence it was conserved.

Women used water more than men for their practical gender needs, like the need to cook, wash and bath children. Despite this resource being of paramount importance to women, conservation of water was not gendered. Both men and women participated in the conservation of water sources. Conservation methods included construction of stonewalls around the water sources as well as fencing them with logs and branches to prevent domestic animals from drinking from the water sources.

Logs also prevented leaves from falling into the well. Women were responsible for carrying of the stones to the site of construction while men would cut prepare and carry the logs build the stone wall or fence the well with logs. Silted wells were cleaned up by elderly women who have reached menopause and young girls who have not reached puberty, it was a taboo for women who are still menstruating to clean up silted wells, as this was believed can irregularise the cycle, thus confirming earlier findings by Khorombi (2001) in South Africa certain tree species such as *Mukhalu* (Buffalo thorn –English and *Ziziphus mucronata*-scientificname), *mutangule* (*Euclea divinorum*-Scientific name),*murabva* (*grewia bicolor*-scientific name),*mupunzu*(*grewia villosa*-scientific name),*muhoto* (carmel thorn-English name and *Acacia Albida*--scientific name) as well as *munyelenga*(*Anna tree*-English and *Alcacia erioloba*-scientific name)were also conserved mostly by women when they occur along water sources as they helped to prevent contamination of water, Running water down the streams far from water wells were used as bathing pools while the sources of water are upstream to prevent contamination of drinking water.

When it comes to soil, emphasis was more on preventing soil degradation than correcting. To do this, the vhavenda people encouraged people to have smaller fields and monogamous marriages to keep the population size under control and within the carrying capacity of the land. In situations where degradation of soil has occurred, methods such as planting trees and grass was done by women while men could be involved in the construction of diverging ditches. Adding dry kraal (*muvhudela*). This is dry cow dung or goat droppings which were used to maintain the soil in a crumb structure.

Both women and men were involved in the carrying of the dry manure to sites which needed attention. Stones were also used to construct contours to regulate the flow of rain water by diverting it down slopes. Construction of contours was done by men while women were responsible for the collection of the stones to the site. Men were also responsible for making terraces to prevent soil erosion in steep slopes. Women could plant grass to reinforce the terraces. Prohibitive laws were enforced by the headman such as not to cut trees indiscriminately helped to hold the soil together. There were also prohibitions on pulling of sledges (*tshileyi*) This was a traditional cart made of wood, to prevent formation of gully.

Animal conservation was not an issue at all as men and animals managed to coexist harmoniously within the limits of carrying capacity. The population of people versus the animal population was always balanced. This was due to use of different surnames (*mitupo*), which were based on animal names and people with the same totem with the animal could not eat the animal hence this approach kept the animals and humans on check and balances.

Drawing from the practices and principles used by the vhavenda people, dialogue inclusiveness and complementarity were the major pillars that helped to sustain ecological systems at the same time benefiting the human race. Traditional conservation methods saw men and women playing different and complementary roles in the activities. Energy demanding duties under the methods were done by men while women did or were relegated to lighter but time consuming tasks. What is interesting to note and highlight is that both men and women participated in the conservation of different resources. There was no gendered resource conservation, that is, no specific resources were considered to be a responsibility of women or men instead they worked together (collaboration and dialogue) although with gendered roles in the process, an ethic that the current conservation initiatives can borrow if they are to succeed.

### ***Implications for Sustainable Development***

Research after research have reported that failure to include a gender perspective in these initiatives have led to failure of well-planned programmes as they continue to sideline women (Khaledi, Agahi and Eskandari, 2012, Mwangi, Meinzen-Dick and Sun 2011, Guiriba, 2010, Ogunlela and Mukhtar, 2009, Fonjong 2008, Franklin 2007) yet research has established that sustainable development strategies that do not promote full participation of women and girls will not succeed (UNDP, 2012). Thus this study argues that for sustainable development to be achieved especially in the conservation of natural resources there is need to borrow the communalistic ethic from vhavenda practices of natural conservations that calls for cooperation, connectedness, inclusiveness, collaboration and dialogue among men and women in place of separatist initiatives that tend to focus on males leaving women. This practice has been reported to lead to failure of the strategies and also leaving women at the mercy of climate change vicissitudes. The study therefore argues, that it is high time that modern, methods of natural conservation under the guise of sustainable development try to borrow from the vhavenda practices by recognizing that as the world's inhabitants both men and women have a stake in the conservation of resources if sustainable development is to be achieved.

Ugwu and Ugwu (2013), report that women suffer disproportionately in all disasters as they are made more vulnerable because of the reduced access to sources of emergency interventions as well as their lack of decision making power in disaster prevention and preparedness programmes, hence this study recommends that there is need for an explicit gender orientation in resource conservation that recognizes complementarity, dialogue, collaboration and inclusiveness as evidenced in the *vhavenda* practices of natural resources conservation to equip both women and men with adaptive knowledge and skills. In agreement with Toroitich (2004), who notes that gender equality and equity are not only a question of fundamental human rights and social justice but are essential to the functioning of the environment as well, this study recognizes that it is only when the economic, political, and cultural spheres are fully democratized that men and women will be able to realize their common interests in form of development that is ecologically, economically, socially and cultural sustainable. It is therefore only if conservation initiatives and their informing environmental policies and education are prepared to challenge the undemocratic nature of existing social structures in natural resource conservation that they are likely to have any real prospect of realizing sustainability. Discrimination of women which increases their vulnerability to environmental disasters due to lack of knowledge, skills and power poses a challenge to sustainable development (Mukoni, 2013), by limiting also their substantive freedoms (Sen in Elliot, 2007). There is a need therefore to question and open for examination and expansion of the methods of natural conservation that are geared to achieve sustainable development to embrace some of the principles of the *vhavenda* like communalism and holism that informed their natural resource practice, to improve their chances of success. Akin to sustainable development are the concepts of gender equality and social justice (UNESCO, 2005). This study has argued that these goals of sustainable development are achievable if the values, principles and practices of the *vhavenda* as espoused by this study are emulated, if not integrated in modern conservation initiatives.

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